

Chuck Close
MATRIX/BERKELEY 50

University Art Museum
March - April 1982

Self-Portrait/Composite,
six parts, 1980



In 1968 Chuck Close painted a 9' x 7' black and white acrylic on canvas self-portrait. Using an air brush, he reproduced every detail of a photograph he had taken of himself, recording both the in- and out-of-focus areas with equal fidelity. In 1971, after completing a total of twelve startling black and white portraits, Close began a series of color works in which he adapted the process of dye transfer printing to painting. Working from three color separation prints—magenta, cyan and yellow—he applied each color on the canvas sequentially, which resulted in the naturalistic, if somewhat garish, color of magazine illustrations. While each black and white painting took Close four months to finish, it required over a year to complete each color work. Close's billboard-scale faces astonished the public when they first appeared on gallery walls in 1969. Not only was Close painting figuratively at a time when Minimalism held sway in the art world, but he was producing figures on a scale which made them impossible to ignore.

During the past decade Close has explored a variety of media, including etching, pastel, ink and watercolor, creating images with lines, dots, and, more recently, his own fingerprint. However, he has never deviated from his original subject matter: full face and shoulder views of himself, family, and friends—as Close says, "...images that matter." (Close, unlike Andy Warhol, for example, will never accept a portrait commission.) Nonetheless, Close photographs the subjects in an anonymous manner and selects the photograph to be translated into paint not because it is flattering (usually, the contrary) or psychologically

revealing, but because its abstract, formal elements can be expected to make an interesting painting. Close's personal feelings about the sitter must be put aside during the long, dispassionate process of creating the paintings, but the significance each image has for him should not be underestimated.

Though Close's work is realistic, the repetitive subject matter and highly intellectualized and pre-conceived method by which he makes the paintings derives from Minimalism. Each work is rendered mechanically, beginning at the top of the canvas and working down, square by square, from the photograph on which a grid pattern has been drawn. No one section is more important than any other. Paradoxically, however, while the attitude and process is reductionist, the finished work contains maximum rather than minimum information, albeit information about the photograph rather than the human being it represents.

Close has sometimes been compared with Photo Realist painters who gained prominence in the late sixties and seventies and who also used the photograph as the source of their imagery. Close has never felt comfortable with the association, since his concerns have more to do with the interface between figuration and abstraction than with the technical virtuosity that is the hallmark of Photo Realism. In shooting the photographs, for instance, Close uses a 190mm lens to achieve an extremely shallow depth of field so that only a small portion of the face is in sharp focus. The fuzzy quality of the remainder of the photograph encourages more of an abstract reading.

When confronted by the gigantic, iconic images, the viewer tends to read the myriad details of the skin surface—the pores, wrinkles, hairs—like a map, and only when distanced sufficiently from the painting can he or she perceive the whole.

Up until 1979, the photograph functioned as a working sketch for Close. When Polaroid Corporation invited him to use their camera which makes 20" x 24" contact prints, it provided an opportunity for him to produce photographs with greater detail than ever before. To translate these photographs directly into large-scale portraits, Close conceived of the idea of photographing and assembling 20" x 24" detail prints of sections of the face, as exemplified by the nine-part self-portrait in the MATRIX exhibition. In this way, the desired scale was achieved without resort to enlargement from a smaller negative, in the process of which much detail and clarity is lost.

While working on the 20" x 24" prints, Close learned of a camera Polaroid kept in the basement of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston which produces 40" x 80" prints. In the Lustrum Press book, Portrait: Theory, Close describes the camera: "I guess the word camera actually means room, and this camera is a room 12' wide, 12' high, and 16' long, with a lens board mounted in one end of it. It has no bellows. It has a fixed focus flat plane lens. And at the other end of the room is a kind of jerry-built apparatus that functions as a focusing screen, into which the rolls of paper and the positive "film" fit. Well, anyhow, you're inside a room with a telephone, and the

outside of the room is a forklift truck onto which I had a chair tied for the sitter." When Close tripped the shutter, a bank of strobe lights were set off and the exposure was made. A sheet of printing paper was placed against the negative and then sandwiched between two enormous rollers. In sixty seconds, the negative was peeled off, revealing the finished print.

Because the one-of-a-kind 80" x 40" photographs were not conceived as preliminary to paintings, Close thinks of them as his first "photographs." One can imagine the thrill he felt seeing the results of his vision in one minute instead of one year! Close made several individual portraits with this immense camera and a particularly arresting self-portrait composed of six 80" x 40" sections.

There have been many instances of artists working with advanced technology made available through the cooperation of private corporations. The uneven results of such collaborations have demonstrated that technology, no matter how sophisticated, is merely a tool. The success of the association between Close and Polaroid can be attributed to the fact that Polaroid provided the technical means for a natural extension of Close's stylistic development.

Close was born in Monroe, Washington, in 1940. He received a BA from the University of Washington (1962) and an MFA from Yale University (1964). He lives in New York City where he is represented by The Pace Gallery.

Constance Lewallen

Works in MATRIX:

All works are color
Polaroid photographs,
lent by the artist.

85" x 44½" each, 1980:

Joanne

Stanley

Carl

Heidi

Arnold

Jeffrey

Self-Portrait

Self-Portrait/Composite,
six parts

ea. 31" x 21 3/4" each, 1979:

Ray, 5 photographs

Carl, 4 photographs

Georgia, 5 photographs

Hanlon, 2 photographs

Walter, 2 photographs

John R., 2 photographs

Leslie, 3 photographs

John B., 2 photographs

Self-Portrait/Composite,
nine parts, 1980

Selected one-person exhibi-
tions:

Bykert Gallery, NY '70, '71,
'75; The Museum of Modern Art,
NY '73; Portland Center for
Visual Arts, OR '75; The Pace
Gallery, NY '77, '79 (cats.
pub.); Close Portraits,
Walker Art Center, Minn.,
MN '80 (circulated to three
museums in the U.S.; cat.
pub.).

Selected group exhibitions:

Whitney Museum of American
Art, NY, Annuals and Bien-
nials, '69, '72, '77, '79
(cats. pub.); Düsseldorf,
W. Germany, Prospect '71
(cat. pub.); Corcoran
Gallery, Wash., DC, 34th
Biennial Exhibition of
Contemporary Painting, '75
(cat. pub.); Daniel Weinberg
Gallery, SF, Richard Art-
schwager, Chuck Close, Joe
Zucker, '76; Centre Georges
Pompidou, Paris, Paris-
New York, '77 (cat. pub.);
Albright Knox Gallery,
Buffalo, NY, American
Painting of the 1970's, '78
(cat. pub.).

Selected bibliography about
Close (see also catalogues
under exhibitions):

Nemser, Cindy. "An
Interview with Chuck Close,"
Artforum (Jan. '70).

Rose, Barbara. American
Art Since 1900 (New York:
Praeger '72).

Canaday, John. "Chuck
Close," New York Times
(Oct. 27, '73).

Hess, Thomas B. "Art:
Up Close with Richard,
Philip, Nancy and Klaus,"
New York Magazine (May 30,
'77).

Wise, Kelly, ed.
Portrait: Theory (New York:
Lustrum '81).

MATRIX is supported in part
by a grant from the National
Endowment for the Arts, a
Federal agency.