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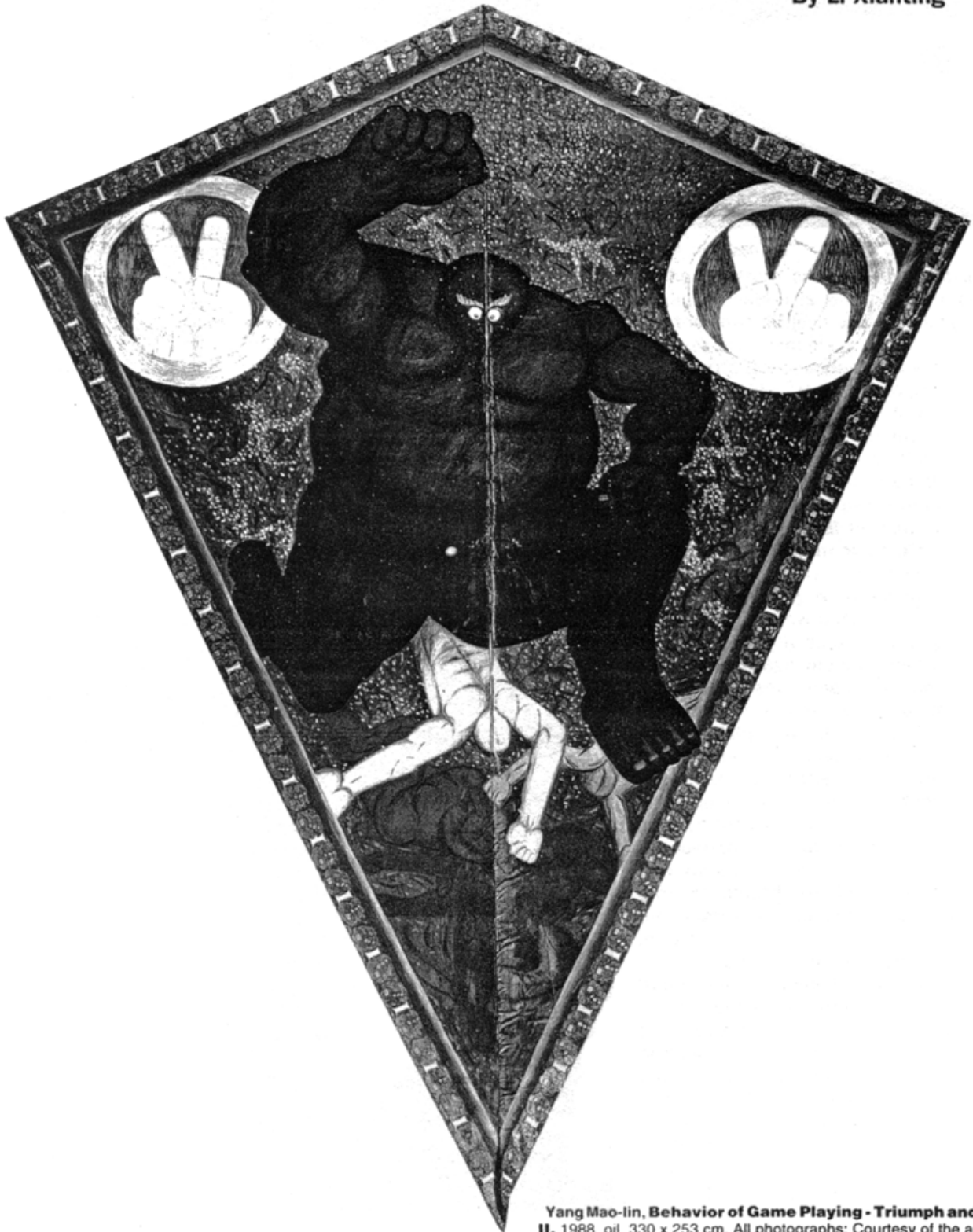


Three Taiwan Artists: Yuan Jia-hong, Hsiao-Jung,
Sung-tzu Hou * Layering Tradition and Modernity
Thuy Anett * Hanoi Painter: Phan Luan

In A Sea Of Cultures

The Taiwanese artist Yang Mao-lin uses his art to explore Taiwan's modern culture against the backdrop of the globalization of culture through mass-consumerism.

