EVA AND ASIA CHOW

If Los Angeles ever elects a First Lady it should be Eva Chow. She’s more ambassador than socialite and, no, she doesn’t care for that term at all – though anyone who had the privilege of being invited to her exquisitely eclectic Beverly Hills home will tell you she’s the living definition of a prefect, cultivated hostess.
Mrs Chow is one half of the power couple behind the eponymous restaurant chain. Mr Chow, whose tables are frequented by the titans of the international creative class — and anyone else who just wants something really good Beijing Duck.

In contrast to her style of dress, which displays a level of glamour rarely seen outside of Marlene Dietrich movies, Korean-born Mrs Chow speaks about her activities and interests with a friendly, positive enthusiasm that's pure LA, especially when the subject turns to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA).

Mrs Chow co-chairs LACMA's annual Art + Film Gala (with Leonardo DiCaprio) which this year honoured Ed Ruscha and Stanley Kubrick and, though she's passionate about travel, LA — and particularly LACMA — is clearly the part of the planet she loves the most.

She's a surprisingly uncomplicated, disarmingly friendly woman who seems to divide everything into two categories: "Interesting" and "Other." And while she has nothing bad to say about the latter category, she bubbles over with enthusiasm for anything that falls into the former: cinema, food, decorating, travel, fashion.

She was kind enough to take a break from house-hunting in Manhattan (to be closer to her daughter, Asia — a style reference in her own right and a freshman at Columbia for a little chat, all about Eva, just before this year's Art + Film Gala.

SO LET'S START WITH SOMETHING EVERYONE AGREES ON: YOUR AMAZING HOUSE. WHAT'S THE DESIGN THEORY BEHIND IT?

In our home we have things from the 16th century up to now, anchored with mostly art deco of 1920s-30s France mixed with 17th century Chinese and 18th century Italian. It all works. The skill is in linking the thread that makes it all hang together. I really believe that the key to design is to exclude anything fake from what you're doing. Apart from that, it's like music on a playlist: if one piece is really strong it's just go with everything else. I mean Bowie can follow Callas can follow Nina Simone. You know?

AND DECORATING IS KIND OF LIKE MAKING A HARMONY WITH OBJECTS?

Yes, but objects that are personal to you! That's why I believe that everybody's home has to be personal. I just don't like the so-called "professional decoration," you know, that kind of homogenized "good taste." I recently went to a friend's house and it was so beautifully, so personally done. There was so much love and attention poured into it. That's what's beautiful. It's just so much better than you know, "design number two."

OFF THE RACK DESIGN.

Yes! You know, I couldn't be a surgeon. That's just not my skill set. But I like objects, beautiful things, art, wonderful food.

WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOURSELF AS KIND OF A "LIFESTYLE ARTIST"?

[pauses] I really resist that term.

ARTIST WHY?

Well, I kind of grew up surrounded by the two most eminent artists in Korea and I never really pursued art. That's why I really admire artists who stay their course and make it happen. It's really one of the bravest things to do. Artists are the bravest kind of person. While I'd love to be an artist, I just don't think that's what I'm supposed to be doing for the moment. Maybe one day I will.

WHEN THE MOMENT COMES?

You know, when I did fashion I didn't really even think about it. I just did it and Neiman Marcus and Bergdorf Goodman just bought it. I made a ten-piece collection in pink and white pear de soie that I showed to Neiman Marcus and they just bought it. But I just did it.

YOU MEAN YOU DIDN'T INTELLECTUALIZE IT?

Exactly, but that's not to say I don't work very hard at everything I do. It just so happens that I'm the sort of person who doesn't have to want to try. When I'm doing something, I like to give it everything I have.

LET'S TALK ABOUT YOUR GALLERIES. I CAN IMAGINE THAT A LOT OF DIFFERENT PEOPLE WOULD CALL IT SIMPLE ATTRACTION TO MARY PINSKY. BUT HOW DO YOU SUCCEED IN BRINGING OUT THAT KIND OF STAR POWER?

I probably oversell this term but, personal relationships. It's not that I set out to make a certain kind of friend. I've just always been drawn to creative people. I just find them so interesting. You know I cherish a lot and the core of my relationships with people is that my friendships are built over the years. They've been building for years. I just enjoy people who are interesting.

