

# BOMB

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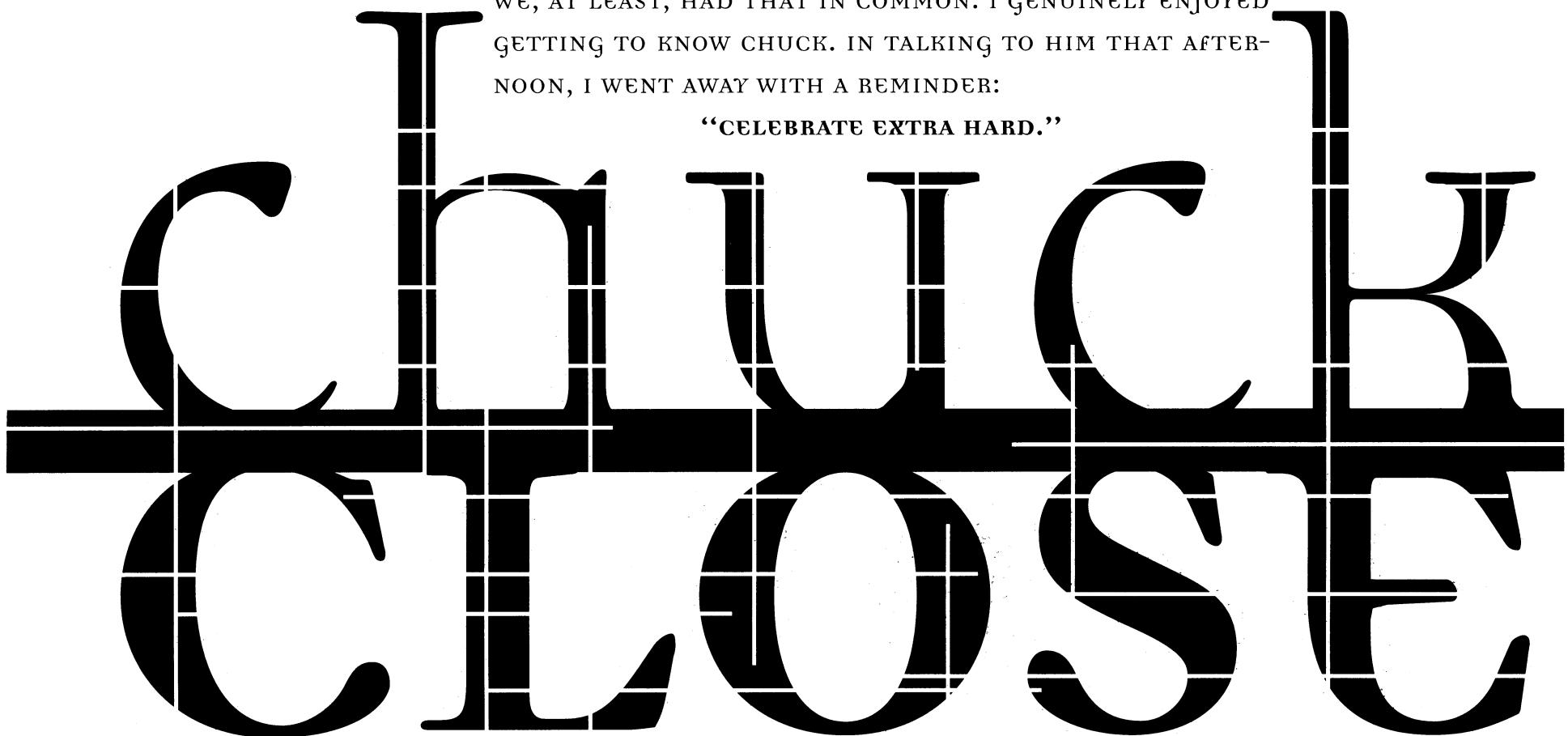
