

Close's subject : part portrait/part process

[Deborah Wye]

Author

Close, Chuck, 1940-

Date

1998

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art, Department
of Prints and Illustrated Books

Exhibition URL

www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2768

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Close's Subject

Part Portrait/Part Process

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

Self-Portrait. 1988. Spit-bite aquatint, 20½ x 15½" (52.1 x 40 cm). Publisher: Pace Editions, New York.

Printer: Aldo Crommelynck, New York. Edition: 50
S.P.#1. 1997. Linoleum cut, 24 x 18" (61 x 45.7 cm). Publisher: Pace Editions, New York. Printer: Spring Street Workshop, New York. Edition: 70

While the sitters in the portraits of Chuck Close (born 1940) stare out at us with unflinching gazes, locking us in eye contact, they and their individual personalities have never been the artist's main preoccupation. Close came to artistic maturity in a period when concepts and ideas about art's internal nature took center stage. Trained in a modernist tradition based primarily on art's formal elements, he has focused on a kind of pictorial problem-solving, rather than on subject matter or narrative content.

The challenge Close sets out for himself is to create a system that can depict a photograph. By narrowing in on the photographic portrait as a starting point, he established a constant for his work and has gone on to find the myriad possibilities

for turning a photograph into a painting or a print. He formulates an overall plan, breaks that down into incremental steps, and works methodically, day by day. Eventually, parts begin to

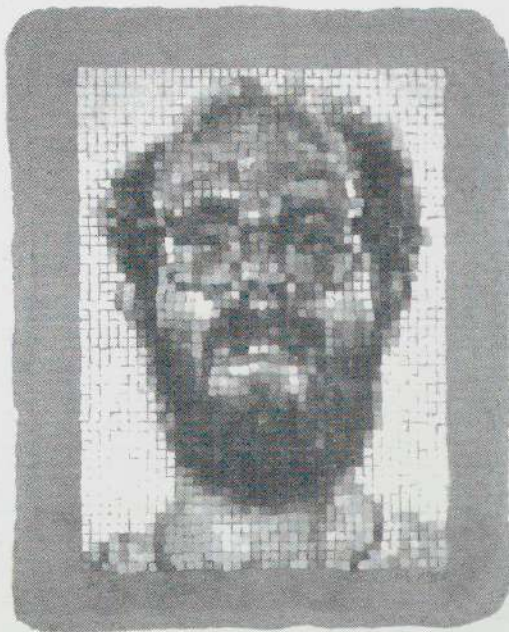
constitute wholes, and each choice made yields a variety of large and small pleasures, as well as subproblems

requiring and suggesting further solutions for the future. This process is almost visible as one peruses the surfaces of his works. "The route you take is a large part of the experience for the artist, and vicariously for the viewer," says Close.¹

But Close has also acknowledged that portraiture itself has begun to capture his attention explicitly, rather than incidentally. "Recently, I've realized that when I go to a museum, the works I stand in front of for any protracted period of time are almost always portraits. So there must be something there that's more com-



Self-Portrait, 1988



Self-Portrait/Manipulated, 1982

elling to me than I ever thought was the case."² He shoots countless portrait photographs of family members and friends and has accumulated many more than he has ultimately chosen to portray in his artwork. His selection of a subject for a painting or print is based more on the nature of the resulting photograph than on his relationship to a particular person.

Close characterizes the sitters he has chosen as a kind of extended family, made up of the approximately sixty people found in his paintings, drawings, and prints. Some have been portrayed repeatedly, and seeing works of a single sitter side by side allows one to grasp immediately the unique properties of a particular medium. This is especially telling for print techniques, where the conceptual and expressive possibilities of etching and aquatint, lithography, woodcut and linoleum cut, screenprint, or even paper pulp become immediately apparent.

Over the course of his career, Close has had the opportunity to photograph himself numerous times and represent the result in various mediums. He has created over thirty self-portraits, using several different photographs as points of departure. Rather than probing his own image for psychological insight, though, he notices the changes in his physical appearance: "I watch my hair disappear," he says.³ But a comparison of self-

portraits does demonstrate the distinct relationship Close achieves between his depicted subject and his process of depiction, with the tension between the two providing some measure of each work's vitality.

For Close, the systematic approaches devised for his works, including an understanding of the properties of the various mediums he employs, inevitably affect the characterization of his sitters. But while interpretations of personality are primary considerations in traditional portraiture, for Close they are the by-product of his other, more conceptual concerns. His work demands attention primarily for his artistic methods, even while the close-up poses of his sitters make them impossible to ignore as subjects. In his art, means and ends form a new kind of symbiotic wholeness.



S.P. #1, 1997

Deborah Wye
Chief Curator

1 Interview with the author, June 1997.

2 "Artist's Statement," in *Artist's Choice: Chuck Close, Head-On: The Modern Portrait*, exhibition brochure (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 2.

3 Interview with the author, July 1997.

This card is made possible through the generosity of Janice and Roger Oresman.

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Photos: Ellen Page Wilson

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Produced in conjunction with the exhibition
Focus: Chuck Close Editioned Works
February 26–May 26, 1998

The Museum
of Modern Art
Department of Prints
and Illustrated Books