By Li Xianting



Yang Mao-lin, **Behavior of Game Playing - Triumph and Strength II**, 1988. oil. 330 x 253 cm. All photographs: Courtesy of the artist and Lin & Ken Gallery, Taipei.

The globalization of culture is one of the principal features of contemporary art. There are two principal reasons for this situation. Firstly, the West has come to global prominence through its development in economics and information technologies, and in so doing has become one of the main sources of culture. Secondly, the West was the first to develop the sort of modern society chiefly characterized by its industrial civilization. This in turn enabled those societies to expand and colonize. The result of this was a suppression of many indigenous cultures and the forced introduction of Western culture. Yet, in the post-colonial era non-Western societies have been obliged to consider their own cultures and development and study the paths that the West has followed. In many cases this has led, in varying degrees, to the adoption of a Western-style approach, in art as well as in business and politics.

An open-minded approach to this globalization of culture is an important part of any active response to the challenge that this phenomenon presents. From the perspective of art, this means acknowledging that art has become an international language. In addition, we see that art has become the most revolutionary and the most suitable form of global language in the contemporary world. Modern art has opened up new worlds of possibility and means of expression. This development has simul-



Yang Mao-lin, *On the Spot of Murdering Kun*, 1986, oil, 160 x 260 cm.

taneously been a process of increasing association; those Western artists who created modern art absorbed the nourishment of non-Western art and cultures. Actually, any new culture will, in its formative stages, be influenced by and in turn absorb portions of other cultures.

The core question is: How did Western artists combine aspects of their own cultures and those of non-Western cultures to produce a new artistic vocabulary? I think the important thing was their cultural standpoint and language.

For non-Western artists, then, the important question is whether they can face their own difficult and confusing existential environments.

Art's transcendence of ethnicity and nationality often stems from its uses of iconic images and forms that have wide cultural resonance. But, speaking only in terms of the basic struggle of the artistic process, the artist must first grasp his own interior feelings and the fact that he must reside within the environment of a specific ethnicity and locality, with its attendant culture and society. No artist can wholly disregard this environment as he creates. Also, simply as a result of globalization, language models, methodologies, forms, and images—all so-called fragments of culture—will automatically be part of the context in which any work of art is created. Thus, non-Western artists, in accepting the verbal forms and methodologies of Western contemporary art, self-consciously or otherwise, come to understand and utilize them from their own standpoint. In this process, an individual situated within a specific cultural matrix becomes the starting point for art.

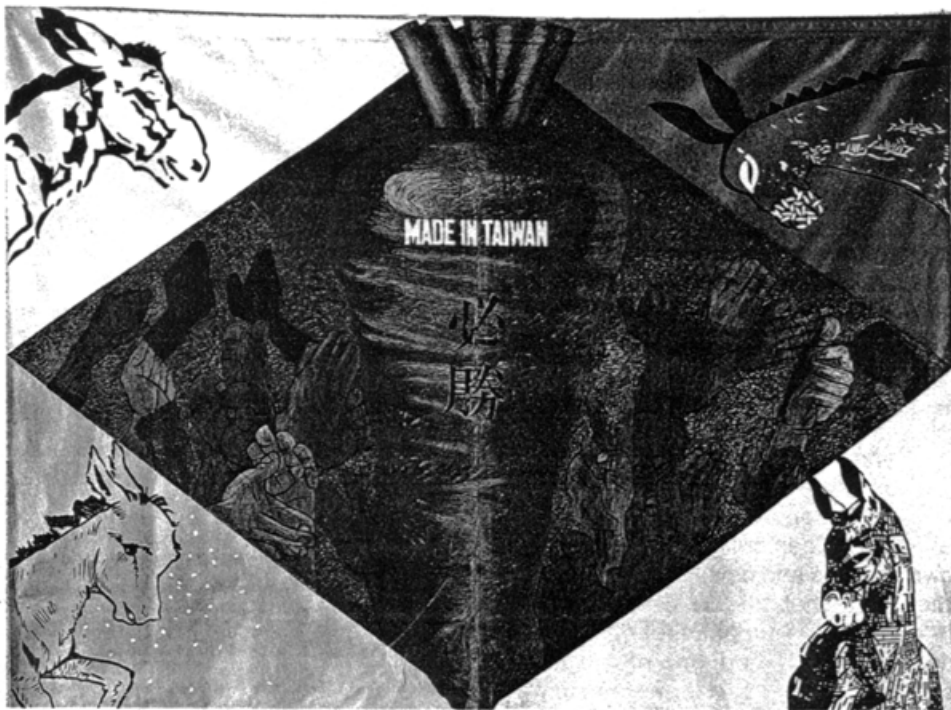
Seen from another perspective, by the time many non-Western countries had discovered Modern art, Europe had already basically completed the creation of most verbal models. As a result the room for creativity in this area was extremely limited. In addition, since the 1960s the focus of art in the West has shifted from language formulation to attention to questions of contemporary identity, biological relationships, women's rights, and various kinds of socio-political issues. Seen in this light,



