

## Chuck Close / Portraits

### Introduction

Objectives: to address the work of Chuck Close, focusing on how his paintings work both with and against conventions of portraiture. To also explore his creative practice over the course of his life, including his response to an injury suffered mid-career that left him partially paralyzed.

### ***Phil, synthetic polymer on canvas, 1969, 108 x 84 inches***

Composer Philip Glass. The photo for this image has been reused by Close in a variety of media more than 30 times over the years. Media have included airbrush, gridded watercolor and fingerprint, paper pulp compositions.

### Life

Born 1940 in Monroe, Washington.

Earned his BA in painting from the University of Washington-Seattle.

Earned his MFA in painting from Yale

**His paintings originated with a photorealist school or movement of artists working with the main objective to faithfully copy photographic sources into paintings. Most photorealists focused on urban scenes or still life. In an effort to move away from artistic fashion during the 70s, Close chose to bring photorealist sensibilities to the figure which was clearly unfashionable at the time.**

### Portraiture Context

#### ***Susan, acrylic, 1971***

Artist Susan Zucker

Considers himself a reluctant portraitist; early in his career he refused to call his pieces *portraits*. Rather he referred to the pieces as *heads*.

All of Close's work makes use of the classic portraiture form: head and shoulders, frontal view of the subject's face. In this sense his work does strongly *refer* to traditional portraiture, though several critics and Close himself do not consider his pieces formal, conventional portraits which are generally (1) commissioned, (2) require a sitter to paint from and (3) often aim to address something about social status or psyche of the sitter.

Thus, while his images *appear to be portraits*, there is some question as to the appropriateness of that classification.

### Models

Models are people he knows, his wife, himself, and many of the people in his paintings are themselves, important artists.

He says that working on an image of a friend makes him more responsible to get the image right and it's easier to work (up to 14 months) on an image of someone you know and care about.

He isn't interested in pop stars or celebrities in the manner Warhol was.

### On Likeness and Expression

#### ***Kent, acrylic on canvas, 1970-71, 100 x 90 inches***

Painter Kent Floeter

**His objective is to create an image that does not exaggerate or idealize the sitter.**

**His primary goal is not revelation of the special personal qualities of each subject;** while his meticulously detailed approach represents every subject down to each hair and pore, and he does capture likeness, his work does not aim to reveal the subject's *identity* or psyche, though wrinkles and laugh lines do say something about the life lived.

He doesn't create images with extreme emotion or expression; doing so "would render only one reading" of the image. "if you present someone neutrally without editorializing, it invites the viewer try to size this person up the way people size each other up in personal interactions.

**His objective is to objectify the sitter's image – to remove associations, expressions, pathos, psychology, status, class, environment – everything from the painted image.**

The scale of the work has been discomfiting for sitters, who become uncomfortable with the fact that every aspect of their visage – including the parts they may be sensitive about -- is blown up in a objective manner. Most sitters quickly change eye glass frames or hair styles – they change their appearance somehow -- upon completion of his paintings.

#### Commissions

**He will not paint portraits on commission, though he's been approached numerous times.**

Close believes that if he did commissioned pieces, the works "would be possessed spiritually as well as actually by the buyer" -- in a sense taking his inquiry and intentions out of the creative process.

Thus, if Close is a portrait artist, he is one in the sense that Malcolm Warner describes the Modern portrait artist – one who does portraits for his own pleasure and interest -- not at the behest of a patron.

#### The Viewer

The arresting quality of the work is due primarily to the scale of the images.

"The bigger they are, the longer it takes to walk by them, therefore the harder they are to ignore...."

"I want to build powerful images without using powerful gestures"

#### Working Process

Since 1968, Close as been working with the gridded system of transferring photographic imagery to a large scale canvas (often 9 feet tall). His earliest pieces disguise or 'disappear' the grid. His later works emphasize its presence in the process.

***Self portrait, acrylic on canvas, 1968, 108 x 84 inches***

**Black and white photo, gridded study, 14 x 11 inches**

Close as said that his 1968 self portrait made him very sensitive about his thinning hair.

In this image Close is striking a James Dean-like pose (what Shearer West might refer to as role playing in a limited manner)

The photographic origin of each painting is never in doubt.

