

# **Chuck Close : [brochure] February 26 through May 26, 1998, the Museum of Modern Art, New York**

**[Robert Storr]**

Author

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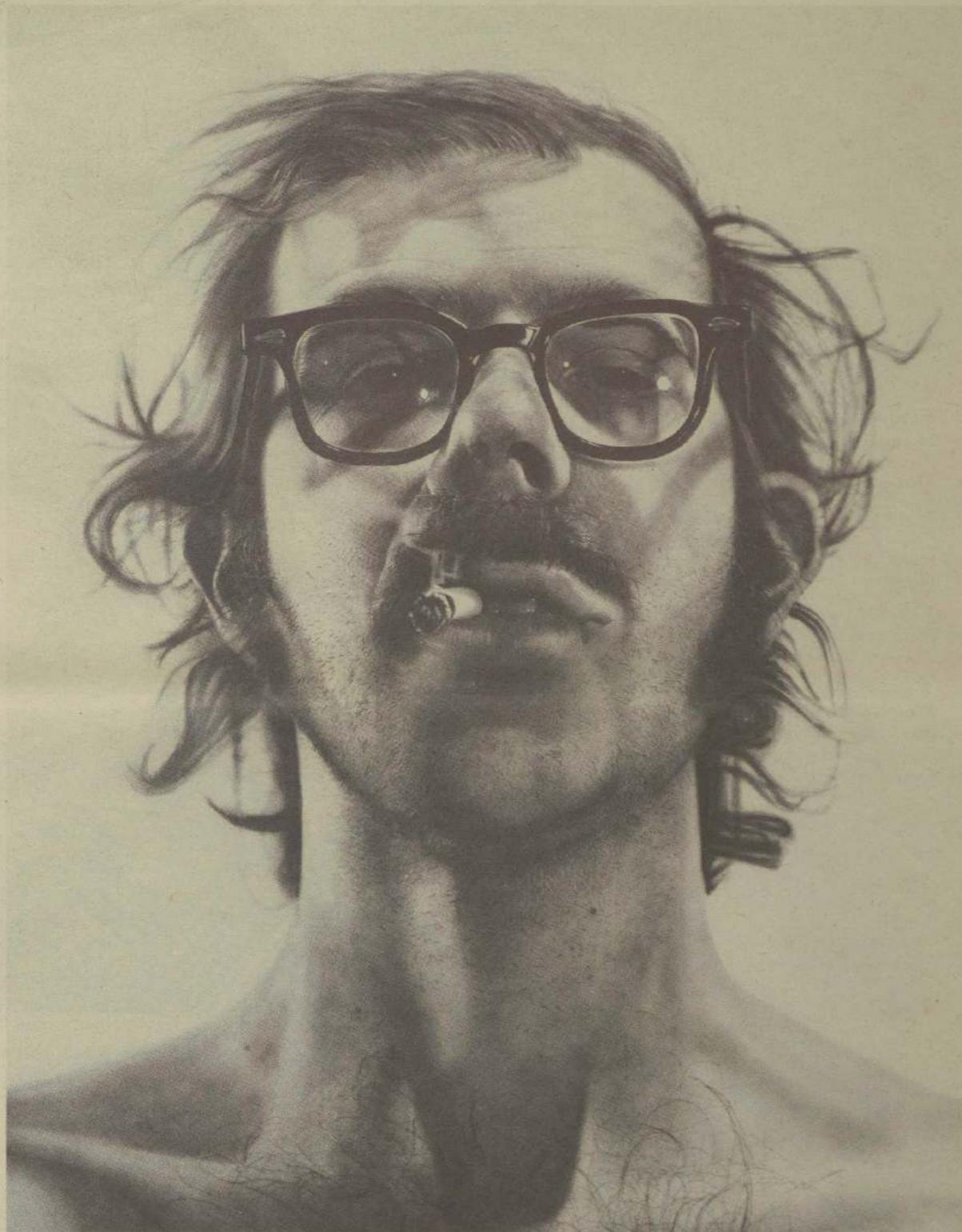
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# CHUCK CLOSE

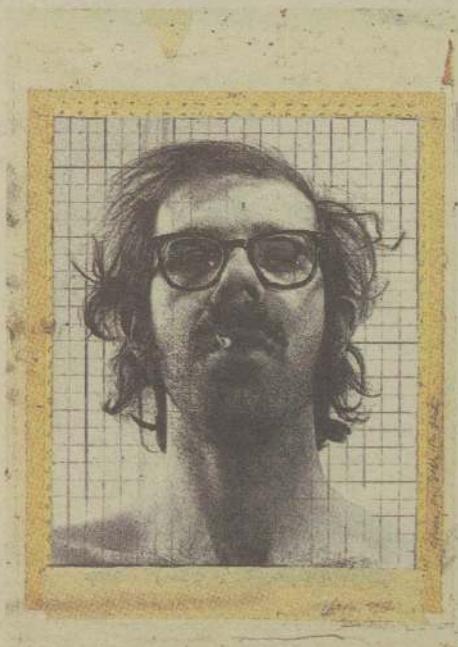
THERE IS METHOD to Chuck Close's madness. Or, more accurately, his method is a kind of madness. Just imagine spending every working day of the year, nine-to-five, filling a blank gridded surface with unerringly placed marks that in their final count number in the thousands or tens of thousands, if not, as is the case with some of his largest and most photographically detailed paintings, in the millions.

Such has been Close's preoccupied task since he burst upon the scene more than thirty years ago with his monumental mugshot pictures. Appropriately enough, the first of these paintings was a 1967-68 self-portrait, in which its creator introduced himself to the general public in the guise of a scruffy, cigarette smoking and decidedly in-your-face denizen of the burgeoning downtown Manhattan art scene. Since then,



Above: *Big Self-Portrait*. 1967-68. Acrylic on canvas, 107½ x 83½" (273.1 x 212.1 cm). Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Art Center Acquisition Fund, 1969

Left: *Study for Self-Portrait*. Photographed 1967; dated 1968. Photograph, pen and ink, pencil, masking tape, acrylic, wash and blue plastic strips on cardboard, 18¾ x 13¾" (47.3 x 34 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Norman Dubrow. Photo ©1998 The Museum of Modern Art, New York