Yang Mao-lin, *Behavior of Game Playing - Fighting Section I*, 1987, oil, 254 x 303 cm.

the questions addressed by artists, both Eastern and Western, are similar. Thus, contemporary art is an internationally simultaneous art, and this forces all artists to face their own personal existential environments in order to develop creative power. The reason why an American artist is an American artist is exactly because he is profoundly affected by freedom and mass consumer culture; only then will he tackle Expressionism, Abstraction, and Dadaism, which have their roots in Europe, and creativity transform them into Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art.

Looking now at the condition of globalized culture, we see that mainland China and Taiwan, like other non-Western areas, are parts of the same cultural sphere. If we situate ourselves there, we can better understand and respect the works of the Taiwanese artist, Yang Mao-lin. Though he has open-mindedly taken the useful aspects of globalized culture and incorporated them into his own work, Yang is solidly situated within his own life and native cultural environment. His work has been a process of inquiring deeply into new sources, as even a cursory glance through the ten years of his career reveals. As with those artists who are seen by critics as forming the new generation of important Taiwanese artists, including Wu Tien-chang, Huang Chin-ho, Lien Te-cheng, and Wu Ma-li, among others, who face in their works contemporary Taiwanese culture, Yang Mao-lin is representative of such an emergence of contemporary art in Taiwan.



Yang Mao-lin, *Made in Taiwan - Slogan Section VI*, 1990, mixed media, 265 x 350 cm.

Yang Mao-lin first appeared in the art scene before the lifting of martial law in Taiwan. His 1986 *Myth* series, which includes works such as *Chy You's Fate* and *On the Spot of Murdering Kun*, uses the tragic hero as a symbol. The canvases are full of images of struggle, battle, and injury in a blend of warm colors that convey the artist's anger and sorrow. He took the tragedy of his own personal history and that of his family under the authoritarian rule of the Martial Law era and brewed it within his hatred of authoritarianism and deep-seated sense of powerlessness. Out of this he created not only his independent

and free consciousness, but also feelings that all can share. This is one of the reasons why Yang has become an artist who has earned the attention of the whole of Taiwan.

In the period of his series *Behavior of Game Playing*, the tragedy disappeared and the imagery of struggle took on a heroic feeling. The paintings' surfaces are filled with simplified symbols of giant figures locked in combat. The colors are hotter and fierier than those of the *Myth* series. As Tung Si-pai wrote in his article, "I-shu yu Hsien-shih Chih Chian (In Between Art and Reality)" in *Hsiung-shih Mei-shu*: "In those years when the streets of Taiwan were filled with the shouts, protests, bricks, billy-clubs, and pipes that so enraged the people, Yang Mao-lin's paintings also became more violent, with a series of struggling figures that profoundly moved the viewer." However, from the perspective of artistic language, the works of these two periods have not yet exhibited anything uniquely individual. The Chinese *Myth* series clearly shows the influence of German Expressionism and Italian Transavantgarde art, particularly that of Sandro Chia, and symbolic and metaphorical expressionism have in the past 100 years become quite commonplace. One can see that in many cases the artist merely uses this form as a shell in which he inserts his own consciousness and emotions. It has not yet been remade into his own personal language—the artist's personalization through individualistic use of color, form, style, and composition, of personal or public images and symbols. These ele-



