



In Female Vajradhara a cartoon figure lies in the Reclining Buddha position, by Yang Mao-lin. Further statues from his exhibition *Ceremonies before Rewarding—Inviting the Immortals III*, are shown below.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LIN & KENG GALLERY

[ ARTS JOURNAL ]



Little Vajradhara II.



Ah Chiang Deva II.



Black Or Great Vidyajara.



Contemplative Female Vajradhara.



Tie Vidyajara.

## Art for God's sake

Yang Mao-lin is as famous for his 'Made in Taiwan' series of paintings in the late 1980s as for his recent Taiwanese pop culture-inspired works and computer-generated art. Now he has taken up woodcarving

BY JULES QUARTLY  
STAFF REPORTER

Astroboy is reincarnated as God in the latest exhibition of important local artist Yang Mao-lin (楊茂林). From being a Japanese comic creation in the 1960s, the boy-robot-with-a-heart who saves the world becomes a willing sex slave and finally evolves into *Astro Buddha*, a cartoon figure carved from juniper wood in a traditional religious style and placed on an altar.

Another cartoon figure appears to western eyes to be Wonder Woman (or a female Hong Kong power ranger) in *Reclining Buddha* mode, complete with a missile bra, that is gold leaved on another statue. *Ah Chiang Deva II* a comic, comic book hero scratches his haloed head in bemusement.

Twenty two of these pop culture icons created in Taiwanese folk, Buddhist and Daoist styles are on show at the Lin & Keng Gallery, at the *Ceremonies before Rewarding—Inviting the*

*Immortals III* exhibition. They are arranged in alcoves, their own *Eight Immortals Altar*, or a similar devotional space—further reinforcing the dominant themes of religious and consumer iconography.

This is the third phase of a series of works by Yang that began in 1989 with *Inviting the Immortals: High Officials—Record of Cultural Mating* and introduced the comic, toy and film figures that color a youth's pop cultural life in Taiwan, with its mix of primarily Japanese, Chinese and US icons. Batman, Japanese comic book girls, King Kong, Rockman and others were presented in a classically painterly style, in oil and acrylic paints on canvas, but with the bright, primary colored-hues of many toys.

For the second stage, Yang turned to computer-generated images and his works were often back-lit to appear like stained

glass windows, or a computer monitor, and were hung on the various walls of clubs, private individuals and national exhibition spaces around Asia. New pop heroes were rendered in a pastiche commercial style and incorporated Web-based pornography. In *Baby, You're Amazing*, even Pokemon got a blowjob. In another picture, Astroboy is buggered by a power ranger while being encouraged by Superman to perform fellatio.

In Yang's current exhibition, *Astro Buddha* is portrayed lifting off serenely toward heaven, the embodiment of purity and strength. Or seen in a pose that is characterized as *Contemplative Astro Bodhisattva*. The pop culture icon has shed worldly attachments and attained religious significance. The 21st century sex slave is reborn as a kind of God. This startling transformation obviously has a shock value that amuses the artist and inspires him.

"Firstly, I really like cartoons and I have raised their significance beyond the level of just a cartoon. They are pretty and they carry a message. ... Second, they're not real, it's just a story, like Buddhism, they have a place," Yang said. "Third, their place is of equal respect, just as in Buddhism, all things are given equal respect."

In Yang's series of works that have culminated in a Buddha-like statues of popular cartoon figures, the images that dominate our lives have an equal significance. The messages in comics that we read as children are as important to us as our understanding of religion. Pop culture shapes us as much as God.

The artist formally studied woodcarving and religious iconography for two-and-a-half years in order to produce the third instalment of his *Inviting the Immortals* series and he has spent around 13 years developing

these themes. And though comic heroes as gods might seem to be a natural end point, full circle perhaps, Yang has further plans for his characters. He wants to learn sewing next and has lined up a Hello Kitty-inspired machine on which to practice.

"I want to sew clothes that the cartoons will wear, like in a fashion shoot, we will take pictures and produce a kind of [shopping] magazine," Yang said.

His charming and thought-provoking statues, in which the carving marks appear to be like brush strokes, are on offer for around NT\$200,000, but some were already sold before the exhibition formally opens today.

*The Lin & Keng Gallery is at 1F, 11 Ln 252, Tunkua S Road, Sec 1, Taipei (台北東區國光路一段252號). The gallery is open from 11am to 7pm. Telephone (02) 2750 8811.*