

# MODERN-DAY MYTHOLOGY: YUAN'S DYNAMIC MURAL AT TUFTS

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*Yuan Yunsheng, Detail of Two Ancient Chinese Tales — Blue + Red + Yellow = White?, 1983, charcoal and acrylic on canvas, Tufts University Permanent Collection, commission 1982. Image courtesy of Steve Briggs.*

## REVIEW

### YUAN YUNSHENG: CHINESE MYTH, FOLKLORE AND HISTORY

TUFTS UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

AIDEKMAN ARTS CENTER

40 TALBOT AVENUE

## MEDFORD, MASSACHUSETTS

By Franklin W. Liu

Even at 80, contemporary Chinese muralist Yuan Yunsheng is actively producing art while also serving as a mentor and teacher. Yunsheng, born in 1937 in Nantong, Jiangsu Province, China, is widely praised for his vibrant, large-scale, narrative-murals resplendent with ethnic cultural symbolism that are hand painted on-site in America as well as within China, where he currently resides.

Yuan's ruminating, diversified, internationally known artworks are now showcased in two separate 2017 exhibitions. One, a group show, "Anren Biennale-Crossroads," on view in Anren, Chengdu; another, a prismatic solo exhibition, "Yuan Yunsheng: Chinese Myth, Folklore and History," is being presented at the Tisch Family Gallery at the Aidekman Arts Center on the campus of Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts.



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"Two Ancient Chinese Tales — Blue + Red + Yellow = White?" — mounted along with six other distinctive artworks — is Yuan's signature, spirited, 72-foot-long mural painted in 1983, originally commissioned for the walls of the Reserve Room in Tufts University's Wessell Library. In the ensuing 34 years, the mural was relocated due to the library's 1994 renovations, carefully put in storage, then re-hung. In recent years, the mural has received an attentive restoration to bring out its pristine condition, primed for the university community and

received an attentive restoration to bring out its pristine condition, primed for the university community and for the public's view- ing; many have only heard about this enrapturing mural, but now all have the unique opportunity to see it up close for the first time.

The mural's theme is both grand and exotic, a morality tale reinterpreted, alluding to the ancient Chinese tradi- tional myths of gods' ferocious epic battles with each other to seize control of the heavens. And Yuan Yunsheng, in revisiting this lofty theme, applies it as a modern-day retrospective-commen- tary on the tumultuous political and cul- tural upheaval harshly inflicted under Chairman Mao Zedong's China.

Yuan conceived the mural as a personal rebuke, a gesture of rekindled activism and renewed criticism of that unrelenting, inhumane period when Mao imposed his Cultural Revolution, the "Great Leap Forward" re- education program from 1966-1976. It was an agonizing period that Yuan had to endure day to day, fearful for his own life, but managing to survive as a then-wide- eyed 21-year-old. His life would be permanently altered in the ensuing 10-year period as he witnessed countless numbers of people die from persecution without mercy.

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