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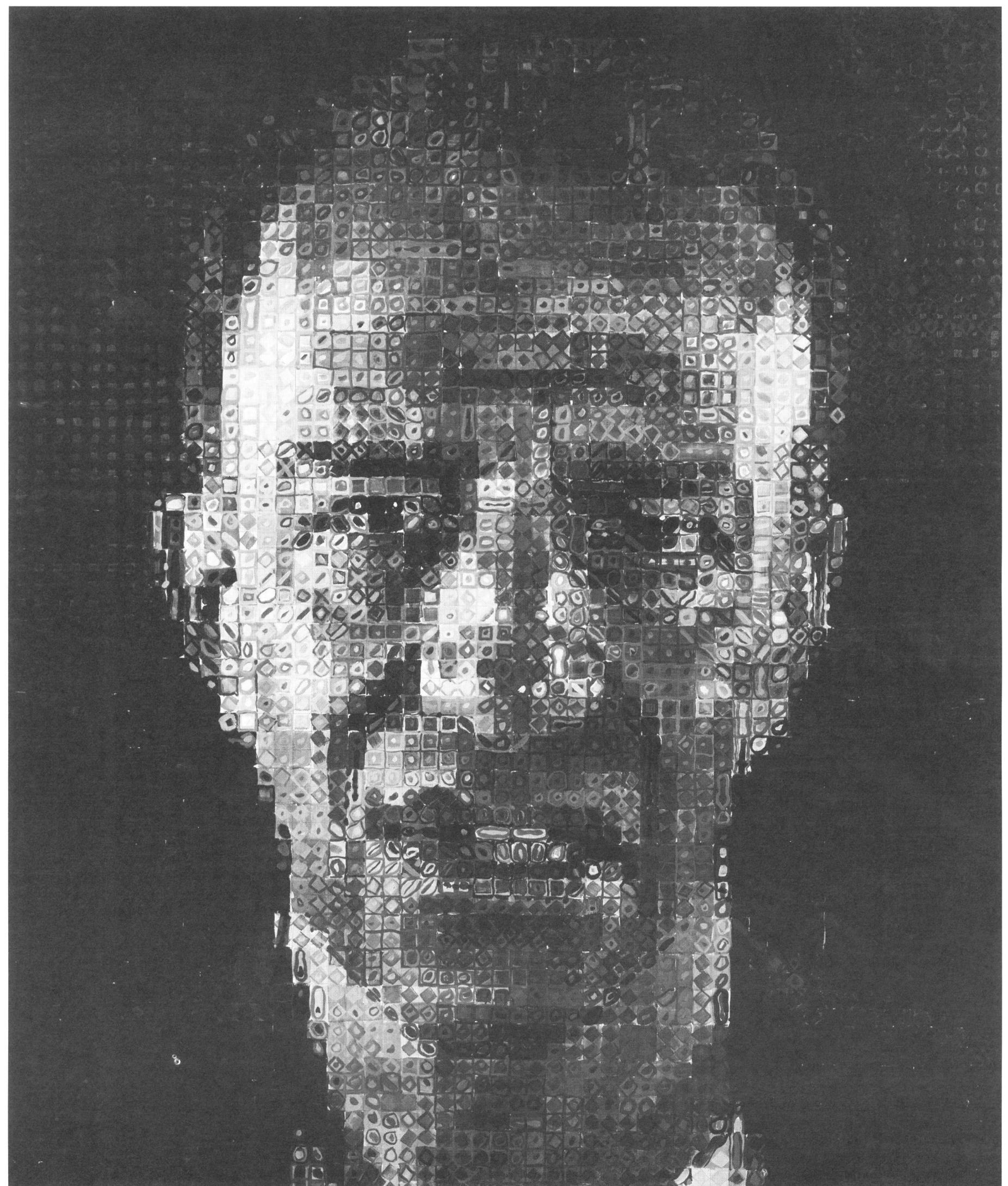
Lisa Yuskavage

