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Double Life: Restaurateur Michael Chow's first solo show of his paintings

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For the first in a new series called Double Lives, documenting the alternative careers and unexpected passions of leading creatives, we talk to restaurateur (and 2014 Wallpaper* Design Awards judge) Michael Chow about rebooting his role as an artist, as his first solo show opens at Pearl Lam Gallery in Hong Kong. Chow is photographed at his TriBeCa, NY restaurant, by Dana Lixenberg

Michael Chow first burst onto the creative scene with [his eponymous restaurants](#) which made Chinese food fashionable in 1960s London and 1980s New York. The self-styled Chinese cultural ambassador has, however, always considered himself an artist. Born in Shanghai, he studied art and architecture in London but, after a decade struggling to establish himself as a painter, decided to pursue his dining ventures (where he famously often swapped noodles for art by friends who were the leading artists of the day). As his first solo exhibition of large sculptural canvases - a maelstrom of paint, milk and melted precious metals - opens at Pearl Lam Gallery in Hong Kong, the 74-year-old [2014 Wallpaper* Design Awards Judge](#) tells us why he began painting again after a 50 year 'sabbatical'.

W*: Having studied art, why did you veer away from painting to gastronomy?

Michael Chow: When I was painting before I opened the restaurant, there was no chance of success for anyone who was Chinese or African-American. I had to stop to survive. Then, for years, my work didn't allow me to paint.

What made you revisit the world of painting? Twenty months ago I had a break-through where I found my medium. I did a smaller painting for my wife Eva and it just worked. Everything fell into place.

Talk us through how you actually produce the works. I forget everything. The minute I begin to paint the composition comes in different variations so the structural vocabulary is different and I don't know how it will be. You 'listen' with your eyes and just help the painting along. The idea is to build and build and stop when it reaches a climax. It is like whipping cream, where you need to know when enough is enough. With painting, you can ruin the whole thing by just adding one more thing.

Is there one figure from your past or one key influencer who has inspired your work as an artist? My father, Zhou Xinfang, has always been very important in everything I do. He was a grandmaster of [Beijing Opera](#) and very famous but he and my mother suffered a great deal in the Cultural Revolution. The essence of my father is art, so this show is all about me visiting my relationship with China and my parents. I had only a short time with my father as I was sent away to boarding school but I always wanted to be a great artist like him. [former MOCA director] Jeffrey Deitch was also very important in encouraging me to paint again. I felt like Cinderella: no-one looked at me like an artist but I have always felt like an artist. It has just been suppressed.

How does it feel to be showing your work now and why have you waited until this moment? If I were very greedy, I would wish I'd started earlier but I don't think these paintings would have meant anything in the 1980s. Everything I do, I try to make into a creative process, so I've found the two worlds are not so different. A restaurant is like theatre, where it is all about making the night into the most exciting thing. Every detail is important. That is my philosophy. If I didn't have that I couldn't have survived.

How does your work represent your cross-cultural experiences? The paintings on show are a conceptual idea of anti-racism. I didn't like the way Chinese were disregarded in the west so this part of my life is to show respect for Chinese culture. That is how I managed to keep a restaurant going for 47 years; because it is comes out of respect for my father and China.

Is there a common strand between your ventures across disciplines? I've always lived an artistic life. Even when I was opening my first restaurant I wanted the environment to be great and the food to be authentic. I was still an artist then and knew that if I made it look Chinese people wouldn't have the same respect or pay as much. I am obsessive about detail and passionate about what I do. I apply the same philosophy in everything. When I collect art, for example, I study the artist and become an expert. Even if I had to make a cappuccino, it would have passion and be the best.

How does it feel to return to the art world? Collecting art helped me always stay in contact with that world and it made coming back as a painter much easier as I had never really left it. My track record as a collector is fantastic. It is something like 95% and that is not just luck. Part of it has to do with my broken education. Schools try to suppress individuality but my energy goes to what I am interested in. I am a man of extremes. I want to do things I am good at. It's all about my father. He was so famous and everyone made such a fuss of him. I want to be like that.

INFORMATION

Recipe for a Painter [Pearl Lam Galleries](#) 6/F, Pedder Building 12 Pedder Street Central Hong Kong