

Chuck Close – Family and Others

Chuck Close (b.1940) is a contemporary artist who rejects the conventional understanding of what a portrait is and has created a signature style that is instantly recognisable.¹ Throughout his life the optimistic Close has continued to come up with strategies and devices to overcome the struggles and obstacles that life has thrown in his path. His early education was a struggle as he contended with undiagnosed learning difficulties but went on to attend the University of Washington in Seattle, Yale University and the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Vienna to study Art. In December 1988 he suffered a severe spinal aneurism which initially paralysed him from the neck down and reduced his mobility leaving him without the strength to lift a paintbrush and reducing the sensitivity in his fingers. Even though his movement had been severely restricted after his stroke Close's painted marks appear unrestrained and he no longer works with colouristic abandon. This accident led him to develop his paintings into larger units of coloured paint and employ a grid with a more incremental process. Close says 'I think I'm doing, essentially, the same as I was doing before, that I would've been doing, anyhow. But I do feel like I get more pleasure from it'.² This pleasure and appreciation for life definitely shows in his post 1988 paintings of family and friends on display in this exhibition at the Mason's Yard, White Cube, London where he employs vibrant colours that give a real sense of enjoyment and happiness. The exhibition titled *Family and Others* ran from October 10th to November 17th 2007 and featured a collection of monumental, psychologically charged recent paintings, tapestries and daguerreotype curated by Susanna Hyman and Andrew Gilliams.

The White Cube gallery, situated at Mason's Yard, opened in September 2006. The location is concealed behind buildings off Duke Street, St. James's, home of the original White Cube gallery, on a site that was previously an electricity sub-station.³ The uniquely designed structure has historical importance as the first free-standing building to be built in the St James's district for more than 30 years. The building

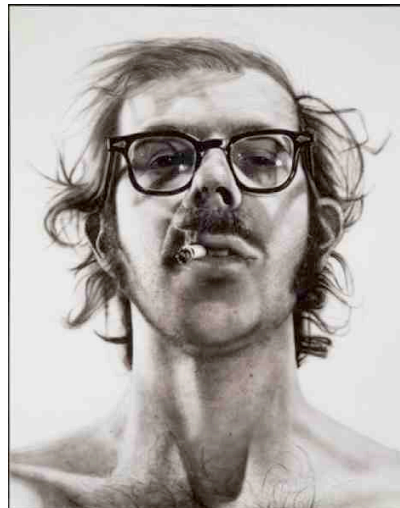
¹ <http://www.whitecube.com/exhibitions/close/>

² Sischy, I. *Chuck Close in conversation with Ingrid Sischy* from Costello, D. and Sischy, I. (2007) *Chuck Close: Family and Others*, London Jay Jopling/ White Cube. Page 28.

³ <http://www.whitecube.com/exhibitions/close/>

interior houses a main, basement floor gallery which is naturally lit and hosted Close's paintings, and a double-height space with a second gallery on street level providing a substantial amount of exhibition space for the monumental tapestries and Kate Moss daguerreotypes. One found the gallery a suitable environment for Chuck Close's colossal and exquisite pieces.

Family is the key to this exhibition and is definitely one of the motivating factors for Close to continue his career as an artist and produce work. The disability had an effect on not just Close but his whole family. He says 'I think It's been much harder on them than it has on me...I didn't really have a choice I had to work, wanted to support my family, wanted to have a career'.⁴ The portraits in the exhibition are people central to his life and who have had a connection with Close in some way or another, his family and friends and the people from the art world who have stood by him or influenced him (a second family). It is a common critical opinion that the work of the last 20 years, since his stroke, has got better and stronger as it has become more visionary and emotional. In his most recent works there is a mixture of loss and celebration.⁵ A more celebratory aspect to the work can be visualised through the brightener and increased range of the palette, particularly evident in his paintings when viewed up close.



Big Self-portrait
1967
2730 x 2120mm
Acrylic on canvas

⁴ Sischy, I. *Chuck Close in conversation with Ingrid Sischy* from Costello, D. and Sischy, I. (2007) *Chuck Close: Family and Others*, London Jay Jopling/ White Cube. Page 28.

⁵ Sischy, I. *Chuck Close in conversation with Ingrid Sischy* from Costello, D. and Sischy, I. (2007) *Chuck Close: Family and Others*, London Jay Jopling/ White Cube. Page 35.