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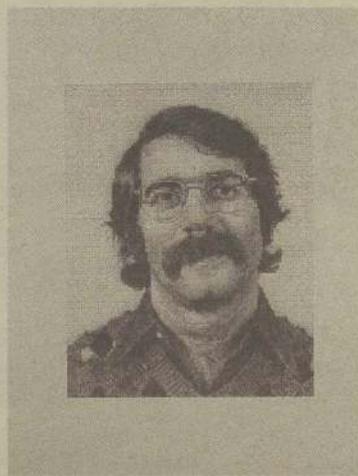
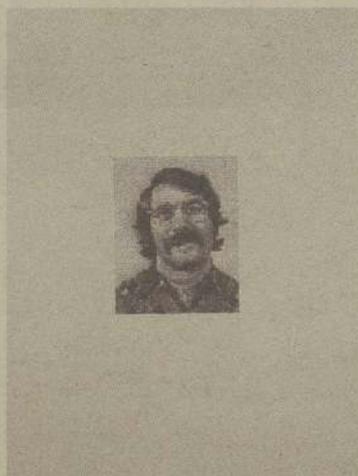
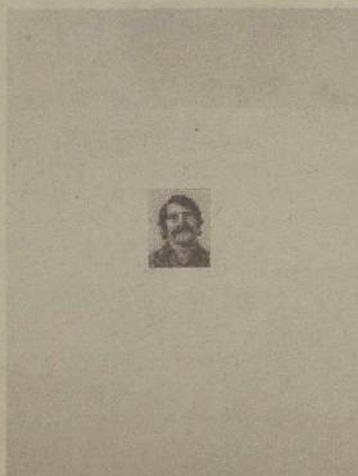
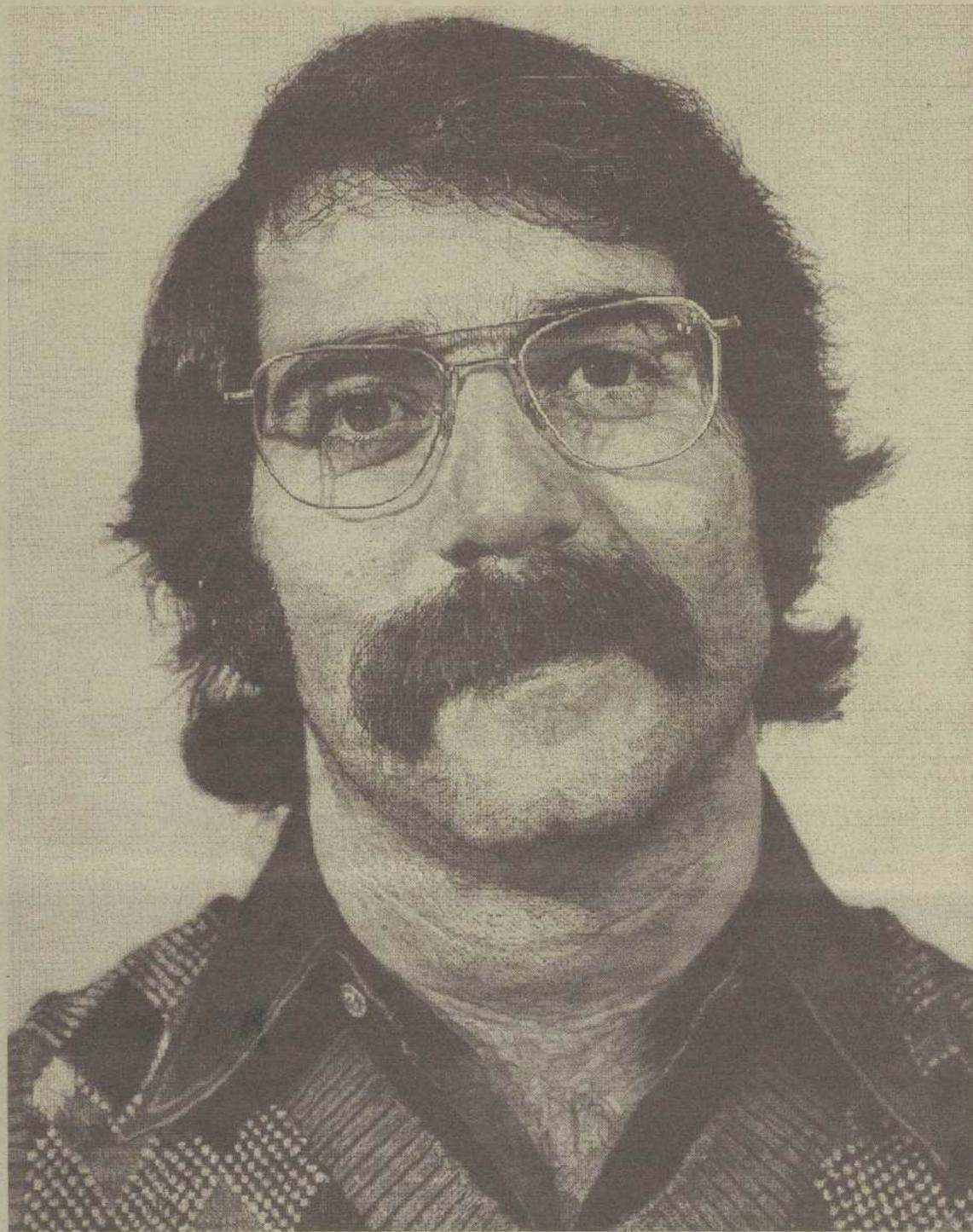
Right: *Robert/104,072*. 1973-74. Acrylic and ink with pencil on canvas, 108 x 84" (274.3 x 213.4 cm) The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Frederic Byers III and promised gift of an anonymous donor. Photo ©1998 The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Below: *Robert V/154*. 1974. Ink and pencil on paper, 30 x 22½" (76.2 x 57.2 cm). Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University. Purchased in part with funds from The National Endowment for the Arts. Photo: Frederik Marsh ©1991

*Robert II/616*. 1974. Ink and pencil on paper, 30 x 22½" (76.2 x 57.2 cm). Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University. Purchased in part with funds from The National Endowment for the Arts. Photo: Frederik Marsh ©1991

*Robert III/2,464*. 1974. Ink and pencil on paper, 30 x 22½" (76.2 x 57.2 cm). Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University. Purchased in part with funds from The National Endowment for the Arts. Photo: Frederik Marsh ©1991

*Robert IV/9,856*. 1974. Ink and pencil on paper, 30 x 22½" (76.2 x 57.2 cm). Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University. Purchased in part with funds from The National Endowment for the Arts. Photo: Frederik Marsh ©1991

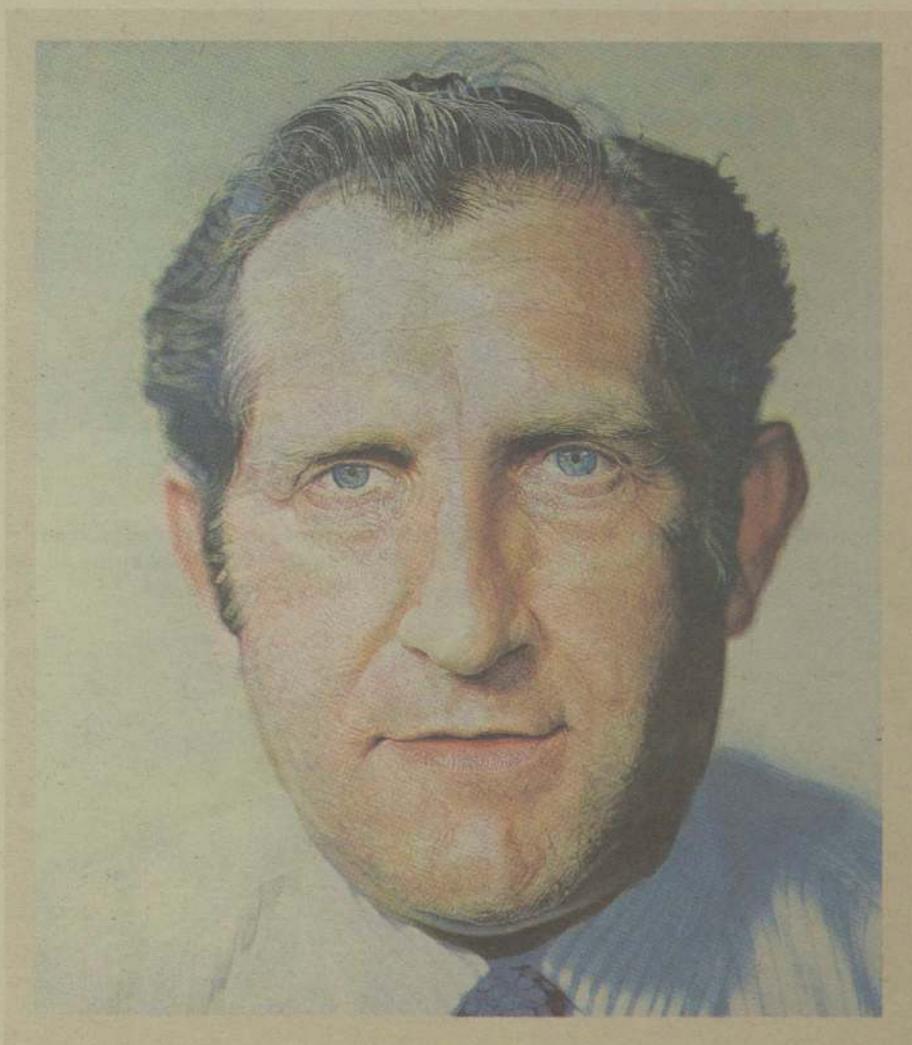


Close's persona has aged and mellowed—the most recent of his many mirrorlike images depicts an elegantly bearded and completely self-possessed man in his prime—but the rigor that Close initially brought to his self-imposed labor has been unflagging, despite the broader, brighter touch of his newest canvases. That Close, during the past three decades, has been able to ring so many formal and technical changes around the constant focus of his attention—the human head, stared at without reserve and staring back with equal and unflinching intensity—is a signal demonstration of the generally underappreciated fact that aesthetic possibilities carried to extremes of deliberateness are as likely to produce visual marvels as the caprices of the unfettered hand. By much the same token, Close's unsparing but curiously intimate likenesses are a reminder that the emotional impact of a work does not necessarily depend upon the artist transfusing his or her own painterly life-blood into a picture, van Gogh-style, but may instead result from the unexpected encounter between the subject and the viewer, in which the portraitist plays the part of scrupulously neutral intermediary.