YOU ARE A LEGENDARY HOSTESS.

Well, you know, I love interesting people. And I love introducing interesting people. Good food, good company, good wine — those are the components of a good evening. I love good china and beautiful wines and good service and I do my own flowers, always, and these little things add up to good experience. I think people do have a reasonably good time at our house. We talk, listen to music, we roll around on the floor [laughs] and we end up having very musical evenings. Maybe Asia will sing and play the piano...

MAYBE YOU'RE A REALLY GOOD CURATOR, AND THAT'S WHY PEOPLE TURN TO YOU FOR INSPIRATION?

Well, I don't know if I'd say that. I'm like that every day. My house is always the same. Even when I'm alone with Michael and Asia the atmosphere is always the same. We don't rearrange the furniture for guests. The music you hear at an evening is what I listen to when I'm alone. The wine I serve is the wine I drink. I just share what I like.
SO A FISTER GETS A KIND OF SNAPSHOT OF YOUR LIFESTYLE?
Yes, for example, I often drink champagne and listen to music at around ten. And I come home by taxi that's what we do.

WHAT PEOPLE 'STOP BY' DOES THAT REALLY HAPPEN?
Um, [laughs], people of close friends. Maybe a couple.

LET'S TALK ABOUT MICHAEL FOR A SECOND. COULD YOUR MARRIAGE ALSO BE DESCRIBED AS AN ESTHETIC COLLABORATION? DO YOU LEARN THINGS FROM HIM? DOES HE TEACH YOU?
For instance, if we both walk into an artist's studio on the same day but at different times and pick out a painting, when the delivery arrives and we unpack it, it's going to be the same piece. We'll have chosen the same painting. I guess you could say I learned from him and he learned from me but a better way of putting it is something he says all the time: 'With Ed and me it's 1 - 1 - 5.' It's nothing as easy as a match made in heaven but, frankly, if two very strong-minded people can be together for 15 years it's because there's something more.

THE TWO OF YOU ADD UP TO A KIND OF SURPRISE? THE SUM IS GREATER THAN ITS PARTS?
Yes.

TELL ME ABOUT A PERFECT DAY IN LOS ANGELES. LACMA. DEFINITELY. AND NOT BECAUSE I'M ON THE BOARD.
There are a lot of established, beautiful museums in the world, but there's a certain excitement when something is being pioneered, when something is developing and growing.

WHAT IS YOUR AMBITION FOR LACMA?
I think we have a very good shot at turning it into the kind of place that people come to LA to see. And when you look at the art scene that's here in LA, it really makes sense.

WHAT ABOUT WORK? DO YOU EVER GO BACK?
Well you know they say: 'you become mature when you want to go back to where you came from.' I hadn't been there since 1979, but I love visiting now. But really it comes down to who is there. You can step out of the Ritz into Place Vendôme and all of that beautiful grey but still what matters is who you're there to see.

DO YOU HAVE A FAVOURITE PLACE AROUND HOME?
[Pauses]. If I had to pick, I'd say Paris. And even there the most important thing is going to her who you're going to see, where you're going to eat and what are we going to talk about?
WHO IS THE MOST INTERESTING PERSON YOU KNOW?

Well, I don’t like to name names. That’s not really fair to my friends. But, once again, when I’m in Paris, I meet a lot of designers. But we don’t talk about fashion—what could be more boring than that? Right? It’s life. And it makes a person creative and it comes out in a specific medium but really what makes a person interesting is the expression of his life experience.

IS THERE ANY PRECONCEIVED IDEA ABOUT YOU THAT REALLY ANNOYS YOU? ANYTHING YOU SEE IN THE PRESS THAT ANNOYS THE HELL OUT OF YOU?

Well, sometimes I get the feeling that people describe me as a socialite. That is a word I detest.

TELL ME MORE...

Well, first of all, what is a socialite? Is it a job, a title? What is it? Whatever the idea of a socialite is what I have in my head is not me. The reality is that I don’t really go to a lot of parties. I don’t get photographed all the time. My life is really family, friends, and work. I’m just not that party and event kind of person. It’s not an attractive term but I’m not that social. [laughs] Anyway it’s not that serious.