IT WAS IN 1981 AND I WAS A SOPHOMORE IN ART SCHOOL WHEN I FIRST ENCOUNTERED CHUCK CLOSE'S WORK AT A SHOW CALLED "CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN REALISM SINCE 1960." I WAS STRUCK BY HOW IT DIDN'T RESEMBLE ANY OF THE OTHER WORK IN THE SHOW. I CAN REMEMBER THINKING THE PIECE WAS FULL OF CONTRADICTIONS: IT WAS THE MOST "REALISTIC" ON ONE HAND AND YET SIMULTANEOUSLY IT WAS THE LEAST. IT WAS VERY MUCH A HAND-MADE THING, YET IT SEEMED TO BE DERIVED FROM MECHANICAL PROCESSES... IT WAS SO LABORIOUSLY MADE, AND YET I COULD FEEL THE PLEASURE HE TOOK IN MAKING IT. IT DIDN'T LOOK LIKE PAINTING AS I KNEW IT AND YET IT WAS GOING TO INFORM THE WAY I WOULD GO ON TO LOOK AT PAINTINGS.

WHEN ASKED TO DO THIS INTERVIEW, I WAS SHOCKED THAT THIS FAMOUS FIGURE IN AMERICAN ART EVEN KNEW MY WORK, LET ALONE WOULD ENTRUST ME TO INTERVIEW HIM. EVERYONE I KNEW WHO HAD MET HIM GUSHED ABOUT HIM. I FELT THE BURDEN OF ALL THE PEOPLE WHO WORSHIP HIM AND MY OWN AWE AS I WALKED OFF THE NOISY NOHO STREET INTO HIS PRISTINE STOREFRONT STUDIO, WHERE I FOUND MYSELF SURROUNDED BY THE LARGE SWIRLINGLY MANIPULATED FACES OF THE "GODS" OF ART, AS I KNEW THEM. THESE ARE CHUCK'S FRIENDS. THEN I SAW A SMALL BLUE YALE BANNER HANGING OVER HIS DESK, WHICH REMINDED ME THAT WE, AT LEAST, HAD THAT IN COMMON. I GENUINELY ENJOYED GETTING TO KNOW CHUCK. IN TALKING TO HIM THAT AFTERNOON, I WENT AWAY WITH A REMINDER:

"CELEBRATE EXTRA HARD."





CHUCK CLOSE, ALEX, 1991, OIL ON CANVAS, 100 X 84". COLLECTION LANAN FOUNDATION, LOS ANGELES. PHOTO BY BILL JACOBSON. ALL PHOTOS COURTESY PACE WILDENSTEIN GALLERY.

LISA YUSKAVAGE: I'm going to interview you like a shrink, let's take this very psychoanalytically.

CHUCK CLOSE: Twenty years of being shrunk. This should be good. Should I lie down?

LY: No, face to face therapy only. So, what's your ethnicity?

cc: My family's been in America for so many generations that no one is quite sure. It's white, American, Midwestern, and probably English. "Close" in Old English is a road which turns around on itself and comes back out.

LY: They call them circles here.

cc: It's not quite a circle. It's a dead-end street with a turn-around, usually in English cities. Out on Long Island there are lots of closes. But we were just regular, poor, white-trash Americans.

LY: Poor-white-trash is one of my favorite subjects!

cc: We aspired to the middle-class. My father had an eighth-grade education; my mother studied to be a concert pianist after high school, during the Depression. But there wasn't anything to do with that skill. We didn't actually throw beer cans out of our trailer windows but everyone around us did. We were the aristocracy of the trailer court. (Just joking — we didn't actually live in a trailer court.)

LY: Last time I was here you mentioned your dyslexia and your difficulty in recognizing faces. That has added another layer to your obsession with painting portraits.

cc: What did you come up with?

LY: You've said we work from our weaknesses. And I thought, "Well of course! You're obsessed by things that you can't do." Your work is a combination of what you do really well and what you struggle with.

cc: My art has been greatly influenced by having a brain that sees, thinks, and accesses information very differently from other people's. 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.

Maybe I should say something about the nature of this affliction: I could spend an evening having dinner with someone, stare at their face, be incredibly interested in everything they say, and the next day, be able to remember all kinds of things they had told me. But, if I were to see that person on the street I'd have no idea that I'd ever seen them before in my life. But I can remember things that are flat, which is why I use photography as the source for the paintings. With photography, I can memorize a face. Painting is the perfect medium and photography is the perfect source, because they have already translated three dimensions into something flat. I can just affect the translation.