He first developed as an abstract painter and created biomorphic imagery then, following his return to America from Vienna in 1965, he started working from photographs and in 1967 produced a series of highly finished and detailed realist paintings. Each painting had been dramatically enlarged from the photograph and produced in black and white. Among this series was *Big Self-portrait* 1967 which acts as an iconic image for the rebellious generation of artists in the 1960's.⁶ Rather than class himself as a photorealist Close was more concerned with the combination of systems and visual information. When creating these large photorealist pieces he was laying the foundations and developing strategies that are at the heart of his work today. This exhibition demonstrates how his work is as much about how to convey an image as about the image itself, which is why during his early career he deliberately decided to paint friends that would be unrecognisable to gallery's viewers. 'I wanted every man and every woman – no-one in particular. I certainly didn't want to rear into Andy Warhol's territory of superstars' Close repeated.⁷ Some of the subjects in this exhibition, particularly the artists, are no longer unknowns despite his intentions. With his breakthrough series of "heads" (a continuation of which are on display in this show) Close opened up a working space entirely of his own by bringing together painting and photography that would have been thought unachievable.⁸

Ad Reinhardt had a tremendous influence on Close. Reinhardt made the choice not to do something and created art through self-imposed limitations. Although setting limitations seemed negative it was a positive decision that acted as the modus operandi in Close's career.⁹ The Reinhardtian notion of producing art through self-imposed limitations to rid the work of all associations with other artists may be the key to Close's individual signature style which is as instantly recognisable as anyone

⁶ Bond, A. and Woodall, J. (2005) *Self Portrait: Renaissance to Contemporary*, London: National Portrait Gallery. Page 202.

⁷ Bond, A. and Woodall, J. (2005) *Self Portrait: Renaissance to Contemporary*, London: National Portrait Gallery. Page 204.

⁸ Costello, D. *Painting through Photography, Photography through Painting: Some Thoughts On Chuck Close's Contrarian Modernism* from Costello, D. and Sischy, I. (2007) *Chuck Close: Family and Others*, London Jay Jopling/ White Cube. Page 50.

⁹ Sischy, I. *Chuck Close in conversation with Ingrid Sischy* from Costello, D. and Sischy, I. (2007) *Chuck Close: Family and Others*, London Jay Jopling/ White Cube. Page 30.

since Andy Warhol.¹⁰ Close is devoted to the process that resulted from imposing limitations and finds that the ritualistic activity of adding four, five or six layers of varying colour frees his intuition.¹¹

Inspired by Van Gogh, Max Beckmann and the early portraits of Rembrandt, Close moved away from photorealism and focused in on the face that he assembled using marks rather than brushstrokes and built up the overall image using looser units. In contrast to other artists his portraits subject everyone to the same rule, the same grid of representation and each square inch of the canvas is treated with equal importance. 'It's only with the most rigorous self control that I work to be as nonchalant as I can'¹² Close has stated. Each brush mark tells a story and each cube, with a different combination of colours, interacts with its neighbour. Through these painted portraits Close is trying to rip the face loose of the context in which we normally see portraits and the faces around us. He makes viewing his painting a more scanning experience for the spectator and is interested in the face as a landscape.

Painting from photographs instead of life and the innovative use of different photographic techniques in the most recent pieces allows Close to capture a frozen moment in time and gives the work a freshness and immediacy of the moment. Close paints through photography and photographs through painting. He embraces the thought of both Greenberg and Benjamin rather than embracing one at the expense of the other¹³ as has been much more common among other post-modern artists of the 1960's.

This exhibition successfully demonstrates how Close never accepted the idea that you had to define yourself in just one medium. He has never had a hierarchy of painting