Yang Mao-lin, *Zealandia Memorandum*, 1993, oil and acrylic on canvas, 194 x 260 cm.

ments are not clear enough in the *Myth* series. In the *Behavior of Game Playing* series, there is a somewhat cartoonish and conceptual feel, as well as the prominent use of powerful and heroic figures, which are all common images of revolutionary periods, as can be seen in the works of Honoré Daumier during the French Revolution, Mexican mural paintings, and in the comics and posters of the Russian Revolution and Chinese Cultural Revolution.

The distinctive locality of contemporary art is twofold. It must resonate within the local cultural environment and at the same time it must create for itself a place within the entire history of art; it must exhibit a locality that is not ignorant of the international. On this point, Yang's *Made in Taiwan* series may be said to have succeeded in creating an internationally meaningful contemporary local culture.

In the final turning point of a recent American movie *Toy Story*, one of the main characters, a toy spaceman, lifts up his clothing and reveals an eye-opening line of text: "Made in Taiwan." This more than suffices to show the international recognizability of this phrase. Yang was sensitive to the cultural significance that lies behind this image and took the lead in using a pop style. At the same time, in this composition he uses the same kind of exaggerated body code found in *The Behavior of Game-Playing*, particularly the "V" for victory and thumbs-up hand gestures, and the "carrot and stick" story from Aesop's fables, among others. All of these serve



Yang Mao-lin, *Pinocchio's Nose*, 1996, oil, acrylic on canvas, 116.5 x 160 cm.

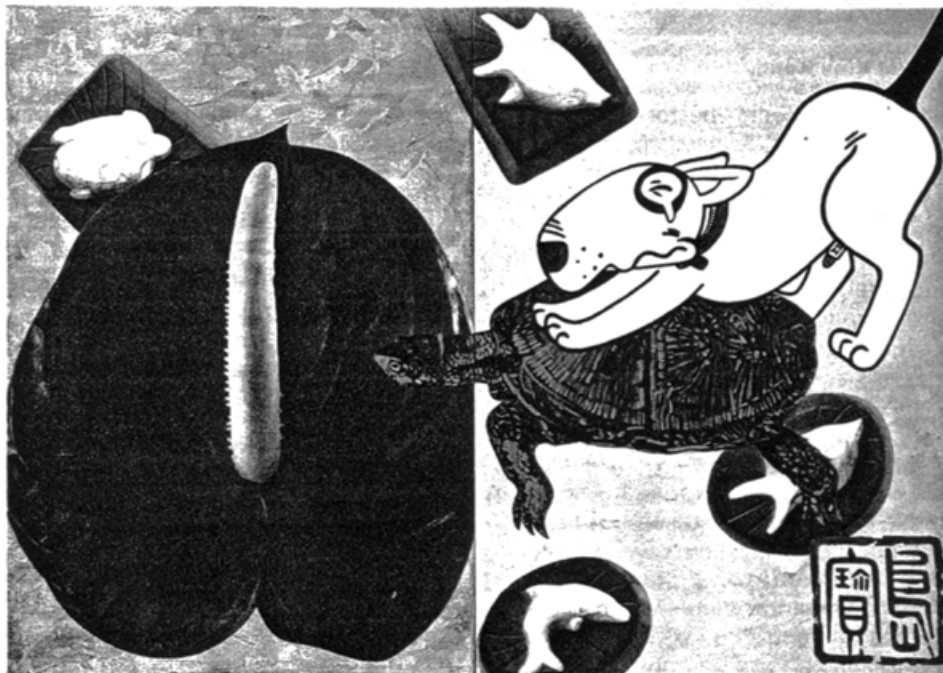


to give the work a humorous, ironic flavor. The body imagery and the exaggeratedly large victory V hand gestures are characteristic of strong emotion but are softened by his use of color and his brush technique. The body images, especially because they are presented alongside the omnipresent "Made in Taiwan" phrase, become ironic conceptual symbols. The allusion to Aesop's fables provides a further ironic analogy. This is reminiscent of the political pop of the early 1990s in mainland China—both refer to local culture in the wake of global

consumerism. The difference was that the mainland Chinese artists took images of Western consumer society and set them against images of communist consciousness as a way to express the sense of absurdity that resulted from their long education against communism and the current assault of consumer culture.

