

Culture Stories, *An Experimental Relationship* Text/ Caitlin Robinson, March 2016

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An Experimental Relationship

What happens when you draw artistic inspiration from your real life relationship? For photographer Pixy Liao, it's just another day in the studio



"It's Never Been Easy to Carry You", Pixy Liao

Culture Stories: What inspired your photographic series, Experimental Relationship?

Pixy Liao: The Experimental Relationship project was inspired by people's reaction to my relationship with my younger boyfriend. In the beginning, I was only asking him to pose in my various photo class assignments, in a way that I was using him as a "prop" in my photos. Sometimes I would ask him to play dead in the bathtub or climb into a suitcase naked. When I was showing these photos on class, my teachers and classmates' first question would be "How can you treat your boyfriend like that?" It was quite surprising to me, because I thought it was totally normal. I asked him to pose in my photos and he did it. It was natural for us. Then I started to make photos of us together.

CS: In your artist statements you explain how the Experimental relationship series grows alongside your real life relationship. Can you describe some of the off-camera power dynamics at play? For example, to what extent is it a collaboration between you and your partner? Is he just a model in your work, and if so how did you decide that this would be the case? This seems to be the very foundation for the play on 'power dynamics' that permeates your work.

PL: When I first met him, he was very young. In the beginning, he was just a model in my photographs. He seemed to like following my directions. I asked him to pose & he would do as I said. But after a few years, he became more involved in my photos. He totally understands what I'm doing. Sometimes he would do something different from what I had planned in the photo shoot. It's his way of collaborating with me. Meanwhile our relationship is also changing. He's more grown up and independent now.



Pixy and Moro explore their 'Experimental Relationship'

<https://culturestories.co/an-experimental-relationship/>

LEO XU PROJECTS

CS: In a few pictures your partner is holding the camera's button (with a cord) even though you're arguably represented in the dominant position based on the staging of the photograph. Is this an intentional play on power, the fact that he seems to be submissive but in effect he is the one who chooses when to take the picture by clicking the button?

PL: The cord is an air cable release for film camera. I had to leave it in my photographs because it's always just two of us when taking the photos. He is usually the person who holds the cable release. In the beginning, I handed him the cable release because my hand does not have enough power to squeeze the air bulb. It would make my facial expression very painful. One of the earliest photos in the project called "Relationships work best when each partner knows their proper place", in which I was pinching his nipple and he's clicking the shutter. It seemed like I'm sending a signal to him to take the photo, I think it's like a metaphor for our relationship. Sometimes the one seems to be in control is actually the one who is being controlled. After that, I'm always happy to hand him the cable release.

CS: *Experimental Relationship* feels very soft and warm, aesthetically speaking, while the larger themes of the series circle around questioning issues of gender, heteronormativity and power. The images created are intimately staged in their depiction of complicity and tenderness. Is this you own 'real' connection as a couple shining through, or is this an intentional artistic choice?

PL: I would say both, but mostly 'real'. I didn't start making the photos thinking I'm going to do a project on gender & power. I did it because I really enjoy being with him and I wanted to show that this relationship works. Artistically, I mainly choose bright looks for the photos because I hate the feeling of heavy weighted love type of bs and I want to make relationship feel light and uplifting.



Moro posing as Pixy's 'Home-made Sushi' (2011)

CS: *We love Home-Made Sushi. Can you talk a little bit about that photo? How does it play upon your differing national identities?*

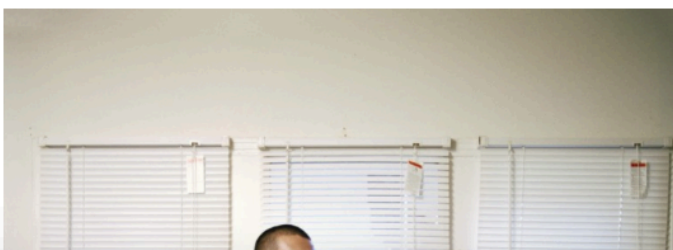
PL: This photo was made because I was invited to do a photo interaction game by Ben Apler. Each photographer needs to make one photo that connects with the photo by another photographer in front of him/her. So the photo I got was from Phil Jung. If I remember correctly, it was a very old hand with green nail paint. The green color really struck me & we happen to have a green scarf at home that looks like seaweed. Also I'm really interested in Japanese serving food on body culture. Another thing that inspired me for this photo is an online joke I heard, about a woman tied her husband up with blanket and belt on the outside for whole day. Anyway, I found it really funny. So all these things come together and gave me the idea of Home-made Sushi. And him being Japanese is also an inside joke for this photograph.

CS: *Because Experimental Relationship is an ongoing photographic series that evolves alongside your existing real-life relationship, how have the images you've created reflect the transformations in your off-camera relationship (or not)?*

PL: Our relationship has ups and downs like all other relationships. Even though I would like to keep the relationship look light and uplifting, sometimes the dark side of the relationship comes out and it finds a way to sneak into my photos. Like the one photo called "Some words are just between us", is one of the very few dark images in this project. Sometimes I would criticise myself for overpowering him and being too protective. This photo is about that. Also in the earlier photos, you will see I'm usually more dominant in the photos, but in recent photos, our relationship became more equal. Even though I'm still trying to protect him, he grows up, in photos and in real life.

PIXY & MORO ON AND OFF CAMERA

Curious to learn more about the dynamic between Pixy and Moro both on and off camera, we asked them to comment separately upon four of our favourite images from the *Experimental Relationship* series. Here's what they said...



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"Relationships work best when each partner knows their proper place" (2008)

Pixy: This is probably the 2nd or 3rd photo in this project. We were still in school in Memphis. This is probably the first image that set the direction for this project. I remember my living room was messy. And I pulled all the stuff out and left the red dustpan purposefully for the photo.

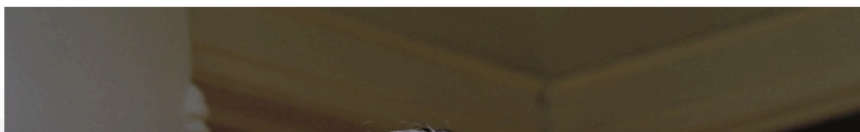
Moro: That was early collaboration we started. I wasn't thinking about anything. I was just obeying whatever you ordered me. We were both busy for school.



"Try to live like a pair of Siamese twins" (2009)

Pixy: That's our first apartment in New York, in Bushwick. It was a basement apartment, but luckily we had a large kitchen that got lots of daylight. I took most of the photos there when living there.

Moro: That's the time we were in Bushwick. & we had the kitchen facing south. It was a poor time. Still poor though.



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"Some words are just between us" (2010)

Pixy: It's our second apartment in New York. The apartment has skylight in the hallway. The light looks holy.

Moro: We shot this under the sky window. We had very bright apartment, expensive though. You wanted to do something using the natural light. I didn't like this photo in the beginning. I'm getting used to it. I kinda look powerless in the photo. I guess that's how you wanted in the photo.



"I can tell that your heart is fogged" (2012)

Pixy: We moved to our 3rd apartment in New York. (yes, in New York you have to move a lot. Luckily we are still in the same apartment.) Somehow I was very stressed at that time. Even though we didn't fight, I felt there was an invisible barrier between us. Taking that photo helped me a little of getting my emotion out.

Moro: We had so many ideas on how to make the glasses foggy, using hot tea, or steam. So I told you to put the glasses in the refrigerator. This is a very setup photo. You had very specific requirements for clothes and props, even my hairstyle. So it was quite easy for me.

All photographs are courtesy of the artist. To learn more about Pixy and Moro's Experimental Relationship, check out her [website](#).

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