



CARLOS ANTONIO RIOS PHOTOS : CHRONICLE

**EAST MEETS WEST:** Chinese artist Yang Jin Long's *Pure Space* will be on display at Deborah Colton Gallery through March 3.

# Art, born of Chinese experience

As a child of the Cultural Revolution, Yang Jin Long grew up in a society that stifled creativity. Now he filters the traditions of his homeland through a Western pop sensibility.

By **PATRICIA C. JOHNSON**  
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

With a soft voice but animated hand gestures, Yang Jin Long speaks through an interpreter at Deborah Colton Gallery, surrounded by the paintings of his first solo exhibit in this country.

Executed in a brilliant palette, the complex compositions by this Chinese artist blend the delicacy of traditional Asian scrolls and calligraphy with brash Pop Art directness.

*Crossroads*, created after his first visit to the United States in 2001, reflects his approach and seems to foreshadow his future here. In November, the artist was granted a visa as an "alien of extraordinary abil-

ity," which allowed him, wife Jian-ping Jing and 17-year old daughter Cheng-Cheng Yang permanent residency in this country.

*Crossroads'* imagery includes an American flag in the upper-right corner that hides a portion of a green street sign for Houston's Woodway Drive on the opposite corner. A clown's head lies with its left cheek down near the lower-right corner. The carnivalesque composition is pinned in the center by an ovoid gray object that resembles a grenade.

"No," Yang says, "not a grenade. It's a fish caught in a net. I don't like weapons."

And yet *The Holy Mountain*, a 2003 painting about Tibet, has  
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**THE HOLY MOUNTAIN:** A painting about Tibet has among its components a cylindrical object that looks like the nose of a missile.



**GREEN LEAVES:** A 2003 painting that is part of *Pure Space*, Yang's first solo exhibit in this country.

## YANG JIN LONG: PURE SPACE

■ **Where:** Deborah Colton Gallery, 2500 Summer; 713-864-2364  
■ **When:** 10:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays. Through March 3.





**THE ARTIST AND HIS WORK:** *Crossroads'* imagery includes an American flag in the upper-right corner that hides a portion of a green street sign for Houston's Woodway Drive on the opposite corner. The composition is pinned in the center by what appears to be a grenade but is actually a fish caught in a net.

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## YANG: Child of the Cultural Revolution

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among its components a cylindrical object that looks like the nose of a missile; also, a figure wearing goggles and dressed in ashy reds and black, looks very much like a walking burn victim. Tibet has long been fighting Chinese occupation and domination.

Yang denies his work is political.

"Politics is too much to get involved with," he says, "so I stay away from it in my life." His wife smiles. "We have a lot of family in China," she says softly.

But his work — and occasional phrases — contradict him.

Born in 1960, he grew up during the convulsions of the Cultural Revolution, when intellectuals and artists were "re-educated" to serve as laborers in the fields and factories. What effect did it have on him, on his parents?

Yang shakes his head with discomfort. "I don't want to talk about it." Pressed, he says his father worked at a chemical plant. Reluctantly, he adds, "I don't know much. I was too young. My mother didn't tell me anything until I was much older, like 17."

Yang's future as an artist was evident from the time he was in second grade in his native city of Zhenjiang. His mother, who taught Mandarin, encouraged him. His teachers called on him to create class projects and lead his schoolmates in art activities.

"In school, when I was hungry and had no food, I'd just draw and look at art," he says. "I love to go to museums. I love to look at art."

But when you leave middle school in China, Yang explains, "you have two choices — the fields or the army. I joined the army. I sat in an office and drew, for myself and for others who asked. Part of my job was to arrange entertainment. So I watched a lot of movies, too, all kinds of movies, Chinese and foreign movies, many times."

He studied traditional Chinese painting in Zhenjiang in the early 1970s and was still in the military when he began to study Western painting. After completing his service in 1988, he returned to Zhenjiang. Seven years later he became dean of

Zhenjiang College's art department.

"I've seen a lot, done a lot," Yang says. "I like to draw from the imagination. My paintings are from my experience in all those areas — school, soldier, factory worker, teacher. It takes a lot of life experience to successfully produce something."

