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## INTERVIEW: Michael Chow Debuts in HK After 50-Year Art Hiatus

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Detail from "Sweet Tongue" by Michael Chow aka Zhou Yinghua.  
(Image copyright Fredrik Nilsen)

**Zhou Yinghua**, a self-appointed ambassador of Chinese culture, first conquered the palates of Hollywood A-listers with a string of Chinese restaurants, and now continues to express his patriotism through art. The abstract works on canvas are now debuting in Hong Kong at the **Pearl Lam Gallery** in an exhibition titled "Recipe for a Painter."

Better known in the West as **Michael Chow**, the owner of the Mr Chow restaurants, and former husband to fashion darlings **Grace Coddington** and the late **Tina Chow**, Zhou has a very different identity in his native China, where he is known as the son of the great Beijing Opera master **Zhou Xinfang**.

Abandoning his early artistic ambitions to become a restaurateur, Zhou opened the first Mr Chow in 1968 in Knightsbridge, London. It has become a regular haunt for the jet set and grew to a small empire of restaurants around the world. The LA location is frequented by the likes of **Lady Gaga** and **Paris Hilton**.

But 50 years later, after a period of what Zhou himself dubs his "radical sabbatical," he returns to his artistic roots and takes up painting once again, only, he has replaced pigment with sheets of precious metal and paintbrushes for gas torches.

Zhou's large canvases are heaped with plastics in different forms, crumpled pieces of metal, dollops

of household paint, even an eggshell here and there. “Basically, I look at a trash bin and I see great beauty in it,” says Zhou.

We ask the artist at the opening of his show why he has chosen to return to art now, the Chineseness of his work, and how painting, opera, and cooking are all about the same thing.

### ***After your "Radical Sabbatical" what brought you back to art?***

Jeffrey Deitch at the time was head of MOCA in LA, I met him after he took that directorship, he came to my home and saw a little painting I had made tucked away in my house. He said, ‘It’s really good.’

I had kind of buried everything. I painted for 10 years, hundreds of pictures. I had one man shows. But the conditions weren’t quite right, there was no support system for me to be an artist, certainly not in London and America and history proves that. I think the only successful artist was Zao Wou-ki and he lived in Paris.

Also, 50 years ago, I lost my parents, not because they died, and I lost my country, not because China disappeared, but as a teenager I moved to London and I was put there because of social and political circumstances, I suffered culture shock and panic attacks. It took me a few years to recover. Through this experience I developed a need to promote China. The only practical way at the time was through a restaurant, so I used it as an embassy so to speak, to promote Chinese culture, Chinese food and mainly respect for China, as well as to find my own identity. So I dropped painting.

Until Jeffrey reminded me that I once had a life of art, and that maybe I am even good. Oh, another thing that happened is, I discovered silver. First I thought of using gold, a Warholian idea, but through a jeweler I discovered these silver sheets. Everything just fell into place from there. It was a kind of out of body experience.

### ***Does the memory of your father influence your work?***

Internally, because my father is a Beijing opera master, I know that the form of art is most important, if you have individuality it will come through the form, if you don’t have it, you will at least know the form and technique. In all Chinese culture, whether painting, opera, cooking, it is the same, the form is chief.

Let’s say Chinese cooking, in the early days you have charcoal burning stoves with the flame about three feet high, no chef can go near it, and yet they will put a wok on, the hotter the fire, the quicker you seal the food, the better the taste. In 30 seconds, you have to throw the food in and, pow-pow-pow, the dish comes out. In that 30 seconds of cooking all your experience has to come in, which is very like calligraphy, what the Chinese call ‘one breath,’ and same as Beijing opera, when an actor comes out in that split second the world explodes. My painting is the same thing.

### ***Your work does look like landscape painting from afar.***

It’s basically landscape paintings, of course in recent time landscape painting is out of fashion or Romanticism and even painting is uncool, but these notions are silly. Painting is not gonna die, man has been painting since cave man days, it’s going to be here for quite a bit.

### ***Why do you refer to using trash in your catalogue? Is any of the plastic actually discarded rubbish?***

Trash is just an idea that valueless plastic is kind of trash, egg shell is also trash. Basically I look at a trash bin and I see great beauty in it. It has a little bit to do with racism too, like I am equalizing high

and low culture, precious material and trash. Each thing has its own value, each thing has its own universe, and I'm able to treat silver like I treat trash, to combine them and make it work. In the end I'm painting the same story as a Chinese ink painter thousands of years ago, the medium is different because I have to be true to my time, I can't do it in a conventional way, I have to express it in today's world with my experience and be true to myself.

***These painting are almost sculptural aren't they?***

These paintings are half sculpture, half painting, the problem solving part is definitely painting as you solve a sculpture piece differently. What you see are all painting problems. But the use of shapes is very important, the profile of the work is important. It is 3D, there is depth and mystery between layers.

***Do you still feel you need to promote the importance of Chinese culture in the West?***

That became part of my life. I still live in the West and it still goes on, although life is easier, but it's become my way of life. I walk into a restaurant here and I feel so free, because I'm surrounded by Chinese and they look at me normal. Well, my antennae is very sensitive towards these things, but it's become my way of life. All my strength and weakness become the same thing,

Sometimes they look down on the Chinese and these moments are quite often and it motivates me to do something about it. That's why in my restaurants everything is so chic and so beautiful. It motivates me internally, and sometimes it is anger that motivates me too. Otherwise I would never survive as a business for 47 years, are you out of your mind?

*"Recipe for a Painter" is at Pearl Lam Galleries Hong Kong until March 8, [www.pearllam.com](http://www.pearllam.com)*