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HONG KONG

FEBRUARY 2014 | HK\$30

*Valentine's
Day Special*

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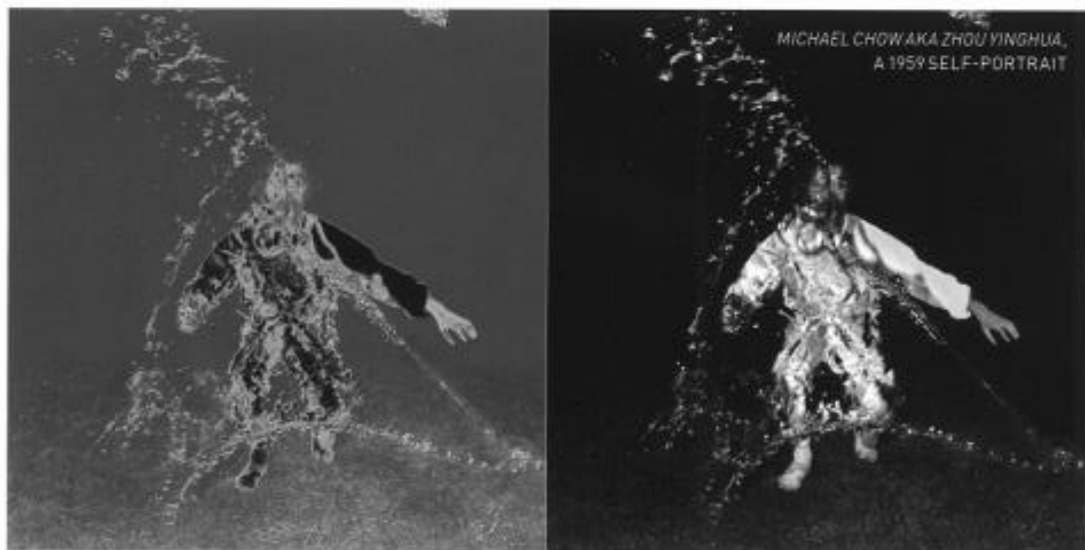
ISSN 1815-7350

Exclusive Interview
LIU WEN
CHINA'S CATWALK QUEEN

PORTRAITS / UNTIL CHAN

SECOND IMPRESSION

After laying down his brushes and palette for the best part of 50 years, celebrated restaurateur Michael Chow has returned to painting. He explains why – and a whole lot more – to MATHEW SCOTT







MICHAEL CHOW KNOWS all there is to know about the importance of first impressions. Those distinctive owl-like glasses were, after all, designed to take people's attention away from his ethnicity, when he emerged in the 1950s on a mission to showcase Chinese culture to the world.

Chow's early years were spent at the foot of his father, Zhou Xinfang, the most commanding presence Beijing opera has ever known and a man who redefined the art form. It has long been said that once you saw Zhou stepping out on stage, you never forgot him.

By 1952 - at the age of 13 - Chow had been sent off to boarding school in the United Kingdom. It was an experience that would shape him, for better or for worse, and eventually Chow found himself on the swinging streets of 1960s London, where his restaurant Mr Chow became *the* place to see and be seen.

Part of the fascination with Mr Chow ever since - and through the opening of branches in New York, Beverly Hills and Miami - has been the art that lines the walls, initially showcasing the work of Chow's contemporaries in the London art scene. But Chow himself had tucked away his brush and easel by the time that first Mr Chow opened - and he left things that way for almost 50 years.

Thanks to the urgings of a friend, however, Chow - who paints under the name of Zhou Yinghua - has turned his focus back on to the canvas, as highlighted during the *Recipe for a Painter* solo exhibition at Pearl Lam Galleries in Hong Kong. Walk through the doors and you're greeted by dazzling mixed-media canvases that grab your attention, and hold it fast.

Interesting, then, that as we leave the photo shoot and walk towards Four Seasons Hotel Hong Kong and a quiet place to

chat, Chow reveals that one of his many skills is being able to recount the opening scenes of any movie you might care to mention. *The Searchers*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* - the man nails all three in an instant.

It's those first impressions, he says. They set the framework for everything that is to follow.

What was it that initially led you into life as an artist?

It was very simple. I was born into the theatre, through my father and Beijing opera. He started very young and was famous by the time he was seven years old. He was a star for more than 60 years, played over 800 roles and wrote many operas. Basically, he radically changed Beijing opera from just opera to acting. He was the great influence on Beijing opera. He created his own style - *qi* - and this spirit of understanding the creative process was with me all along. His work was expressionist work - like Beethoven - which can be very violent at times, but it can also be very tender. His work was very much about dealing with the moment, like all good art.

Did you ever want to follow in his footsteps?

It was entrenched in me. I always wanted to be in the theatre. But it was too tough. In Beijing opera they used to say that actors are beaten out of people. It was true. It was very violent. Too violent for me.

How aware were you from a young age of his fame?

Oh, very aware. People were always pointing at me saying, "There is his son!" And I would



look in the mirror and I would say, "I am the small Qiling Tong" - which was my father's stage name, which means Unicorn Boy. So I was very much aware of and very much intrigued by the theatre.

