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# Variety

E SECTION

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## TODAY'S QUOTE

► "I stopped believing in Santa Claus when my mother took me to see him in a department store, and he asked for my autograph." — *Shirley Temple, actress*

StarTribune



From the brutal politics of China to the consumer-crazed American dream, immigrant painter **Yi Kai** has fashioned an international art career that draws from both nations.

## a cultural evolution

"Symbolic Impressions of America," oil on wood, 1995-1999

By Mary Abbe  
Star Tribune Staff Writer

**a** decade ago in Beijing, painter Yi Kai worked as an associate professor of art at a prestigious university and his wife as a reporter at a major newspaper. With their 5-year-old son, they lived only a few blocks from Tiananmen Square, the vast plaza where university students that summer clamored for democracy.

Yi joined the daily protests, which were televised internationally, much to the embarrassment of Chinese officials. For a time Yi and his students were buoyed by a tide of change that appeared destined to wash away Communist repression. But one night, tanks rolled into the square and gunfire echoed in nearby streets. By morning, hun-

dreds or perhaps thousands of students were dead and China's incipient democracy movement was driven underground again.

Yi and his family were unharmed, but he knew then that he had no future as an artist in China and would have to invent a new life elsewhere. But how? And where? And at what emotional and financial cost?

Trusting fate, Yi emigrated to Minneapolis in 1990 and brought his wife and son to the United States the next year. He quickly invented a new abstract painting style that combines Eastern motifs (Yin and Yang symbols, Chinese characters and pictographs) with U.S. themes (patriotic words and colors, the flag and dollar sign, the country's silhouette).

**ARTIST continues on E3:**  
— *Caught in Cultural Revolution.*

### Millennial Confluence: Paintings by Yi Kai

- **What:** Cross-cultural paintings, spanning 10 years, by Chinese-born Minneapolis artist Yi Kai.
- **When:** Through Oct. 29.
- **Where:** Dolly Fitterman Fine Arts, 100 University Av. SE., Mpls.
- **Tickets:** Free. 612-623-3300.



# He communicates on both sides of the world through his art

Overcoming the art market's indifference to new talent, he forged an international career that has included exhibitions in Hong Kong, Singapore, New York, San Francisco and now Minneapolis, where Dolly Fiterman Fine Arts is showing his art through Oct. 29.

"Just as he can speak both languages — English and Chinese — he can communicate through his art on both sides of the world," said Ruth Appelhof, a Connecticut-based art consultant who added one of Yi's paintings to the Minnesota Museum of American Art in St. Paul while she was its director in the early '90s. Fiterman helped the museum pay for that painting, an 8-by-10-foot canvas divided into broad panels of white, red and blue marked with cross-cultural symbols.

"He has a glorious way of handling paint and color," said Appelhof. "But the theme of the work is communication and the commingling of different cultures in ways that are very positive."

## Hewing beauty from a hard life

Genial and relaxed, Yi speaks fluent English, although he knew very little of the language when he arrived in this country. His explanations of Chinese politics and culture flow naturally into talk about his art and life.

He even sees cultural significance in the different ways that Chinese and Americans write names and addresses. Chinese

addresses, for example, begin with the country or province, followed by the city, the street and finally the name. In the Chinese mode, his surname "Yi" precedes his given name "Kai."

"For Chinese culture, the family is more important than the individual and the country is more important than the family," he said. "In China, sometimes the family makes bad decisions and squelches the child, but in the U.S. sometimes there is too much emphasis on the individual and families tend to separate because it's everything me, me, me."

## Orphan of revolution

Yi's equanimity is hard-won. He was born in 1955 in Changsha, China, and was 11 when his father, a government official, was sent to work on a farm as part of China's Cultural Revolution, which suppressed education, conscripted intellectuals for manual labor and attempted to create a classless nation. His mother, a teacher, was also sent away, leaving Yi and his 10-year-old brother to fend for themselves.

For three years, the boys lived alone, doing all their own cooking, cleaning and laundry. Sometimes their father would slip in on Saturday nights with a bit of money. All schools were closed until 1968, when the political winds shifted slightly. After he finished middle school in 1970, 15-year-old Yi was drafted.