LY: What surprises me is that you work in incre-

mental units, building toward a whole rather than from the whole to the parts. It would seem to me that this would increase the problem, not help you to overcome it. Is the size of your grid based on the movement of your wrist?

cc: No. Gradually, over the years, the dot grid got coarser. The size of the increment got larger and there was more room inside the square.

LY: You made that decision before your paralysis?

cc: Yes, I was exploring certain thresholds. As the incremental sizes slowly grew larger it was possible to put more than one color into each individual

neutralizes the quality of another. Each mixture, as it gets more and more complicated, gets duller and duller... Recently, instead of layering these colors on top of each other, I put them next to each other.

LY: The most obvious reference is Seurat. His marks do the same thing in terms of optical mixture.

cc: Not as much as people think they do.

LY: I know he didn't layer.

cc: If you look at Seurat, most of the dots in the grass are green, the generic color of that area. The other colors only modify that color. I feel less kinship to Seurat than I do to Byzantine mosaics,

where an image is built out of discreet incremental marks — chunks of stone or glass — that fit together. I want people to see what made the image. I like dropping crumbs along the trail like Hansel and Gretel. That's what all these paintings are about.

How something is made does influence what it looks like, or what it means, but a painting of a photograph is still a painting. I've always thought it was funny, that idea that painting from photographs was considered cheating.

LY: I want to bring up the idea of "anti-art" in your work.

cc: It's wonderful when the first time you see something, it doesn't look like art. When artists challenge what you think art should be about, what it should look like, that's an experience I've been chasing all my life.

LY: When was the first time you had that?

cc: The first time I saw Warhol's Boxes in the Stable Gallery in the sixties. It really did look like a supermarket warehouse stacked to the ceiling with soup can boxes, ketchup boxes and whatnot. It was pretty wild. That art can move you, can make you angry, is truly amazing. Art is one of the activities that defines a culture, an historical period. Once in the sixties, I was eating in a restaurant in Chinatown where Jasper Johns was having dinner in absolute anonymity; no one knew who he was or cared. And then some third-string relief pitcher for the Yankees came in and everybody jumped to get his autograph. I thought, "Isn't it funny that at this particular moment, everyone knows who this crummy relief pitcher is and in one hundred years, everybody will know Jasper Johns' paintings."

LY: That brings us back to your work and its effect on anonymity. You have made Alex Katz such a recognizable face — I know what he looks like from your paintings.

cc: Yeah, but he's painted himself a lot, too. You'd recognize his wife, Ada, from his paintings of her, as well.

LY: The recognition would not be the same. The flavor of the paintings is more about him. What was it about Alex Katz that made you choose his face, that made him your Ada, so to speak?

cc: Well, he's one of my Ada's. I have a number of people that I recycle over and over.

LY: But how do you pick?



PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST WITH WORK IN PROGRESS: JOHN, 1992, OIL ON CANVAS, 100 X 84". PHOTO BY BILL JACOBSON

square. There's a difference between going directly to a color and thinking, "That's close enough," and slowly finding a color by putting several together and building them until you get exactly what you want.

LY: Did you learn this from doing those early air brush paintings, which were based on color separation?

cc: That's where I learned to really use my skill. I wanted the color to be rich and full of intensity — full saturated color. The trouble with brown paint is that they dig dirt out of the ground and put it in the tube. It doesn't have the same quality as other colors. So I've always liked to build browns and ochres. I like to see what happens when one color

cc: Certain images are more compelling than others and seem more recyclable. When you're looking for certain things in a chosen photograph, you miss other things. When you go to the photograph again, you're looking for a different set of issues than you were before. It's a well to which I go over and over, and each time I get a different bucketful out of it.

ly: Here I go being a little shrink-like. Can you be more specific about what you got from painting Alex?

cc: I thought to myself that the difference between my portrait of him and Alex's self portrait was that he was kinder and gentler to himself than I was. And Alex said, "You really captured my rage." I didn't realize it, but he felt that I managed to put my finger on the rage beneath the surface. Another anecdote is, I was coming out of my shrink's office and a woman came up to me and said, "Alex is much better looking than you made him!" She was furious with me.

ly: Did you know who she was?

