

Grand Vision

Taiwan, though a part of China, has over the past five decades gradually developed its own sense of independence.

Reflections on this process, and its attendant problems, are significant in the work of a number of Taiwan artists.

Yang Mao-lin, however, has made the issue of Taiwan's identity the central theme in

his work.

By Ian Findlay



And Identity



Since the sixteenth century, Taiwan has had many faces, not all of them beautiful. It has been by turns a colony, an imperial outpost, and a place of refuge, as well as a frequent political playground for foreigner and Chinese alike. Since 1949, when China's Nationalist government and Chiang Kai-shek retreated to Taiwan, the island has regularly been at the center of political and social controversy. Under a draconian Martial Law Act of 1949 freedom to examine and to question Taiwan's history and leadership was virtually outlawed. For artists the system strangled the creative process, essentially silencing their art as an independent political and social voice. It was rare indeed to find art that was at all critical of any aspect of Taiwan life while the minority mainland Chinese ruled the majority Taiwanese.

This situation changed dramatically, however, after the lifting of Martial Law in 1987. Since then artists have been able to tackle almost every subject with little anxiety over censorship. In a commotion of activity artists have produced an enormous range of work on politics, social questions, traditional values, and cultural identity. Young artists such as Huang Chin-Ho, Wu Tien-chang, Lee Ming-tse, Mei Dean-e, Hou Chun-ming, Lu Hsien-ming, Kuo Jen-chang, and Yang Mao-lin

have made art which highlights and questions many of the problems confronting modern Taiwanese society. Their works are bold explorations in comment and observation, criticism and analysis. Of these artists, Yang Mao-lin, 43, however, more than most, has made the search for Taiwan's political and cultural identity central to all his major works. While he has made other series beginning in late-1980s, such as *Behavior of Game Playing* and *Yun Mountain Memorandum*, his series entitled *Made in Taiwan* is his major accomplishment. His work is an affirmation of Taiwan as an individual society which has gained strength from its turmoil and from which a distinct culture is gradually emerging. Taiwan cannot repudiate any part of its past if it is to be a whole, if the Taiwanese are to have a strong cultural and personal identity.

"In three hundred years, politics in Taiwan has changed greatly through other influences. Today, Taiwanese are now beginning to know themselves and understand themselves and to believe in themselves. We can do anything, now," Yang says. "But Taiwan can't reject or chose any single part of the influence—Japanese, American, or Chinese—to reject. It must accept all of them for they are part of its culture."

Yang's *Made in Taiwan* series—the third part of which he expects to complete soon—has been a truly ambitious undertaking. It is a both an investigation and a search—an intelligent and knowledgeable one—not only into the essence of modern Taiwan's identity, but also a deeply felt personal voyage. His work ranges across a broad front—historical, social, politi-

