



# THE PHOTO AS SUBJECT

## The Paintings and Drawings of Chuck Close

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All unidentified quotes are taken from tape-recorded interviews made with the artist between January and September 1973. Close read, corrected, and discussed the manuscript. I am also indebted to Don Eddy for suggestions and observations about Close's art and his own.

**People keep asking me if I'm still painting heads, and if I say yes, they think there's been no change.**

**Chuck Close**

**T**wo years ago, an art-history seminar at a West Coast university discussed the topic *Chuck Close: What Can He Do Next?* They devoted several days to his work and the corner into which they believed he had painted himself—yet none of them had ever actually seen one of his paintings.

It seems unlikely that many people would comment on an artist like van Gogh strictly on the basis of magazine illustrations. Nevertheless, many do not seem to be aware of the dangers of drawing conclusions from greatly reduced halftone reproductions of photographs of paintings that are intentionally photographic in appearance. The Photo Realist segment of the New Realist movement has been the victim of many such oversights: of the ironic fact that the very medium that inspired it is also the one

called upon to disseminate it; of a superficial resemblance to other methods of painting that portray the visible world; of the various pressures applied by those who had reason to encourage or discourage realist movements; and of critical attitudes that have moved reluctantly from outright rejection to tepid recognition of established fact. Of all these artists, none would seem to have been as misunderstood or underestimated as Chuck Close, despite the fact that he has been one of the most successful in getting at the central problems that Photo Realism poses. It is the economy of his style and his human subject matter that have created most of the confusion. It is a difficulty that might be overcome if people were to think of Photo Realism in terms of field painting instead of Pop Art, as a system of "art marks," as Close has often called them, rather than icons of the banal.

## PHOTOGRAPHY AND PAINTING

The accurate translation of three-dimensional shapes and settings into two dimensions has been a central problem for realist painters since the invention of linear perspective. With the invention of photography, artists were finally relieved of the task of documentation and left to pursue more entertaining problems. Although a fair number of those who depended on portraiture for a living were pleased to have access to a mechanical means of resolving the spatial-translation problem, the majority clearly viewed the camera as an unworthy rival. They began to turn away from stricter forms of representation to stress the abstract design qualities that only the artist's hand and eye could capture and to make a conscious point of the uniqueness of the materials.<sup>1</sup> The idea of borrowing not only the technical skills of the camera but of imitating the photo's physical characteristics was literally unthinkable at the time and continues to be so for a large part of the public even today.

By the latter half of the sixties, art was ripe for a photographic style. This was not because of a renewed interest in realism, but because the camera and the photograph had achieved such absolute currency in everyday life. There was no longer any question of competition after a hundred years of the most radical experimentation in both arts. Moreover, the imagery of the media had become an integral part of the landscape. It was

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<sup>1</sup> "Impressionistic composition is unthinkable without the application of focus. The lens of the camera taught the painter . . . that all subjects cannot be seen with equal clearness . . . it was the broadcast appearance of the photographic images in the eighteen-sixties that taught the Impressionists to see and represent life in focal planes and divisions."

Sadakichi Hartmann, *The Whistler Book* (Boston, 1910), pp. 163-164, quoted in Van Deren Coke, *The Painter and the Photograph*. (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1971).

recorded, interpreted, and even printed on the paintings of a generation of artists. At the same time, artists moving into areas involving performance or monumental constructions at a distance from the public turned to the camera to document, interpret, enhance, and distribute their work. Photo Realism was undoubtedly a foregone conclusion—even if no one happened to be aware of it at the time.<sup>2</sup>

## SUBJECT MATTER

Subject matter has presented the Photo Realists with many problems. The traditional weight of this element in representational art proved a distraction to viewer and artist alike. And although some artists minimized the confusion by limiting themselves to single subjects, viewers came to distinguish them by what they usually depict rather than by their technical concerns.