BEING CALLED A SOCIALITE WOULDN’T KEEP YOU AWAKE AT NIGHT

[laughs] Not. Nothing keeps me up at night. I used to be really sensitive about what people said or “is this picture of me bad?” but, I do my best. And I don’t do a lot of interviews and I don’t take myself for some kind of celebrity.

YOU LIVE IN LA. WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT REALITY TELEVISION? ARE REALITY-STAR CREATIVE PEOPLE?

I don’t pay attention to it. Someone did approach Michael and me once about it but we just laughed it off. It was kind of funny. I see them in magazines and I always have to ask whoever is next to me, “Who is this person?” And they seem so important. But I have no clue. I never seen them in my life.

DO YOU DRAW ON CINEMA FOR YOUR PERSONAL STYLE YOU’VE MENTIONED VISCONTI.

Well, it’s not really the clothes in the movie. It’s the whole visual aesthetic. I mean it’s all circular—style is not really fashion, per se. Marlene Dietrich for example could wear a pant and a shirt and be the chicest, coolest person in the world. I think having good style is being like a computer, in a way, registering everything around you and then producing something new from it. There are very few people who have really incredible style. If you ask me who inspires me, I’ll tell you that I’m inspired by beauty, period.

SO ISN’T A MOVIE SORT OF A LITTLE UNIVERSE OF STYLE?

Yes. And film is art and film is art. And in a way that’s why it’s so important to honour great directors.

BECAUSE IT’S COLORFUL?

Well, more respect, I’d say. When I say “honouring” Stanley Kubrick it’s really that. To be honoured and appreciated and to spotlight their work more time is a good thing.

SO, THIS YEAR YOU ARE CO-HAIRING FOR THE 2ND TIME WITH LEONARDO (DI)CAPRIO THE 2ND LACMA ART FILM GALA.

This is the second year of the art and film gala, yes, and thankfully we are sold out.

GUCCI IS SPONSORING THE EVENT. HOW DID THEY COME ABOUT?

They are just a great partner. Not because they support what I do or what someone else does but because they support what is done for film. A few months ago, I was at MoMA watching Once Upon A Time In America and I was alone with Mary [Stoessel’s] Film Association, had restored this amazing version of the film. They did the same for The Leopard (Visconti’s 1963 film based on the novel tracing the decadence of the Sicilian nobility, considered a style reference for anyone, interior designers). They are just great partners. I didn’t have to interest them in my projects. It was deeply felt and they were doing good work already when I approached them. The intention was already there.

SHIFTING GEAR: A HINT YOUR DAUGHTER...A HINT THAT DIVING IS A BIGGER STYLE ICON IN HER OWN RIGHT. HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE HER STYLE? HOW IS IT DIFFERENT FROM YOUP. DO YOU GIVE HER ANY ADVICE? DID YOU FIND ANYTHING WHEN SHE WAS A KID?

Asia has a special look that comes from inside. It has a certain magic. I grew every mother and daughter who are as close as we are influence each other. I’ve been cutting her hair since she was a baby. I gave her the fringe that suits her so well—still cut her hair. I dressed her a certain way as she grew up. But her look isn’t necessarily a question of what she wears but rather how she wears it and I think she has that look. Now she’s grown up and a college freshman in NYC. She grew up with lots of music and music is her passion. She loves to play and play guitar and piano and compose. She is our dinner performer at home. We usually end the evening listening to her singing and playing piano. My friends love to hear her sing and end up joining her sometimes.

WHAT DO YOU LOVE ABOUT L.A.?

I tend to wear clothes that are timeless, functional but unique in cut and detail. Alber’s designs have all those elements. He makes beautiful clothes that work. His clothes reflect not only his obvious talent but also his warm and generous heart. It gives scale to the garment. Often I wear my Lainin dresses until the fabric wears out.

LAST QUESTION: ANY BAD HABITS?

Well, I’m still lingering over cigarettes. If I’m drinking wine or champagne, that cigarette just tastes so good to me. But I’m working on it.