

Name: Yungfong Tang (aka Frank Tang)

Chosen artwork: William J. Clinton (2006) by Chuck Close

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My name: Frank Yungfong Tang Date: March 1, 2023.

Name: Yungfong TANG (aka Frank TANG)

Class: ARTS 2D, Winter 2023, De Anza College

Due Date: Mar 2, 2023

Title: William J. Clinton (2006) by Chuck Close

On October 9, 2022, I visited the National Portrait Gallery in Washington DC to see this “William J. Clinton” (Fig 1) in their “America’s Presidents” exhibition¹ (Fig 2). It is a colossal seven feet wide nine feet tall oil on canvas contemporary style portrait by Chuck Close, completed in 2006. Its size, its artistic presentation, and its subject attracted all my attention away from other presidential portraits in the same hall. Seeing this real work with my own eyes simply shocked me.

The Artist - Chuck Close

The artist Chuck Close is famous for painting giant faces. Before 1988, he was well known for his enormous Photo-realist work. However, his artistic style changed dramatically in 1988 by a tragic event.

Close was born in 1940 in Washington state.² He started art lessons when he was a school child. Art works of American Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock motivated him to be a painter when he was 14 years old. He received formal artistic training from University of Washington School of Art and Yale University School of Art and Architecture. When age 24, he studied in Vienna, Austria under the support of a Fulbright scholarship³. He taught art classes at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst the year after. His early solo exhibition focused on black-and-white self-portraits in huge size, from the neck up.

¹ “Now on View: Bill Clinton by Chuck Close.”

² Storr, Varndoe, and Wye. Chuck Close. The Museum of Modern Art. 203

³ Warren. *Encyclopedia of twentieth-century photography*. 288

His basic painting process⁴ is unique and very consistent from the beginning of his career to his death in 2021, even the artistic style of their final results showed a dramatic shift in the mid of 1988. Close always starts his painting process by taking several detailed photographs of the subject's head, sometimes with lighting from different angles. He then selected one key photograph as a base and superimposed a grid on that. Then he drew a grid on the canvas as references. He painted the canvas, cell by cell, line by line. Some of his works revealed that he conducted several rounds of painting on the cell-by-cell application. In the first round, he will only paint one color, such as yellow, cell by cell. And after painting all the cells with the amount of yellow, cell by cell, line by line, he will go back to the first cell in the first line to repeat the process of painting all the blue on each cell. In his later work he no longer divided the rounds by the application of colors, but rather by the level of details- he painted the background color in the first round, and then finer details of each cell in the next rounds. In his early Photo-realistic period, he also used acrylic paint and airbrush as application methods. Close always focuses on the painting of one cell at a time, but will repeat the cell-focusing-process on each cell in several rounds, with each round a slightly different technical goal.

Since first grade, Close suffered the chronic disability of Dyslexia and Prosopagnosia⁵ which both impact his learning. Dyslexia⁶ is a form of learning disability that impedes someone's reading ability and those with this disorder have hardship to process spelling and phonology, and lack rapid visual-verbal reaction. Close's dyslexia narrowed his career choice from very early in his life while he had a very hard time to learn through reading and complete some simple mathematical tasks.⁷ Prosopagnosia⁸ is also known as "facial agnosia" or "face blindness". It is a

⁴ "Chuck Close." *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

⁵ Finch. *Chuck Close: Life*. 23

⁶ Johnson. *Designing Meaning-Based Interventions for Struggling Readers*. 154

⁷ Kandel. *The age of insight: The quest to understand the unconscious in art, mind, and brain*. 486

⁸ Hahn. "Prosopagnosia When All Faces Look The Same." 48

neurological disorder which lacks the ability to differentiate faces. In a video interview, Close mentioned this issue drove him to paint portraits from photographs “as a method of preserving and cataloging the faces of his friends and family.”⁹ This probably is why he did the cell-by-cell painting process of human faces- he cannot do it otherwise, with his Prosopagnosia. He shifted to experiment with more color and a variety of gimmicks and mediums during the 1970s and 1980s.