The near-absence of the human figure in the Photo Realist movement should have made it clear that this particular approach to realism was not like the others that have perennially appeared since the invention of Cubism. Of all the artists who began working with photo-based images in the mid-sixties, only Close elected to focus on the human figure. Yet in spite of this, he has managed to sidestep the many problems raised by the long European tradition of figure painting. Stressing the photographic qualities of the image enables him to treat his subject more as an object than as a human being. Even so, his decision to paint faces went against the conventions being prescribed by those who view the photo-realist impulse in terms of Pop Art and others who insist that banal subject matter is an essential element of American realist painting.

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<sup>2</sup> For a more extensive commentary on the Pop generation's interest in and approach to photography, see Richard Hamilton's collected statements and observations in the Guggenheim Museum catalogue of his work, published September 1973.

Close was moved in part by the need for a more demanding model against which to measure his work. He felt that painting less-specific, nonhuman surfaces would allow him to get away with being imprecise, for it would be too difficult for him (and the viewer) to detect. The human face provides as many problems of shape, texture, surface detail, and reflection as the materials of city landscapes, but by using his friends as subjects, he forces himself to be accurate. And if faces are not among the least-emotional things one can portray, the struggle to keep them impersonal has added to the interest of making them.

### SCALE

Close employs a gigantic scale so that the photograph's information about the surface of the face will be not merely available but unavoidable. When approaching one of these works in a gallery, one is first aware only of the head itself. However, upon moving in one is forced to relinquish this image and deal only with the real content of the painting: how the details of a face as recorded by a camera have been translated by the artist into colors and shapes made of paint. At this distance, the illusion of space provided by the limited focus gives way to awareness of the flatness of the painted surface, and the brilliance of certain highlights fades into the dullness of the paper and paint—just as the image itself becomes a kind of abstract landscape.<sup>3</sup>

This treatment of scale is more important and complex than one might expect, for the concept has changed drastically in

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<sup>3</sup> Several years ago Close experimented with scale in another medium. Using a live model and a very precise system of panning, he made a portrait with a movie camera, slowly crossing the picture area with a macro-close-up lens. The system effectively enforced a concentration on details, but viewers were unable to identify the head from photos after only one showing. *Slow Pan/Bob*, 16 mm, black-and-white, ten minutes long, 1970.

recent times. Scale is no longer a relatively minor element dictated by the subject matter or by factors exterior to the work itself. (Would it decorate an entire wall or a small chamber? Was its purpose to exalt or simply to record?) Since the day Jackson Pollock extended the working gesture to include the entire arm and torso threw the paint across the canvas, scale has been carried to colossal proportions. Today these seem to be limited only by the physical and economic means available to the artist (e.g., Claes Oldenburg's proposals for gigantic monuments based on everyday objects and Michael Heizer's drawings made with a motorcycle). Scale was far more essential to Pop than it had been to Abstract Expressionism, encouraged by billboards, the generally prodigious proportions of the cityscapes it celebrated, and the anything-goes attitude of the artists.

Though he arrived at it for very different reasons, Close's huge scale encouraged people to see his work in the same terms as James Rosenquist's and to assume that what he was doing was merely a technically more-refined version.<sup>4</sup> In fact, his scale has proved to be unique. John Roy (subject of the painting *John*) once pointed out to Close that when the paintings of the Abstract Expressionists became larger,

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Hilton Kramer's attack on Close as recently as two years ago (*The New York Times*, December 26, 1971). What seems to have happened is that there is an inevitable confusion of motivations caused by the overlapping of our rather brief contemporary "periods." Close sees the way he does because he is really a product of the fifties, "when you were sort of programmed to turn on to oil slicks on mud puddles and cracks in the sidewalk and all that." Trying to link him too directly to the inventions of Pop is extremely misleading because he thinks more like an Abstract Expressionist. Don Eddy is another good example of the varied sources of the Photo Realist movement. He started to paint while a student in Hawaii, isolated from contemporary movements. He gradually moved toward a photo-realistic style in part because of his background as a professional photographer and because his experience with major art works was largely based on transparencies.

their brushwork also became larger, so that scale—part to whole—actually remained the same. Close was the first painter to work on such an enormous scale without making correspondingly large marks.