What Yang Mao-lin expressed was mainstream doubts about Taiwan's transition to a successful international consumer culture. Is culture just another product made in Taiwan? Are toys such as the transformers in *Made in Taiwan* the crystallization of culture? The Mainland Chinese political pop and Yang Mao-lin's conceptual pop, or pop-style art, both make use of a simplicity and symbolic language to raise questions about contemporary culture that are as simple and easy to understand as they are profound and difficult to answer. Independently, they have chosen the same sort of culturally symbolic compositions and language. This reflects the complex and multilayered condition of contemporary culture in non-Western regions.

In his more recent works, *Yun Mountain Memorandum*, *Lily Memorandum*, *Zealandia Memorandum*, *Taoyuan Memorandum*, and *Taoyuan Topography*, Yang has continued the same sort of cultural inquiry. Within these series we can discern the artist's thoughts as a whole. He has taken the fundamental question of "Where are we going?" and turned it upon Taiwanese culture. In these four series, he takes people, things, and ani-



Yang Mao-lin, *Turtle Formosa*, 1996, oil, acrylic on canvas, 116.5 x 160 cm.

mals that have influenced different periods of Taiwanese culture and uses them to formulate questions such as "Where did Taiwanese culture come from?" and "What is Taiwanese culture?" He uses the variety of changing cultural images to precisely express the uncertainty of Taiwanese culture. After viewing these series, one feels that Taiwan is a boat afloat in a sea of cultures, following several coastlines but unable to find its own harbor. Since this cultural uncertainty is formed by history, Taiwanese cultural identity is a difficult problem to solve.

This identity crisis does not only stem from history, but also from present reality. For this reason *Taoyuan Topography* returns to the primary questions of contemporary culture considered in the *Made in Taiwan* series. These are exemplified by *Superman and Wu-Kong*, in which he uses Superman—an image of American culture—and Wu-Kong—a Japanese cartoon image appropriated from Chinese folklore. The background is the traditional Chinese painting *Fish Jumps the Dragon Gate* (symbolizing success) with a full frontal view of a woman in the process of giving birth. The work's codes express the dual influences of America and Japan on Taiwanese culture, while Chinese culture constitutes the mother-tongue culture of Han ethnicity. All three of these have been, and continue to be, important elements and sources of contemporary Taiwanese culture. But how do they combine together? Or, more to the point, do they combine in such a way as to enable Taiwan to leap like a carp over the dragon gate?

Fat Prick of Steel King Kong, among others, lampoons contemporary Taiwanese consumer culture. It is a partial map of Taiwan above male genitalia, both of which are alongside an image of the "Made in Taiwan" toy King Kong. The male genitalia is portrayed in an attitude of powerful erection, with *Steel King Kong* looking similarly mighty.

But the image is an Americanized cartoon version. The symbolic system of the painting is simple and easy to understand; the questions it encompasses are difficult to answer. The artist has not (and it is an impossible task) answered them; it is enough that it makes people think deeply. Art cannot solve society's problems.

In *Made in Taiwan* and in those series that followed it, Yang Mao-lin benefited from both popular and conceptual art. In his later series, in addition to the juxtaposition of discordant or opposite images characteristic of *Made in Taiwan*, he has added jumbled and ironically mixed composition. In *Taoyuan Memorandum - Tiger*, for example, the "roles" of the tiger and rabbit are confounded

such a way that the contrast between different cultural systems is emphasized. His third language form is the use of allusion and exaggerated body imagery, as in *Taoyuan Memorandum - Excellent*, where part of the painting is a map of Taiwan filled with words of virtue—loyalty, filial obedience, virtuous government leadership, etc. In the map is also a carrot, alluding to the Aesop fable. Together with the map in this painting is an exaggeratedly large thumbs-up gesture above which are drawn images of a horse and a stag, metaphorically indicating the Chinese expression "pointing at a stag and calling it a horse" (an image of the confusion of right and wrong.).