These were lessons Close learned the hard way. A student gifted with uncommon facility, he came of age artistically in the early 1960s under the still-glowing shadow of Abstract Expressionism. Jackson Pollock's work showed him the dramatic tension created when a graphic image is evenly extended over the entire canvas and pulled drum-tight. Willem de Kooning's example taught him the pleasures of brushy cadenzas, pleasures in which he, like many of his contemporaries, eagerly indulged.

Easy satisfaction ultimately provoked Close's rebellion. Still at the height of his capacities when Close fell under his spell, de Kooning had forged and reformed his style by working against his innate gifts as a classical draftsman and through his thorough demolition of traditional compositional structures. Close, who brashly but also self-accusingly claimed to have painted as many de Koonings as de Kooning himself, could toss off lively pastiches of Abstract Expressionism but barely touched upon fundamental painterly problems his predecessors had struggled so hard to address.

Discontented with this unearned virtuosity, Close was in turn prompted to resist his own talents and dismantle the pictorial conventions he had inherited. In opposition to the prevailing taste for abstraction, Close opted for carefully observed figuration. In defiance of his own knack for expressive effects and the widespread belief that



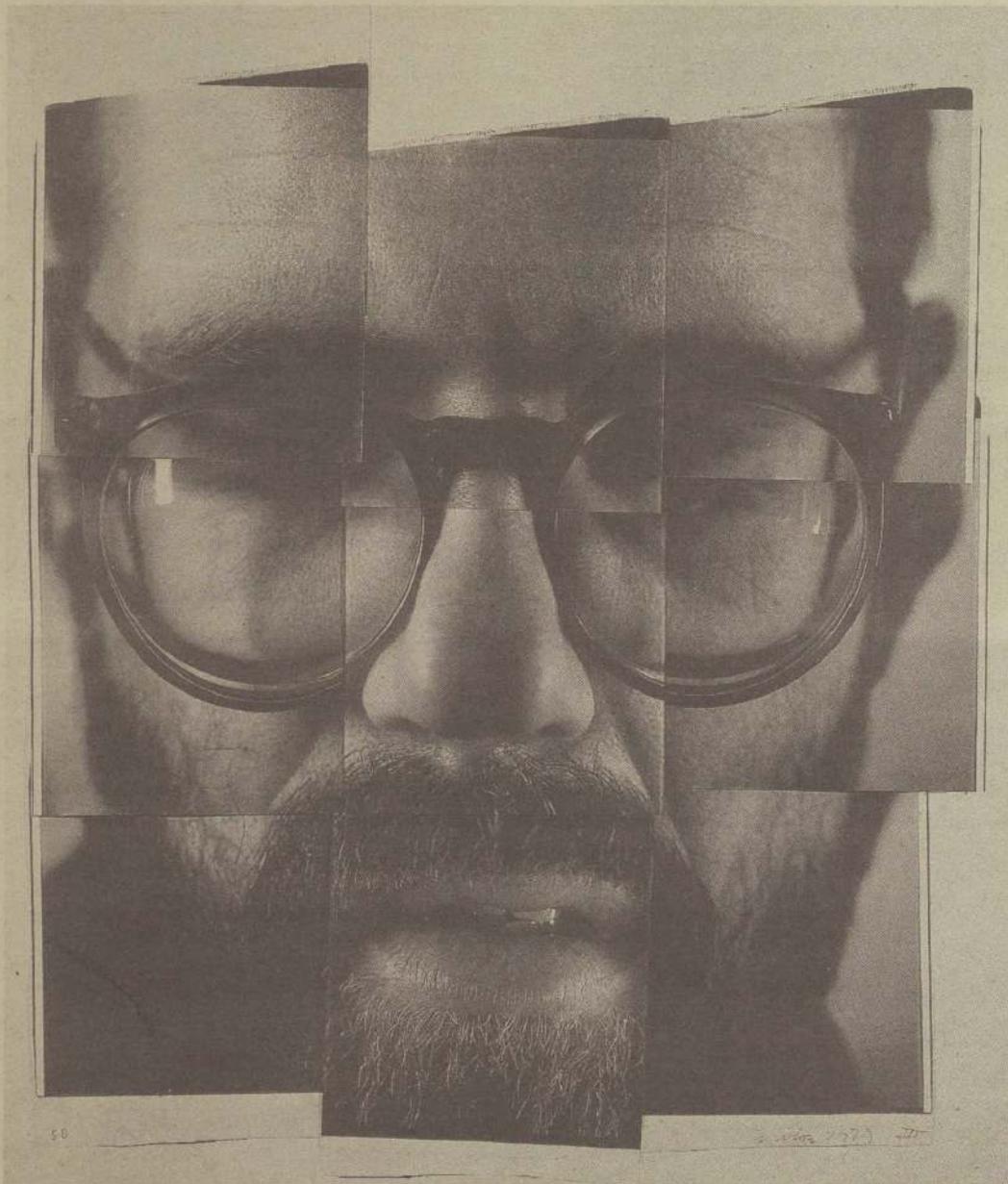
Top: *Linda*. 1975-76. Acrylic and pencil on canvas, 108 x 84" (274.3 x 213.4 cm). Akron Art Museum. Purchased with funds from an anonymous contribution, an anonymous contribution in honor of Ruth C. Roush, and the Museum Acquisition Fund. Photo: Richman Haire

Right: *Nat/Watercolor*. 1972. Watercolor on paper mounted on canvas, 67 x 57" (170.2 x 144.8 cm). Museum of Contemporary Art / Ludwig Museum Budapest. Photo: József Rosta

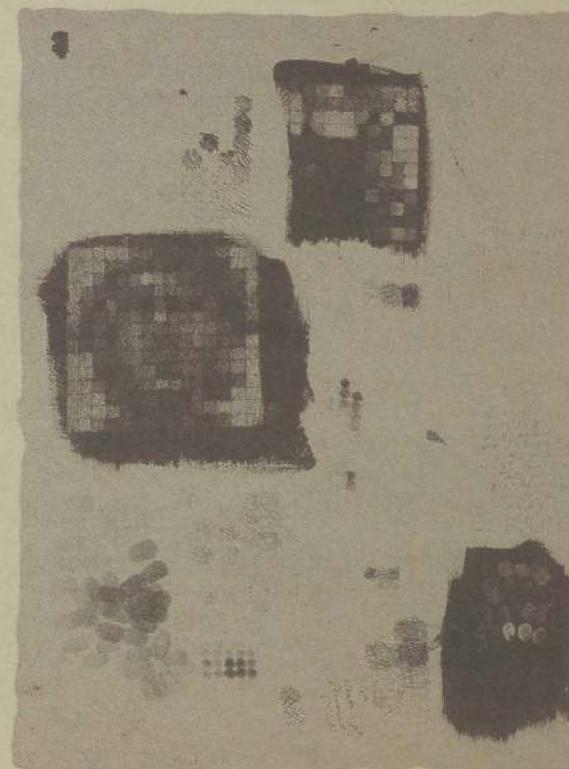
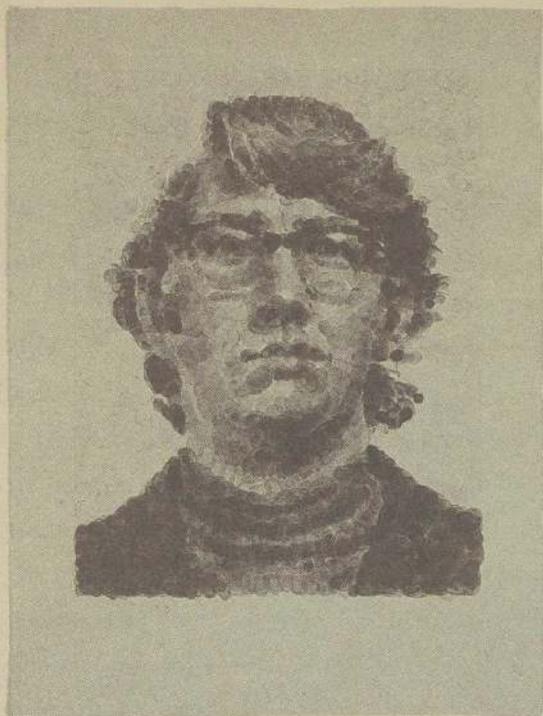
creative freedom was vested in spontaneity, he set himself strict studio procedures that allowed neither improvisation nor correction. As of 1967, Close thus devoted himself to a single subject—the human face—and a rarely altered compositional set-up—a frontal, symmetrical pose cropped high on the sitters' shoulders, tightly at the sides and top of their heads. Everything the artist needed to make and remake his picture, or, at any rate, everything he would permit himself, was to be found within this densely packed rectangle.

