

Make sense of it all.

Become an FT subscriber. Pay annually and save 20%.

[Subscribe now](#)

The Aesthete Visual Arts

'I love name-dropping': Michael Chow

The legendary restaurateur and artist on 'trade dressing', sea moss and the importance of a good pee

Victoria Woodcock. Photography by Arianna Lago MARCH 3 2023

Receive free Visual Arts updates

We'll send you a *myFT Daily Digest* email rounding up the latest Visual Arts news every morning.

[Sign up](#)

My personal style signifiers are my moustache and my glasses. I grew a moustache when I was very young – they were popular then because of Clark Gable – and that was the beginning of what I call “trade dressing”. It’s a device for instant recognition. The greatest trade dresser of all time was Andy Warhol, with his ridiculous wig. I adapt a lot of Andy’s philosophy, but in my case it’s for practical reasons. As the racism at the time was so severe, I had to wear a mask to disguise my Chineseness in order to survive in the west. I couldn’t wear an actual mask, but the glasses became a trademark. They are by [Cutler and Gross](#), made in two colours; they’re called Mr Chow glasses. Same as my [\[George\] Cleverley](#) shoes; they call them Mr Chow shoes.



His trademark style includes glasses by Cutler and Gross... © Arianna Lago



...and "Mr Chow" shoes by George Cleverley © Arianna Lago

The last thing I bought and loved was [Peter Blake](#)'s last painting. I've always liked Picasso's last portrait. He looked terrible. He was old. And this was a man who had lived such an incredible life of energy. And finally, death called. And so he painted this portrait of himself that borders on [Francis] Bacon grotesque. So when I saw Sir Peter again a few months ago – and by the way, I love name-dropping – he said he had quit painting. So I bought his last one. It's kind-of a still life called *The Plum*: a tiny object. His work has been getting smaller and smaller. This is maybe his smallest painting. It's a beautiful thing.



His Peter Blake painting, The Plum © Courtesy of Waddington Custot

The place that means a lot to me is London. It was here that I started painting in the late 1950s, when I went to Saint Martin's. I did hundreds of paintings. And I was fortunate to spend time on the centre stage of swinging London. It was a very exciting time. Britain has a very important relationship with the visual arts. It's also where I opened my first restaurant, in 1968. Now I live in Los Angeles – the land of movies. It has this cool. But America has a different cultural understanding. For me, London has much more of a culture of artists talking to each other.

And the best souvenir I've brought home is a Chinese ceramic roof tile that I brought back from Shanghai. Really, it's a nothing thing – I picked it up from a demolition site – but to me it represents the essence, the greatness of China. It has so much spirit in my memory.



Chow in his sitting room, with an artwork by Kathryn Andrews © Arianna Lago

The grooming staple I'm never without is Touch of Grey by [Just For Men](#). Men tend to become fat, bald and grey. I try not to be too fat. I'm going a bit bald. But I'm not too grey at least. This is a shampoo that slowly makes your hair darker and darker. It's a little bit messy: you leave it for five minutes... and ta-da! You have a little bit of white coming through, so it looks *naturale*. It takes a real man to admit that.

There is a very thin line between elegance and arrogance

And my grooming gurus are the facialists at [Biologique Recherche](#). They're in Paris and LA, and they're good. I go in and say, "Give me the expensive one that's going to make me look young." Also, my two youngest children – one is three, the other one – keep me young. For instance, I can be down on the

floor and get up very quickly. A lot of other people my age can't do that.



The most recent of the four books he has read © Arianna Lago

The best book I've read in the past year is called [*Modernists & Mavericks*](#), by Martin Gayford. I've only ever read four books: *The Catcher in the Rye* by JD Salinger, *Magnificent Obsession* by Lloyd C Douglas and *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell. And now this. It's about the 25 years of British art from the second world war to the '70s – Hockney, Bacon, Freud and so on.

My style icon is Fred Astaire, because he was very elegant. By the way, there's a very thin line between elegance and arrogance.