cc: No, I didn't know who in the hell she was. But she didn't like one bit what I did to Alex. One of the reasons I picked Alex was that he has been a very important figure for me, since the sixties. He made a kind of modernist figuration in his paintings that was very much about the time in which we live and wasn't trying to go back and breathe new life into nineteenth century figurative issues. When I paint another artist, it's not necessarily because they're my best friend, although sometimes they are, or that I'm all that involved with them personally. Often it's because I have an intimate relationship with their work and feel like we have a dialog going, that we talk to each other, whether or not we actually talk to each other in words.

ly: Do you feel closer to Alex now? Is there something intimate for you after having gone over every little square inch of his face? How does he feel about your use of his face?

cc: You'd have to ask him. I don't think it is as hard on my sitters to be a subject of my recent paintings as it used to be. The work in the sixties was relentlessly, obsessively detailed. People had a lot of trouble dealing with those images. If you had a zit, it was going to be a six-inch white zit. If your nose was bent, it was really bent. There was no getting around flaws. I must say that I have tremendous respect and affection for the people who, in real selfless generosity, lent me their image to do whatever I like for however many years I choose to do it — until they're sick of seeing it. They cannot be vain; they can't lobby for this individual photograph or that one. I don't try to do a hatchet job, I don't try to make anyone look unattractive, but the paintings are often very difficult for the subjects to deal with.

ly: Because then, their faces belong to the world and all of us get to look at them obsessively. But your work, like most good work, is full of contradictions. It implies intimacy, yet, in order to look at

each painting, you are forced to step way back. cc: The details in my paintings are what you can see when you are too close to someone, when you would be invading their private space.

ly: How would you describe that?

cc: By using the metaphor of *Gulliver's Travels*: Lilliputians crawl over the body of this giant, maybe not even knowing that they're on a giant until they fall into a nostril or trip over beard stubble. There's a level where you're probably not that close to someone's face unless you're making love to them. Because of their size, the paintings are aggressive; they do seem to be pushing you and

a community, a comraderie, and a clubbiness to the art world that means a lot to me. I would never try to make art somewhere else.

ly: Somewhere other than New York City?

cc: Yeah. It's hard to make art when nobody gives a shit. In an art ghetto we can convince ourselves that what we're doing is a very important activity because we're surrounded by other people who agree that it is. It's very hard to make art when people don't think it's valuable. That's why we cluster together in groups.

ly: It is essentially seen as an elitist endeavor.

cc: Well, we're also defined from the outside. If you look at the definition that's imposed on us by Jesse Helms, people who see us and our activity as a threat, of course we're elitist. I heard a conservative congressman from Texas say, "I don't have any trouble with homosexuals, I just don't like it when they shove it down my throat." (laughter)

ly: What a wonderful Freudian slip.

cc: All this Jesse Helms stuff makes me want to go out and draw penises all over my paintings. The reaction that they're going to get is the exact opposite of what they think they're doing.

ly: I'm glad you paint artists whose work you feel some kinship to. That was why your interview with Vija Celmins was so remarkable. The work you both do conjures up drug-related experiences. Her work goes in and in and in — that's a mind blowing idea. When I talk about it, I start sounding stoned. Your work is trippy; the things start morphing and coming up harshly at you.

cc: There is a psychedelic aspect to it. In fact, people start relating it to artists whose work I can't stand.

ly: Like who?

cc: Vassarely. Someone said my paintings are like Vassarely on acid. Of all the artists I'd like to be associated with, he's not one. But there is something to it.

ly: It's weird to see your work in books; the paintings almost return to photos.

cc: I publish studio shots to remind people that these paintings are nine feet high though the book reduces them, takes it back to a photograph, renders it scaleless, does away with the surface... I've tried to show you what the painting looks like up close, that's what I'm looking at in my paintings.

ly: You also show the process shots of the paintings in very optical states.

cc: Underneath these color paintings, there's a faux face... I find it indulgent to leave a painting unfinished, but I have nothing against having photographs of the process. Not that I think it's essential to the experience, but I'd like to demystify the process. People are in awe of anybody who can do anything they can't do, and say, "How do you do that?" I have this naive belief in systems, that if you believe in a system and follow it, you will create something.