Taking this tack, Close aligned himself with the systems-based approach associated with the new strains of Minimal and Conceptual art that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s. While colleagues such as Sol LeWitt physically diagrammed all the partial permutations of an open-frame cube or wrote equations for geometric wall drawings, and Richard Serra—Close's former Yale classmate and the pugnacious visage in one of his earliest black-and-white portraits—took stock of sculptural materials and manipulations, Close trained his skill and attention on a comparably exhaustive examination of the available techniques for constructing and deconstructing the most iconic of motifs—the identity-card photo.

The consequence of Close's single-minded endeavor has been an eye-catching, eye-testing series of paintings, drawings, prints, and photographs, in which a motley assortment of men and women—all friends or family of the artist, who refuses to accept commissions or to do portraits of strangers—offered their faces to an unrelenting scrutiny that results in works that are as revealing of the varied mediums in which they are executed as they are of the sitters' actual countenances. Indeed, the "realism" of these pictures resides as much in the frank display of artistic artifice—the methodical laying bare of the devices by which illusions are achieved—as in the exacting depiction of the individual whose most-times unnaturally large features are spread out before us. Rather than competing with the camera in an attempt to render a convincing likeness, or simply using a photograph as a technical aid in accomplishing the same goal, Close indexes the many ways in which the formal *how's* of any given medium are themselves the content of picture-making and not merely the means to a picture-perfect end.



*Self-Portrait/Composite/Nine Parts*. 1979. Nine color Polaroid photographs mounted on canvas, overall: 76 x 61½" (194.3 x 156.2 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Gift of Barbara and Eugene Schwartz. Photo: Geoffrey Clemens. Photo ©1997 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York



Top row left: *Keith/Six Drawings Series: Keith/Random Fingerprint Version*. 1979. Stamp-pad ink and pencil on paper, 30 x 22 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (76.2 x 56.8 cm). Reynolda House, Museum of American Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Photo: Jackson Smith

Top row center: *Keith/Six Drawings Series: Keith/Square Fingerprint Version*. 1979. Stamp-pad ink and pencil on paper, 30 x 22" (76.2 x 56.5 cm). Reynolda House, Museum of American Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Photo: Jackson Smith

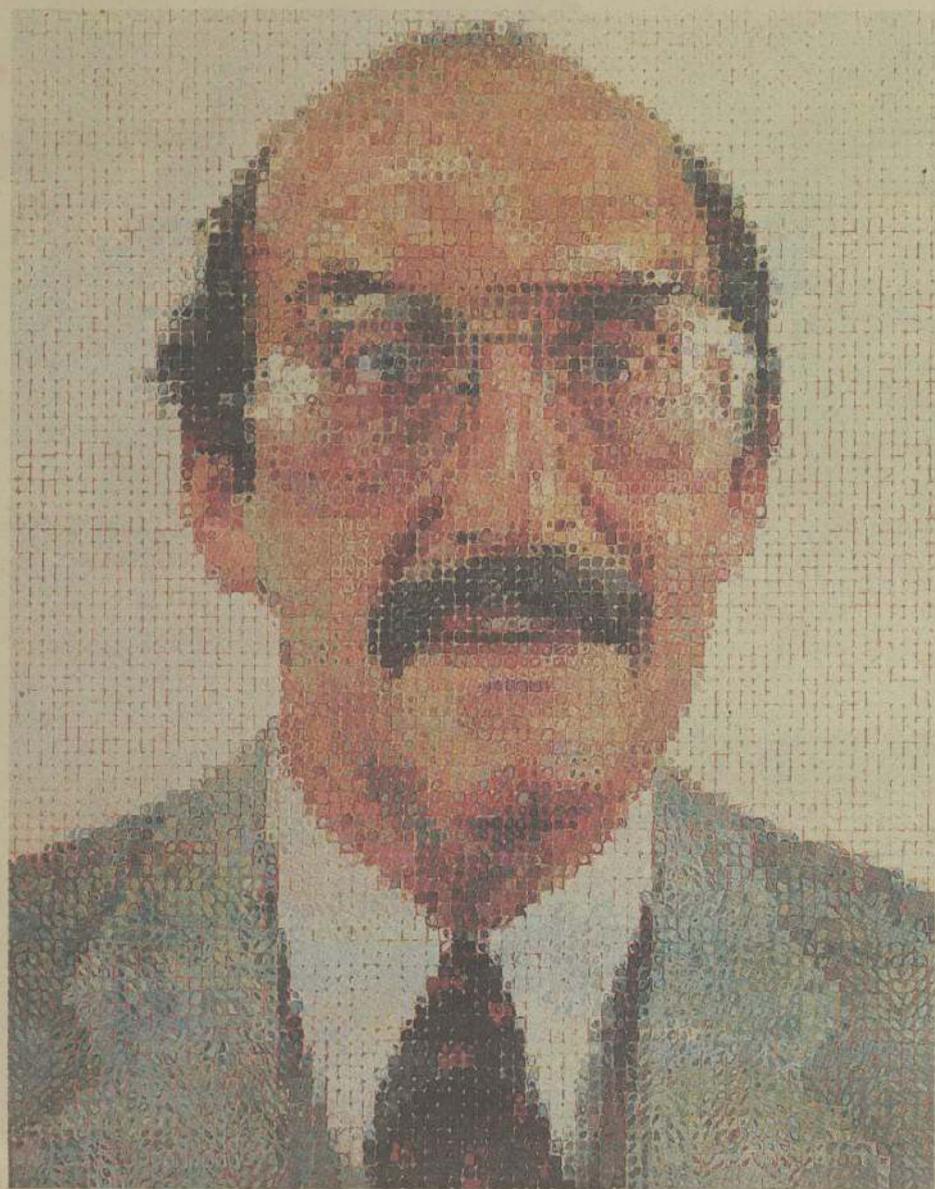
Top row right: *Keith/Six Drawings Series: Keith/Watercolor Version*. 1979. Watercolor and pencil on paper, 29 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 22 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (75.2 x 56.2 cm). Reynolda House, Museum of American Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Photo: Jackson Smith

Bottom row left: *Keith/Six Drawings Series: Keith/Round Fingerprint Version*. 1979. Stamp-pad ink and pencil on paper, 30 x 22 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (76.2 x 56.8 cm). Reynolda House, Museum of American Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Photo: Jackson Smith

Bottom row center: *Keith/Six Drawings Series: Keith/White Conté Version*. 1979. Conté crayon, pencil, and black gouache on paper, 29 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 22" (75.2 x 55.9 cm). Reynolda House, Museum of American Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Photo: Jackson Smith

Bottom row right: *Keith/Six Drawings Series: Keith/Ink Stick Version*. 1979. Ink and pencil on paper, 29 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 22" (75.2 x 55.9 cm). Reynolda House, Museum of American Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Photo: Jackson Smith

Right: Study for *Keith/Six Drawings Series*. 1979. Mixed media, 29 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 22 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (75.2 x 56.2 cm). Reynolda House, Museum of American Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina



Above: *Stanley*. 1980. Oil on canvas, 55 x 42" (139.7 x 106.7 cm). Collection Mr. and Mrs. Charles Diker. Photo: David Allison

Below: *Mark/Progression*. 1983. Oil-based ink on paper, 30 x 80" (76.2 x 203.2 cm). Collection Arne and Milly Glimcher, New York. Photo: Ellen Page Wilson, courtesy PaceWildenstein

Step by workmanlike step, Close has taken the greatest conceivable advantage of the opportunities inherent in his chosen format or process. Meticulously transcribing the information recorded in his black-and-white photo "maquettes" in the late 1960s, Close enlarged the images of his early paintings to a point where the most mundane attributes—the grain and irregular creasing of flesh, the tufting of hair or the texture of garments—assumed an exaggerated almost hallucinatory vividness. Shifting in the early 1970s to fully chromatic photographs, Close began to mimic the techniques of color reproduction by layering the three primary printer's hues—transparent magenta, yellow, and cyan blue—in such a manner that they optically mixed to create a complete spectrum of tones and tints. By the mid-1970s, Close was letting the matrix undergirding his painterly moves show, and by the latter half of the decade, the grid became an increasingly important image in its own right. Meanwhile, the methods used to apply pigments or patch together images extended from airbrush to watercolor, pastel, ink-stamp, and fingerprint, as well as a host of printmaking techniques. Only in 1980 did Close return to the use of oil paints, a practice he had abandoned in 1966 when he turned away from Abstract Expressionism. For the past eighteen years he has experimented in that medium with everything from a precise neo-Pointillist build-up of nested dots to looser, tapestrylike weaving of gestural strokes, to kaleidoscopic accumulations of polychrome facets and mark-clusters.

