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Pixy Liao

Words

[Caitlin Low](#)

My friend and I are at a zine fair, perusing tables of xeroxed pages and comics and prints. The stall we're at is selling loot bags filled with miscellaneous art things. A lucky dip of sorts. I see a pink, riso-printed postcard of a half-naked man draped over the shoulders of an apathetic woman with a black bob. I have to have it. My friend wants it too. We fight over it. I go home and peg it on the wall above my bed. >



“My grandmother asked me what kind of photos I was showing... ‘Oh, those little porno photos?’”



A few months later, I'm sleepless and drafting an email to Shanghai-raised, Brooklyn-based artist Pixy Liao. The postcard was promoting her debut Australian exhibition at Sydney's Firstdraft Gallery, and the couple in the photo is Pixy and her boyfriend Moro. Pixy's *Experimental Relationship* series (2007-) depicts Moro in tongue-in-cheek, provocative and somewhat demeaning scenarios – naked on a breakfast table, in a dress, with his nipple crippled.

I've since done my research on Pixy. She's like some guardian angel sent down on an A6 piece of cardboard to make art about things that are really important to me – a Western-raised Asian woman in an interracial relationship with a boy who likes flowers. Her work challenges cultural barriers, explores identity and power, and turns the traditional heterosexual gender dynamic on its head.

Experimental Relationship is probably Pixy's best-known project, but I'm equally floored by the rest of her work. Take, for instance, 'Soft-Heeled Shoes' (2013), where Pixy uses a 3D-printed silicon replica of her boyfriend's penis as stiletto heels ("Walking on my boyfriend's soft penis is also metaphor of my relationship with him," she explains). 'Breast Spray' (2015), Pixy's current favourite piece, is exactly that – a breast, attached to a spray, shooting milk. It was inspired by a news story about a woman who robbed a store by spraying her breast milk into the cashier's eyes. Then there's her *For Your Eyes Only* series (2012-), which is all butts and nipples and gold penises. That last one sells it for me. I know I have to talk to her.

The next week, at 6am my time and 3pm New York time, I do. She greets me via a laggy Skype connection and immediately apologises about how early it is on my end. I ask her what she's up to and she explains the Japanese word 'otaku' – describing obsessive people who like to stay at home all day. "Sometimes I go out," she adds.

One thing that strikes me about Pixy's work is how pragmatic and detached she is about her relationship, and relationships in general. To her, they're nothing more than an experiment. "My parents were divorced," she says. "And, you know, a relationship, no matter how intimate it can be, it's not something for certain.

"Especially my current relationship. When it started, I had a lot of doubt, and I wasn't sure it was going to last. It wasn't a relationship I thought was going to work, or that's what I was told."

Moro is five years younger than Pixy. Chinese customs tend to prescribe a heterosexual relationship in which the man acts as the protector and the provider, while the woman

[Previous Page](#)
['Play Station' \(2013\)](#)
[Background](#)
['Nipple Kiss' \(2013\)](#)
[Opposite Above](#)
['Home-made Sushi' \(2011\)](#)
[Opposite Below](#)
['Exam of a Kiss' \(2015\)](#)



Background
'Bath' (2012)
Above

'Try to Live Like a Pair of Siamese
Twins' (2009)
Opposite Below
'It's Never Been Easy to Carry You'
(2013)

is younger and vulnerable. It's deep-seeded. Even as an independent Asian-Australian, I sometimes have trouble escaping this notion.

Moro is also Japanese. "There was another level of not trusting each other because of our nationalities," Pixy says. "It wasn't just about if I trust him, or if he trusts me. It was also whether my family trusts him, or if his family trusts me."

In most Asian cultures, this family approval is so important, even into adulthood. I'm not sure if it was the early-childhood scare tactics, or because I really do respect my parents as people, but I still make most of my life decisions trying to earn their approval. A good, filial daughter. It gets hard when your interests don't align with the stable future they envisioned for you. At the peak of my late-teen 'rebellion', I was still a high-achieving law student living under my parents' roof.

"My parents didn't know what I was doing for many years, but now they know what kind of projects I'm working on," Pixy says. "I think they accept my work more than in the beginning. They're changing their minds. These days, my dad will say, 'oh, I like that photo'. Some of my photos are very controversial and he'll say, 'oh, I like that one'."

"But I think they don't necessarily want my other family to know what I'm doing, because they don't have the faith that other people will understand me as much as they do. There's a lot of misunderstanding. One time my grandmother asked me what kind of photos I was showing at my exhibition. I said, 'not landscape...' and she said, 'oh, those little porno photos?'"

Pixy and I both burst into laughter. "But, you know, with old people, it's very hard to change their minds. I'm just happy she's not preventing me from doing what I'm doing."

And it is plenty surprising to see what Pixy's doing now, considering her fairly traditional Chinese upbringing. "I lived most of my life in Shanghai and I grew up as a good student," she says. "I never failed exams and I was always going to good schools."

"At the same time, I always felt I didn't like who I was – especially my gender identity. I don't like the image the woman has in China. So, when I was growing up, I was a tomboy. I refused to be a girl or do girly stuff or wear a dress."

I remember an old interview where Pixy declined to identify as a feminist. This seems strange to me, because her work – especially those damn dick stilettos – could easily land her as a poster woman for the Female Gaze. "I didn't think I was a feminist from the very beginning," she

explains. "Feminism was never talked about in China, so I didn't even know it existed. But after I started this project, and after people started to bring up the topic of feminism, I looked it up, and there are a lot of ideas that are very similar to what I'm thinking."

"I think you can consider me a feminist, but it would not be right to call my project a feminist work. If feminism is really about equality, my project is not politically correct. If you want to represent feminism, it would be the wrong project. But I myself support feminism."

When Pixy moved to Memphis for grad school, her first time abroad, the city was like a theme park to her. "It's totally different here," she says of her culture shock, at both the landscape and lifestyle. "In the US, I don't think people have such limited ideas of what you should do. That was my first time being able to study art, because I'd just been going to school to get a degree and get a job."

I nod my head knowingly, because 'get a degree and get a job' is probably the Hail Mary of every Asian household. Pixy is curious where I'm from. Singapore, I tell her, but I moved to Australia when I was five. "The person who made that postcard, the curator of my show (curator and arts writer Sophia Cai), she's very similar to you," Pixy says. "She was born in China, but she moved to Australia at a very young age. And I'm very curious to see if the family tradition is still strong even if you're living outside of Asia."

"Girls like you, even though you grew up in a more open society, you still feel the same way. I always thought maybe my work would only appeal to girls with my experiences, you know, girls like me in China. But I can see it actually applies to a lot more people than I thought."

It's oddly comforting opening up to Pixy, and we chat for far longer than I expect. I ask her, finally, if she ended up reinventing herself like she wanted to. "I've done a lot of things I don't think I'd ever do if I still had my life in China," she says. "Like keeping this relationship for so long, which isn't one that people think is a stable one. And keeping this lifestyle as an artist, which is also not a stable one."

Pixy chuckles to herself. "I'm still pursuing my dreams while all my classmates are having a family, and kids, and cars." ☺

