



Painter Yi Kai ... 'Blending the East and West is the way to go for art in the future as the world becomes more advanced.'

■ CHEW SENG K

Blue, red, yellow to blend East, West

LEONG WENG KAM

AS HE sees it, the future of art lies in the blending of two big cultures, that of the East and West. This, perhaps, explains why Chinese-American painter Yi Kai, 41, is showing a mix of the two cultures in his works with the colours and images he used on canvas.

Painting mainly in oil and acrylic, the colour blue in his paintings represents the West, while yellow and red symbolise the East.

English words and Chinese characters are also often seen together to express how they can blend — not clash — with each other in his works.

"Words are the finest expressions of a culture," said the artist, who is here for his first one-man exhibition.

About 60 of his paintings will be shown at the Yi Kai Art Exhibition, a five-day event which opens at the Orchard Point Exhibition Hall from tomorrow.

A soldier before he learnt painting at the art institute of the People's Liberation Army in Beijing in 1981, the Hunan-born artist first painted traditional works in Chinese ink and colours.

He switched to Western oil after graduating from the University of the Nationalities with a Master's degree in the medium in 1988.

After teaching art at the university for about three years, he was invited to be visiting scholar at the Middle-west China Centre in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1990.

He decided to remain in the United States when his journalist wife was also sent there to work with the China

News Agency in the state for a short stint in the same year.

It was a turning point in his life and career. He had to start a new life, learn a new language and he realised that making a living out of art in a new place was not easy, he said.

He recalled: "Breaking into the American society was very difficult. Making my works acceptable to the Americans was even more difficult.

"I couldn't just live in Chinatown because by doing so, I would not have been able to move into the society's mainstream. I might as well remain in China."

So he moved out and that showed in the works which he produced.

He later gained acceptance and some measure of popularity by the number of special commissions he re-

ceived and exhibitions he held all over the country.

He explained: "I realised that to survive as a Chinese painter in the US, I must draw inspirations from my background and then blend them with my new life in the US.

"If I painted only in traditional Chinese ink and colours, few could appreciate my works. If I painted the modern abstract stuff like the Americans do, I might find it difficult to be accepted as one, too."

So, from his realistic oil works, he moved into abstract art, but with a blend of East and West.

His trademarks today are his use of the colours blue, red and yellow to show his influences and experiences from the two cultures.

Images and symbols such as those from the I-Ching, or the Chinese philosophical

Book Of Changes, and Chinese characters in calligraphy script are found in his works. So are images from the Western world such as the cross and English letters forming words like "family" and "spirit".

"Blending the East and West is the way to go for art in the future as the world becomes more advanced," he said.

Artists from both East and West, past and present, he noted, started learning from each other long ago.

The late Chinese master Zhang Daqian's method of "ink splashing" had its origins from the modern art painting technique of the West.

Picasso's use of lines in his Cubist works was an idea which came from Chinese painting. And the Impressionists were well-known for their influence from the Jap-

anese painters of the 19th century.

"More and more artists the US today are drawing inspirations from Chinese works of art, especially Chinese calligraphy," he said.

The Yi Kai Art Exhibition will be opened officially National Arts Council chairman Liu Thai Ker at the Orchard Point Exhibition Hall Level 4, Orchard Point Shopping Centre, tomorrow at 7 pm. Members of the public can view the show from Saturday, daily between 10 am and 8 pm until Jan 29. Admission is free.

The artist will also be giving three talks in Mandarin on Saturday, Sunday and Monday at the same venue between 3 and 4 pm daily (the comparison, understanding and merging of Eastern and Western cultures).