

# Chuck Close

Chuck Close	
<i>Mark</i> (1978–1979), acrylic on canvas. Seen on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York; detail at right of eye. <i>Mark</i> , a painting that took fourteen months to complete, was constructed from a series of airbrushed layers that imitated CMYK color printing. Compare the picture's integrity close up with the later work below, executed through a different technique.	
Birth name	Charles Thomas Close
Born	July 5, 1940 Monroe, Washington
Nationality	American
Field	photorealistic painter, photographer,
Training	B.A., University of Washington in Seattle, 1962 M.F.A., Yale University

**Charles Thomas "Chuck" Close** (born July 5, 1940) is an American painter and photographer who achieved fame as a photorealist, through his massive-scale portraits. Though a catastrophic spinal artery collapse in 1988 left him severely paralyzed, he has continued to paint and produce work that remains sought after by museums and collectors. Close currently lives and works in New York's West Village<sup>[1]</sup> and in Bridgehampton, New York.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Early life and education

Close was born in Monroe, Washington.<sup>[3]</sup> His father died when he was eleven years old. Most of his early works are very large portraits based on photographs (Photorealism or Hyperrealism technique) of family and friends, often other artists. In an interview with Phong Bui in *The Brooklyn Rail*, Close describes an early encounter with a Jackson Pollock painting at the Seattle Art Museum: "I went to the Seattle Art Museum with my mother for the first time when I was 11. I saw this Jackson Pollock drip painting with aluminum paint, tar, gravel and all that stuff. I was absolutely outraged, disturbed. It was so far removed from what I thought art was. However, within 2 or 3 days, I was dripping paint all over my old paintings. In a way I've been chasing that experience ever since."<sup>[4]</sup>

Close attended Everett Community College in 1958–60.<sup>[5]</sup> In 1962, Close received his B.A. from the University of Washington in Seattle. In 1961 he won a coveted scholarship to the Yale Summer School of Music and Art,<sup>[5]</sup> and the following year entered the graduate degree program at Yale University, where he received his MFA in 1964. Among Close's classmates at Yale were Brice Marden, Vija Celmins, Janet Fish, Richard Serra, Nancy Graves, Jennifer Bartlett, Robert Mangold, and Sylvia Plimack Mangold.<sup>[2]</sup> After Yale, he studied at Academy of Fine Arts Vienna for a while on a Fulbright grant.<sup>[6]</sup> When he returned to the US, he worked as an art teacher at the University of Massachusetts. Close came to New York City in 1967 and established himself in SoHo.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Work

Throughout his career, Close has endeavored to expand his contribution to portraiture through the mastery of such varied drawing and painting techniques as ink, graphite, pastel, watercolor, conté crayon, finger painting, and stamp-pad ink on paper; printmaking techniques, such as Mezzotint, etching, woodcuts, linocuts, and silkscreens; as well as handmade paper collage, Polaroid photographs, Daguerreotypes, and Jacquard tapestries.<sup>[7]</sup> His early airbrush techniques inspired the development of the ink jet printer.<sup>[8]</sup>

Close had been known for his skillful brushwork as a graduate student at Yale University. There, he emulated Willem de Kooning and seemed "destined to become a third-generation abstract expressionist, although with a dash of Pop iconoclasm".<sup>[2]</sup> After a brief experiment with figurative constructions, Close began copying black-and-white

photographs of a female nude in colour on to canvas.<sup>[9]</sup> As he explained in a 2009 interview with the Cleveland Ohio Plain Dealer, he made a choice in 1967 to make art hard for himself and force a personal artistic breakthrough by abandoning the paintbrush. "I threw away my tools", Close said. "I chose to do things I had no facility with. The choice not to do something is in a funny way more positive than the choice to do something. If you impose a limit to not do something you've done before, it will push you to where you've never gone before."<sup>[10]</sup> One photo of Philip Glass was included in his resulting black and white series in 1969, redone with water colors in 1977, again redone with stamp pad and fingerprints in 1978, and also done as gray handmade paper in 1982.

Working from a gridded photograph, he builds his images by applying one careful stroke after another in multi-colors or grayscale. He works methodically, starting his loose but regular grid from the left hand corner of the canvas.<sup>[11]</sup> His works are generally larger than life and highly focused.<sup>[12]</sup> "One demonstration of the way photography became assimilated into the art world is the success of photorealist painting in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is also called super-realism or hyper-realism and painters like Richard Estes, Denis Peterson, Audrey Flack, and Chuck Close often worked from photographic stills to create paintings that appeared to be photographs. The everyday nature of the subject matter of the paintings likewise worked to secure the painting as a realist object."<sup>[13]</sup>