"Being an artist is difficult. You feel sorrow, pity, you paint from your heart. It takes time to make something that others have seen and that they can relate to."

Yang had his first solo show in 1996 in Nanjing; a second solo exhibit three years later at Bangkok, Thailand's Silpakorn University introduced him to gallery owner Deborah Colton.

"I couldn't believe how good he was. He was the first to address the situation in China," she said. "I became his patron."

Beyond the Jade Screen, a group exhibit sponsored by the Asia Society, brought Yang to Houston on his first trip to the United States in 2001. *Crossroads*, the painting at the entrance to the current exhibit, resulted from that visit. "It's im-



COURTESY PHOTO

**BRILLIANT PALETTE:** *The Colorful Masks* features the bright colors that are common in Yang's works.

Bangkok. As director of finance for the company in Thailand, he would present the corporation's gift in support of the National Gallery's annual exhibition to the royal family.

As his wife, Deborah Colton says, "I got a lot of attention."

"And the artists liked me be-

sity in Hamden, Conn., with a marketing degree and a minor in psychology. She began working in the business communications division of the 3M company in 1982, first in Houston and then in New York. She resigned when her husband was transferred from New York to Tokyo five years later.

She started a company called Iklektik Designs with a friend. "We both had babies, but we were getting really bored," Colton says. The company imported furniture and artifacts from all over Asia.

When the Coltons were transferred back to Houston, Deborah Colton applied her connections, marketing skills and experience to organizing and promoting exhibits of art from Asia for different venues. Iklektik became the funder of projects and of her gallery.

But when she opened her eponymous gallery in 2004, "I didn't want to be an 'Asian art' gallery. I wanted to establish myself as mainstream."

Last fall, she was named the YWCA's 2006 Woman in the Arts.

This summer, she is opening an office in Berlin, where her interest in international art, from Asia to Europe, will have another forum.

Art galleries, she said, "are a vehicle for artists like Yang and can be a force for positive change."

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**THE BENEFACTOR:** With the help of gallery owner Deborah Colton, Yang and his family have settled in Houston.

pressions of America, what I absorbed, heard and saw," he says.

Aided by Colton and others, including collectors, the Yang family has settled in Houston.

### The patron

Colton's interest in art from Asia started in 1998 when her husband, William M. Colton, an executive with ExxonMobil, was transferred from Tokyo to

cause I understood the tension and stress in the work. . . .

"They would ask me to bring their portfolios to the U.S., and I tried to help them. I sort of became a goodwill ambassador. I would brief the American Embassy on what I was doing."

"I never thought I would become an art dealer."

Born in New Jersey in 1956, Colton graduated magna cum laude from Quinnipiac Univer-



# ArtNotes

**Diversity reigns:** At the **Contemporary Arts Museum Houston**, Valerie Cassel Oliver curates the first solo museum show for Houston-based **Robert Pruitt**. Multimedia works and sculptures use humor to critique society's notions of blackness (through February 18) ... Late Latin American avant-gardist **Hélio Oiticica** (1937 – 1980) gets his due at the **Museum of Fine Arts, Houston**, in

© PROJETO HÉLIO OITICICA, RIO DE JANEIRO



Hélio Oiticica's *B01 Box Bólido 01 "Cartesiano," 1963*

"The Body of Color," curated by the MFAH's **Mari Carmen Ramírez** (through April 1) ... **Blaffer Gallery** presents offerings by Asian Americans born in the late 1960s and the 1970s in "One Way or Another: Asian American Art Now," (January 20 – March 31).

**Girl Power:** International star **Judy Pfaff** hits town (she last showed here in the '80s) with a scintillating site-specific installation for **Rice Gallery** (January 25 – April 15) ... National notable **Joyce J. Scott's** beaded sculptures address topics from memory to racism (**Houston Center for Contemporary Craft**, January 27 – March 18) ... At **Wade Wilson Art**, New York's **Jill Moser** solos with gestural abstractions that dance between drawing and painting (January 13 – February 24). Concurrently, her etchings

launch Wade Wilson Art Editions ... **Sandi Seltzer Bryant's** vertical stripes pulse with seductive energy (**McMurtrey Gallery**, January 13 – February 10) ... Arkansas-based, former Core Resident **Kristin Musgnug's** landscapes meditate on Arcadia at **Inman Gallery** (January 12 – February 23) ... At **The Jung Center**, Houston's **Becky Soria** paints abstracted female torsos (January 3 – 30; reception January 6).