### CONTENT

Close keeps the anonymous, head-on mug shots as cool as possible, lighting and posing them not to flatter the subject but to supply interesting painting problems. He discourages any suggestion of expression on the part of the model—a smile would provide a whole new set of lines and shapes and textures to examine, but the overall look of the image would be too strong. “I reject humanist issues in my work,” Close insists, but he admits “that doesn't mean that there aren't, ultimately, other levels of content. It's just that I can't afford to think about them.”

In spite of his attempts to reduce emotional content, the works unavoidably retain (or acquire) a certain level. The sheer size of the heads leads to the use of the word monumental and suggests a kind of exaltation of humanity or a godlike superiority. The effect is further encouraged by a concession to the logic of the image: shooting the photos from slightly lower angle than usual, in keeping with the visual relationship that the viewer will have with the work when first confronting it.

Close's gargantuan amplification and literal interpretation of photographic information force us to realize how little we have examined the world around us or the various ways in which it is presented to us. The fact that so many people persist in seeing these paintings as highly factual representations of people rather than as photographic representations of people is proof of our total assimilation of photographic syntax. It is easy enough to overlook the distortions

in a family snapshot or a newsphoto, but it requires a lifetime of training to screen so much out of a nine-foot-high painting.

### THE CAMERA'S EYE

The 160mm lens is the focal length that most closely resembles that of the eye (for an 8-by-10-inch camera). Close, however, uses a 190mm lens to take the photograph he will work from. He does this in order to restrict the depth of field to only an inch or so at the plane of the eyes. A longer lens can do this more easily than a lens of normal length, but it also compresses the image. (As in the familiar “stacked-up” look encountered in movies in which distant automobiles on a highway appear to be on top of one another.)

Distortion is mild with a 190mm lens, yet it alters the subject's appearance enough to make the head look narrower. In Close's work, this is partially camouflaged by the extremely tight focus. But, along with the “push” of the focus, it may well contribute to the strange sensation that we get from these portraits. Most influential is the fact that his subject's eyes are focused on the distant camera lens. This creates the disturbing sensation of the portrait looking through the viewer.



Depth of field is linked to scale in Close's work. In a normal photo, an extremely limited depth of field is confusing because an out-of-focus nose makes no sense when it is only a fraction of an inch from a sharply focused eye. But, taken to a scale where the two are several feet apart, the differences seem understandable. A vivid sensation of depth is established, in which the eyes are level with the picture plane, the nose seems to hover out in front, and the ears are set well back. The result is so striking that one wonders why painters have for so long ignored or rejected focus as a means of suggesting depth.<sup>5</sup>

Close's focus clashes with our own. He manipulates the focus and perspective in an attempt to orchestrate our response, establishing preferential viewing distances and leading the eye. He does not try to follow the cinematic convention of using focus to designate important areas. On the contrary, he fully intends to call attention to the beauty of the reflection of an earring or a strand of hair when it is blurred—things that we might not notice in a photograph or a movie and are not capable of seeing with our eyes alone. He notes that the pleasure that he gets in

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<sup>5</sup> Close is not, of course, the only one experimenting with focus and perspective today—although a surprisingly small number of artists are. Ben Schonzeit has done some spectacular things in this area, but his contributions were obscured by the distracting conglomeration of colors and effects he put into each painting. In 1973, he began to concentrate on simpler, more easily recognized subjects—and relying too heavily, perhaps, on sheer size. Don Eddy is a particularly interesting case because he has gone for the opposite effect, using the camera to achieve a highly restricted sense of dimension. In his more recent works, he has moved away from surface reflections to deal with transparencies. Eddy manipulates extreme depth of field to overcome the natural selectiveness of the eye, sandwiching planes of differing depths on the same level. He, too, is essentially a field painter, more concerned with the interactions of shapes and colors than with the representation of specific objects in space.

discovering these details is also a risk: the unconscious desire to “crank it up a little” and make the area *too* interesting.

