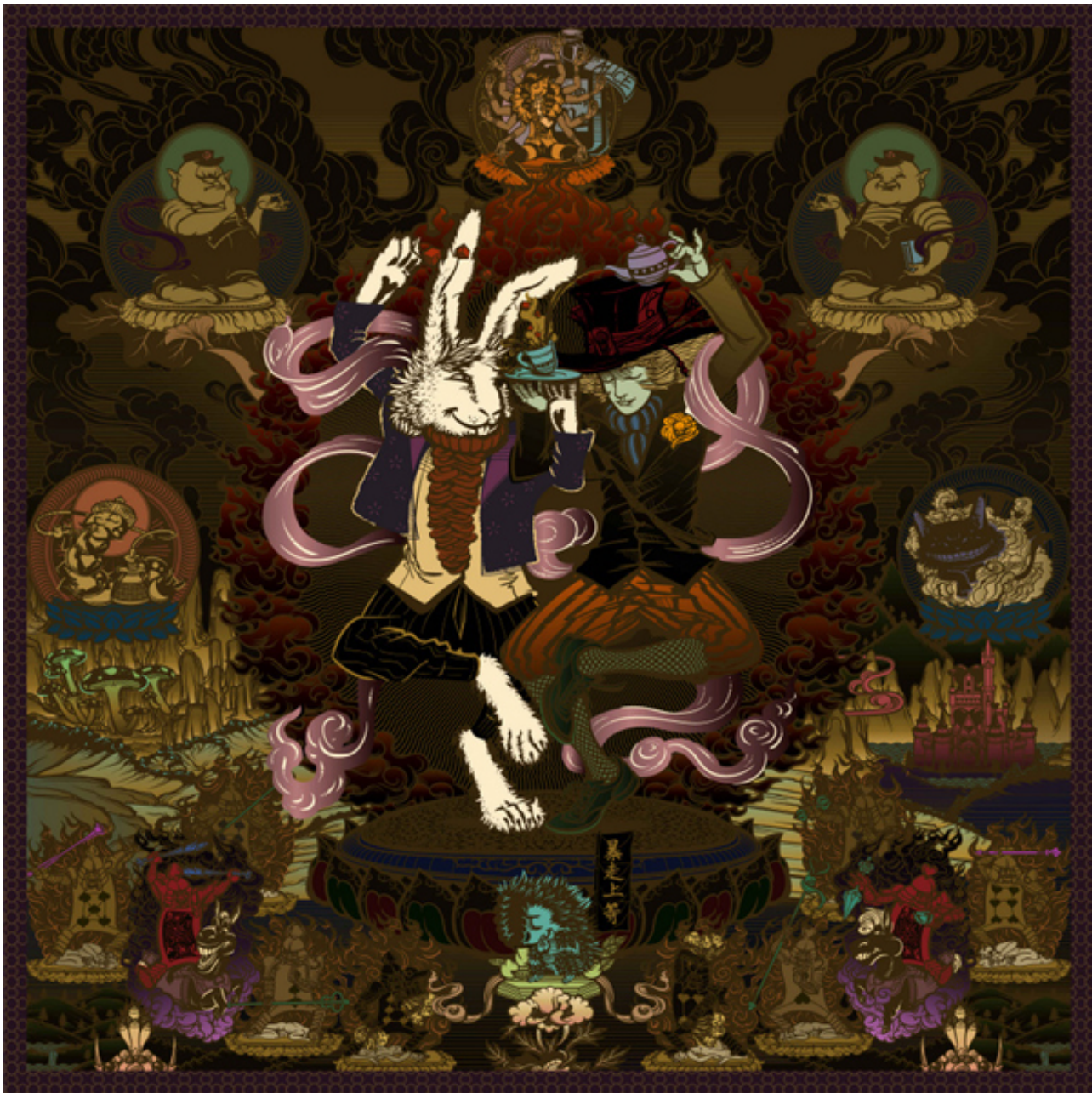


Made in Taiwan: A Retrospective of Yang Mao-Lin at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum

A robust Asian democracy, Taiwan elected its first female president earlier this year. Yet thirty years ago, when the island was tentatively emerging from four decades of military rule, this future was far from certain. *Made in Taiwan: A Retrospective of Yang Mao-Lin*, now on view at [Taipei Fine Arts Museum](http://www.taipeifinearts.com), spans three decades of the artist's work. His vivid early paintings captured the growing pains of a young democracy, while his more recent narrative installations offer heroes more whimsical than fierce. Together these works present a history of Taiwan and reveal an artist who plumbed the depths of his regional identity before transcending it.



Yang Mao-lin. *Jataka Tale of the Two Insane Dripa Namsal*, 2011; metallic photo paper; 240 x 240 cm. Courtesy of the Artist.