Physiognomic similarities and eccentricities are Close's ace-in-the-hole. It is hard to ignore these countenances, not just because of their usually colossal size or the extravagant labor he has lavished

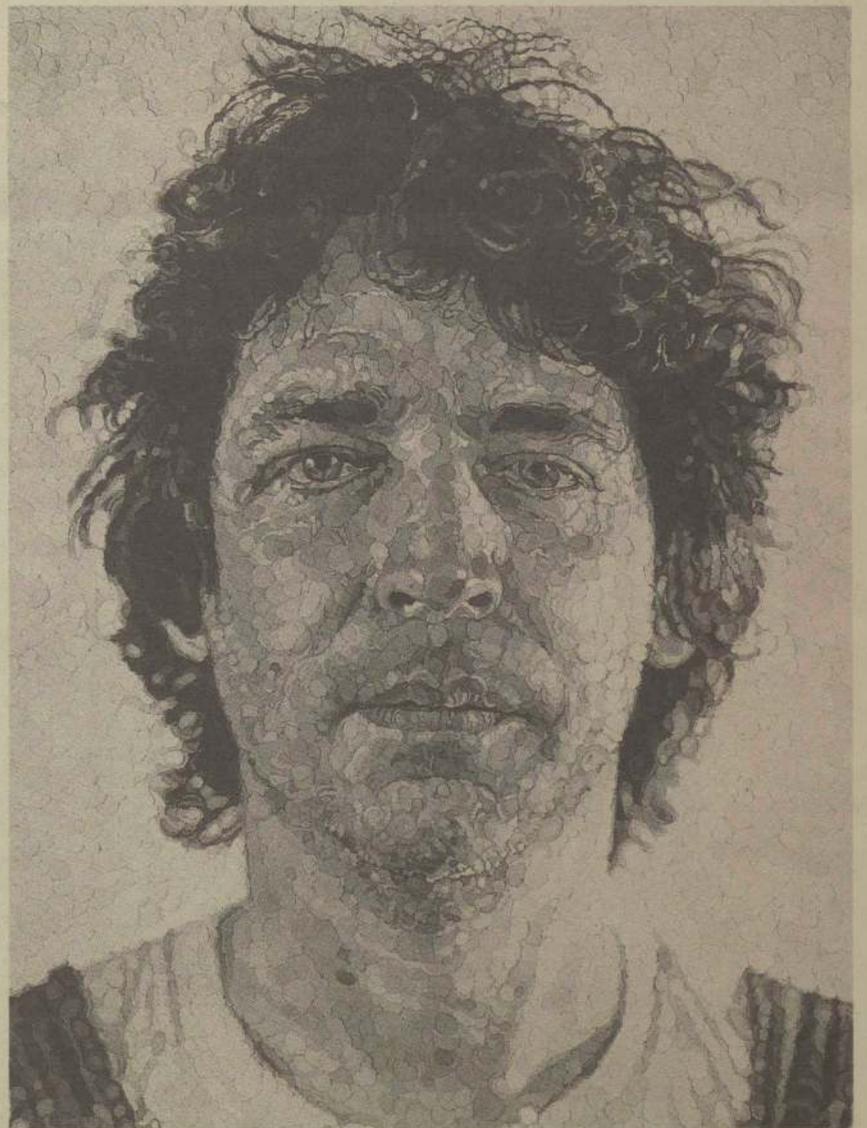
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Left: *Fanny/Fingerpainting*. 1985. Oil-based ink on canvas, 102 x 84" (259.1 x 213.4 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. Gift of Lila Acheson Wallace Fund. ©1997 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. Photo: Bob Grove

Below: *Jud/Collage*. 1982. Pulp paper collage on canvas, 96 x 72" (243.8 x 182.9 cm). Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. Gift of The Sydney and Frances Lewis Foundation. ©1994 Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Photo: Ron Jennings



## CHUCK CLOSE EDITIONED WORKS

*"It's an entirely different way of thinking and looking from technique to technique"*

WHILE PAINTINGS and drawings are known for their uniqueness, other art forms can be created in editions, with groups of identical works signed and numbered by the artist. Chuck Close has made many such editions—particularly in printmaking, but also in other techniques—and one reason for his interest in these art forms is the opportunities they provide for a wide range of viewers to experience his work. Rarity has never been Close's intention, although the method he devised for creating paintings has turned out to be slow and laborious, with a total output of only about sixty or seventy works. "I really believe in access," he says, "in people standing or sitting in front of these objects. That is the essential experience." The creation of editions has helped him achieve this social function for his art.

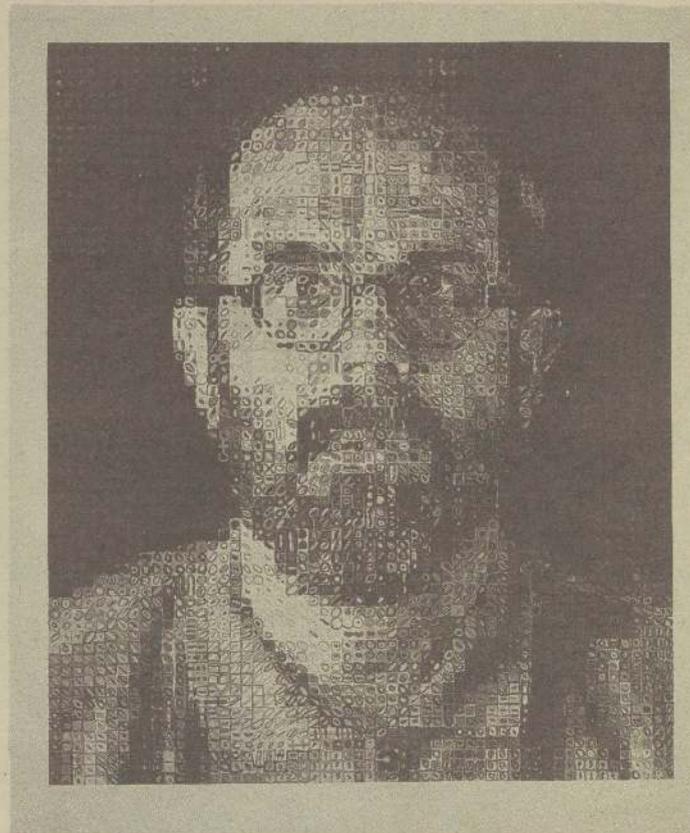
Close realized early on that he did not want to make "signed, posterized reproductions." He wanted to involve himself deeply in the technical possibilities available and to devise methods that were as fundamental to him as were those for his painting. In fact, learning the techniques of printmaking, as

well as paper pulp and woven fabric editions, has served as a catalyst for him in his work as a whole. The arcane processes, the distinctive tools and equipment, and the collaboration with expert technicians and specialized publishers stimulated him to invent new conceptual systems that lie at the core of all his artistic achievements. Since 1972, Close has created nearly fifty different editioned images, along with many related experimental works.

