



Ullens Center for  
Contemporary Art  
尤伦斯当代艺术中心

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**Exhibition Dates:**

23 January - 22 March 2015

**Exhibition Venue:**

Long Gallery, Nave, and Lobby

Press material also available for  
download from the UCCA website

## Michael Chow: Voice for My Father

Released on January 19, 2015

**This tripartite exhibition features Chow's colossal canvases alongside archival images of his father Zhou Xinfang and an illustrious collection of commissioned portraits from art world celebrities Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and more.**

His father transformed Beijing opera, his MR CHOW restaurants reinvented Chinese cuisine for the chic set, and now impresario-turned-artist Michael Chow (b. 1939, Shanghai) is mounting his first exhibition of paintings in Mainland China. The Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) is proud to present "Michael Chow: Voice for my Father," showcasing a man whose multiple talents and long history of cross-cultural creative practice have inspired the art world for generations. Coinciding with the 120th birthday of his father Zhou Xinfang, a seminal figure in modern Beijing opera, the exhibition consists of three components: twelve of Chow's explosive works of gestural abstraction, an extensive selection of archival photos from Zhou Xinfang's performances, and ten commissioned portraits of Michael Chow from the artist's collection. Occupying the UCCA Nave and Long Gallery, "Michael Chow: Voice for My Father" runs from 23 January to 22 March 2015.

Born to the heiress of a tea empire and a grandmaster of Beijing opera, Michael Chow fondly recalls their family home in the French Concession. He was a sickly child who was pampered by his mother, and before being sent to boarding school in England at the age of twelve, his father spent every waking moment instilling in him a passion for theater and an earnest respect for the creative process. Years later, after enrolling in the Architecture Department of Saint Martin's School of Art, Chow began to experiment with painting only to be rejected by an art world perhaps unwilling to accept a Chinese painter working in London.

Too savvy for impoverishment, Chow took a different approach, opening an upscale Chinese restaurant in London's fashionable Knightsbridge. The venue's clever combination of high-end Chinese fare with immaculate, theatrical presentation and design quickly won the approval of tastemakers the world over. Later expanding to New York, LA, and Miami, Chow conceived of these restaurants as micro cultural embassies, celebrating the culinary traditions of China in a Western environment conditioned to look down upon its native products. MR CHOW remains a popular chain, not only for its roast duck, but also for the diverse roster of celebrities, luminaries, politicians, and artists filling its tables.

In 2012, Michael Chow returned to fine art after a nearly fifty-year hiatus. Chow paints on a monumental scale, with certain pieces measuring over three meters in length. As UCCA Director Philip Tinari has commented, these canvases “incorporate a pharmacopeia of materials, breathtaking less for their physical properties than for the range of technical and aesthetic demands they imply.” Many critics see his practice as bridging a gap between Western and Eastern painterly traditions. Chow himself maintains that his Chinese cultural heritage, one of calligraphy and his father’s Qi School of Beijing opera, is essential to interpreting his work. The point is clearly illustrated by the “Seasons” series, which assumes a traditional Chinese motif with post-ironic sincerity. His acute sense of color, texture, and scale appear astoundingly mature, and unlike several contemporaries in the LA scene, he does not employ studio assistants to produce these massive, time-consuming, physically demanding artworks.

Michael Chow’s return to painting coincides with a physical and symbolic return to China for the artist. As Chow has noted, this is in part to “to give a voice to [his] father” Zhou Xinfang, a man whose manifold contributions to Beijing opera have made him a household name in the discipline. For the UCCA presentation, archival images of Zhou Xinfang from 1915 to 1961 occupy one wall of the Long Gallery, depicting him in full opera regalia from dozens of his performances, such as *Four Scholars*, *Xiao He Chases Han Xin Under the Moonlight*, and *When Minister Xu Ce Hears News of a Battlefield Victory*. Shortly before the Xinhai Revolution of 1911, his voice—almost symbolically—cracked, and he was forced to reconsider what was vital to Beijing opera. From this devastating setback, Zhou Xinfang developed the Qi School of performance, which, counter to the prevailing trends, stressed a comprehensive view of Beijing opera as more than merely singing. These documentary images explore a lineage of creative practice, situating Chow’s painting as a form of “Qi School Expressionism” and stressing a deep connection between the performative arenas of painting and theater.

On the opposite wall of the Long Gallery are ten commissioned portraits of Michael Chow from an astounding list of artists, attesting to the popularity and significance of his restaurants as hotbeds of contemporary culture. This open-ended series begins with his friendship to British Pop artist Peter Blake—who executed the portrait in exchange for a tab at MR CHOW—and includes paintings by Julian Schnabel, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Ed Ruscha, Andy Warhol, a wax replica from Urs Fischer, and a filmed interview by Alex Israel. These portraits probe Chow’s dynamic persona from the perspectives of his art world contemporaries while

presenting his indispensable legacy as a cultural agent.

The exhibition is accompanied by the catalogue *Michael Chow: Voice for My Father*, an expansive critical examination that incorporates all three visual components of the show. The publication includes essays by Jeffrey Deitch, Philippe Garner, Christopher R. Leighton, Liu Housheng, Shan Yuejin, Philip Tinari, and Christina Yu Yu, as well as introductions by UCCA CEO May Xue and Power Station of Art Director Gong Yan. This watershed catalogue is published in China by New Star Press and has separate editions in Chinese and English.

The exhibition is curated by Director Philip Tinari and Assistant Curator Zoe Diao and includes five public programs: the forums “Michael Chow: Voice for My Father” and “Zhou Xinfang and Ma Lianliang: Art and Friendship,” film screenings of *Murder in the Oratory* and *Basquiat*, and a “Playful Portraits” workshop. More information can be found on the UCCA website. The exhibition is supported by Gucci. After the UCCA presentation, the show will travel to the Power Station of Art (17 April – 28 June) and the Andy Warhol Museum in 2016.

#### **About the Artist**

Michael Chow (b. 1939, Shanghai) attended Saint Martin’s School of Art and had a brief career in painting until the late 1960s when he opened the restaurant MR CHOW in London’s Knightsbridge. With encouragement from close friend Jeffrey Deitch, Chow began painting once again after a forty-six-year hiatus. He held a solo exhibition last year at Pearl Lam Galleries Hong Kong entitled “Recipe for a Painter.” His UCCA exhibition is his first solo show in Mainland China.

#### **About the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art**

The Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) is an independent, not-for-profit art center serving a global Beijing public. Located at the heart of Beijing’s 798 Art District, it was founded by the Belgian collectors Guy and Myriam Ullens and opened in November 2007. Through a diverse array of exhibitions with artists Chinese and international, established and emerging, as well as a wide range of public programs, UCCA aims to promote the continued development of the Chinese art scene, foster international exchange, and showcase the latest in art and culture to hundreds of thousands of visitors each year.