The exhibition begins with Yang's paintings from the 1980s—large, layered works that combine

heroic, muscular figures reminiscent of Italian futurism, symbols from American popular culture and indigenous Taiwanese cultures, crude line drawings of prostrate figures, and ominous references to Taiwan's military state. *After Hou-yi Shooting the Sun* (1985) shows a mythical Chinese archer juxtaposed with figures wielding lightsabers; in *Kun* (1986) an enormous blue foot descends from the sky. The images suggest a young artist brimming with social criticism. They reveal an obsession with heroes and ancestors and project the muddled unconscious of an island striving to find its identity.

Yang began his *Made in Taiwan* series in the 1990s, in step with Taiwan's rising manufacturing sector. The series addresses Taiwanese identity from three perspectives: natural history, political history, and cultural history. The words "Made in Taiwan" appear on nearly every work. However, taken out of its manufacturing context, "Made in Taiwan" takes on a questioning tone—what does it mean to be Taiwanese?

In the *Lily Memorandum* (1994) series, Yang presents a catalog of Taiwan's imagined flora and fauna. Here, the ripples of shells replace those of muscles; wild cats and lilies replace human strife. The free-floating, overlapped wildlife suggest fossil records. The images in this series are whittled down to a few repeated elements, and the palette is more grounded, an earthy combination of tans, greens, yellows, and blues. These are Yang's most representational works, and in them the artist seems to be searching for a more primordial story of Taiwan—a shift in time, scale, and scope, and a more permanent sense of identity.

The *Zealandia Memorandum* (1993), named after [a fort built by the Dutch East India Company](#), introduces maps, portraits, and capital-H History. Rich yellow canvases the color of old books are filled with depictions of Dutch, Chinese, and Portuguese colonizers, as well as ships, cannons, and military forts. Never shy about political controversy, Yang takes on Taiwan's current relationship with mainland China in *Taoyuan Memorandum* (1995), which juxtaposed symbols of traditional Chinese culture with fighter jets, pterodactyls, and migrating geese, evoking a common heritage, a sense of loss, and an existential threat.



Yang Mao-lin. *The Wonderland in Saha World of Maha* (2006-2009); mixed media; installation view. Courtesy of the Artist.

The years from 1995 to 2000 were Yang's most difficult time. The works collectively labeled "Bad Taste" by the museum contain sexually explicit, angry images featuring U.S. superheroes and Japanese manga, two outsized cultural influences on Taiwanese culture. Motifs include Superman, Batman, and Sailor Moon, as well as Chinese paper cuts and aboriginal Taiwanese figures. These works contain clear accusations of cultural imperialism, as well as a frustration with the limits of the *Made in Taiwan* series in an increasingly post-national cultural landscape. However, most of the images fall flat, and the series feels lacking in originality.

For the next ten years, sculptures dominated Yang's work. He began working with wood in 2002, carving devotional figures out of Taiwanese Juniper wood, and later working with bronze, gold, and stainless steel. At first look, these appear to be typical Buddhist statues: lotus-seated, multi-armed, with radiant halos on their backs. But closer examination reveals that action figures have replaced bodhisattvas; Astro Boy, King Kong, and the Little Mermaid are reimagined as a pantheon of Buddhist gods.

In *A Story about Affection* (2007–2009), a set of six intricate metallic screens that mimic stained-glass windows of Western fairytales are illustrated in the style of a [Jataka tale](#). Originally mounted in an Italian church, they expand Yang's play on religious iconography into a Western context. *Kill Alice* (2009–2011) is an even more complete execution of Yang's new medium of narrative installation. In the work, scenes from *Alice in Wonderland*—printed on metallic photo paper in a style that combines manga with Buddhist jataka tales—are brought to life by an army of three-dimensional stainless-steel soldiers and a colossal Queen of Hearts.

Yang's latest work, *Quest for Mandala* (2012–present), is a steampunk interpretation of deep-sea creatures. One is also a submarine with Lego figures inside; another has luminescent LED orbs for eyes. Unfortunately, the overdesigned exhibition hall distracts from these objects. In contrast, the presentation of *The Wonderland in Saha World of Maha* (2006–2009)—stainless-steel sculptures of cartoon characters riding larger-than-life insects—turns the museum lobby into a fantastical garden.

These imaginative sculptures return to Yang's earlier themes of heroism and popular culture, but with a new dimension—the artist is no longer describing scenes of his heroes, but instead manipulating these figures to create his own stories. Instead of urgency, there is lightheartedness; these are no longer his idols, they are his toys.

Made in Taiwan: A Retrospective of Yang Mao-Lin *is on view at Taipei Fine Arts Museum through April 24, 2016.*

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