

By Lara Day

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## CULTURE & ENTERTAINMENT

GALLERIES: MICHAEL CHOW



### Menu Maestro Turns to Paint

BY LARA DAY

**F**ood metaphors abound in the big mixed-media canvases in the exhibition "Recipe of a Painter"—and real food is there, too. The painter has used not only precious metals and trash but also eggs, whose yolks he's mummified and sealed.

The food themes are fitting, because the artist is 75-year-old Michael Chow, the Beverly Hills-based restaurateur known for his Mr. Chow fine-dining group. Its original Chinese restaurant helped define Swinging '60s London, and the six branches today cater to the famous and span Malibu to Manhattan's 57th Street. Now, Mr. Chow has opened the nine-work "Recipe" at Pearl Lam Galleries in Hong Kong; the show closes March 8.

This isn't Mr. Chow's first foray into art making, though it has been almost five decades since he took the pursuit seriously. An orphan of China's Cultural Revolution, he began his career as a painter in the 1950s, studying at St. Martin's School of Art in London and showing his work in group and solo shows to moderate success. One of his pieces, a woodcut from a mixed exhibition at London's Redfern Gallery in 1958, made it into the collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art.

At the time, Mr. Chow was living in the shadow of his father Zhou Xinfang, a well-known Beijing Opera performer who was killed during Mao Zedong's political purges. Zhou's death prompted his son to set down his paintbrush for almost 50 years. "My father was great. He's my hero. He represents China," says Mr. Chow. "I wasn't great, so I didn't want to know about it," he says. Af-

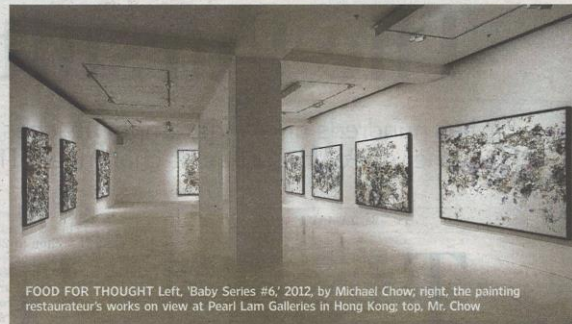


Pearl Lam Galleries (3)

ter nine years of trying to make it as a painter, the son gave up.

Eventually, he opened a hair salon that he later sold to Twiggy, launched his restaurants and ran in the same circles as Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring in 1970s Los Angeles and 1980s New York. Other ventures faltered. Mr. Chow tried unsuccessfully to make a film about his father's life (his movie hero is David Lean, the English director of epic classics such as "Lawrence of Arabia"). The restaurateur has been married to Vogue art director Grace Coddington, model Tina Chow and designer Eva Chun, his wife since 1992.

But while Mr. Chow has long collected artworks by his famous friends—among his treasured possessions are portraits of him by Basquiat and Peter Blake—he is only now seeking to position himself as an art-



FOOD FOR THOUGHT Left, 'Baby Series #6,' 2012, by Michael Chow, right, the painting restaurateur's works on view at Pearl Lam Galleries in Hong Kong; top, Mr. Chow

ist, going by his Chinese name, Zhou Yinghua, in his works. "I lost everything when I was 13 years old, including my name," he says. "Now I get my name back, my father's name, which is fantastic."

A turning point came a few years ago during a visit to his art-filled mansion by Jeffrey Deitch, then the director of Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art, who admiringly noted a small white canvas splashed with black and blue household paint from 1962. The artist, it turned out, was Mr. Chow. Spurred on by Mr. Deitch and friends such as Julian Schnabel, Mr. Chow returned to painting. In June 2012, he created a three-dimensional work called "Miracle," made with sheets of sterling silver—each sheet cost \$140.

Other ingredients in his paintings include sponges, a tribute to Yves Klein's

sponge sculptures, and bank notes, a nod to Warhol. "Money is very sexy," Mr. Chow says. "People love money." The canvases' titles range from the sincere-ironic "My Heart Belongs to Dada" to the Chinese-inspired, deliberately hokey "Bitter Morning Mist." He adds: "Sometimes I do a title just to be romantic, just to screw people up." He likens the spontaneity of his method to Basquiat and Chinese calligraphy ("the spirit of calligraphy, you have to keep the brush firm and at the same time loose").

In just a year and a half Mr. Chow created more than 60 paintings; he plans shows in New York for April (he declines to say where) and in Beijing. Prices in Hong Kong start from \$40,000 for smaller works, going up to \$600,000 for larger pieces. Will he add more food products to his works? "Not now," he says, but he's considering it.