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Restaurateur Mr Chow returns to art after 50 year sabbatical



Michael Chow, the celebrated restaurateur, has returned to his “true” passion of making art after what he described as a “50 year sabbatical”.

Following a successful career in hospitality, with Mr Chow restaurants in London and across America, he will display work in London this week for the first time since he was in his 20s. “When I was very young, I painted professionally,” Mr Chow said. “Then I quit for a radical sabbatical for 50 years. Now I’m back.”

Pearl Lam Galleries is to display his work in the UK during Art14 London, the art fair that opens on Friday. The paintings range in price from \$30,000 to \$120,000.

Mr Chow returned to painting in 2012 after encouragement from his friend Jeffrey Deitch, the former head of the LA Museum of Contemporary Art.

“He saw one of my paintings and he encouraged me to return to it,” the restaurateur said. “I haven’t stopped since.” Writing a catalogue essay for Mr Chow’s work, James Lawrence said it was “good to have him back”.

The abstract expressionist paintings, which measure eight feet by six, are made with household paint, sheets of silver and rubbish.

Mr Chow paints using his Chinese name Zhou Yinghua, saying he wanted to return to his cultural heritage, and cites artists including Robert Rauschenberg among his influences.

Mr Chow, son of Peking Opera Grand Master Zhou Xing Fang, was born in Shanghai and went to an English boarding school at 13, where he was given the name Michael Chow. After that, he went to Saint Martin School of Design to study architecture.

He started as an artist at the age of 18 with a few one-man shows as well as some mixed with other artists. “I got a woodcut into the Museum of Modern Art and showed at the ICA, I had a fairly decent career for a young man,” he said.

“But there was too much rejection and no support system. I’m happy Chinese artists are doing well now, but a little jealous of the support system that is there now.”

He dropped art and opened the first Mr Chow restaurant in London in 1968 and expanded to the US six years later. It now has venues in Los Angeles, New York, Miami and Malibu. Mr Chow said: “Painting wise I’d done nothing in those five decades. I’d never stopped being creative, even my restaurants would become installations and very theatrical. Every night it’s a performance; magic must happen.”

Through his career in hospitality he made friends with artists including Andy Warhol, David Hockney and Jean Michel Basquiat, another influence and someone to whom he was “very close, almost a father figure”.

“I’m 110 per cent an artist. I do many other things, and can multitask very well,” Mr Chow said. “I paid my dues in my restaurant. I now spend so much time on painting and I love it, it’s the closest thing to god.”