

Newfound, *Experimental Relationship*, Text/ Courtney Simchak, March 2016

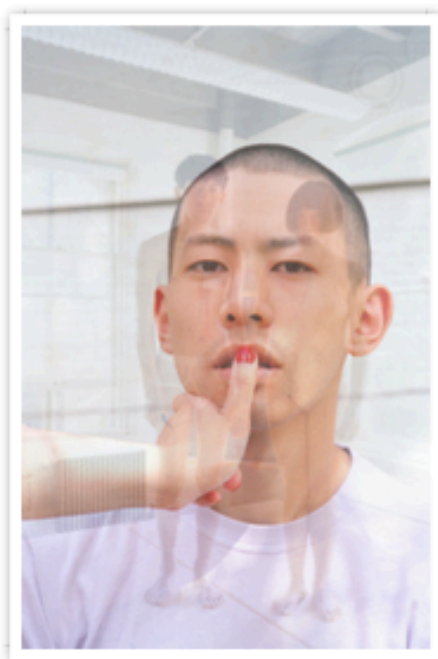
Newfound

MENU



Experimental Relationship

Pixy Liao



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Rebellion is a special kind of wildness. Not only is it an act of freedom, but it is also an act of defiance. While Pixy Liao's work isn't driven by rebellion, her work is defiant. Imagine, if you will, the traditional heterosexual relationship. It might look a little something like this: An older man walks down the street while holding hands with his wife. She is feminine, passive, responsive, probably younger than he is. He is direct in his gait, confident, and maybe taller.

In an effort to share an alternative, Pixy Liao's "Experimental Relationship," explores the possibilities and understandings in a relationship where things might work differently.

During a critique in graduate school, her peers' first remarks about her images were more about her boyfriend's helpless pose than on the photograph itself. The response sparked Liao's imagination and she started working on the basis for the series.

In an interview with Newfound, Pixy Liao explains more about her inspiration for the on-going series, the nature of performance in her work, how the series has changed over time and where she plans on taking it next.

5

COURTNEY SIMCHAK: What inspired your "Experimental Relationship" series?

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PIXY LIAO: I met my boyfriend while I was study photography in Memphis. Before doing this project, I was merely photographing my boyfriend in my various photo class assignments. I kind of use him as a prop in my photos. Sometime I would ask him to be a dead body or be naked and fit in a suitcase. When my class saw my photos, first thing they would say is not about my photos, but "how could you treat your boyfriend like that?" I was surprised because it was all very natural for us. I asked him to pose for me and he did it. They are just photographs. From then on, I start to make self-portraits of us. My best male friend asked me how I could choose a boyfriend the way men choose girlfriends and I thought "why not?" I was really just pushed by people's response to my photos. I wanted to show that this relationship is OK.

SIMCHAK: In "Experimental Relationship," there is a playful exploration into the dichotomies between men and women's traditional gender roles, but it also seriously challenges mainstream assumptions made about heterosexual relationship dynamics. Power is an important element in these photographs. What do you think about the role of power in relationships and gender expectations?

LIAO: I think age and experience have much more to do with power than gender. My boyfriend is 5 years younger than me. When I first met him, I had already worked for a couple of years and he was still in his undergrad, so it's quite natural for me to take up the power role in our relationship. Growing up in China, I was always told to find a man who I can rely on, who is older and more mature. Even though I never believed in this, I wasn't sure if the other way would work either. What if my man is younger and inexperienced compared to me, if I become the stronger one, would this relationship last? These are the things I want to explore in this project.

SIMCHAK: There is a theatrical sense to in your work overall. It's very apparent in this series, but I'm also thinking about the work in your "Stills from Unseen Films" series, where photographs are styled after film stills taken on a film set. What do you think draws you to these cinematic arrangements in your photography?

LIAO: "Stills from Unseen Films" was an earlier project prior to "Experimental Relationship." At that time, I was taking a lot of film production classes. I have always been interested in film, but I'm more interested how a single image can trigger people's imagination.

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SIMCHAK: Your series "Experimental Relationship" exists somewhere between documentary and performance. I believe these images are primarily staged photographs, but it is hard to deny the genuine vulnerability expressed in these images. Do you find it's easier to get close to honesty and vulnerability through performance?

LIAO: In this project, each photo is an experiment itself. I designed the experiments and perform it in front of the camera with Moro. I'll decide what we dress, how we pose, where to look, etc., but subtle things like how the facial expression is and how we actually interact with each other in the photo always happen spontaneously. This is the "documentary" part of my project.

SIMCHAK: Usually an experiment is a process used when someone wants to understand

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something misunderstood, baffling, or unknown. Do you think all relationships are a kind of experiment?

LIAO: Nobody can say for sure if one relationship will work or not, but there are some more experimental than the others. Some people may never think their relationship as experiments, because they are very sure it's the right way even though some will fail in the end, regardless.

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SIMCHAK: Do you find this project helps weave understanding between your Chinese cultural background and Moro's Japanese background?

LIAO: I guess to a certain degree, it does help. For this project, I'm always thinking about our relationship, how we differ from each other. I'm curious about Japanese culture because I'm curious about him. I have learned many things through my own research and living with him. Some of these things I learned appeared in my photos. I'm not sure how much he would learn about Chinese culture through this project, except that he has met a weird Chinese woman.

SIMCHAK: As a project that has developed over a several years, has your relationship to this series changed or expanded? If so, how?

LIAO: This project grows with our relationship. Our relationship changes. In the beginning I was definitely more dominant. He's more grown up now and participates more. I was a sole creator and now I collaborate with him. I also expand this project to other projects. One of the projects we have collaborated on is called "Pimo Dictionary." We collected all of the daily words we use and made it into a dictionary. Another project is a new photo project I have been shooting in the last 3 years called "For Your Eyes Only" which are photographs of body parts. It's less about the specific relationship and more about love messages and performance in daily life.

SIMCHAK: What have you been currently working on? Do you have any exciting projects you'd like us to keep an eye on for?

LIAO: I'm also making videos and sculptures these days. One of the videos I'm working on is about gender identity called "We Girls." Also I've been making sculptures using ready-made material or 3D printed material. Most of these sculptures are related to body. One of the finished works can be found on my website called [Soft Heel Shoes](#).



Born and raised in Shanghai, artist Pixy Liao currently resides in Brooklyn. She is a recipient of NYFA Fellowship, En Foco's New Works Fellowship, and LensCulture Exposure Awards. Her photographs have been exhibited internationally, and she holds a MFA in photography from University of Memphis.