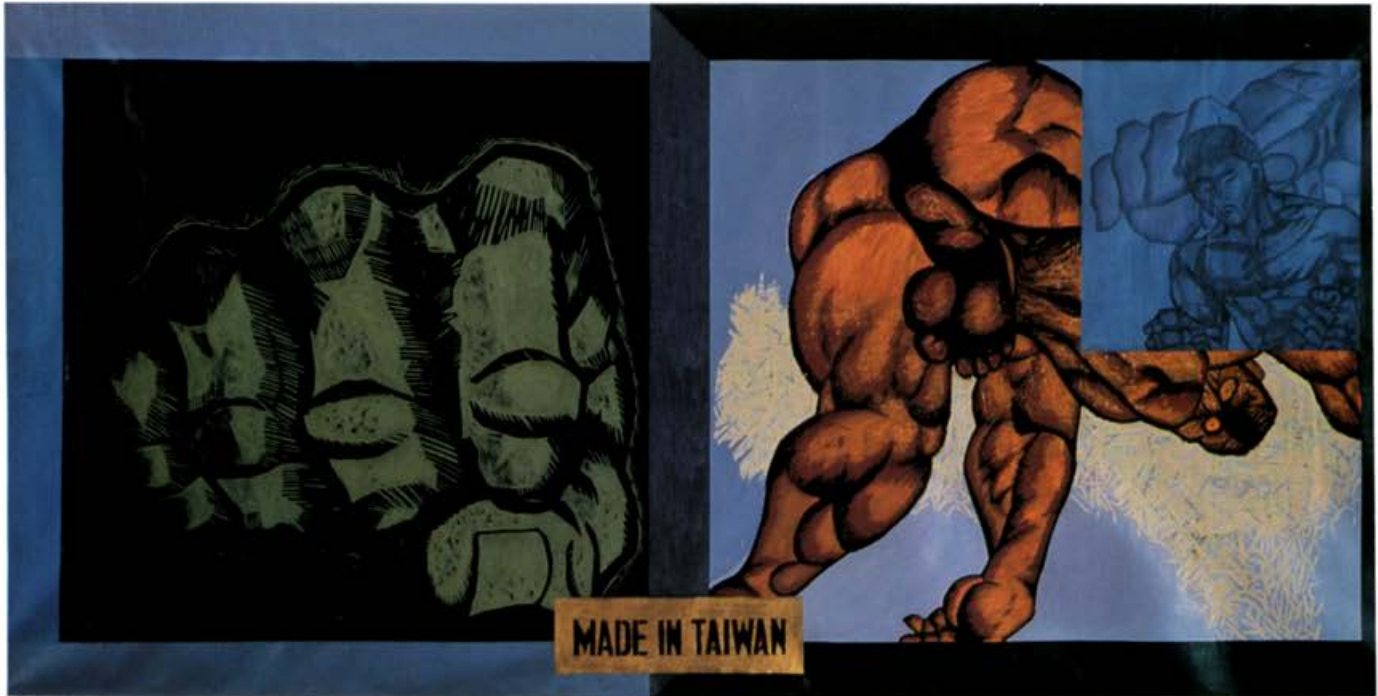
cal, cultural, familial, and artistic. The spark which inspired his change of direction as an artist was a mere aside in an American film of the mid-1980s which suggested that anything made in Taiwan was of inferior quality. The comment and its implications were deeply felt by Yang. It was not simply a slight on the quality of what was made in Taiwan, according to Yang, but behind it there was the suggestion that Taiwan lacked a recognizable and cohesive culture. Emotion told him there was a recognizable culture, but his intellect and instinct suggested otherwise.

"Taiwan is an island whose culture is a mix of local cultural influences and those from abroad. Taiwan's culture is a 'from-everywhere culture' which has become its own," says Yang. "Often when foreigners look at Taiwan's culture they see that its special trait is that it is a mix. They often cannot see the original. Even Taiwan people often can't separate their own culture from the influences because it is such a mix."

Yang does not seek to escape the cultural mix that is Taiwan. It is an exciting concoction to him for it contains ingredients as varied as those from mainland Chinese, traditional religious and dynastic beliefs, the eccentric dichotomy of Japanese and Western conservatism and liberalism, both ancient and contemporary myths and legends, particularly from the United States. He does not wish to either escape from the past or reject the disorder of the influences. He appreciates only too well that if he is to satisfy himself that there is a distinct contemporary Taiwan culture then he must understand each historical, cultural, political, and social thread that



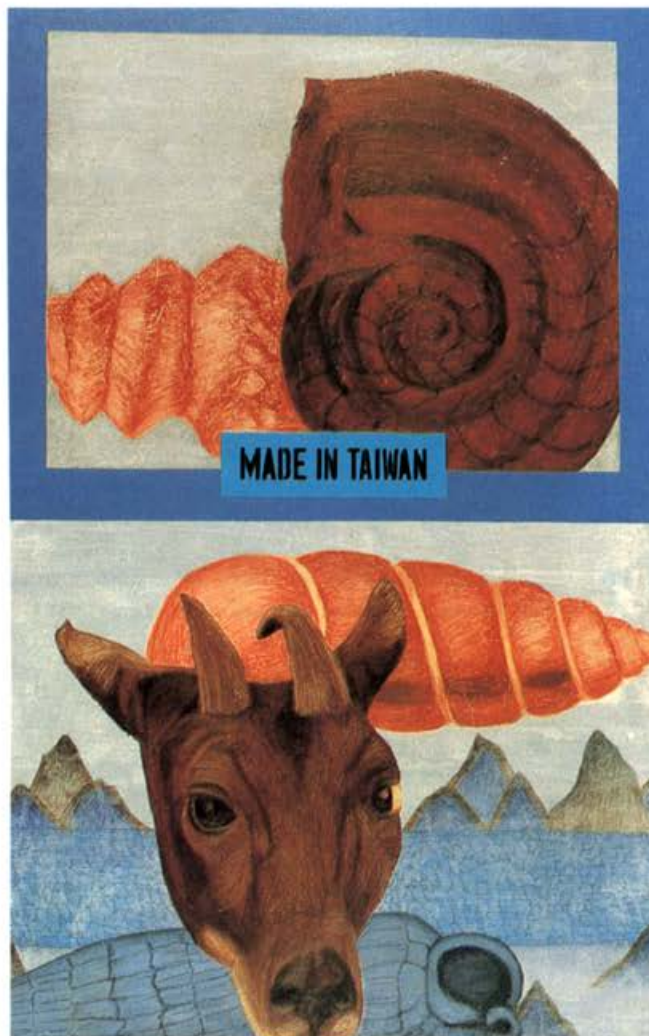
Yang Mao Ling, *Zealandia Memorandum L9401*, 1994, oil and acrylic, 194 x 324 cm.