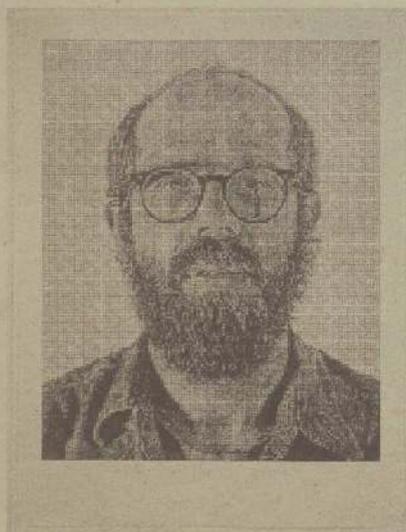
Close was first invited to undertake a print project by publisher Robert Feldman of Parasol Press in New York. After agreeing reluctantly, Close suggested that they try the long-out-of-favor and labor-intensive technique of mezzotint, thereby challenging the expertise of master printer Kathan Brown of Crown Point Press in Oakland, California. In the end, as he had hoped, the process tested both his limits and those of the printer as they worked together

to create the monumental *Keith/Mezzotint*, a piece that has become a milestone in contemporary printmaking. One unexpected result of the process was Close's decision to leave his gridded working guide visible for the first time. This practice would continue in his subsequent work in all mediums.

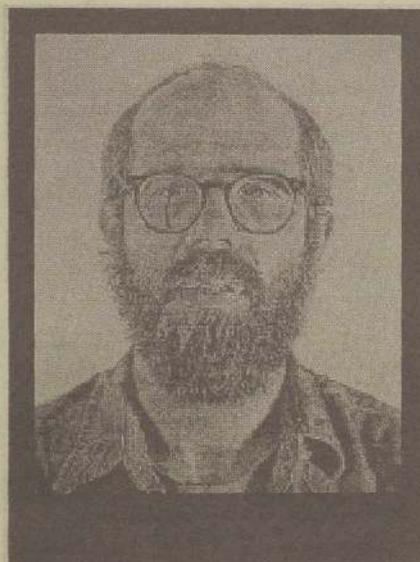
Close's collaboration with the late master printer Joseph Wilfer also pushed him to explore new areas. After much cajoling,



*Self-Portrait*. 1995. Screenprint, 64½ x 54" (163.8 x 137.2 cm). Publisher: Pace Editions, New York. Printer: Brand X Editions, New York. Edition: 50. Photo: Ellen Page Wilson



*Self-Portrait*. 1977. Etching, 53¾ x 40¾" (136.9 x 103.5 cm). Publisher: the artist. Printer: Crown Point Press, Oakland. Edition: 35. Photo: Maggie L. Kundtz



*Self-Portrait/White Ink*. 1978. Etching, aquatint, and engraving, 53 x 41" (136.7 x 104.1 cm). Publisher: the artist. Printer: Crown Point Press, Oakland. Edition: 35. Photo: Maggie L. Kundtz



*Self-Portrait/Manipulated*. 1982. Handmade paper, 39 x 29" (99.1 x 73.7 cm). Publisher: Pace Editions, New York. Printer: Joseph Wilfer, New York. Edition: 25. Photo: Ellen Page Wilson

Wilfer convinced him to try the medium of paper pulp. Those editions required new technical processes and produced a new kind of expressiveness. A comparison of the mezzotint version of *Keith* with that created in paper pulp shows the distinctions. Wilfer, who eventually became the master printer of Spring Street Workshop for Pace Editions, was, in Close's words, "the single greatest problem-solving mind I've ever worked with. He came up with thousands of ideas. We learned from the processes and saw other possibilities." Such a working dialogue is fundamental to the practice of contemporary printmaking, where artists depend on professional printers in workshop settings for technical expertise.

After Close was physically handicapped in 1988, collaboration took on even greater significance. The system-making impulse so fundamental to his art served him poignantly well in these tragic circumstances. He sought and found ever-new ways to create prints. One clear example is the ingenuity required to realize *Alex/Reduction Print*. During its initial stages, when Close was working with a huge linoleum block, he became director rather than leading man. He oversaw a team of six or seven assistants who carved according to his felt-tip markings. He assigned particular areas to those with certain manners of cutting, and then rotated the block periodically, so that individual styles would not be visible in the final image. At this stage in his life, as Close has said, such solutions allowed him not to "cross whole ways of working off my list of possibilities."

In this case, as in so many instances, the often constricting rules and regulations of printmaking—as well as the other editioned techniques—have proven to be assets for Close rather than liabilities. The special

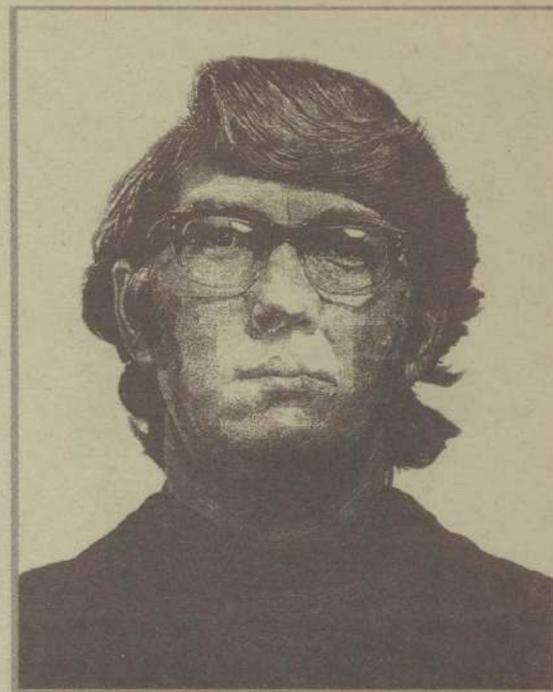


languages of each process have challenged him to go in new conceptual directions and have enriched his art generally. As he states it: "The thing that is the constant surprise is how my multiple work informs my unique work and how the unique works then change the prints. It's a real conversation back and forth. It just keeps going."

Deborah Wye

Chief Curator

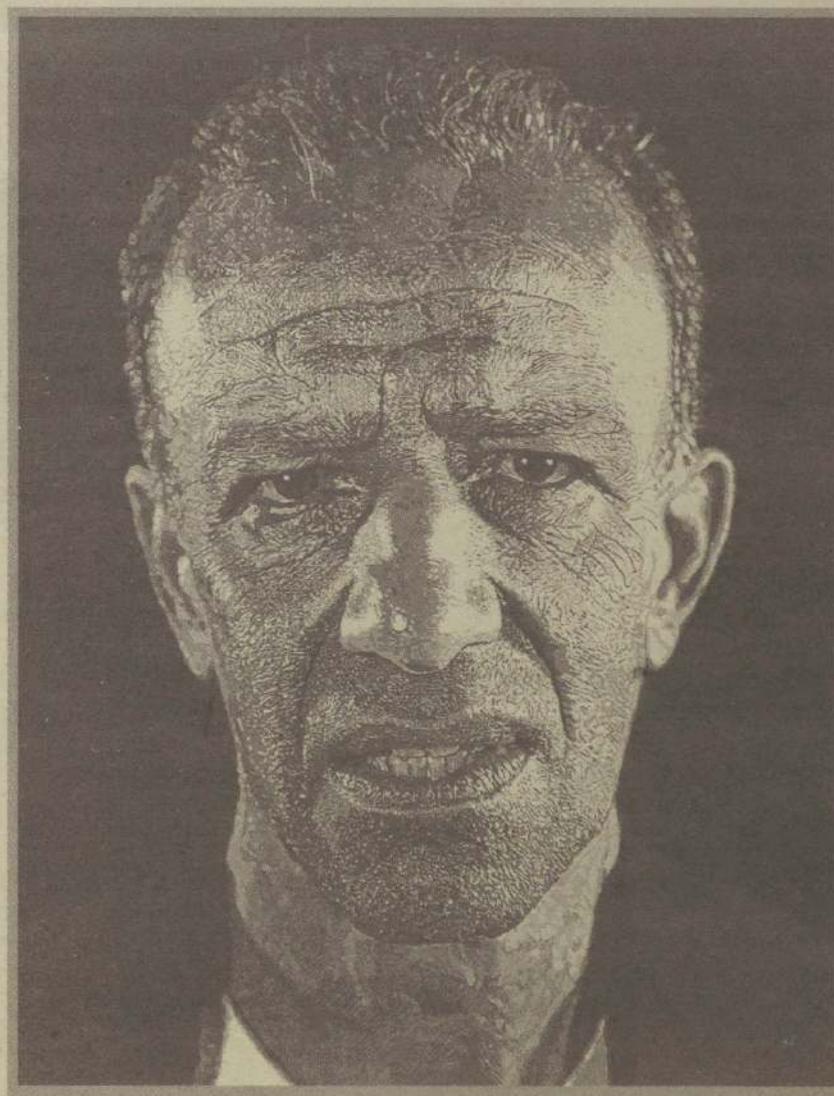
Department of Prints and Illustrated Books