In the year 1988, we see a dramatic change of style in Close’ work. He became quadriplegic- yet another unfortunate event in his life! A spinal blood clot paralyzed him to a wheelchair.¹⁰ Close was already a well-known artist at that time. His wife understands him and requests his doctor to incorporate painting as part of his rehabilitation process. His strong desire to paint again encouraged him to recover. However, after this incident, he lost fine control of hand movement. He therefore rendered each cell with several nesting colorful ovoid and elliptical shapes, usually through several rounds of process, cell-by-cell, just like how he progressed his painting process before. Sometimes the geometric shapes go beyond one cell and connect two or three cells together. After leaving the hospital, he is wheelchair-bound, and has to strap his brush to his wrist and forearm by using a brush-holding device. In this new style of painting, these tiles jointly formed a dynamic decomposition of the human face when we see them from a distance.

In 2015, Close was diagnosed with frontotemporal dementia¹¹. In 2017 during the “#Metoo” movement, some of his potential models accused Close for sexual misconduct.¹² Close apologized for inappropriate comments but denied any wrongful actions.¹³ Close died of congestive heart failure at age 84 in New York¹⁴.

⁹ “Channel- Chuck Close.”

¹⁰ Britannica. *Britannica Book of the Year 1991*. 68

¹¹ Mayer. “Chuck Close, Creator of Gigantic Portraits, Has Died at 81.” *NPR*.

¹² Cohen-Homapour "Chuck Close: The Cost of Behaving Badly, and# Metoo." 1

¹³ Pogrebin. "Chuck Close Apologizes After Accusations of Sexual Harassment.".

¹⁴ Mayer. “Chuck Close, Creator of Gigantic Portraits, Has Died at 81.” *NPR*.

Close embraced his disabilities- dyslexia, prosopagnosia, and quadriplegic, into his work. These disabilities not only did not limit him, but also dictated his artistic creating process. The constraints he suffered under became his platform to support his art styles. His life story is just inspiring.

The Subject - William J. Clinton

William J. Clinton, better known as Bill Clinton, served as the 42nd President of the United States between 1993 and 2001. He took office at the end of the Cold War and was the first baby-boomer President.¹⁵ Clinton was born in 1946. He was elected as Arkansas Attorney General in 1976, when he was 30 years old. He was later elected and served as the 40th and the 42nd Governor of Arkansas, first between 1979 and 1981, and later between 1983 and 1992. As the presidential candidate of the Democratic party, he defeated incumbent George Bush and third party candidate Ross Perot in the 1992 presidential race and became the third-youngest president of the United States. Clinton won his second term in 1996 with 370 Electoral votes from 31 states and DC, with a strong 49.2% popular votes casting to support him while his Republican opponent Bob Dole only got 40.7% popular votes. At the end of Clinton's second term, he denied his sexual scandal with intern Monica Lewinsky. He was later impeached by the House of Representatives and tried in the Senate, but was found not guilty. After his presidency, his wife Hillary Clinton was elected and served as a United States senator to represent the state of New York from 2001 to 2009. She later served as secretary of state between 2009 and 2013 under president Obama. President Bill Clinton is still actively influencing American politics today, even 23 years after he moved out from the Oval Office.

The Painting

¹⁵ Tomasky. *Bill Clinton: The American Presidents Series: The 42nd President, 1993-2001.*

The rendering of president Clinton in this work represents the late style of Chuck Close-colorful portraits on colossus canvas, recognizable from the distance, but became variants of geometry shapes when the viewer moved close up. According to Close, none of the geometry shapes in his painting has any symbolic meaning. They are just “bricks” in the hands of the architect¹⁶.

