

Yi Kai

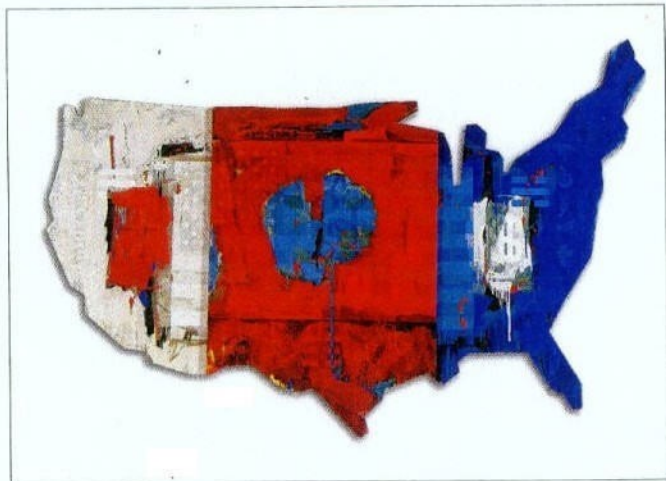
DOLLY FITERMAN

Minneapolis

One of the many talented and well-trained painters who fled China after the 1989 massacre in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, Yi Kai, 44, settled in Minneapolis and has spent the past decade reinventing himself as an artist. Eagerly embracing the cultural heritage of his adopted country, he has developed a hybrid painting style that fuses Chinese symbols and calligraphic brush strokes with bold colors of the American flag, English words, and symbols of Western culture.

This handsome show began with a few brisk,

beautifully observed ink drawings of Tibetan villages and markets done in the late 1980s when Yi was an art professor at a Beijing university. By 1994, when he painted *Impressions of Beijing Opera*, a dramatic crimson-and-white canvas more than five feet square,



Yi Kai, *Symbolic Impressions of America*, 1995-99, oil on wood, 52" x 92".
Dolly Fiterman.

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he had already assimilated Western color theory and design.

Like many of Yi's paintings, the opera canvas is divided vertically into broad bands of alternating color. Stylized maidens, warriors, deities, and other characters flicker within the stripes. Their grimacing faces and embroidered gowns are enlivened by dashes of purple, teal, gold, and blue that recall the mosaic effects of Gustav Klimt.

Yi's flag series made up the bulk of the show. Inspired in part by Jasper Johns's iconography and Richard Diebenkorn's lush brush strokes, the flag paintings fuse ghostly maps of the United States with the Stars and Stripes. The most ambitious is *Symbolic Impressions of America*, an eight-foot-wide oil-on-wood panel shaped like the United States. Internet addresses and Chinese ideograms for earth, sky, and other concepts enrich the painting. A cross and a dollar sign flanking a yin-yang symbol signify the need to balance faith and commerce. In this vision of the American Dream, Yi makes room for his cultural roots.

—Mary Abbe