Close suffers from Prosopagnosia, also known as face blindness, in which he is unable to recognize faces. By painting portraits, he is better able to recognize and remember faces.<sup>[14]</sup> On the subject, Close has said, "I was not conscious of making a decision to paint portraits because I have difficulty recognizing faces. That occurred to me twenty years after the fact when I looked at why I was still painting portraits, why that still had urgency for me. I began to realize that it has sustained me for so long because I have difficulty in recognizing faces."<sup>[15]</sup>

Although his later paintings differ in method from his earlier canvases, the preliminary process remains the same. To create his grid work copies of photos, Close puts a grid on the photo and on the canvas and copies cell by cell. Typically, each square within the grid is filled with roughly executed regions of color (usually consisting of painted rings on a contrasting background) which give the cell a perceived 'average' hue which makes sense from a distance. His first tools for this included an airbrush, rags, razor blade, and an eraser mounted on a power drill. His first picture with this method was *Big Self Portrait*, a black and white enlargement of his face to a 107.5 in by 83.5 in (2.73 m by 2.12 m) canvas, made in over four months in 1968, and acquired by the Walker Art Center in 1969. He made seven more black and white portraits during this period. He has been quoted as saying that he used such diluted paint in the airbrush that all eight of the paintings were made with a single tube of mars black acrylic.

Later work has branched into non-rectangular grids, topographic map style regions of similar colors, CMYK color grid work, and using larger grids to make the cell by cell nature of his work obvious even in small reproductions. The *Big Self Portrait* is so finely done that even a full page reproduction in an art book is still indistinguishable from a regular photograph.

## "The Event"

On December 7, 1988, Close felt a strange pain in his chest. That day he was at a ceremony honoring local artists in New York City and was waiting to be called to the podium to present an award. Close delivered his speech and then made his way across the street to Beth Israel Medical Center where he suffered a seizure which left him paralyzed from the neck down. The cause was diagnosed as a spinal artery collapse.<sup>[16]</sup> He had also suffered from neuromuscular problems as a child.<sup>[17]</sup> Close called that day "The Event". For months, Close was in rehab strengthening his muscles with physical therapy; he soon had slight movement in his arms and could walk, yet only for a few steps. He has relied on a wheelchair ever since.

However, Close continued to paint with a brush strapped onto his wrist with tape, creating large portraits in low-resolution grid squares created by an assistant. Viewed from afar, these squares appear as a single, unified image which attempt photo-reality, albeit in pixelated form. Although the paralysis restricted his ability to paint as meticulously as before, Close had, in a sense, placed artificial restrictions upon his hyperrealist approach well before the injury. That is, he adopted materials and techniques that did not lend themselves well to achieving a

photorealistic effect. Small bits of irregular paper or inked fingerprints were used as media to achieve astoundingly realistic and interesting results. Close proved able to create his desired effects even with the most difficult of materials to control. He spoke candidly about the impact disability had on his life and work in the book *Chronicles of Courage: Very Special Artists* written by Jean Kennedy Smith and George Plimpton and published by Random House.<sup>[18]</sup>

## Prints

Close has been a printmaker throughout his career, with most of his prints published by Pace Editions, New York.<sup>[5]</sup> He made his first serious foray into print making in 1972, when he moved himself and family to San Francisco to work on a mezzotint at Crown Point Press for a three-month residency. To accommodate him, Crown Point found the largest copper plate it could (36 inches wide) and purchased a new press, allowing Close to make a work that was 3 feet by 4 feet. In 1986 he went to Kyoto to work with Tadashi Toda, a highly respected woodblock printer.<sup>[19]</sup>

In 1995, curator Colin Westerbeck used a grant from the Lannan Foundation to bring Close together with Grant Romer, director of conservation at the George Eastman House.<sup>[8]</sup> Ever since, the artist has also continued to explore difficult photographic processes such as daguerreotype in collaboration with Jerry Spagnoli and sophisticated modular/cell-based forms such as tapestry. Close's photogravure portrait of artist Robert Rauschenberg, "Robert" (1998), appeared in a 2009 exhibition at the Heckscher Museum of Art in Huntington, New York, featuring prints from Universal Limited Art Editions.<sup>[20]</sup> In the daguerreotype photographs, the background defines the limit of the image plane as well as the outline of the subject, with the inky pitch-black setting off the light, reflective quality of the subject's face.<sup>[21]</sup> Close's wall-size tapestry portraits, in which each image is composed of thousands of combinations of woven colored thread, depict subjects including Kate Moss, Cindy Sherman, Lorna Simpson, Lucas Samaras, Philip Glass, and Close himself.<sup>[22]</sup> They are produced in collaboration with Donald Farnsworth of Magnolia Editions in Oakland, CA.<sup>[23]</sup>

