

reveals his increasing maturity and his willingness to express his inner emotions.

Maggie Pai

Yang Mao-lin at the Crown Art Center

Before the Taiwanese artist Yang Mao-lin began his *Made in Taiwan* series in 1990 in which he has sought to qualify the identity of Taiwan, he had already become known for his works using mythology to criticize or satirize Taiwan's society. Using slogans, signs, symbols, myths and historical facts, and figures drawn from Taiwan's colonial history, aboriginal culture, and contemporary Taiwanese society, Yang sought to express his deep concern about the lack of local identity and the negative effect of modernization and Western influences accompanied by environmental pollution and the destruction of urban and country life. These paintings were particularly noteworthy for their harsh somber colors, the layering together of separate images, the scenes painted beneath the surface, and the underlying feeling of strife and despair.

Included in this show were several paintings using familiar Chinese and Western icons, combined with adult and children's toys, to emphasize the ridiculous state of Taiwanese society today. Though still critical, the paintings were ironically amusing presenting a lighter side of Yang's psyche. In *Superman and Wukung* (1996), two of the most famous cartoon characters confront each other over the spread thighs of a woman exposing her genitals; the inflated, bright blue thighs resembling a sex toy. In the background a small Chinese pavilion contains a carp, the Chinese symbol for man, leaping from a pool of curving waves into a cloud-laden sky; water and the clouds being a metaphor for sexual union.

The main portion of the exhibition was devoted to six paintings. In two sets, in which

Yang continues to decipher the prevailing confusion over the emotional phenomenon of Taiwanese national and cultural identity. In these oil and acrylic works Yang demonstrates his mastery of color, shape, and line by using saturated colors combined with pastels, giving them a delicacy and a sense of beauty absent in his previously distraught works.

Yang continues to use dual frames in his paintings in which contracting scenes combine to form a whole. In the first set, instead of using his familiar technique of painted, faintly discernible scenes below the painting's surface he recreates old Taiwanese postage stamps in delicate colors, juxtaposing them against traditional symbols; the stamps communicate Yang's search of the past and its relevance today.

In both *Dragon and Tiger*, painted in 1995, Yang uses the metaphor of a child's

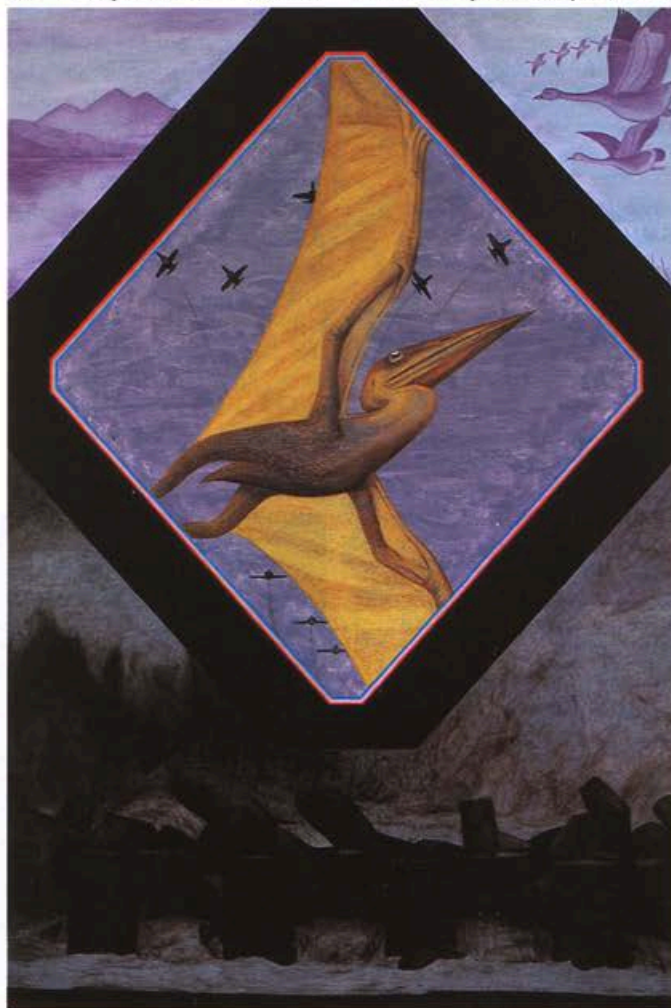
wooden puzzle with all the square pieces misplaced while one blank space indicated that the puzzle needs to be rearranged. In *Tiger* the upper portion of the painting is occupied by a puzzle with a jumbled-up tiger in the shape of a rabbit, clothed in exquisitely stripped blue and white tiger's skin. As Yang explains, the tiger, which does not look like a tiger, expresses Taiwan's confused identity; blue and white are the colors of the Kuomintang, Taiwan's ruling party. The base of the painting is occupied by a recreated postage stamp painted in shades of soft red. Here the farmer, in his conical hat, and his buffalo, once an important part of Taiwan's rural life, are shown against an idyllic background of farmhouses and mountains.

In *Phoenix* (1995), the setting becomes more somber introducing a new recurring motif, the pterodactyl, one of

the prehistoric creatures which Yang also uses in the other three paintings as a metaphor for the predatory foreign powers which in past have tried to conquer Taiwan. The center of the painting is occupied by a black-edged diamond shape with a yellow pterodactyl in flight against a blue sky filled with warplanes. At the base of the painting waves break over rocks indicating impending typhoons and destruction. The old postage stamp at the top of the painting is again idyllic with purple-colored flying geese and mountains against a pale blue sky. Yang believes that in the past the phoenix, which he represents as a pterodactyl, signified immortality and, like the geese, brought good news, but now the geese bring only bad news from mainland China.

The second set of pictorially beautiful paintings demonstrates Yang's complete mastery of composition, color, and metaphor, but to be fully appreciated, they also require some understanding of past attempts to colonize Taiwan. In *Don't Forget Your Homeland* (1995), a triangular section in the center of the painting is outlined by 14 tigers on a yellow background based on the flag of the 14-day existence of the Republic of Formosa in 1895. The green background within the triangle is the green of the old "Double Happiness" cigarette packet. Within this space a war memorial for the Japanese and Taiwanese stands on the top of mountains while to the right guided missiles succeed in destroying aircraft seen falling from a sky filled with pterodactyls and other aircraft. A portrait of Li Hung-chang, the Chinese minister who was responsible for handing over Taiwan to Japan after the 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki, occupies the left-hand corner of the painting. In the opposite corner, a large rock with the calligraphic words "Don't Forget Your Homeland" written by Chiang Kai-Shek is a subtle reminder of yet another "visitor" to Taiwan.

After the lifting of martial law in 1987 the whole of Taiwan society was chaotic. Now



Yang Mao-lin, *The Story of Taiwan, Phoenix*, 1995, oil and acrylic, 218 x 140 cm. Photo courtesy of Crown Art Center.