I think of my work as what used to be called women's work: knitting, quilting. Women were

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invading your space and giving you more than you ever wanted to know.

ly: I get this funny feeling looking at your paintings, as if somebody took my head, pushed me into them and said, "Here, know this person." In the end, the painting is not you, not them, not me, but the gesture of you manipulating me. But also, the intimacy is furthered by the fact that you title them by their subjects' first names.

cc: I originally wanted to paint them as anonymous portraits. And at first, nobody knew who they were. Then, the people I painted got famous, at least in the art world: Richard Serra, Nancy Graves...

ly: It puts everybody in your shoes: "Welcome, embrace some of my friends."

cc: For me the art world has always felt intimate. It's left over from when the art world was so tiny that you literally did know everyone. And now of course that's entirely different... Although there is



CHUCK CLOSE, KIKI, 1993, OIL ON CANVAS, 100 X 84". COLLECTION WALKER ART CENTER, PHOTO BY ELLEN PAGE WILSON

busy cooking, raising children, so they had to have an activity that they could pick up and put down. A quilt may take a year, but if you just keep doing it, you get a quilt. Or if you knit one and pearl two, and you believe in the process, eventually you'll make a sweater. There's some aspect of that in me.

With the writers I love to read, at least part of the experience is the way the words trickle off the tongue. I don't want to lose track of the words while I'm also getting the content. So the best work is work that is simultaneously, incrementally interesting — the marks, the words on the surface — and then warps back to its physicality. That's what really interests me. It came up in the late sixties when work was reduced to its essence, more severe. Artists would go to Canal Street and get rubber or some of the industrial material and schlepp the stuff back to the studio because it didn't have historical baggage associated with its usage. You just used it as material. It was that same kind of belief in process, and following that process wherever it would go, that I applied to representational painting.

LY: And that's what you have your faith in?

CC: Absolutely. It's a way to back myself into a corner where nobody else's answers are appropriate.

LY: You have constantly re-made yourself even though you've remained very much on track. Your last show was a lot of fun. There are many artists of your generation who are out there, who are also vital.

CC: I have a theory about why that happened to our generation. I think that's true. People who came up in the late sixties and early seventies look pretty good right now because we came up the way the nineties seem to be shaping up, as a very unfocused time, when there was a lot of confusion and no predominant movements in art. So, the artists who became visible in the seventies were able to mature slowly, outside of the white-hot glare of the spotlight; we didn't peak too early.

LY: Going back to why your work is relevant, I like that it is so completely synthetic.

CC: A painting is a synthetic object. It never looks like what it actually is. We all bring what we know about art as baggage to the painting. I do, however, like the idea that an entrance into the work is tied to a life experience. We've all looked at magazines and photographs, we look at each other, stare or whatever — the notion of the work as synthetic is good. I chafe under the term realist; the work is, I suppose, about reality, but it's also highly artificial. It's the artificiality which really interests me, the fact that it's this distribution of colored dirt on a flat surface. But, I would also like to think that my work has a celebratory quality. A celebration of paint, the joy of pushing it around. The way it smells in the studio when I'm using oil paint... But I didn't realize that until I looked at myself in the hospital. All around me were broken bodies of young people who were paralyzed before they really had a chance to figure out who they were, before anything had happened for them. For me, I was already somebody; had something I'd done; all I had to do was get back to painting — now I'm celebrating extra hard. It was always there, but I never realized this until it all got taken away. What are the two great fears of a painter? That you're going

to lose your eyesight or that you're going to lose the use of your hands. What I found out was that I could make art without my hands and that I was lucky, I already knew how to paint. If you already know how to do something, you can figure out some way to get back to it.

LY: It seems to me that you're more than lucky, you have incredible spirit.

CC: But I'm lucky to have such spirit. I really mean that. You get stuff from your family besides just genes. I have had a lot of tragedy in my life: my father died when I was eleven; my mother's cancer and heart disease ruled her life. So, I certainly had problems but I was very lucky in that I got from my family a sense of my own self-worth. I've got an optimistic nature, my glass is half full, for which I take no credit at all. People are either optimistic or they aren't. I find myself unable to blame a person for not trying hard enough, for lying in a corner and whining. They just have a negative world view. When I was in the hospital, I was going to be the best patient that they had ever had.

