

LI JIN



Portrait of Li Jin. Photo by Guo Pengfei. Courtesy Ink Studio, Beijing.

LI JIN, *Unsettled Heart (detail)*, 2015, ink on paper, 180 x 98 cm. Courtesy Ink Studio, Beijing.

Stroke of Insight

BY OLIVIA WANG

On a late April morning in Beijing last year, the air was still crisp when I met Chinese artist Li Jin at his studio in the Maquanying area, which lies four kilometers northeast of the city's Caochangdi art district. After greeting me, Li suggested we sit on his outdoor patio, under a verdant canopy of vines and hanging grapes, but then asked if I would be too cold. After we agreed it was a bit chilly, he ushered me into his studio, a cavernous space where he has been working for the past five years.

I noticed we were both wearing black biker jackets, but his was emblazoned with small figures of himself in comical dance poses, rendered in bright red and orange. This was typical of the artist's signature look; he is known for his quirky and flamboyant attire as well as his burly beard. Similarly, his colorful ink paintings depicting scenes of sensual consumption in contemporary China have become his best-known works. These paintings portray figures—often self-portraits—of semi-nude, voluptuous men and women surrounded by festive, extravagant banquets and accompanied by mouthwatering images of food.

The 59-year-old Li has had a successful career both in his native China and across the globe. In 2006, he was one of ten artists selected by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, to attend an artist-in-residency program, where he produced works for the significant group exhibition, "Fresh Ink: Ten Takes on Chinese Tradition," which served to introduce Li and other notable contemporary artists working in the classical medium to an international audience. Back home, he has continued to exhibit regularly and in 2015, held a major retrospective exhibition at Shanghai's Long Museum, showcasing his artistic practice over the past 30 years. The show marked the first time Li's works were presented together, and celebrated several phases in his career, from his early experimentations in ink to his more mature, colorful paintings.

However, Li's audacious and playful portrayals of food and sexually suggestive scenes are a far cry from his traditional upbringing and education. Born in 1958 in Tianjin to a family of intellectuals, Li enjoyed painting from a young age. Following the advice of his aunt, the prominent ink painter Zhou Sicong, Li then studied the same revered medium at the Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts, from which he graduated in 1983. Most of the paintings created during this period are in the social-realist style—

the then-dominant aesthetic taught in art academies—and depicted peasants or laborers. Li explained that the later development of his expressionistic, fluid paintings resulted from his desire to break away from the stifling forms he had learned as a student.

A year after his graduation, the artist visited Tibet for the first time, after having read W. Somerset Maugham's novel based on the life of Paul Gauguin and Irving Stone's biography of Vincent van Gogh. Li was inspired by the plight of these two painters to pursue art single-mindedly, in spite of the hardships they encountered. Li's intention was to retreat from urban life and seek a "primal feeling of life" in Tibet. After witnessing a sky burial, he began to reflect on the limitations of the body and realized that there was little difference between human and animal flesh. With this disturbing yet freeing realization, Li was impelled to seek deeper spirituality in his artworks. After his return from Tibet, he settled in Beijing permanently, where he shared a small *hutong* home with a friend from Tianjin. There, he led a relatively quiet life, painting and cooking, and in the evenings, drinking wine and listening to his friend sing and play guitar. As a reflection of these scenes, he began to paint vignettes of simple delights such as a couple enjoying a cup of tea in a garden, the act of reading or taking a bath with a lover.

In the mid-1990s, China underwent rapid economic and social transformations in an era of liberalization. Li's paintings gradually changed; he started to depict portraits of men, women and food, and incorporate carnal desires into his work. Yet, amid the extravagance and whimsy, these paintings are often tinged with a sense of melancholy. His figures, portrayed with vacant facial expressions, convey feelings of bewilderment and hopelessness. To him, the pleasures of the flesh could only be temporarily satiated. After reveling in these moments of joy, the realities and the futility of life set in.

Human foibles and insecurities are brought forth more strongly in his latest works, which reveal a more intimate and spiritual dimension. New monochrome paintings shown at Beijing's Ink Studio in May last year mark a more somber direction in his career. While their subjects are similar to his earlier, boisterous works, the overall compositions now reflect a period in Li's life that is more introspective and conveys awareness of past consequences. The self-

portrait works in the series recall the lifestyles of ascetics, Zen Buddhist arhats and scholar literati. The larger-than-life figures are nearly two meters in height and are painted using specially made oversized brushes with bold, expressive gestures. In *Trance* (2015), an emaciated figure resembles a faithful hermit; restless brushstrokes reveal the constant pain and suffering that is inevitable in the path to attaining enlightenment. Similarly, the barely perceptible figure in *Unsettled Heart* (2015) is painted in vigorous strokes of black ink, lending the image a violent and destructive aspect. Its troubled eyes appear through the layers of blackness, conjuring a bleak, existential unease. In other works in the series, portraits of vegetables and meat are rendered as independent, sentient subjects, painted in a style verging on abstraction. In *Meat #3* (2015), one might discern the face of a bearded, elderly man within a fatty piece of pork, while *Big Radish* (2015) shows a juicy and bulbous radish mimicking a section of a forested landscape in its rough forms and texture strokes.

In these works, Li successfully translates his sensitivity to the subtleties of color into a nuanced spectrum of textures and shades of black, gray and white. His new paintings evoke the bold calligraphic expressivity of the works of Liang Kai (active in the early 13th century) and Xu Wei (1521–1593), two masters that have much to teach contemporary ink artists, according to Li. This recent shift away from color is also a result of his commitment to traditional ink painting. He says he wants to explore the special characteristics of the medium itself—the malleable washes of ink tones and the sensation of lifting and pressing a loaded brush, or letting it crash onto the paper. This metamorphosis in Li's work is seen as emblematic of contemporary China, and a documentation of the transition from a society focused on conspicuous consumption to one that is more reflective.

I asked Li about the motivation for experimentation and production, to which he replied: "The present moment has its own beauty and its own sense of life, which relates to my age and my receptiveness. This is why I must take this step forward. Only by following my heart do I feel I'm truly making art." It seems that Li's artistic journey, which began when he was a young, impressionable wanderer in Tibet, in search of an authentic and primitive life, has finally evolved into a deeper, spiritual dialogue with the language of ink.