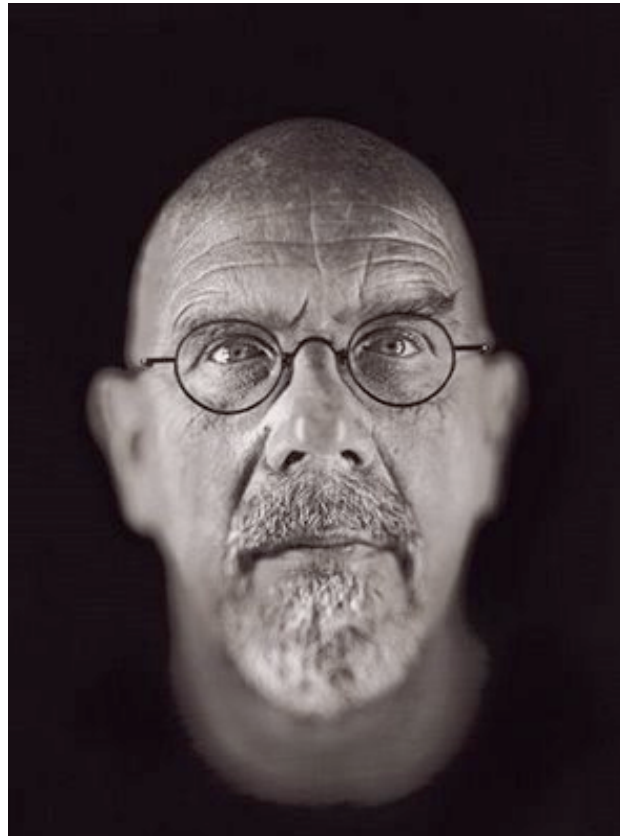
¹⁰ Sischy, I. *Chuck Close in conversation with Ingrid Sischy* from Costello, D. and Sischy, I. (2007) *Chuck Close: Family and Others*, London Jay Jopling/ White Cube. Page 30.

¹¹ Bond, A. and Woodall, J. (2005) *Self Portrait: Renaissance to Contemporary*, London: National Portrait Gallery. Page 205.

¹² Bond, A. and Woodall, J. (2005) *Self Portrait: Renaissance to Contemporary*, London: National Portrait Gallery. Page 207.

¹³ Costello, D. *Painting through Photography, Photography through Painting: Some Thoughts On Chuck Close's Contrarian Modernism* from Costello, D. and Sischy, I. (2007) *Chuck Close: Family and Others*, London Jay Jopling/ White Cube. Page 50.

over photography or any other medium and will not let any barriers be impermeable.¹⁴ The combination of different elements and media makes this exhibition unusual although artists using a variety of media or switching from one to another may be becoming more widely accepted since the 1960's. Post-war artists socialized and connected with composers, musicians, film makers, novelists, poets, choreographers and dancers resulting in a cross fertilisation of ideas and great sense of community and family.



Self-portrait
2006
103 x 79 inches
Jacquard tapestry

On display in the upstairs, double height gallery one first encountered eight monumental tapestries which included a self portrait and portraits of fellow artists Andres Serrano, Kiki Smith, Lorna Simpson, Phillip Glass, Cindy Sherman, Lyle Ashton Harris, all of whom inhabit Close's community of the art world and share

¹⁴ Costello, D. *Painting through Photography, Photography through Painting: Some Thoughts On Chuck Close's Contrarian Modernism* from Costello, D. and Sischy, I. (2007) *Chuck Close: Family and Others*, London Jay Jopling/ White Cube. Page 50.

some aspect of his trajectory through time and space.¹⁵ His reason for selecting these subjects can be explained by the following statement 'I thought, I'll paint my heroes who are not of my generation and I'll paint younger, emerging artists whose work interests me'.¹⁶ He chose artists who he had a dialogue with and as a result of photographing them he built a connection and significant relationship with them. These tapestries although based on a traditional process challenge all art that has been made before, the traditional use of materials, as they fail to follow conventional wisdom. The imagery for the tapestries are taken from daguerreotypes, and produced on a modern Jacquard loom, in a bid to make the process more difficult, challenging and time consuming. As much thought, consideration, manipulation and alteration of the image has taken place in the tapestries as in the paintings to give them the same value and importance.¹⁷

Despite them appearing black and white their are hundreds of colours and much more detail beneath the surface. One found the resulting portraits intimate with a looming and powerful presence. By displaying all these different elements in one gallery space Close wants the viewer to experience the connection and links between the work, particularly that relationship between his painting and tapestries and how both require a detailed inspection and transform when viewed from different distances. Close wants to share the process with the viewer, how the piece was constructed, the limitations in place and to experience the work on different levels. One could see these tapestries as putting the expressive resources of painting in the service of photography.¹⁸

¹⁵ ¹⁵ Sischy, I. *Chuck Close in conversation with Ingrid Sischy* from Costello, D. and Sischy, I. (2007) *Chuck Close: Family and Others*, London Jay Jopling/ White Cube. Page 28.

¹⁶ ¹⁶ Sischy, I. *Chuck Close in conversation with Ingrid Sischy* from Costello, D. and Sischy, I. (2007) *Chuck Close: Family and Others*, London Jay Jopling/ White Cube. Page 33.