**"In fact, his paintings are portraits of *photographs* of his subjects, never the subjects themselves."** (Lyons and Martin, pg 13).

A professional photographer takes all the photos, though Close manages the process very closely, from shooting to printing. His objective is to get an image that will be as objective (neutral) as possible – he selects images for their blandness of expression.

His photos are in short, ID photos similar to license photos or passport photos.

Once he has the photo, the sitter can go away (and he prefers if they do).

By using the same white background and same head-and-shoulders view of all his subjects, Close stresses the similarities between his subjects, rather than their individuality or differences.

***John, acrylic on canvas, 1971-72, 100 x 90 inches***

Artist John Roy, professor at University of Massachusetts – Amherst. A photorealist painter.

John's gaze never meets the viewer's eye, his eyes are directed slightly down. This piece, like the mostly white backgrounded canvases are haunting in that there is usually no distinction between the white background in the painting and the white gallery walls on which it is hung.

The depth of field impact of the close-up photo is evident here – John's nose and bangs are very crisply focused and his hair at the back of his head is less focused – those are indications that this is a painting from a photo and should be read as a painting of a photo (not a painting of a sitter).

***John in progress (12 images)***

Close's color works are developed by using a 3-color (red blue yellow) separation process that is common in offset lithographic media – used for inexpensive commercial printing projects.

He copies the yellow separation on the canvas, then the red separation over the yellow layer, and finally the blue separation over the yellow and red – thus he goes over the painting entirely, three times – in effect becoming a human copy machine.

***Mark, acrylic on canvas, 1978 – 79, 108 x 84 inches***

***Mark in progress I***

***Mark in progress II***

Mark Greenwald indicated that he liked the painting – “it seems like a very human image and despite the size, I don't find it monstrous or shocking. But one subtle, frightening thing happened....shortly after he started the series of works based on my image, I grew a beard and I haven't shaved it off since.”

Here we see Close working on a forklift to move himself around the large canvas.

***Large Mark, pastel, 1978, 56 x 44 inches***

An example of Close's 'recycling' of a single image into another medium.

***Cindy II, oil on canvas, 1988,***

Photographer Cindy Sherman

The year Close made this painting, he suffered a spinal artery collapse that left him severely paralyzed. This event required him to develop a process to continue painting from a wheel chair.

### **Close working in wheel chair, 1991**

He says “the whole art world turned out for me” as he was hospitalized for seven months and progressed through physical therapy. “in the dark, their faces loomed up. I realized just how important these disembodied images of heads were. It reconnected me. It was the first time I ever really accepted the fact that I was making portraits. Prior to that I’d always referred to my paintings as *heads*.”

### **Kiki, oil on canvas, 1993, 100 x 84 inches**

Artist Kiki Smith

*“I think problem-solving is highly overrated. Problem creation is much more interesting. If you want to react personally you have to move away from other people’s ideas. You have to back yourself into your own corner where no one else’s solutions apply and ask yourself to behave like an individual.”*

### **April, oil on canvas, 1990-91, 100 x 84 inches**

#### **April (detail)**

### **Self portrait, oil on canvas, 1997**

A rare, three-quarter view

Over the years, Close has been his most consistent subject, echoing the practices of self portraiture of Rembrandt and Durer. In these images he documents his own aging process.

‘I’ve been fortunate to live long enough during which time painting has been dead several times. When painting’s dead it’s a good time to make paintings. And then, if you did paint, you certainly would not paint the figure (that was dead) and you’d definitely not do anything genre-like portraits....that was completely dead.’

### **Conclusion**

Close’s work does make strong references to traditional portraiture, though his work is made without the benefit of a sitter. He works from photos, which shifts the process from responding to a human being to the process of faithfully copying a photo. His work is never commissioned – in this sense his work is as much about what *he has to communicate* as more obviously self-expressive works by other artists.

### **Bibliography**

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*April* (detail)

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## Photorealism



**Robert Cottingham**

*Frankfurters - Hamburgers*, 1980, lithograph,



**Audrey Flack**

*Marilyn (Vanitas)* 1977, oil



**Richard Estes**

*Telephone Booths*, Acrylic on masonite, no date

One could say that Close's paintings are *not* conventional portraits. Provide three characteristics that support this idea:



Identify this painting.

What school of painting does Close's work originate from?