

Linda, 1975-76



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In the centuries following Renaissance mastery of linear perspective, painters were preoccupied with a fidelity to realism. By the middle 1800s it was evident that advancements in photography would help tear asunder this well-established tradition. Liberated from the obligation to document and pictorialize, painters moved toward increasingly expressive and abstract styles.

More than a full century later the situation is greatly changed. Photography has been recently admitted into the pantheon of the fine arts and the camera itself has now a reputable history of service to painters - from the impressionists to the futurists to many artists of our own time.

Few painters, if any, have used the camera in as straightforward and unsentimental a way as has Chuck Close. He places an 8" x 10" camera slightly below and about six feet away from the subject's face. To accentuate the surface textures he lights the face from the side. Keenly interested in questions of focus and in "nailing down" peripheral vision, Close employs a 190mm. lens to achieve a shallow depth of field of approximately one inch. He creates what he calls "a sandwich": the eyes and the mouth are in sharp focus while the tip of the nose in front and the ears behind are intentionally blurred.

The resulting 8" x 10" photographic print then becomes a strict model for the painting he will make. With painstaking meticulousness Close labors to transpose, as accurately as possible, the information contained on the surface of the small photograph into acrylic paint on a 108" x 84" white gessoed canvas. To do this Close marks off grids on the photograph which relate to the correspondingly larger grids he chalks on the canvas.

These works require considerable time and patience to make. Keith took nearly six months to complete. Linda, the most recent of his large color portraits, was

a vastly more complicated effort which took fourteen months. In the ten years since he began these paintings, he has made only a dozen black and white portraits and five color portraits.

In conscious reaction against the abstract expressionist tradition, Close tries to maintain an emotional neutrality toward his painting. He has chosen a rigorous procedure which assists him in holding a firmly non-hierarchical attitude toward every square inch of the work. Once he begins painting, Close pursues his task with a mechanical indifference. Unlike a portraitist who might concentrate attention on the eyes or the mouth, Close considers any given area of the canvas to be equal in importance to any other.

Rejecting painterly surfaces in his own work, his techniques are borne of a search for the least physicality possible. In Keith, for instance, he used only two tablespoons of paint in the entire painting - and only black paint at that. When he moved into color he limited himself to only three colors: red, blue and yellow. The sparse economy of his color technique, derived directly from commercial photographic processes, are succinctly demonstrated in the group called Linda Eye Series I-V.

The initial encounter with one of Close's nine-foot high portraits can be a disquieting experience. In our culture civility precludes forthrightness and propriety forbids full disclosure. Close's complete audit of surface details in works such as Keith and Linda thrusts us into an unwelcome intimacy.

In these paintings Close has pushed scale to such an extreme that we are confronted with intimacy at a great distance. Ironically, proximity to the works is strangely disorienting. Under normal circumstances we read the human face with rapid ease. As we move in towards Linda and Keith we lose our bearings and are forced to scan a vast and unfamiliar ter-

rain. The original blurred areas are increased in size until they cannot be overlooked. They successfully resist our efforts to sharpen them into focus. Not incidentally, we are confronted by the significant differences between the static lens of the camera and the exquisitely responsive lens of the human eye.

It is to be emphasized that Close himself is genuinely unconcerned with issues of realism and portraiture. He uses his friends as subjects primarily because working with photographs of familiar faces forces upon him a more rigorous accuracy than would, for instance, photographs of familiar trees. Close is far more interested in matters of economy and focus, in the consistency of surface information and in maintaining a laconic neutrality toward the final product.

The abiding determinants of Close's work suggests that it fits more appropriately under the minimalist rubric than within the category of photo-realism. Adhering to these self-imposed restraints, Close has created some of the strongest images in the contemporary visual arts.

Chuck Close was born in Monroe, Washington in 1940. He received a BA from the University of Washington in 1962 and an MFA from Yale University in 1964. In 1964-65 he travelled to Vienna on a Fulbright Fellowship and in 1973 was the recipient of a Visual Artist Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Close has taught at the University of Massachusetts, The School of Visual Arts and New York University. He currently lives in New York City and is represented by The Pace Gallery.