Yang Mao Ling, *Made In Taiwan - Limbs - Trunk Sign Section VI*, 1990, mixed media, 175 x 350 cm.

combines to form it. Yang says that there can be no true understanding of the present and no substantial passage into the future if he cannot come to grips with the past. His series from the early 1990s called *Yun Mountain Memorandum*, each of which has a number for the title, reflects that past as well, and Like his *Made in Taiwan* series, his concern for the land and sea of Taiwan. The animals and the shells, the plants and the land appear to us almost as museum pieces. Indeed, Yang, in talking about Taiwan's culture notes that much of the original culture, including the lengthy aboriginal culture of Taiwan, can now only be seen in museums.

Yang's Taiwan reveals an abundance of simple and esoteric data, obscure intellectual reference and clear historical fact. Yet in retelling the political and cultural history of the island, there is a clarity borne out of thorough research. His central starting point was not highbrow history or politics, but a deeply personal one. He has tried to maintain as objective an approach as possible and his work shows this. There is no strident voice here. The academic research of others has lent a distanced intellec-



Yang Mao Ling, *Yun Mountain Memorandum M9119*, 1991, mixed media, 116 x 73 cm.

tual sheen to the meaning of Taiwan as an international entity which produces goods for the global market and in passing lend it a cultural history of sorts. Yang, on the other hand, looked closer to home, his own family, to begin the process of understanding Taiwan's past and progress towards a modern identity. In the work which he has made over the past decade he asks, in this age of cross-Straits discord highly pertinent question: What is Taiwan culture? It is, according to Yang, no single thing. It is essentially a hybrid of three centuries of invasion and exploitation from within and without, personal and national ambition, and struggle with and the freedom from the constraints of tradition.