Were you two close?

I wasn't very close to him. I was very close to my mother. I had asthma so I was pampered, a spoiled brat and all that stuff. My father was this kind of forbidding image. When we ate with him we had to be very quiet, things like that. Memorably, I did spend two weeks with him alone. Two golden weeks - which I treasure - when I ate with him and he took me to the theatre. I was aged around 10.

And by the age of 13 you'd been packed off to boarding school in the UK. How much of a trauma was that?

As Muhammad Ali said after his fight with Joe Frazier, it was the closest thing to death. It was a panic attack. Devastating. Everything that was familiar was taken away. No language, no food, no rice. I remember one day at school they said we were going to have rice pudding and I got so excited - and then it was sweet. I was so disappointed.

Who did you turn to for support?

After one year I went to a vicarage in Suffolk. They had a few boys there. I only realised later that they all had problems. But the vicar educated me. He was well versed in British history and British society. All kinds of things.

At that age, how were you accepted by the other kids back at boarding school?

Oh, I was bullied. I'm Chinese. Let me put it this way, it wasn't a walk in the park. I didn't stay there that long, though it seemed like an eternity. But in life everybody gets damaged and gets nourished. You have to use everything, especially the Chinese. Like the chicken - the only thing we don't use is the feather. Make the most of everything.

How did your interest in art emerge?

Well, I wanted to be in the theatre at a young age, I wanted to act. Once I got to England it just seemed a natural thing to draw. On the way there - the 30 days or whatever on the P&O liner - I was interested in photography. But the first painting that hit was when I saw Dali's *Soft Construction With Boiled Beans* in a book. I thought, "What the fuck?" So I decided to copy it. It started there.

It led you to studying at St Martin's School of Art in London, which must - again - have been a huge change.

Life was completely different. Dancing and life classes and I was beginning to feel free. I never really got a job - apart from washing dishes and things. I did 16 movies, small roles with some great ones, like Nicholas Ray. So I was very lucky. I survived. I painted for 10 years. By 1957 I was part of my first group exhibition at the Young Contemporary. I had some success but eventually I just quit.

And you turned your attention to restaurants. Why restaurants?

Well, basically I wanted to express how great China is. And how great my father was. That's the truth. I was shocked that no one knew who he was - nobody cared. I wanted the West to experience Chinese culture, and the only medium I found the opportunity to do that with was in a restaurant.

You walked away from art completely?

Yes. I am a man of extremes. When I stop, I stop. When I start, I start. No half measures.

Did the success of the restaurants surprise you?



Not at all. For the few years before we opened you had this British culture revolution. Creative power and the breakdown of classism. Art was the name of the game. I was part of that - including The Beatles, the Stones, Mary Quant, all those people. All that circle in London were looking for restaurants. At that time Chinese restaurants were the lowest of the low. I said, let's make sure the food is authentic, make sure everything is contemporary. The idea was to make people respect Chinese culture. It might sound corny but it's true.

How did it feel to see the most famous people on the planet walking through your doors?

When we opened, everybody was there. Beatles, Stones, everybody came. Pow! It was the height of Swingin' London and then you had Hollywood movie-making people - Sinatra, Paul Newman - dropping by. It really was something.

Were you always keen at the same time to use these establishments as a platform for art, too?

That was actually modelled on a restaurant in Switzerland, which had promoted local artists. The people we used were all my friends and the idea was to have it art-driven, and to attract musicians, film people, photographers, stars. The whole world is doing that now, but then it wasn't really happening. The celebrity obsession. London was the epicentre of the world in terms of creativity and I was lucky to have been a part of it.

What have been the attractions - and the experiences - of running restaurants?

My restaurants have always been theatre. It's like directing a musical. In musicals you have conventions. You have a stage, you have an audience, you have backstage, scenery, costumes, music. It's the same with a restaurant. In every creative process, you use everything. It's like that chicken again. So I made it as creative as possible. Theatre. Everything is boring until you make it exciting. So I would direct everything. Tell the maitre d' how to walk, who to look at or



THIS PHOTO: *BOUQUET* (2012).
OPPOSITE: *POEM FOR ?* (2013)

not to look at. That kept me going for 46 years!

Are you a good boss?

Well, people never seem to want to leave. I think they get addicted to my bullshit. I take that as a compliment though.

What led you back to art?

I'd had memory wipeout. I'd forgotten about it. But [art dealer and curator] Jeffrey Deitch saw something in the corner of my house one day - something I'd done. And he said he thought it was pretty good. We talked more, he taught me a few things, and it's all started from there. I'm a blank page. I haven't painted for almost 50 years so I can do what I want.

Does it come easily to you?

Painting is a very sensitive medium. It's like hitting the jackpot when you get it right. And my first painting back worked. So now I'm like a man possessed. That first painting, I don't really feel like I did it. An out-of-body experience. I finished it in two weeks. The second one was tough.

Like a second album?

Or a second movie! The second one took a long time - but it turned out good. Now you can't stop me. I'm the unchained melody! It's all coming out. All this memory. It's like writing my own bio.

It's allowing you to explore your sense of self?

Absolutely. I'm having a field day. Shock and surprises - and excitement. 📺