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Works in MATRIX:

Keith, 1970, acrylic on canvas, 108" x 84". Lent by the artist, New York City.

Linda, 1975-76, acrylic on linen, 108" x 84". Private collection.

Linda Pastel, 1977, pastel on paper, 29 3/4" x 22 1/8". Lent by Jeff Byers III, New York City.

Linda Eye Series I-V, 1977, watercolor on paper, five drawings 30" x 22 1/2" each. Courtesy of The Pace Gallery, New York City.

Bill Feltzin, 1976, ink on paper, 8 1/2" x 6 1/2". Lent by William Feltzin, Westbury, New York.

Please note: a 13 minute black and white documentary videotape featuring Chuck Close in his New York studio will be on view during this exhibition. This tape was sponsored by the Whitney Museum of American Art and The Drawing Society. It was produced by Don Freil, Inc. of New York City. Helen Ferrulli was the Executive Producer; Tony Marks was the Director.

Due to a Longshoremen's strike in New York City, the painting Linda and the five watercolors Linda Eye Series I-V will be delayed in their return from Documenta 6. In the interim The Pace Gallery has been kind enough to lend an important recent drawing by Chuck Close: 12 Heads x 154 Dots, 1977, ink and pencil on paper, 30" x 80".

Selected one-man exhibitions:
University Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst '67; Bykert Gallery, NYC '70, '71, '73, '75; Los Angeles County Museum of Art '71; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago '72; Museum of Modern Art, NYC, Projects '73; Portland Center for the Visual Arts '75; San Francisco Museum of Art '75; Minneapolis Institute of Art '75; The Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati '76; Baltimore Museum of Art '76; Pace Gallery, NYC '77.

Selected group exhibitions:
Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, Annual '69, '72 and Biennial '77; Whitney Museum of American Art, 22 Realists '70; Sidney Janis, NYC, Colossal Scale '72; Kassel, Germany, Documenta 5 '72; New York Cultural Center, NYC, Realism Now '72; Cologne, Projekt '74 (Kunst Bleibt Kunst), '74; Museum of Modern Art, NYC, Drawing Now '76; Whitney Museum of American Art, American Master Drawings and Watercolors '76; Centre d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, Paris, Paris-New York '77; Kassel, Documenta 6 '77.

Selected statements by Close:

Nemser, Cindy. "An Interview with Chuck Close," Artforum, vol. 8, no. 5 (January '70), p. 51+.

"Chuck Close," Arts Magazine, vol. 46, no. 8 (Summer '72), p. 41.

Chase, Linda and Ted McBurnett. "Photo-Realists: 12 Interviews," Art in America, vol. 60, no. 6 (November-December '72), p. 76+.

"Ten Portraitists-Interviews/Statements," Art in America, vol. 63, no. 1 (January-February '75), p. 76+.

"I Translate From A Photo," The New York Times, (October 31, '76), Section II, p. 29.

Selected Bibliography about Close:

Ryan, David. "Two Contemporary Acquisitions for Minneapolis," The Minneapolis Institute of Arts Bulletin, vol. LVIII (1969), p. 82+.

Nemser, Cindy. "Presenting Charles Close," Art in America, vol. 58, no. 1 (January-February '70), p. 98+.

Spear, Athena T. "Reflections on Close, Cooper and Jenney," Arts Magazine, vol. 44, no. 7 (May '70), p. 40+.

Dyckes, William. "The Photo as Subject: The Paintings and Drawings of Chuck Close," Arts Magazine, vol. 48, no. 5 (February '74), p. 28+.

Field, Richard S. Recent American Etching, National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.) '75.

Chase, Linda. "Photo-Realism: Post-Modern Illusionism," Art International, vol. XX/3-4 (March-April '76), p. 14+.

Rose, Bernice. Drawing Now, Museum of Modern Art, NYC '76.

Hughes, Robert. "Blowing Up the Close-Up," Time, vol. 109, no. 21 (May 23 '77), p. 92.

Hess, Thomas. "Up close with Richard and Philip and Nancy and Klaus," New York Magazine, vol. 10, no. 22 (May 30 '77), p. 95+.