¹⁷ ¹⁷ Sischy, I. *Chuck Close in conversation with Ingrid Sischy* from Costello, D. and Sischy, I. (2007) *Chuck Close: Family and Others*, London Jay Jopling/ White Cube. Page 39.

¹⁸ Costello, D. and Sischy, I. (2007) *Chuck Close: Family and Others*, London Jay Jopling/ White Cube. Page 51.



Untitled Torso Diptych (Kate Moss)
2003
8.5 x 6.5 inches
Daguerreotypes

The exploration of “heads” is balanced in this section of the exhibition by the investigation of the headless terrain of nipples, belly buttons, hips and genitals in a space devoted to Kate Moss which includes daguerreotypes and a tapestry.¹⁹ Daguerreotypes use an early photographic process in which an image is produced on a light sensitive silver plate to produce an intimate, personal image that is transcendent and makes space where there is no space.²⁰ The viewer is able to visualize how the artists abilities and practice as a painter has clearly impacted on what he looks for when he takes a photograph. By importing the anomalous effect of Shutter speeds and f-stops, Close operates at the borders of painting and photography or on the

¹⁹ Rosenblum, R. (2005), *Chuck Close: Recent Paintings: May 10 – June 18, 2005*, New York: Pacewildenstein. Page 7.

²⁰ Rosenblum, R. (2005), *Chuck Close: Recent Paintings: May 10 – June 18, 2005*, New York: Pacewildenstein. Page 7.

unexplored point where photography becomes painting.²¹ It is an interesting media that he has chosen for Kate Moss a subject who, especially in England, is photographed, painted and sculptured more than anyone else. Close has said ‘she has everything. She is the news’.²² This process picks up every detail, every flaw and with no airbrushing in sight perhaps these images offers the viewer a chance to see the real Kate Moss. Viewers to this part of the exhibition will be powerfully affected by the unaccustomed clarity and truth to nature of these daguerreotypes. The in depth, warts and all scrutiny reads and is displayed more clinically evidentiary, presenting the subjects as more vulnerable specimens of a common humanity bound by gravity and morality that have typically intruded significantly less on Close’s recurring faces.²³

The seven pulsating paintings which are on display at the White Cube, include five portraits of family members, one self portrait and *President Bill Clinton* (2006), mirror our visual environment. They look like an extreme form of electronic pixilation that people encounter regularly in this consumer driven society through magazine reproductions, advertising and television.²⁴ The paintings often transcend the photograph and look more like the people than the photograph did. “Copy” captures the exactitude we sense in Close’s art upon viewing it for the first time, but not its uniqueness as the hours of production result in a one-of-a-kind feat of engineering.²⁵ He simultaneously unifies and disperses the image through his attention to detail on all areas of the canvas. The paintings are a record of decisions taken in the course of its production and they wear their working methods on their sleeve for anyone who look closely enough to observe.²⁶ Each cell, created by the grid, appears fluid and abstract but builds to an image that is fully legible from a distance. Viewed up close the cells dissolve into a flat but highly varied abstract

²¹ Costello, D. and Sischy, I. (2007) *Chuck Close: Family and Others*, London Jay Jopling/ White Cube. Page 51.

²² Sischy, I. *Chuck Close in conversation with Ingrid Sischy* from Costello, D. and Sischy, I. (2007) *Chuck Close: Family and Others*, London Jay Jopling/ White Cube. Page 39.

²³ Rosenblum, R. (2005), *Chuck Close: Recent Paintings: May 10 – June 18, 2005*, New York: Pacewildenstein. Page 7.

²⁴ Rosenblum, R. (2005), *Chuck Close: Recent Paintings: May 10 – June 18, 2005*, New York: Pacewildenstein. Page 10.

²⁵ Shiff, R. (2000), *Chuck Close: Recent Paintings: March 17 – April 29, 2000*, New York: Pacewildenstein. Page 6.

²⁶ Costello, D. and Sischy, I. (2007) *Chuck Close: Family and Others*, London Jay Jopling/ White Cube. Page 51.

pattern of brightly coloured, loosely rendered circles, targets, squashed triangles and teardrop shapes all held together on the same surface by the unrelenting strike of the grid.