Unlike those forms of realism that celebrate the visible world and the remarkable abilities of the painter's eye, Photo Realism is essentially critical. It raises questions about the way we see and reminds us of the many physical and psychological factors that alter, compensate, or diminish the things we look at. These artists do not present photographs as a more truthful way of seeing but as a means of understanding more about what we *do* see. Photo Realism is not only unconcerned with realism, it is actively involved with artificiality. Those artists who use the camera as something more than a translation device (and they are the only ones who may accurately be called Photo Realists) are aware of its shortcomings and distortions—and gladly make use of them to expand the vocabulary of art.

Ironically, Close became a Photo Realist in order to impose more discipline on his work. Like every artist who has been to art school, he discovered that his first need was to escape his education. He had acquired a facility for producing paintings under the rules of abstraction that held sway in the more-advanced schools of the late fifties and early sixties (in his case, the University of Washington in Seattle and the graduate school at Yale). “Had the schools I went to been teaching figure painting,” he observes, “then I'm quite sure that I wouldn't be doing what I am. I didn't think of this consciously at the time, but if I'd had to look around and find something about which I knew absolutely nothing, it was figuration.”

His West Coast background may also have been influential, for figuration had continued to be an issue there long after it had been rejected in the East. However, the painterly style that prevailed was too much like the form of Abstract Expressionism he had learned in school to offer any real

change. He wished to start over in very controlled circumstances, so he elected the most precise model and syntax he could find—that of the camera. His first attempt at photographically realistic painting was a nude of Cinemascope proportions, which he began in 1966. He never completed the first version because it soon became obvious that the problems were far greater than he had anticipated. On the second try, he discarded brushes altogether and limited himself to black paint alone, using the white of the canvas the way a photo uses the white of the paper. Still not entirely sure of how to go about it, he tacked a twenty-six-foot-long canvas to the wall and began to experiment.

I started at one end of the painting and by the time I got to the other, I had used it as a testing ground for a lot of different systems of getting stuff on. I used sponges, rags, spray guns, razor blades, even erasers. I stuck a pencil eraser in an electric drill and started to use that to take off the paint I didn't want. When I began, the only thing I knew for sure was that I didn't want to use white paint.

The painting was an erratic anthology of techniques, but it was also an efficient learning device. Among other things, it led him to adopt the airbrush for its precision and absence of brushmarks, and it impressed upon him the need to concentrate on the problems of syntax.<sup>6</sup> which, in a sense, is what his painting has been about ever since.

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<sup>6</sup> The term *syntax* as employed here is borrowed from William M. Ivins, Jr.'s seminal study of the evolution of prints. He applied it to "a convention of drawing" developed in any period to fit the needs of the craftsmen who cut and printed blocks or engravings. It seems a particularly apt term for Close's work because he adapted a mechanical-reproduction system. *Prints and Visual Communications* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1969).

Before attempting any further works, he made a number of large pencil drawings in which he sought a relationship between the way a drawing is made and the way a painting might be, using only the white surface of the paper and the black graphite. Then, settling upon the portrait as his subject, he began the first series of works—eight large black-and-white heads that occupied him from November 1967 through April 1970.

By the end of this series, Close had refined his technique. And, not having any more problems to resolve, he began to look around for new ones.

I didn't get bored with the image but with the process, with not having anything new to think about in the studio. I wanted a real change, one that would affect the way I thought, the tools I used, and all that, and that's when I decided to get color back into my paintings. I'd originally gotten it out because I'd always been too dependent on it, too dependent on certain "learned" color relationships. But this time I tried to find ways where I didn't need a palette and where the color literally mixed on the canvas.

## COLOR

The initial problems required about a year to work out, this time with colored pencils and watercolor paints. He turned to another photographic process, the dye transfer, to break down the image into the component colors—red, blue, and yellow—and their intermediate combinations. Setting these up next to the painting, he proceeded to duplicate each step in order (an extraordinarily difficult feat of matching, simple as it may sound). He began at the top, in order to avoid paint-spill accidents, and worked his way down, area by area, staying within boundaries defined by wrinkles, scars, shadows, or edges. He completed the full set of colors before moving on, a system that helped him to

maintain constant values throughout the work. He applied exactly the same system to the background, reproducing it with all three colors even though it happens to be a fairly uniform and anonymous gray.