Fred Astaire is his style icon © Corbis via Getty Images



Landscaping around his LA home © Arianna Lago

The best gift I've received was my recent show at [Waddington Custot](#) gallery in London. Jacob [Twyford, the gallery's senior director] gave me the show and it means a lot to me. This is not bullshit. I've had a life of rejection in art. A lot of suffering. And then someone recognises me... It really is the greatest gift.

And the best gift I've given recently was to Jacob. One of my *One Breath* paintings, which take 100th of a second to make. I smash a wooden mallet down on the paint. Bam. I signed it "To me darlin', Jacob".



His fridge always contains sea moss gel and eggs © Arianna Lago

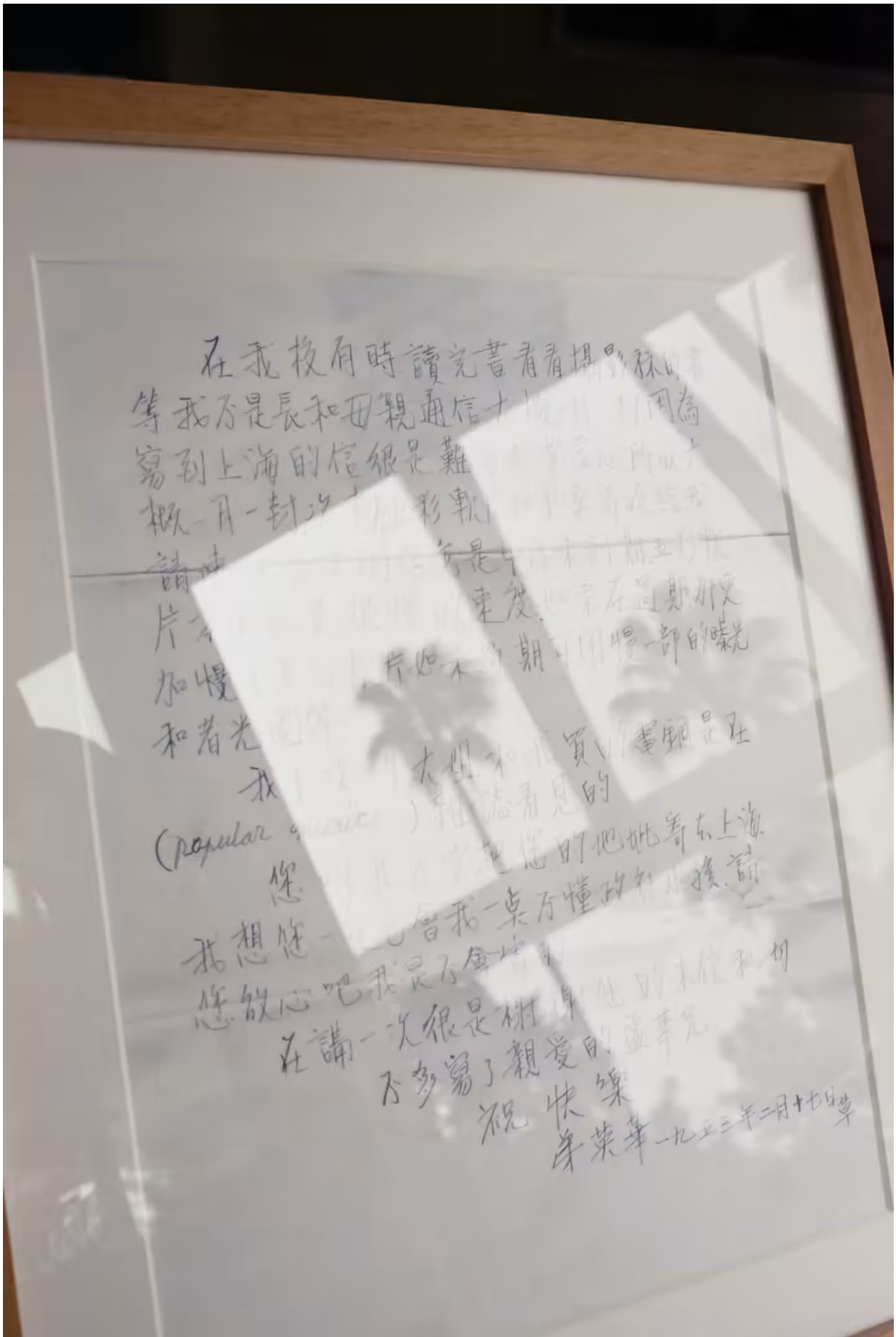
In my fridge you'll always find sea moss. It's kind of a jelly thing – I actually don't know what it is, but it's very expensive, tastes horrible and is very good for your health. And so with Covid and all that, I always have sea moss. And eggs, which I use in my paintings.