But Yang's most important lan-

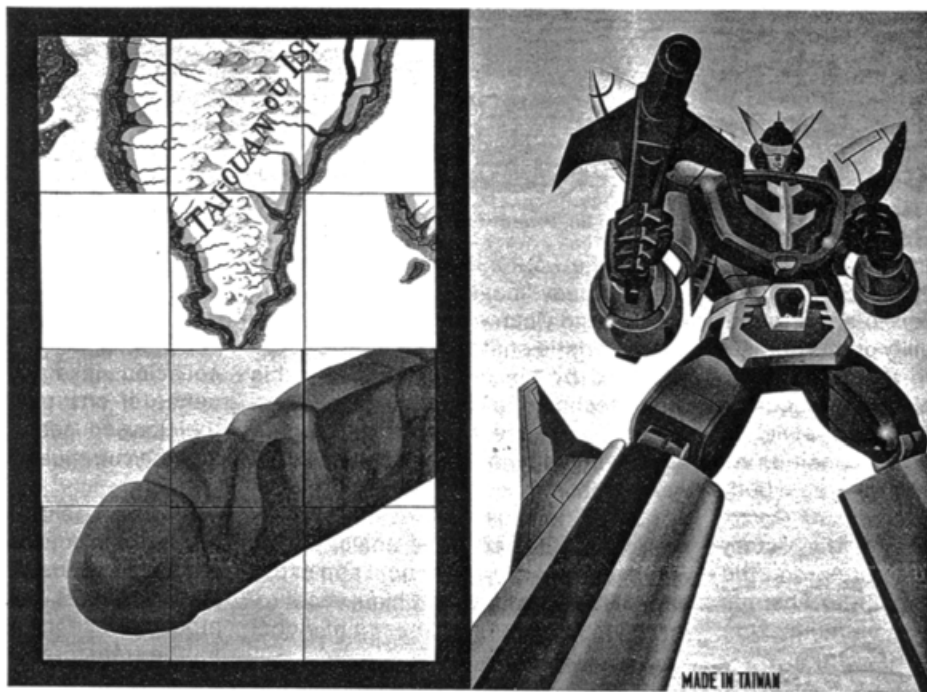
guage form is his use of popular imagery, as in the phrase "Made in Taiwan" and the American and Japanese cartoon imagery, as well as the comic-book style of his painting. Yang's thoughts about Taiwan begin with the success of Taiwanese popular culture and the serious problems about cultural identity that this conceals. Because of this, he repeatedly uses allusive imagery to undercut the popular images, thus increasing the conceptuality

of his work and raising in the mind of the viewer unavoidable questions about culture and cultural identity.

There are the two reasons for Yang's success. One is his simultaneous grasp of local culture and of the process of globalization of culture. The other is his creative transformation of both popular and conceptual art into a unique and personal language. Yang Mao-lin's art, in seeking how to construct a new local culture, has suggested enlightened solutions. Δ

[Translated by Paul Copp.]

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Yang Mao-lin, *Fat Prick of Steel King Kong*, 1996, oil, acrylic on canvas, 218 x 292 cm.

with ironic effect. The forms of the totem animals in *Taoyuan Memorandum* are not those of traditional Chinese culture. Instead, Yang reverses the roles of worm/dragon, rabbit/tiger, bird/phoenix. What is the *Taoyuan men* that has been said to influence Taiwanese culture? Dragon? Worm? Tiger? Rabbit?

Another tool in Yang's employ is the matching of style to cultural image. For example, in *Yun Mountain Memorandum* he uses the style of early Taiwanese folk painting to depict images of early Taiwanese and academic realism to deal with seashells. In *Taoyuan Memorandum - Dragon* he employs a cartoon style to paint dragons and folk-style to paint early settlers, all to effect different cultural changes in