As a viewer one gets the sense that you want to find the optimum optical position to get the correct perspective especially with the paintings. Taking part in a ritualistic dance is part of the experience of viewing these large painted “heads”.²⁷ As a viewer you can stand at a distance, then go to the middle and then up close and watch as the illusion changes. The portraits and features appear clear and crisp and disappear only when you take a step forward across an invisible threshold so that the piece becomes transformed into a series of abstract marks. These paintings of his family and Bill Clinton show serrated edges that convey features, outlines and shadows. In *Maggie* (2005-6) Close creates a subtle descriptive curve of the face by allowing light areas to enter dark areas whilst the cheek and brow bone retain their angularity in line with the jagged contour of the grid.²⁸ All the work requires the active participation of the viewer to gain a full experience and the large, naturally lit basement gallery is well suited to aid this involvement. The visitors are free to move around the large, airy space and gain distance from the pieces without feeling claustrophobic or enclosed.

Situated on the end wall in the basement gallery, for maximum impact, was the 9 foot by 7 foot oil painting of former American *President Bill Clinton*. After photographing Clinton for the cover of *New York Magazine* in August 2005 Close liked the photograph so much he decided to make a monumental painting of one of the most recognisable faces in the world. Close claimed ‘the appeal of the particular photograph (that was the source for the portrait) was that it captured what Clinton looks like when he looks at you personally... Clinton is very seductive’.²⁹ On display in the gallery the complex abundance of abstract marks amalgamate into the recognisable features of Clinton, his rounded nose and bright white toothy smile. It is a fittingly vast portrait of a political colossus and definitely not sycophantic after

²⁷ Bond, A. and Woodall, J. (2005) *Self Portrait: Renaissance to Contemporary*, London: National Portrait Gallery. Page 206.

²⁸ Rosenblum, R. (2005), *Chuck Close: Recent Paintings: May 10 – June 18, 2005*, New York: Pacewildenstein. Page 6.

²⁹ *Chuck Close: Capturing the Clinton Charisma*,
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2007/10/06/bachuck106.xml>

being subjected to the intruding process as the other family members. The painting definitely captures Clinton's charisma and Close says 'It has his intensity'.³⁰ The tension of the pulsating abstraction together with the vivid portraiture gives the painting a remarkable complexity and richness of visual experience.³¹ One found the composition of this portrait slightly more formal in comparison to the other subjects on display. This painting was a clear centrepiece and talking point of the exhibition, however, one can not help but question whether the painting was suited to an exhibition so family orientated. Although painted within the same framework the *President Bill Clinton* (2006) portrait detracted the viewer's attentions from the other equally exquisite paintings and was completely out of place among the self portrait and family members. However, reflecting on the exhibition as a whole, it is the presence of the Bill Clinton portrait that makes the exhibition so memorable.



President Bill Clinton
2006
108.5 x 84 inches
Oil on canvas

³⁰ *Chuck Close: Capturing the Clinton Charisma*,
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2007/10/06/bachuck106.xml>

³¹ *Chuck Close: Capturing the Clinton Charisma*,
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Close's most recent developments into new mediums of art and continuing success as a painter have been brilliantly represented in the recent exhibition *Family and Others* at the Mason's Yard, White Cube Gallery, London. Close continues to dazzle with the precision of his technique and the production of ever more lush and challenging images. The works incorporated in the exhibition including the later photographic pieces of intricately detailed tapestries and daguerreotypes are hugely engaging to the viewer. Through the use of the daguerreotypes for the Kate Moss section and as a source for the tapestries Close has created an aura for these pieces. Each individual piece captures a unique moment in time which attracts and fascinates the eye. Only by visiting these pieces in person can the viewer experience the balancing act between abstraction and representation and uneasy tension that Close creates in his art. His work is also produced in an indeterminate realm between organicism and mechanicity³² (perhaps to reassess human mentality in an age of electronic information and technological advancements). The exhibition is intelligently mediated and brought together through the use of the camera as a source for the pieces, the camera optics and Close's working methods. This is a wide and varied exhibition that adds welcomed depth to the record of Close's work and to the discussion on issues of process in contemporary art. Close appears in each portrait on display through his distinctive, signature style. Diarmuid Costello has said 'What looks back from a Chuck Close, self-portrait or otherwise, is Chuck Close'.³³

³² Rosenblum, R. (2005), *Chuck Close: Recent Paintings: May 10 – June 18, 2005*, New York: Pacewildenstein. Page 6.

³³ Costello, D. *Painting through Photography, Photography through Painting: Some Thoughts On Chuck Close's Contrarian Modernism* from Costello, D. and Sischy, I. (2007) *Chuck Close: Family and Others*, London Jay Jopling/ White Cube. Page 50.