The acrylic color series, begun in January 1971, was completed in only four works, largely because of difficulties posed by the material.

The opacity of the pigment was such that I was never able to have the system work completely to my satisfaction. Although it was possible to make paintings I liked, the system still seemed too bogged down in things that were qualities of the pigment. It was too coarse and not transparent enough, so I decided to make a change in my way of thinking about it. First, I changed the scale, because that would change the way my hand moved and also the surface.

And then I changed the paint and the base to watercolor and paper.

So far, he has painted only two of these, between the summers of 1972 and 1973, both on a scale slightly larger than half of what he had used before. He hopes to try at least one more, this time working in an even larger scale than the acrylics.

Color is another parameter of Close's art that, if not as important as focus and scale, nevertheless offers major opportunities for the development of a new syntax. Photographs, and especially printed reproductions, have a very weak claim to verisimilitude. Magazine color in particular is hopelessly artificial, being subjected first to an impossible division into three basic tints plus black. It is then reconstructed largely by guesswork in a printshop where great numbers of copies are run off with ink that constantly changes in amount and in intensity. Compare the reproductions in your favorite thirty-five-dollar art book with

the original and you may find reality slightly disappointing. Not even those conservative Swiss printers with their seven-color processes seem to be able to resist tarting things up a little.

What Close sees and brings out in the color of his paintings is much the same thing that the Pop artists saw, but it is far more subtly stated. Their obsession with vulgarity as a national characteristic led them to the more blatant manifestations that occur in advertising. Close's color, like the rest of his work, is not super-colossal but simply larger-than-life.

"When I was doing the black-and-white paintings," he recalls, "I got along perfectly well with a black-and-white TV. But when I started the ones in color, I had to go out and buy a color set. It's funny, but I didn't really see color for many years. But when I started to work with it again I kept bumping into colors I really liked." He is fascinated, for example, with the way that television deals with a tone as traditionally pedestrian as gray, making it "the most incredible color in the world because it is actually red, green, and blue. It has a kind of subliminal, full-saturate quality to it. Maybe it'll be a bluish gray or a reddish gray, but it's the richest damn gray I've ever seen."

Close's most recent experiments, a series of "drawings" done with an airbrush, constitute his most radical departure. Unlike the other works, these make no use of the instrument's capacity for blending but only for controlling density. He has broken his image down into tiny dots of gray set in grids that range from as few as eleven squares across to more than two hundred squares. These experiments test the degree of detail necessary to convey the essential information about the face and the original photograph. They are a product of his desire to maintain maximal neutrality toward every part of the image—and another step toward the ideal of economy.

Looking at the eye is one thing and looking at the cheek another, but I have always tried to have the same attitude toward both of them. But because of the nature of things, I had to function differently. The act of making an eyelash with one long stroke is not the same as making a cheek. So, as much as I was interested in same-ness, there was still a need to function differently, depending on what I was doing. But by breaking it down this way I can make the act of painting exactly the same all the way through.

Close calls these works drawings because the issues seem to him to be about drawing. Like the paintings, they are about artificiality—but in a more obvious way. No attempt has been made to erase or otherwise conceal the grid, thus automatically establishing the picture plane. Even though the fuzzy focus of the individual dots promotes a strong sensation of depth, the grid constantly makes us aware of the flat surface.

He constructs these complex images with a simple module of four dots in a square. This is to prevent him from referring to the surrounding dots—which could easily lead to confusions, and to force him to be as faithful as possible to the values in the photo. He reuses images that served him for the black-and-white paintings. New ones are unnecessary because he is dealing with the images in entirely different ways.