Chuck Close started to interact with president Clinton when he went to the White House to take a set of detailed Polaroid photographs for Clinton in 1996¹⁷ (Fig 3-5). Close took a set of photos of president Clinton’s wife, Hillary Clinton, in 1999 for the New York Times Magazine¹⁸. In 2000, president Clinton awarded Close the National Medal of Arts, “the highest award given to artists, arts patrons, and arts organizations by the United States government”¹⁹. President Clinton left the Oval Office on Jan 20, 2001. Not long after that, the United States of America unexpectedly experienced “September 11 attacks” in 2001. President George W. Bush started the Global War on Terror and sent more than 110,000 troops to invade Afghanistan, and then 168,000 to Iraq²⁰. The national unemployment rate soared from 3.9% in the end of 2000 to the peak 5.8% in early 2004, then lower to 4.9% in the end of 2005²¹. Many, including Close, missed the prosperity and strong country president Clinton led in the last century. President Clinton’s wife, Hillary Clinton, was elected as United States Senator to represent New York and campaigned for the election of her second term while Close decided to work on this. Under such social environment, Close painted his first work of a political figure²².

¹⁶ Kimmelman. Portraits: talking with artists at the met, the modern, the louvre, and elsewhere. 241

¹⁷ Sooke. “Chuck Close: Capturing the Clinton Charisma.” *The Telegraph*.

¹⁸ “Hillary Clinton Photographs: Stories behind Greatest Portraits.” Time.

¹⁹ “National Medal of Arts.” *National Endowment for the Arts*.

²⁰ Keating. “In a New Era of Global Conflict, US Troops Are Deployed in Dozens of Countries. Where Are They - and Why?” *Grid News*.

²¹ “United States Unemployment Rate, January 2023 Data - 1948-2022 Historical.”.

²² The World’s Best Ever. “Chuck Close at White Cube Mason’s Yard.”.

While Chuck Close is an amazing portrait painter, he once mentioned he was not painting portraits, but just faces of his family and friends. He did not want to be commissioned to illustrate a public image of a patron. This one is not an exception! In August 2, 2005, Close photographed Clinton for the cover of New York Magazine²³ in Clinton's Harlem headquarters²⁴ (Fig 6). These photos enthused Close to spend four months painting Clinton's portrait after he got the blessing from president Clinton. Close completed this painting in 2006 and then was exhibited in his solo exhibition at White Cube Mason's Yard, opened October 9th, 2007²⁵, alongside his usual subjects of his family members and close friends.

During an interview with Close, he explained why he decided to break his usual rule and paint someone not his family member:

“Bill Clinton is the most recognizable person I’ve ever painted. He’s probably one of the most recognizable people in the world, period. That presents problems, but also opportunities. I guess there’s a significant kind of connection with everybody I have in this show, but clearly my relationship to Clinton is as a citizen who admired the job he did as president—and I miss him, to tell you the truth.”²⁶

One important aspect we should notice, as all other portraits Close painted, this work is NOT a commissioned work²⁷, even though the subject of this work is unique compared to all of Close's other works and depicts a political figure. Chuck Close did not take commission work as one of his key personal principles while making arts.

The Reviews - Mixed

²³ Senior. “Bill Clinton's Post-Presidency - a Plan for World Domination - Nymag.” *New York Magazine*.

²⁴ Sooke. “Chuck Close: Capturing the Clinton Charisma.” *The Telegraph*.

²⁵ The World’s Best Ever. “Chuck Close at White Cube Mason’s Yard.”.

²⁶ The World’s Best Ever. “Chuck Close at White Cube Mason’s Yard.”.

²⁷ Sooke. “Chuck Close: Capturing the Clinton Charisma.” *The Telegraph*.