## Commissions

In 2010, Close was commissioned to create twelve large mosaics, totaling more than 2,000 square feet, for the East 86th Street station in Manhattan.<sup>[24]</sup>

## Exhibitions and collections

Close credits the Walker Art Center and its then-director Martin Friedman for launching his career with the purchase of *Big Self-Portrait* (1967-1968)<sup>[25]</sup> in 1969, the first painting he ever sold.<sup>[26]</sup> His first one-man show was in 1970, at Bykert Gallery in New York. His first print was the focus of a "Projects" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1972. In 1979 his work was included in the Whitney Biennial, and the following year his portraits were the subject of an exhibition at the Walker Art Center. His work has since been the subject of more than 150 solo exhibitions including a number of major museum retrospectives.<sup>[6]</sup> After Close abruptly canceled a major show of his work scheduled for 1997 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art,<sup>[27]</sup> the Museum of Modern Art announced that it would present a major midcareer retrospective of the artist's work in 1998 (curated by Kirk Varnedoe, and later traveling to, among others, the Hayward Gallery, London, in 1999).<sup>[28][29]</sup> In 2003 the Blaffer Gallery at the University of Houston presented a survey of his prints, which traveled to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the following year.<sup>[6]</sup> His most recent retrospective — "Chuck Close Paintings: 1968 / 2006", at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid in 2007 — traveled to the Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst in Aachen, Germany, and the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. He has also participated in almost 800 group exhibitions,<sup>[30]</sup> including documentas V (1972) and VI (1977), the Venice Biennale (1993, 1995, 2003), and the Carnegie International (1995).<sup>[21]</sup>

In 2013, Close's work was featured in an exhibit in White Cube Bermondsey, London. "Process and Collaboration" displayed not only a number of finished prints and paintings, but included plates, woodblocks and mylar stencils

which were used to produce a number of prints.<sup>[31]</sup>

Close's work is in the collections of most of the great international museums of contemporary art, including the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the Tate Modern in London, and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.<sup>[5]</sup>

Chuck Close is represented by The Pace Gallery<sup>[32]</sup> and Pace/MacGill Gallery<sup>[33]</sup> in New York

## Recognition

The recipient of the National Medal of Arts from President Clinton in 2000,<sup>[34]</sup> the New York State Governor's Art Award, and the Skowhegan Arts Medal, among many others, Close has received over 20 honorary degrees including one from Yale University, his alma mater.<sup>[30]</sup> New York Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg appointed the artist to the Cultural Affairs Advisory Commission, a body mandated by the City Charter to advise the mayor and the cultural affairs commissioner.<sup>[35]</sup> In 2010 he was appointed by President Barack Obama to the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities.<sup>[6]</sup>

In 2005, composer Philip Glass wrote a musical portrait of Close. The composition, a 15-minute piece for solo piano, was the idea of Bruce Levingston, a concert pianist, who commissioned it through the Premiere Commission and who performed the piece at a recital at Alice Tully Hall that year.<sup>[36]</sup>

## Art market

Close has been represented by The Pace Gallery, in New York since 1977, and by White Cube, London, since 1999.<sup>[37]</sup> Already in 1999, Close's *Cindy II* (1988), a portrait of the photographer Cindy Sherman sold for \$1.2 million, against a high estimate of \$800,000.<sup>[38]</sup> In 2005, *John* (1971–72) was sold at Sotheby's to the Broad Art Foundation for \$4.8 million.<sup>[39]</sup>

## Fundraising

In September 2012 Magnolia Editions published two tapestry editions and three print editions by Close depicting President Barack Obama. The first tapestry was unveiled at the Mint Museum in North Carolina in honor of the Democratic National Convention. These tapestries and prints were sold as a fundraiser to support the Obama Victory Fund. A number of the works were signed by both Close and Obama. Close has previously sold work at auction to raise funds for the campaigns of Hillary Clinton and Al Gore.<sup>[40][41]</sup>

## In the media

In 1998, PBS broadcast documentary filmmaker Marion Cajori's Emmy-nominated short, "Chuck Close: A Portrait in Progress."<sup>[42]</sup> In 2007, Cajori made "Chuck Close", a full-length expansion of the first film.<sup>[43]</sup> British art critic Christopher Finch wrote a biography, *Chuck Close: Life*, which was published in 2010, a sequel of sorts to Finch's 2007 book, *Chuck Close: Work*, a career-spanning monograph.<sup>[44]</sup>

Close appeared on *The Colbert Report* on August 12, 2010, where he admitted he watches the show every night.

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## External links

- The Pace Gallery (<http://thepacegallery.com>)
- Watch Chuck Close and Robert Storr in Conversation on BUniverse (<http://www.bu.edu/phpbin/buniverse/videos/view/?id=153>)
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