The next step is color, of course, and he has already begun to make smaller studies for the first works. Also being planned is a three-color lithograph, a project that will take at least six months and require a special press that will take eight-by-six-foot paper.<sup>7</sup>

It is an interesting coincidence that these works also correspond to a form of photographic syntax in spite of their practical origin. It is, of course, that of television and wirephotos—another syntax that has been little explored. Once again, the more he takes away, the more he finds to deal with.

Chuck Close: What can't he do next?

Links to other Chuck Close pages

[www.safran-arts.com/links/close.html](http://www.safran-arts.com/links/close.html)

Recent paintings by Chuck Close

[www.pacewildensteen.com/close/recent1.html](http://www.pacewildensteen.com/close/recent1.html)

More about mezzotint

<http://www.haleysteele.com/technical/mezzotint.html>

Parasol Press

<http://WWW.Parasolpress.com>

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<sup>7</sup> Close experimented with mezzotint in the spring of 1972. See the review on the following page.

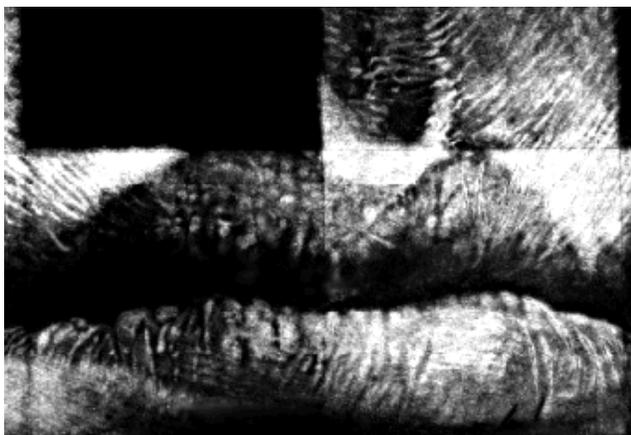
## A ONE-PRINT SHOW BY CHUCK CLOSE AT MOMA

By William Dyckes

When Photo Realist painter Chuck Close accepted a commission from Parasol Press, it was a foregone conclusion that he would elect an unusual technique, and perhaps even predictable that it would be the mezzotint process, which was once popular for its extraordinary tonal range.

Mezzotint, invented in Germany in the 1600s, is essentially engraving in reverse. It begins with a completely black plate—that is, a plate that has had its surface chewed up by the teeth of a rocking tool so that the tiny burrs will hold the ink. The artist then smoothes the surface wherever a variation is desired. Instead of the rocker method, printer Kathan Brown of California used a commercial photo-engraving technique. This provided a density of 200-dots-per-inch. (Most hand-rocked plates rarely exceed 90, and most magazine photos use a 130-dpi screen.)

The main reason for the unusual method of preparing the plate was, of course, Close's taste for the monumental, having painted for so long on canvases taller than himself, he must have felt cramped coming down to a plate size of just 44.5 by 35 inches. Even so, it was more than any etching press had ever been able to handle, and, once again, Ms.



Brown was called upon to extend technical frontiers.

Finally provided with the materials and the means, Close spent about six weeks preparing the plate. He used the same method that he uses on paintings, dividing the surface into dozens of squares that he worked on independently, beginning at the center of the face and moving outward. Keith resembles the super-candid photographic style of Close's black-and-white paintings. It is cruel in its revelation of details—the skin as rough as the whorls of a huge thumb-print and sweet in its rich tonal range, which starts in the soft, smoky blacks of the sweater and runs through a full gamut of grays to the paper-white of the back-ground. Another thing that sets it apart is the evidence of its creation: the lines of the grid still scar the surface, and each individual square is set off by differences of tone. (This was at least partly caused by the pulling of proof states that wore down the oldest sections.) This does not bother Close, however, for he never intended to produce a copy of a painting. Rather than the typical graphic that merely supplements the artists work (something to hang over the couch, as he puts it), the print contributes to a deeper understanding of his techniques and intentions.

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*Keith*, detail of an artist's proof, same size. (The darker side of the mouth is more recent. The black area has not yet been worked on.)