"Students had two choices: Go to the countryside and work with

*Yi synthesizes his observations in "Symbolic Impressions of America," a painting nearly 8 feet long, shaped like the United States and overlaid with a shadowy flag. Vertical bands divide it into three sections. The Western states are mostly white with a cross for religion, a Chinese ideogram for sky and the letters "www.com". The middle section bears a DNA symbol, the Chinese emblem for Earth and references to families. The blue Eastern section has environmental themes in Chinese and English overlaid with a large dollar sign to signify American materialism, which Yi believes is out of control.*

a farmer or into the army to become a soldier," Yi said.

He spent 14 years in the military and was assigned to drive a truck from village to village, showing propaganda films. Then he began to paint posters and make woodcuts for the army. He studied the few books and magazines he could find and began to teach himself to draw and paint.

After Mao Zedong's death in 1976, China's economic and political structures changed and more educational opportunities opened. Yi's big break came in 1979, when an army art college in Beijing held a national contest to fill 35 positions. Competition was fierce because army colleges were free and gave students food, clothes and salaries. Fewer than 5 percent of the people were permitted to attend college.

Of 4,000 applicants, only 400 were allowed to take the painting test. Of that 400, only one earned thumbs-up from all 29 judges: Yi Kai. He studied traditional Chinese ink painting and Western-style drawing and painting, earning a bachelor's degree in 1983 and a master's in 1988. He was even allowed to show and sell his paintings in Taiwan.

Nevertheless, he wanted a chance "to know the whole art world." And after the "big hurt" of Tiananmen Square, he simply wanted out.

He won the opportunity through chance and shrewd networking. First, a Chinese writer introduced him to a visiting Minnesotan affiliated with a now-defunct Chinese cultural organization in St. Paul. In 1989, that organization invited Yi to this country,

but without proof that he could support himself abroad, the Chinese government wouldn't let him leave and U.S. authorities wouldn't let him in.

By coincidence, Yi's journalist wife invited a visiting Minnesota journalist to dinner at their home. Yi gave that writer, Wendy Tai, \$3,000 in U.S. money — which he had earned by selling his art — and asked her to deliver it to the St. Paul organization so it could pay for his trip here.

The Chinese-born Tai, then a Star Tribune staff writer reporting on Tiananmen Square, did as he asked. But first she cautioned him that life in the United States was tougher than it appeared, that the government didn't provide housing or income as it did in China, that the art market was often indifferent. Her warnings didn't deter Yi.

"His story is such an American story," said Tai, now a public-affairs official at Cargill Inc. "Here in the States, you have to stand on what you do and he's done that . . . through sheer will, talent and hard work."

## Art echoes Eastern and Western forebears

At Fiterman's gallery, Yi's paintings fill three spacious rooms, their bold colors and abstract designs broadcasting his dual East-West heritage. Only a few fine-lined drawings of Tibetan villages and markets recall his years in China. One room documents his early efforts to assimilate Western styles. Dreamy paintings of lighter-than-air violinists echo Marc Chagall, and a mosaic rendition of the Beijing opera recalls Gustav Klimt. Brushy, pas-

tel versions of the American flag underlay other paintings whose colors and designs resonate with Jasper Johns and Richard Diebenkorn.

"He is quite eager to learn and has changed styles several times since he came here," said Minneapolis painter Pat Hui, who met Yi in the Twin Cities. By chance, they show their work at the same gallery in Hong Kong, her hometown. "His work is quite well accepted in Asia and he's selling well, too, because people understand his juxtapositioning of American and Chinese icons and find it refreshing," she said.

Yi synthesizes his observations in "Symbolic Impressions of America," a painting nearly 8 feet long, shaped like the United States and overlaid with a shadowy flag. Vertical bands divide it into three sections. The Western states are mostly white with a cross for religion, a Chinese ideogram for sky and the letters "www.com". The middle section bears a DNA symbol, the Chinese emblem for Earth and references to families. The blue Eastern section has environmental themes in Chinese and English overlaid with a large dollar sign to signify American materialism, which Yi believes is out of control.

"This piece is 10 years of my experience," said Yi, explaining that he included the symbols "so that even people who don't know much about art can have something to understand."