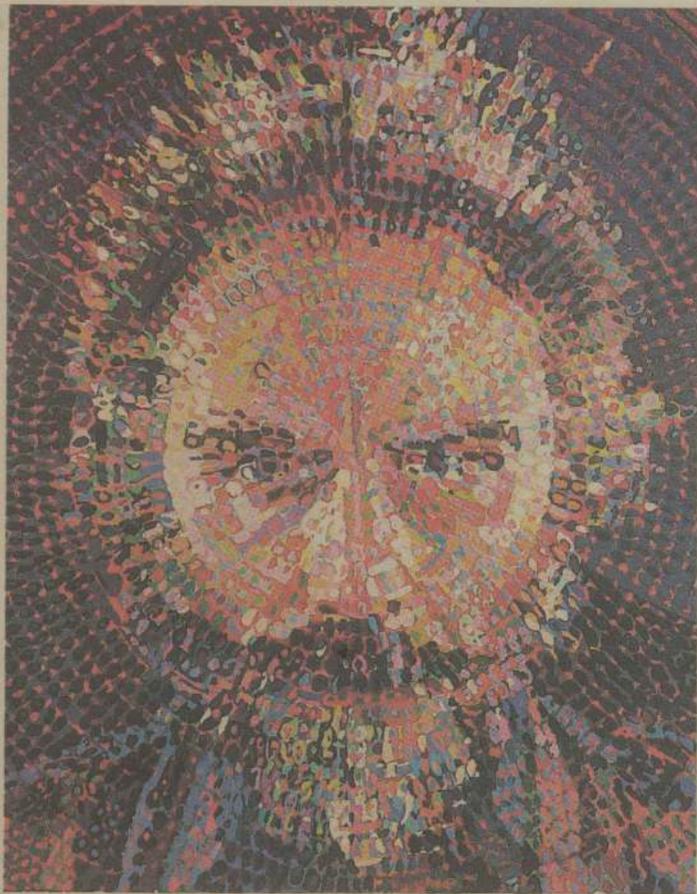


Above: *Keith/Mezzotint*. 1972. Mezzotint, 51 x 41½" (129.6 x 105.4 cm). Publisher: Parasol Press, New York. Printer: Crown Point Press, Oakland. Edition: 10. Photo: Maggie L. Kundtz

Above left: *Keith II*. 1981. Handmade paper, 35 x 26½" (88.9 x 67.3 cm). Publisher: Pace Editions, New York. Printer: Joseph Wilfer at Dieu Donne Papermill, New York. Edition: 20. Photo: Ellen Page Wilson

Below: *Alex/Reduction Print*. 1993. Screenprint, 79 x 60¼" (220.7 x 153.1 cm). Publisher: Pace Editions, New York. Printer: Brand X Editions, New York. Edition: 35. Photo: Ellen Page Wilson





Above: *Dorothea*. 1995. Oil on canvas, 102 x 84" (259.1 x 213.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Promised gift of Robert F. and Anna Marie Shapiro; Vincent D'Aquila and Harry Soviak Bequest, Vassilis Cromwell Voglis Bequest, and The Lauder Foundation Fund. Photo: Ellen Page Wilson, courtesy PaceWildenstein

Above left: *Leslie/Watercolor II*. 1986. Watercolor on paper, 30½ x 22¼" (77.5 x 56.5 cm). Collection James and Barbara Palmer. Photo: Richard Ackley

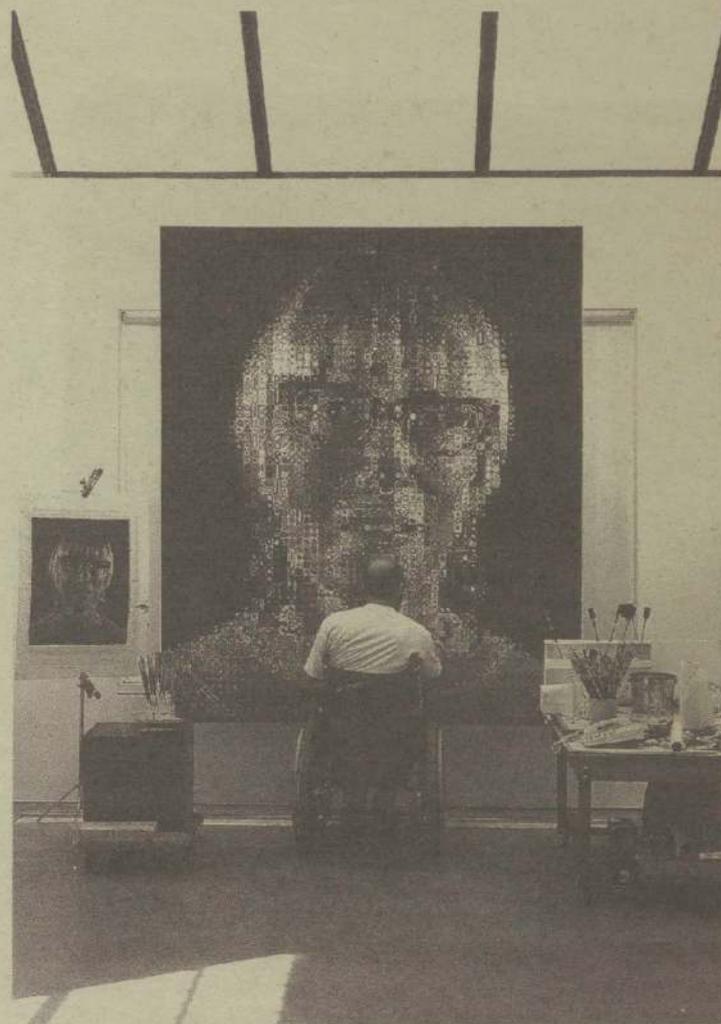
Left: *Lucas II*. 1987. Oil on canvas, 36 x 30" (91.4 x 76.2 cm). Collection Jon and Mary Shirley. Photo: Bill Jacobson

upon them, but because of the intrinsic fascination any face holds. Although we may not resemble Richard, Nancy, Mark, or the other members of Close's pantheon in our specific traits, we instinctively respond to their individual characteristics or expressions as if they were generic reflections of our own. Our various morphologies belong on a continuum with theirs, their humanity is an aspect of ours. Close's superficial detachment—his measured reporting of how ordinary people look—permits us to acquaint ourselves with these semi-anonymous contemporaries on our own terms; but once their skin has gotten under our skin, once their gaze has locked into our gaze, an uncanny fellow-feeling takes over, and we join their Brobdingnagian race.

Close's subject has never changed, but his manner of presenting it to us has done nothing but change. And along with those changes in appearance come changes in affect. Some of these heads loom menacingly over us, some yield unguardedly, almost helplessly to our attention; some seem seized by a morbid rigidity, and some pulse with an animated vitality. The various states of mind Close evokes in these faces or induces in those who see them derive not so much from the psychological dispositions his subjects actually exhibit (for all the existential wear-and-tear detectable in them, his photo sources are usually deadpan) and not at all from his editorial intervention or the projection of his own personality (Close hates trumped-up artistic emotion), but are the product of the ever-varying technical prism through which the painter examines reality.