This work has received mixed reviews. Alastair Sooke, a United Kingdom art critic for BBC television and radio, wrote a critique titled “Chuck Close: Capturing the Clinton charisma” on October 6, 2007 for The Telegraph. Sooke labeled the image of the work “Seductive: Bill Clinton” and commented “It’s a fittingly colossal portrait of a political colossus. And it is resolutely not sycophantic.”²⁸ In the other hand, Holland Cotter, the co-chief art critic of The New York Times, placed this work as one of the five “Worst Presidential Portrait” in his Dec 29, 2016 article “Critic’s Choice: The Best and Worst Presidential Portraits”²⁹ with a short comment “it just turns weird.”

Comparing to Other Works

Interestingly, the official president Clinton portrait commissioned by the National Gallery of Portrait, the one which fits better with the traditional realistic style painted by artist Nelson Shanks, is much less well-known and often not on display (Fig 7). Shanks once revealed “that he had hidden a Monica Lewinsky reference” in his work³⁰. I think the major difference between those two works is that Close was painting a president he personally admired but Shanks was just painting a president he commissioned to paint, and likely one he detested. Today, while we talk about the “Clinton portrait in the National Gallery of Portrait”, most people will think about the one by Close, but not the one by Shanks, even though his work is the one officially commissioned by the institute.

In the collection of Presidential Portraits of the National Portrait Gallery, there are only two portraits that do not depict the presidents in a realistic style- John F. Kennedy (1963) by Elaine de Kooning (Fig 8 & 9) and this one. De Kooning illustrated JFK after with her abstract

²⁸ Sooke. “Chuck Close: Capturing the Clinton Charisma.” *The Telegraph*.

²⁹ Cotter. “Critic’s Choice: The Best and Worst Presidential Portraits.” *The New York Times*.

³⁰ Daniel. “Painter Reveals Clinton Portrait Winks at Monica Lewinsky.”

expressionist style and Close illustrated Clinton in his “Close later style” since there is no better way to describe his unique artistic style. The importance of this work is due to how Close embraced his physical disability into his art making process and we see no other artist in the past did that so well. The value of this art is not just the resulting image on the painting itself, but rather the process that Close must endure to make such work. It is a convincing testimony to all future generations of artists that art making is a passion of life, and any physical constraints of the artist could be turned around and utilized as their platform to make art.

We could compare this to *Self-Portrait* (1887) by Vincent van Gogh (Fig 10). In that painting, van Gogh casted his emotion into his self-portrait. Both works show us the passion of the artists and how each of them breakthrough their limits to cast their love to the canvas. Artistically, both works use a high saturated color palette and abstract lines in detail. Both works empowered their viewers to sense the work differently based on their physical distance from the painting. Both works challenge our eyes to see the subject beyond a still time, into a dynamic flow of views. Van Gogh depicted himself who is still but yet changing. Close rendered president Clinton he missed and admired. The curly brush strokes in van Gogh’s *Self-Portrait* remind us to view him through time. The cells in Close’s work remind the viewers to view Clinton from many different angles, physically, as well as metaphorically.

My Story

In 2018, I resumed my art making when I was 51, more than 40 years after I took my last art classes in my third grade. I visited the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and saw some of Chuck Close’s giant works. The gigantic sizes and the unique style of Close’s artworks astonished me! I researched and watched some videos about Chuck Close and how he painted his work. His grid assistant art making process inspired and encouraged me to paint again. In those

videos he said he only paints the faces of his family members and friends because he has personal connection with them. This encouraged me to resume painting and painted two portraits (Fig 11 & 12) for my 95 years old stepfather Chun-I Chu who lives in Shanghai, China. In April 2018, I visited Shanghai and presented those two portraits to my stepfather as a gesture to tell him I always kept him in my heart even when I was physically away in Silicon Valley. One month later, he passed away. I cherished the opportunity I had to show my love for him through this art making in the last stage of his life. I attached the image of these two portraits at the end of this paper. They are not mimicking Close's process or style, but rather imitating his spirit to paint family members to demonstrate our love.

The life story of Chuck Close is inspiring. And president Clinton is the one serving the US while I get my first job in this country. I missed his presidency just as Chuck Close missed him. Therefore, I decided to write about this work.