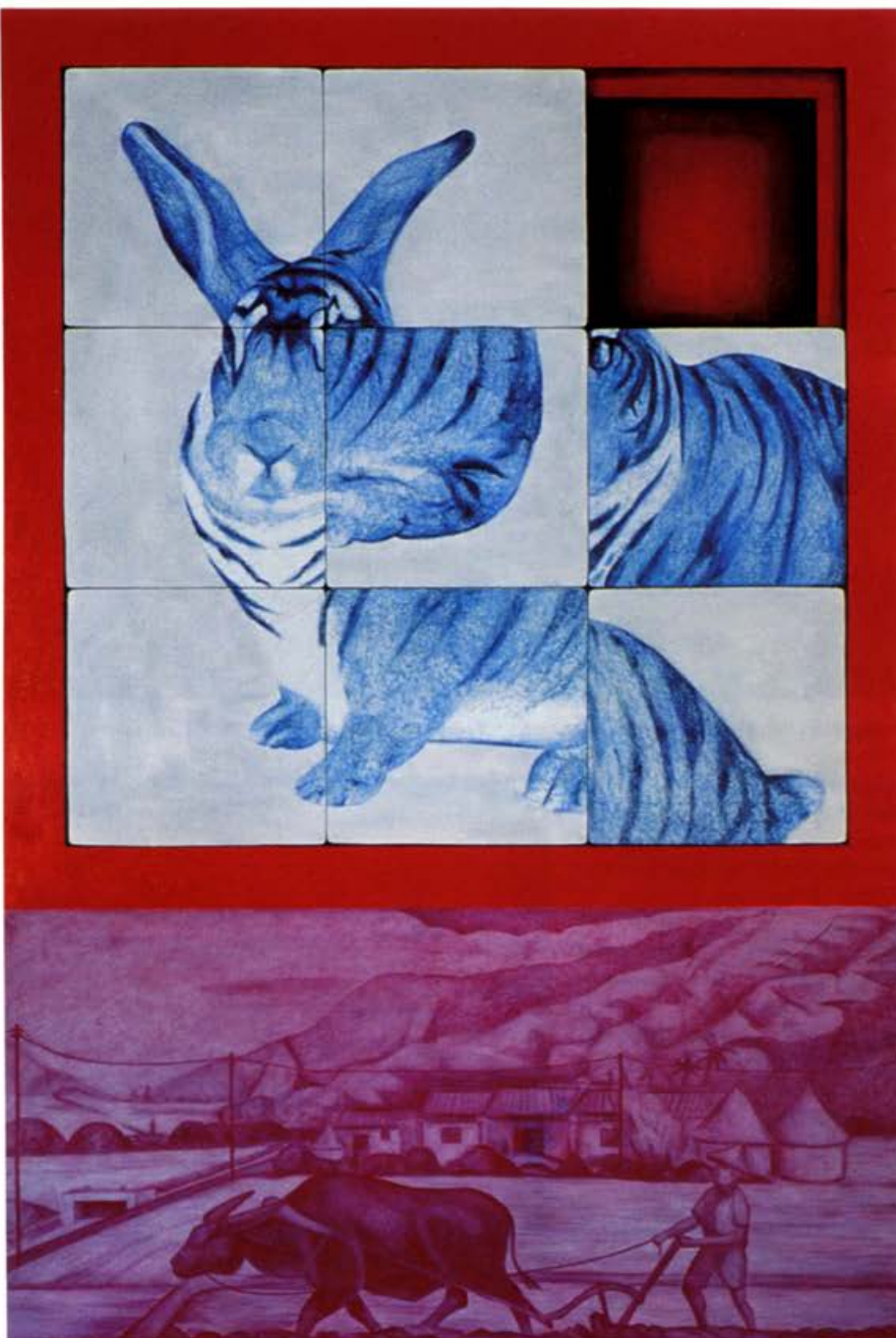
Yang's early impassioned works of the late 1980s show him depicting the vigorous struggle between the land and tradition, industry and modernity. While he brings into play such traditional figures as Kung-Kung and Hor-yi in individual works, it is the series called *Behavior of Game Playing* in which Yang simplifies the drama of struggle in works such as those entitled *Fighting Section I to VII*. Here the colors are strikingly clear, browns and

yellows. The line of the muscle mass of clasped hands or men in the throws of individual combat possesses the exaggeration of the line and action of comic-book characters touched by the hand of the great muralist Deigo Rivera. Here is Yang's nod to revolutionary socialist art but without the stiff unreal posturing of the figures. These pictures also represent the pictorial, as well as the intellectual, beginnings of Yang's own personal search.

"There are two important reference points here for me to begin to create the work I have. Through the land I am looking for my position and my identity as a Taiwanese. And through history and culture I can find today's Taiwan culture and position in the world," he says. "The search for me began at home when I started really listening to my grandfather arguing about politics when I was small. I wanted to find out why in my home there was such disagreement. From that, and from the life around me, I found the direction that I wanted to take in creativity."

The course Yang set for himself with the drama of his early work was that of a narrator whose role is to pull back the veils of history and change. The symbolic and heroic drama which suggested oppression and the struggle against it was not to be lost in his *Made in Taiwan* series which he began in 1989. The *Made in Taiwan* series is in reality three separate series, each of fifteen works, and each depicting a particular stage in his search for the answer to his questions: What is Taiwan and what is its culture? And by working his way through these he would find himself as an artist and as a person with an identity from a place that had hitherto been an unfocused mix. His paintings in these three separate series can be basically divided into three parts. Yet while each part of the series speaks to an exclusive problem or era, they also serve to emphasize in Yang's mind the acceptance and/or rejection of particular aspects of the whole which make it difficult to define Taiwan's culture, and its future.

"I thought to use painting to 'write' Taiwan's history. The first part of my *Made in Taiwan* series was about contemporary society and politics in Taiwan. The second part was begun in 1992 and was about Taiwan's history from the arrival of the first foreigners to the late nineteenth century. The third part is about contemporary culture, hence the robots and the cartoon characters. These series reflect the three generations that



Yang Mao Ling, *TAoyuan Memorandum - Tiger L9501*, no date given, oil and acrylic, 218 x146 cm.

my family represents.

"The culture has in a strange way somehow come together. But really what is being said is that if I don't want my grandfather's culture or my father's culture and if I don't want to accept contemporary culture with all its foreign and local influences then I don't have a culture or an identity.

