

Born in 1958 in Tianjin, Li Jin belongs to the New Literati School, a group of artists who sought to reinvigorate the tradition of brush-and-ink painting. In these four works made between 2000 and 2017, men and women are shown consumed by different kinds of excess, some brought on by drinking, others led by carnal desire. Indulgence and pleasure are persistent themes in Li's depictions of contemporary life, yet these are often tempered by a sense of melancholy.

In *Erroneous* (2000), a woman dressed only in her underwear is seated, leaning on her elbow, hand propping up her head. There is a small wine pot and cup on the table. As she gazes out from the scene, her drunkenness leads her to daydream. As the inscription on the left reads: 'Leave someone at large to apprehend them afterwards / Leave things to take their own course, they may become clearer'.

While the woman in *Erroneous* appears lost in thought, the woman in *Sex is nothing, nothingness is sex* (2006) meets the viewer's gaze. A man approaches her from the left side of the frame, holding a string of beads. The woman's expression is difficult to read; she appears bored, or perhaps a little disgusted at the encounter taking place. The ink around her face softly bleeds into the surface of the xuan paper, heightening our awareness of the material. The calligraphy title is arranged between the figures, suggesting that the image precedes the text.

Humour is also a significant aspect of Li's work, as is evident in a work such as *Good gas* (2008). Bearing the bearded face of a Confucian scholar, this man sitting on the toilet appears to be a caricature of the artist himself. Li often incorporates his own image into his paintings, whether in physical likeness or in spirit. The title, which has again been inscribed at the top of the composition, speaks to a bodily ritual that has been managed by and through the lavatory. This intervention in nature manifests also in the management of plants; nature is contained within a pot or guided to grow up the walls.

Looking at Li's paintings, we are frequently reminded that the painted surface is touched by both word and image. In *Sleeping under flowers* (2017), a single sleeping figure rests underneath the large bold script. A similar subject appears in Li's 2016 painting *Sleeping in the flowers*, in which a sleeping man is surrounded by a flower garden. However, in the later work, made the following year, it is the text itself which the man sleeps under. As we are invited to negotiate these practices of reading and viewing, one may recall what the 14th-century scholar Song Lian wrote: 'writing and painting are not different Ways, but are as one in their origin' (Clunas 1997, p. 109).

Shanti Shea-An, 2022



#### From top

*Sex is nothing, nothingness is sex*, 2006  
ink and colour on xuan paper

*Good gas*, 2008  
ink and colour on xuan paper

*Sleeping under flowers*, 2017  
ink on xuan paper

*Erroneous*, 2000  
ink and colour on xuan paper

La Trobe University, Geoff Raby Collection of Chinese Art.  
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#### Reference:

Clunas, C 1997, *Pictures and visibility in early modern China*, Reaktion, London.