I've recently discovered Andy Warhol's two famous words, which changed his life: "So what." Nothing matters.

**For older people,
creating physical
harmony is very
important**

The last item of clothing I added to my wardrobe is a pair of glasses. I lost my regular pair and so I went to Boots and saw a very nice blue pair of [children's glasses](#). Some glasses steam up, but these don't because they are very small.

An object I would never part with is one of the letters I wrote to my brother-in-law, Meng Hua, in Chinese. They were all destroyed during the turbulence in China except this one, and even that is a copy, I think. It's a piece of paper that is very valuable to me.



His most treasured object – a handwritten letter to his brother-in-law © Arianna Lago



A marble bathroom, his favourite room in his house © Arianna Lago

My favourite room in my house is the bathroom. The morning is my good time. My brain is completely clear and I'm my happiest. And I associate this with the bathroom – shaving, doing my grooming shit... Pardon my French. Pardon the pun. Shitting is also important. For older people, it becomes very important, creating a physical harmony. Even peeing. All these things we take for granted are related to our health – physical and emotional.

The artwork I would buy if I could is the *Mona Lisa*. I had a private audience with Mona at the Louvre and I would love to own it for a few hours. To start with, it would be very good for name-dropping. But I also think it's a great artwork. It's extraordinarily complex, even the landscape in the background. The whole thing. And Leonardo da Vinci only made less than 20 paintings, or something ridiculous like that. Picasso made more than 13,000...



Chow wearing his new children's glasses from Boots and cracking an egg – he uses them in his paintings © Arianna Lago

In another life, I would have been exactly the same. I wouldn't trade it for anything. I've had many, many gifts throughout my life. I had to give up painting for half a century. I painted for 15 years when I was younger, and now I've been painting again for 12 years. Finally, this is a dream beginning to come true. A film company is doing a documentary on my life. It's like an out-of-body experience. I'm reminded of all these things that happened, and I think, "That wasn't me."

My favourite building is the National Parliament House in Dhaka, Bangladesh, by Louis Kahn. It's very spiritual-looking, with the reflection of the water, almost out of this world, literally. To me, he's the greatest architect, beyond even Frank Lloyd Wright.



A living room space in Chow's residence featuring a Joaquim Tenreiro sofa, Jorge Zalszupin side tables bought from Brazilian design dealer Ulysses de Santi, and works by artist Kathryn Andrews © Arianna Lago

The work of art that changed everything for me is Salvador Dalí's *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War)*. When I was about 14, I saw this in a magazine and I copied it. I'd never painted before.

The music I love is Ennio Morricone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*, the whole soundtrack, but especially the sequence where Claudia Cardinale appears. It's a masterpiece, an incredible entrance scene – and the music is so romantic.

I have a collection of first shots from classic movies. I memorise them. The first shot is like the moment when you first meet someone – it's always the most important. Name me three movies out of the thousands and thousands created in the past 80 years – but not musical, comedy, horror – and I can describe the first shot. Do you know what kind of memory you need to be able to do that? I played high-stakes poker for a long time – maybe that helped.

The best bit of advice I ever received was from my father, Zhou Xinfang, who was grandmaster of the Beijing Opera and a national treasure. I parted from him when I was 12, when I was sent to boarding school in Britain, first on the Isle of Wight, and then in Shropshire – a miniature Harry Potter school. It was a horrible time. I didn't speak English. I lost everything familiar to me – my people, my culture. But before I left, my father told me never to listen to people clapping with their hands, but when they clap with their heart.

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2023. All rights reserved.
