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Propaganda



After years spent using his talents for China's communists, painter Yi Kai moved to the US and found a brighter future, writes *Victoria Finlay*

artist shows his true colours

Yi Kai's first job was showing propaganda movies to PLA soldiers — and the Minnesota-based artist is still, 25 years later, obsessed with the notion of blatant symbolism that transcends nationalism or politics. His work includes hints of flags, tiny parts of Chinese writing, English words and scientific and mystical symbols. "I like to mix together symbols to show that differences don't have to mean war: If you know each other there will be no fighting," he says.

Yi's boldly colourful acrylic abstracts (see left) on show at Alisan Fine Arts this month are a world away from the duller figurative paintings of ethnic minorities he was showing a decade ago. But those served their purpose. First of all they informed Yi's sense of how blocks of colour work on canvas, and secondly — and most importantly — they were his ticket out of China.

Yi is 45 and like many of his generation he was, at 16, faced with a choice between the army and an unspecified amount of time in the countryside. He opted for the former, which was lucky because after that movie-showing experience he was packed off to art school to learn how to paint propoganda as well as screen it. It was 1979 and the Art Institute of the PLA in Beijing was just reopening — with 4,000 keen applicants for limited places. The director was determined that the places

should not just go to those with connections so invited 29 specialists to judge the candidates' work. Fifteen votes meant a place... and Yi — who had no senior officer mentors or relatives — got the maximum of 29.

In 1990 he got an invitation to visit from an arts and humanitarian organisation in Minnesota. They were offering enthusiasm not money, he says. But by passing most of the profits from his first overseas show — in Taipei in 1989 — through about five middlemen to the people in Minnesota (who could then genuinely say they were offering him a ticket) he managed to get an exit visa to what has, in the past 10 years, become his home.

His real artistic thrill since arriving in the US has been learning different ways of using colour — and having newer and better materials to work with. "In China the tradition is all about ink and black and white. I have been so excited to learn about colour in the United States," he says.

His work has become very abstract, which he says is rather like the natural progression of Chinese calligraphy.

Exhibition: Time, Yin and Yang. Alisan Fine Arts, 315 Prince's Building, Central until October 30. Tel: 2526 1091.