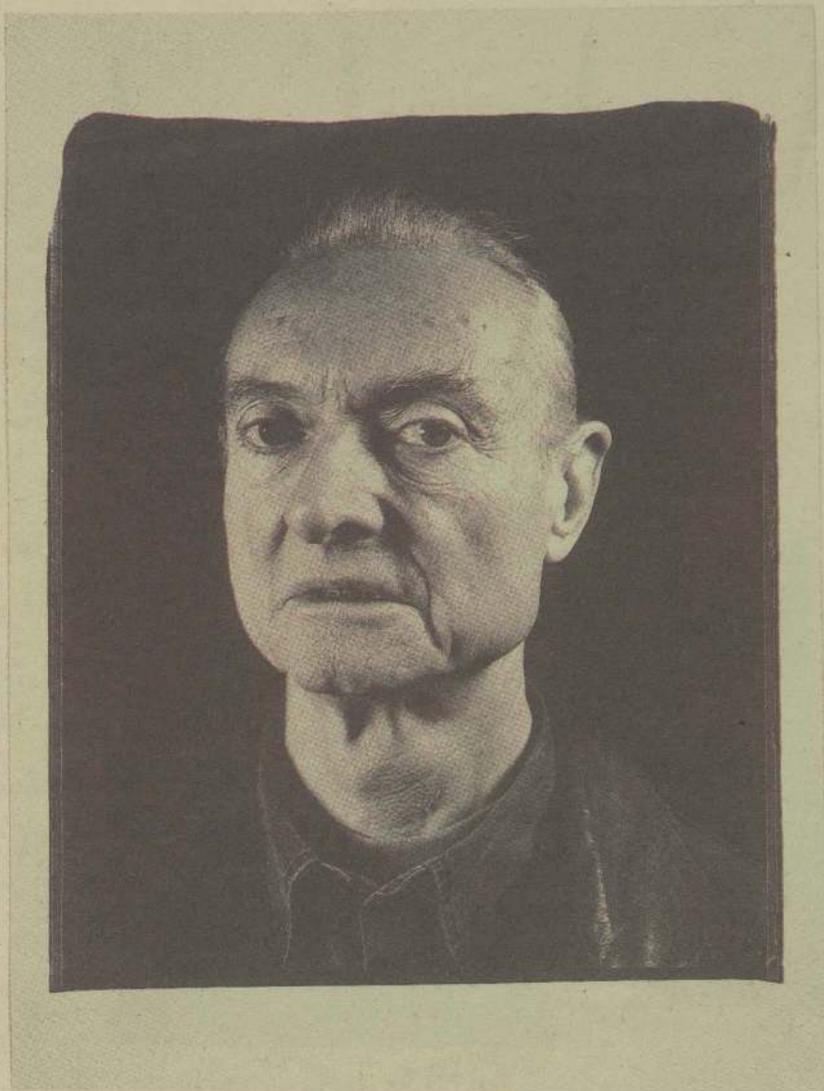
Instead of offering us lots of different things to see, therefore, he demonstrates for us myriad ways of seeing one thing. In his programmatic but ceaselessly inventive hands, that "thing" has undergone the most startling and revelatory transformations, and undergoes them still. Thirty years after he began to pursue his apparently "one-track" aesthetic idea, Close can now look back on a body of work that is as unique in its diversity of effect as it is unwaveringly consistent in its working premises. And, so this mid-career retrospective attests, there is every reason to believe that there will be more of the same—that is to say more surprises—to come.

Robert Storr  
*Curator*  
*Department of Painting and Sculpture*



Top: Chuck Close in his studio working on *Janet* (1992). Photo: Bill Jacobson

Above: *Janet*. 1992. Oil on canvas, 100 x 84" (254 x 213.4 cm). Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York. George B. and Jenny R. Mathews Fund, 1992. Photo: Biff Henrich



## PUBLIC PROGRAMS

The following public programs will be held in conjunction with the exhibition *Chuck Close*:

**Thursday, March 19, 8:00 p.m.**

The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 1

### *Artists Panel Discussion*

A panel discussion with artists Janet Fish, Philip Glass, Mark Greenwald, and Lucas Samaras. Moderated by Robert Storr, Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art.

**Thursday, March 26, 8:15 p.m.**

The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 1

A slide-illustrated lecture and dialogue between artist Chuck Close and Robert Storr. *This program is in collaboration with the 92nd Street Y Art Center as part of the series Artists' Visions.*

**Tuesday, April 28, 6:30 p.m.**

The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 2

### *Critics Panel Discussion*

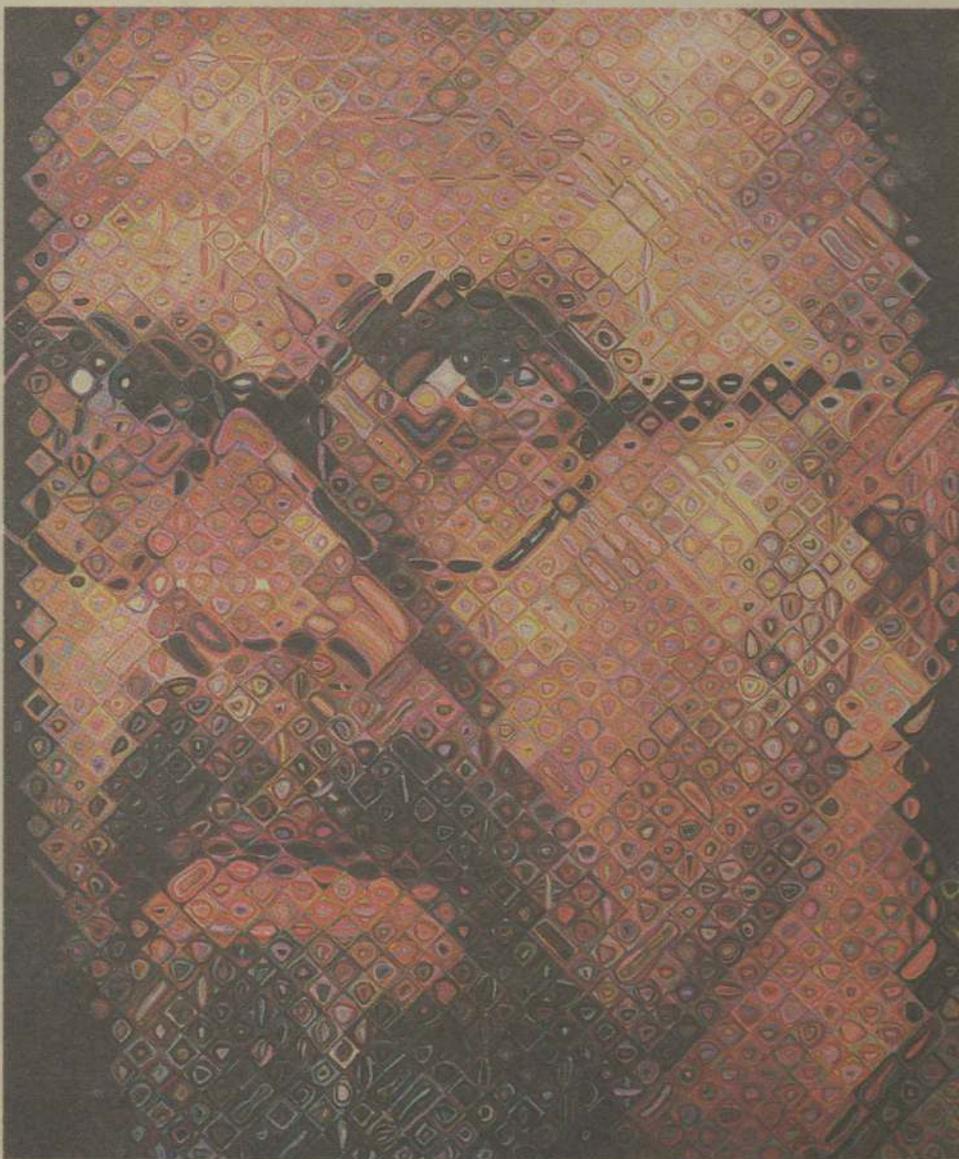
A panel discussion with Kay Larson, writer and critic; Linda Nochlin, Lila Acheson Wallace Professor of Modern Art, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University; and David Rimaneli, writer and contributing editor for *Artforum* magazine. Moderated by Robert Storr.

### **Tickets:**

\$8; members \$7; students and seniors \$5. Tickets are available at the Lobby Information Desk. For more information, please call the Department of Education at 212-708-9781.

## PUBLICATION

*Chuck Close*, by Robert Storr with additional essays by Kirk Varnedoe and Deborah Wye, 224 pages, 178 illustrations, 113 in full color. Cloth \$50, paperbound \$24.95. Available at The MoMA Book Store.



Above: *Roy II*. 1996. Four digital ink jet prints on Somerset paper, overall: 88 x 84" (223.5 x 173 cm). Collection Arthur and Carol Goldberg. Photo: Maggie L. Kundtz, courtesy PaceWildenstein MacGill, New York

Right: *Self-Portrait*. 1997. Oil on canvas, 102 x 84" (259.1 x 213.4 cm). Private collection, New York. Photo: Ellen Page Wilson, courtesy PaceWildenstein

This exhibition is made possible by Michael and Judy Ovitz.

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