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Michael Chow - The famed restaurateur's heart is in art

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After more than 40 years as a renowned restaurateur, **Michael Chow** of Mr Chow fame is now refocusing his lens on his true passion, painting. As he enters a new chapter of his life, the Chinese cuisine legend tells Ysabelle Cheung about his quirky approach to art... Photography by Calvin Sit

Food! Glorious food! Prawns tossed in spinach-green dressing; hand-pulled noodles unctuous with meaty, salty gravy; fire-engine red lobster, fragrant and plump. And to top it all off, a Beijing duck, voluptuously oozing with rich juices, the skin crisp and buttery hot. This is not merely a meal. This is a Mr Chow meal.

But it is not just the culinary delights that take centre stage at restaurant Mr Chow, which has six branches stretching from Knightsbridge, London (the original, opened Valentine's Day, 1968) to Beverly Hills, New York, Miami and Malibu. For isn't that Anjelica Huston, draped in chic black, nibbling on velvet chicken? Back to back with Jay-Z? And once upon a time, Warhol and Basquiat, and John Lennon too (who famously took his last meal at the NYC 57th street joint before his untimely murder) all framed in dinner conversation with a magnificent backdrop of art pieces by David Hockney, Peter Blake and Jim Dine. All have one thing in common: they all love Mr Chow, and they all love Michael Chow, the man behind it all.

Chow should be nearing retirement right about now. After all, he's nigh on 75 years old and has been in the culinary business for more than 40 years, where, as he says, 'every night is different, like live theatre'. But it's not over yet for the septuagenarian who wears owlish spectacles, who's arrived in Hong Kong just a few days shy of the opening of his first ever major solo show. For Chow, as he likes to remind us, has not always just been a restaurateur, art collector, mover 'n shaker and Hollywood actor – he is also a passionate artist.

In the early 60s, Chow graduated from Central St Martins college in London and attempted to paint for a living. It didn't go so well. "Rejection upon rejection," he says, with a tinge of bitterness. "It was a painful time."

Then came the distractions to his art: a hair salon, a cluster of nightclubs, a few marriages – to Grace Coddington, creative director of American *Vogue*, and fashion socialite Tina Chow – and then finally, his empire of Western-influenced Chinese restaurants, all amounting to a 50-year-plus sabbatical since Chow has revealed his works on canvas to the public.

"I have been suppressed," he says, beating a fist down into a palm. "I had no confidence internally. Deep down, I didn't think I was that good; if I were, I would be producing great work. My father was an incredibly great Beijing Opera star, so I never wanted to be mediocre."

Chow's first solo show, at Hong Kong's Pearl Lam Galleries, is titled *Recipe for a Painter*, which alludes to his unique process in placing materials on huge canvasses, materials such as eggs, sponges, mixed precious metals – real gold and silver – wire and paint, all knitted together with staples. "We talk about making a painting, just like you would make a cake. There is a sequence that is complex, tactically. All the collected ingredients are connected to European contemporary artists, for example, the sponge is a conversation with [the sponge sculptures of] Yves Klein and the surrealists. My art is a dialogue. From the moment I first saw the paint, it had already begun."

"Each move is a controlled accident," he continues. "My father's performances were all about control of technique, something Chinese people call one breath or qi. When the moment comes, it comes very quickly. A masterpiece is just that: a controlled accident."

It was no controlled accident orchestrated by Chow, however, that Jeffrey Deitch, long-time friend and erstwhile director of MOCA in Los Angeles, stumbled upon an old Chow painting in 2010 and immediately urged him to continue. “Everything that has happened in the last few years has been by fate,” Chow says. “Even the first painting I did after my hiatus, which could have been terrible. What gave me confidence were the giants of the art world supporting me, like Julian Schnabel. Now I am addicted to painting.”

Despite being so ensconced in the affluent Western lifestyle, Chow retains a proud link with China – and one that has perhaps been strengthened by his long tenures in London and now Los Angeles, where he lives with his wife Eva Chow and his children, China, Maximilian and Asia. His exhibition at Pearl Lam Galleries, he explains, is almost like coming home – he left his native city of Shanghai when he was 13. “It is important that the gallery is Chinese and that Pearl is Chinese,” he says. “Back when I first started out, there was absolutely no support for Chinese artists. For so long, the art world has been dominated by Western culture and Western artists. Now that’s changing; I have to say my timing is impeccable.” He recalls, with hilarious detail, an incident between himself and fellow Chinese artists exhibiting at Venice Biennale one year. “I was like, ‘Chinese artists! Wow! Can I play? I’m a Chinese artist too!’” he says, laughing and clapping his hands. “But they said no. Haha.”

Chow’s frequent joviality is punctuated with more serious stuff – one topic he keeps returning to is one of his father, the opera star Zhou Xinfang. Chow is extremely vocal about his admiration for the art of Beijing Opera and, in a way, attempts to reconcile with his father by continuing to support a craft that is sadly fading, and by heralding the virtues of China and Chinese people. He even exhibits under his Chinese name, Zhou Yinghua. “I left my father when I was very young and never spoke to him again, even when he died,” he says, mentioning when he was shipped off to boarding school during the Cultural Revolution. His parents encountered complications with the government soon after. “I always connect my father to China. So when I arrived in London, I was shocked to find how Chinese people were perceived in the West,” he says. “In a way, I opened Mr Chow to make Westerners respect the Chinese. It is not just a restaurant.”

The road ahead for Chow may be paved with plenty of opportunities – for his art, for his restaurants, and his recent appointment as a board member of forthcoming The Broad museum in Los Angeles – but even he’s aware of his age. “Physically, I’m getting old,” he admits. “I don’t have much time. Fortunately, I work very quickly. I have also recently started some works on paper, that’s a new thing I’m doing. I will keep going. I have this saying that whatever is true, the reverse is truer. Your next painting might be a failure but it might also be a masterpiece. This will be my legacy.”

Recipe for a Painter Pearl Lam Galleries, until Thu Mar 8; pearllam.com.

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