LY: So then how does this therapy function for you?

CC: Let me tell you one thing, having a good attitude may help you survive and it's good for your head, but it doesn't change your body. There were people in the hospital with the worst attitude, they whined and complained, didn't lift a finger and they got better. And there were other people with the best attitude in the world who worked their butts off, never skipped therapy, and never got one bit better. So life is not fair. The person who works hard is not necessarily going to win; the person with the lousy attitude might win. That's part of the picture. However, I look around at who is successful, and talent is a dime a dozen. I think people succeed if they don't fail.

LY: And how do you not fail?

CC: By not putting myself in a position to.

LY: That's funny, that's the advice that my mother gave me about not being seduced. (laughter)

CC: I was really raised to believe that anything was possible: at its worst, that's arrogance; at its best, it's self-assuredness. But generally, on a day to day operational level, most artists are pretty self-involved. To think that you have something to say is a rather egotistical position. And then to assume that anybody else might want to hear it is another jump. What makes us think that these things we make are going to interest anybody? Yet we want them to, we put work out for people to receive. It's a call for attention, no doubt.

LY: There are certain things that speak to people. Let's backtrack. You said that you like to paint people whose work interests you, when you paint is it a form of meditation?

CC: I'm the least mystical person on the face of the earth.

LY: I believe you. This is not about mysticism. What stories go through your head? Say you're working on Kiki Smith. Do you meditate on her?

CC: Some.

LY: But you don't try to make yourself think about her. What anecdotes go through your head?

CC: No. I am involved with the person when I choose the photograph, and then for a reasonably long time I distance myself from the subject matter. And then, near the end of the project, I am

more in touch again, and I have them into the studio to look at their own image. I go back to being involved in that dialogue, and that's the third element of the painting.

LY: Do you always have the person come to look at the painting?

CC: Yes.

LY: Do you have an ultimate viewer of your work, someone who says, "You know, Chuck..."?

CC: I have trusted eyes, my wife being one set of them. There are other artists who I trust because they knew me when I was a junior Abstract Expressionist. One of the funny things about being handicapped is that often you have people in the room not because you want to have them in the room, but because you have to have people in the room. Usually I enjoy having people around. I've always had a very social life. The trouble now is that I'm never totally alone and that's really a stress. I became an artist initially because I wanted to be in a room by myself. And I wanted to use drugs and get laid. (laughter)

LY: It worked out?

CC: Well, for awhile. In the fifties if you wanted to use drugs and get laid, you had to be an artist or a poet.

LY: Why would you want to be in a room by yourself?

CC: Well, I enjoy the dialogue with myself.

LY: Where did you meet your wife?

CC: She was my student — forbidden love.

LY: How many years between you?

CC: Seven.

LY: That's not too bad for forbidden love. There's a tradition of that.

CC: You can't do that now.

LY: I realize why there's a tradition of teachers and their students. They're so young and beautiful.

CC: I tried to sleep with a bunch of the students in my classes. I just thought they all found me irresistible. It never occurred to me that I was in a power position and that they would find that attractive. I just thought they craved my body.

LY: How did you find out they didn't? Maybe they did.

CC: I would hope that was the case, but now I realize why that was not a great idea.

LY: The first question I wanted to ask you, although I wanted to warm up to it a bit is...

CC: That's a good place for you to end. End with the first question.

LY: You are one of the few people I know who has taken a vivid interest in the work of younger artists. I had often seen you making the gallery rounds, even before I knew you. You are consistently out there looking at art.

CC: I don't do it because I think I have to, I do it because I want to. It's not that I take so much interest in younger artists, I take an interest in art. I've always liked looking at art. In fact, one of the things that bothers me the most is that now it's so difficult to get around, it requires the help of other people. I don't do it as much as I'd like to and as much as I used to. But I can't imagine how somebody could be part of a field and not be interested. I am narcissistically interested in my own time, in what makes this time different from all other times.