"Even though I accept this cultural mix, I feel uneasy about the future. If Taiwan were returned to mainland China there would be yet another political change which would undoubtedly reject the culture we have created for ourselves much in the same way the Qing, the Japanese, and

the Nationalist rejected the past and refused to adopt it into a growing cultural identity. They wanted a cultural identity, but on their own terms."

While there is a certain surreal quality to the work of Wu Tien-chang, a colorful, brisk comic, and local character to that of Huang Chin-ho, and a moody hard-edge to the work of Lu Hsien-ming, Yang's works represent a more fully realized narrative of the whole spectrum of the Taiwanese experience. Each series is rich in the diversity of symbols which make up the panorama of Taiwan's past and present. The exception is that there are virtually no religious elements or symbols in Yang's

work which is odd given the strong Buddhist, Taoist, and Western religious influences. The dual-picture character of the *Made in Taiwan* series enables Yang to present perceptive juxtapositions of ideas and images, character and action, symbol and reality to the viewer in a manner that is immediately accessible without prior knowledge.

Shells, plants, vegetables, animals, historical figures and objects, contemporary cartoon characters, and private symbol are woven together as a narrative that finally achieves its own voice. It is a vision that is greater than the sum of its part. The artist here has become, not the controller or the omnipotent hand which makes the images but is the medium through which his collection of symbols and visual anecdote pass into a separate identity which Yang has striven for throughout all his work.

The graphic nature of much Yang's work does not detract from the overall painterly qualities. His colors closely fit his subject, indeed, the subjects often dictate the colors he uses. In his historical pieces there is a darker hue to the colors. In his most recent contemporary series there is the lighter and more vibrant tones of comic and graphic art, which is, as he notes, "much lighter since it is influenced by my children's culture of toys, movies, cartoons, and comics, all of which are brightly colored." The line, too, is carried over from one series to another and is reconciled to the subject matter: the hard edge of the cartoon characters, the bold line of muscled figures in struggle, the softer line of the historical figures and plants.

Each individual aspect of Yang's work presents the artist with its own set of problems—line, color, and construction—

as does the arrangements of these on this picture's surface. Each theme also throws up its particular problems—accuracy of detail and importance of subject. Each idea, and the adapting of new ideas, must be held to consistently if the narrative is to have power, not in one painting alone, but in a series, and in multiple series. To achieve an unfailingly accurate and exciting tale in bringing together all that is Taiwan's identity, all that is, in essence *Made in Taiwan*, begins not with the brush, but with the book and personal observation.

"The problem lies in studying new things. When I finish one series then it is closed. I don't go back. I have to start a new one and to do this I have to be open to new ideas as in studying my children's culture and how it influences me. In some ways this can be seen as a problem. New ideas are a problem, but I don't have a problem with technique because that I have that already," says Yang. "I like to use characters like Superman and the Japanese cartoon character Goko because they are contemporary culture and they represent the most basic cultural aspects of today's youth culture. Some people see them as without any value. But this is not true. Perhaps today's low cultural icons may become the high culture of tomorrow. I have to look to popular culture as it is part of our cultural identity. Besides being a painter I also have to be an historian, sociologist, and so on. So it is a question of time. I don't have time. I really don't have any other problems, other than perhaps that I am poor."

Yang Mao-lin's voyage has been one of discovery through all aspects of his culture as well as his personal world. It has changed him, he notes, making him a much

more considerate artist, a much calmer individual with an eye to the future.

"I have discovered the tragedy of our history. Through three generations we have gone through the Qing dynasty, Japanese occupation, and the government of the Kuomintang [Nationalist]. That represents the three last generations of my family. Myself, my father and my grandfather. I have discovered that each generation has gone through many changes, politically, socially, and culturally. But with each change the previous changes were rejected," says Yang. "The Qing dynasty was rejected by the Japanese, the Japanese rejected the Qing, and the Nationalists rejected both previous influences. The changes have not been reflected in each step of the process of our development though some have been reflected in our culture that hasn't quite meshed yet.

"So the points of cultural reference have disappeared and each new generation has had to look for and to create a new culture. My grandfather was brought up in the Qing dynasty but I have no real reference point or contact to that era. My father was educated during the Japanese occupation and was educated in Japan and used to speak Japanese at home. But his cultural background was rejected by the Nationalist. Now I have to look elsewhere with my own children." Δ



Yang Mao Ling, *Superwoman and Goku*, 1996, oil and acrylic, 194 x 272 cm.