**Global to Local:** Devin Borden Hiram Butler Gallery pairs London-based Rice University grad **Michael Petry's** sexually charged Eden installation with hometown sculptor **Brooke Stroud** (opens January 13) ... **The Menil Collection** mounts a rare peek at the heroic geometric canvases of American master **David Novros** (through March 4) ... **Be there:** Saturday, January 13, 7:30 pm at **Talente Bilingue de Houston** for "String," a multimedia message directed by **David La Duca**, with works by **McKay Otto**, **Wayne Gilbert** and **Neva Mikulicz** (free) ... **Must see:** "Assistance League of Houston Celebrates Texas Art," a top juried show (**Williams Tower Gallery**, opens January 19) ... **Lloyd Walsh**, **Lordy Rodriguez** and **Kim Squaglia** showcase the many faces of contemporary painting (**Finesilver Gallery**, through February 3) ... **Brian Neal Sensabaugh's** "DEAR Camp" at **Lawndale Art Center** comments on growing up in rural Arkansas and the artist's current life as an urbane gay male (through January 20) ... **Houston Potters Guild's** First Annual Teapot Tournament, juried by clay master **Nick de Vries**, opens with a black-tie night, Thursday, January 4 (tickets 713.529.2488; through January 31) ... **Chinese-born Texan Yang Jin Long's** Norman Rockwell-ian realism at **Deborah Colton Gallery** (January 13 – March 3) ... **Christian Renonciat's** way with wood at **Gremillion & Co. Fine Art** (January 11 – February 10).

**New Players:** **Toby Kamps** arrives from Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center, joining the curatorial team at CAMH. Kamps' credentials: the recent view "**Ellsworth Kelly: Red Green Blue**" and shows on **Sarah Sze**, **Vanessa Beecroft** and **Michael Queenland** ... CAMH Studio founder **Leslie Ballard Hull** (daughter of collectors **Carol** and **Les Ballard**) launches the Houston arm of her two-year-old art advisory biz, **EBH Fine Art**, in new digs on Taft, neighboring the Federal Reserve. Expect salon-style evenings and mini-exhibitions of artists on Hull's radar (information 713.898.3302) ... **Madeline Yale** is the new interim executive director at **Houston Center for Photography**, having previously served as HCP's program director ... Houston-raised painter **Karla Alonso** returns from Florence to open **De'Medici Art Academy** (2022 Bissonnet, 713.520.0291).

**The Out-of-Towners:** The MFAH's **Gilbert Vicario** curates the U.S. Pavilion for the **Cairo International Biennale** (through January 31), selecting L.A. sculptor **Daniel Joseph Martinez's** shocking realism ... **Aurora Picture Show's** **Andrea Grover** returns from curating NYC **Apexart's** "Phantom Captain: Art and Crowdsourcing," a prescient show that garnered a **Holland Cotter** *New York Times* review ... Coastal action: Photog **Allison Hunter** recently soloed at Chelsea's **511 Gallery**; painter **Aaron Parazette** continued his dialogue with text and abstraction at SF's **Gregory Lind Gallery**.

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## SCENE IN HOUSTON



Deborah Colton, Yang Jin Long at 'Colton'

### YOWZA SAUZA!

Few things bring people together like tequila, so Sauza and *Houston* magazine held two events with the same mission: great people enjoying mouth-watering margaritas. Guests at the exclusive chef dinner, held at Las Alamedas restaurant,



Philippe Schmit, Adriane Fischziur at 'Alamedas'



Meredith DeLone at 'Alamedas'



Krista and Ken Hanley at 'Alamedas'

got a fun lesson on tippy-top shelf tequilas. ... And ... at the Deborah Colton Gallery, art lovers got a taste of the latest exhibit from artist Yang Jin Long, those delicious Sauza cocktails and bites from El Tiempo Cantina. —ER



Amy Noris, Evan Kajander at 'Colton'

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANIEL ORTIZ