Conclusion

This gigantic "**William J. Clinton**" (2006) by Chuck Close is the most attention grabbing work inside the National Portrait Gallery in Washington DC. It is not a commissioned work, but rather an admiration from a citizen toward his former president. Close created his unique style by embracing his physical disability. He broke through all his limitations and put the subject in an unavoidable style. The story of the artist, the process of the art making, and the work itself inspired me and changed my life.

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Appendix A- Illustrations

Fig 1. William J. Clinton (2006) by Chuck Close, Oil on Canvas, 9 feet tall by 7 feet wide, National Portrait Gallery.



Fig 2. Author, Frank Yung-fong Tang, and the painting *William J. Clinton* (2006) by Chuck Close, in National Portrait Gallery Oct 9, 2022.



(Left) Fig 3. Chuck Close photographed president Clinton in the White House, 1996.

(Right) Fig 4. President Clinton viewed the photographs by Chuck Close in the White House, 1996.



Fig 5 Two photos Chuck Close took for president Clinton in 1996.



Fig 6. Photo of President Clinton, taken by Chuck Close, as published in the New York Magazine. Left: the same one as in Fig 5, filmed Aug 23, 1996, The Oval Office. Right: August 2, 2005, Harlem, New York.



Fig 7. *William J. Clinton* (2005) by Nelson Shanks, Oil on Canvas, Stretcher: 228.6 x 121.9cm (90 x 48") Frame: 257.5 x 151.1 x 7.3cm (101 3/8 x 59 1/2 x 2 7/8"), National Portrait Gallery.

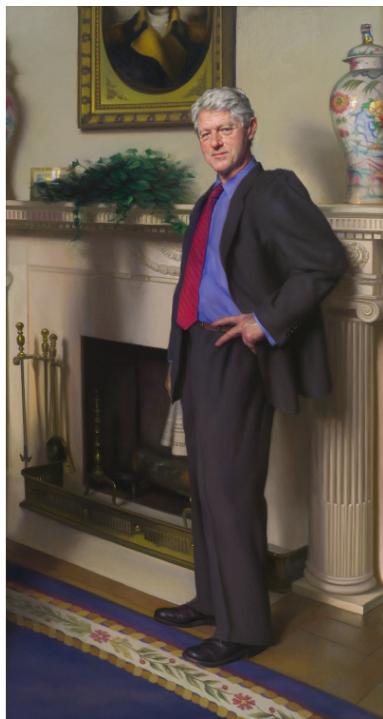
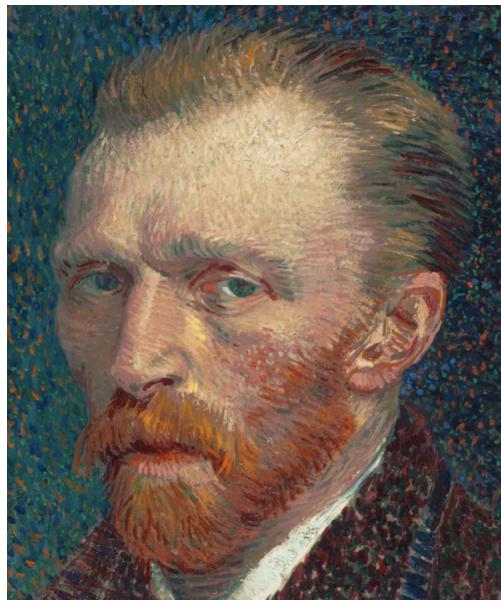


Fig 8 & 9. *John F. Kennedy* (1963) by Elaine de Kooning, Oil on canvas, National Portrait Gallery



Fig 10. *Self-Portrait* (1887) Vincent van Gogh



Left: Fig 11. *Chun-I Chu* (2018) Frank Yung-fong Tang, Watercolor on paper

Right: Fig 12. *Chun-I Chu* (2018) Frank Yung-fong Tang, Acrylic on paper

