

Miami Art Museum

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Chuck Close Prints
Process and Collaboration

May 14 - Aug 22, 2004

CHUCK CLOSE WAS BORN IN 1940 and grew up in Washington State. He was an only child whose father died when he was eleven. As a child, academics were difficult for him; decades later he learned he has an unusual form of dyslexia. (Schools were less savvy about learning disorders in those days. Some teachers called him “slow” or “dumb.”) But Close was a precocious young draftsman. He quickly mastered realistic techniques like drawing in perspective. Fortunately, his mother encouraged his abilities, arranging for art lessons from a neighbor. His formal artistic education continued at schools in Washington, then across the country at the vital MFA program at Yale University. He moved to lower Manhattan in the 1960s. In the late 1960s, he grabbed the attention of the art world with the nine-foot-high, hyper-realistic black-and-white heads he painted of himself and his friends. He has since made large and small heads, in a spectrum of styles and media. They can look more real than photographs or as blurry as the fuzziest TV station. In addition to his work in painting and printmaking, Close is also highly respected for his photography.

Chuck Close began pushing the boundaries of printmaking in 1972 and has continued to do so for more than 30 years. This exhibition – a comprehensive survey of his prints – demonstrates why he is one of America’s foremost artists in any medium. Close’s prints combine remarkable technical skill with subject matter that is always more than it seems. And the more we engage with these remarkable images, the more impressive they become.

The subjects of these prints will be familiar to anyone who has seen his paintings. They tend to be Close’s friends – often well-known artists – or family, or very often himself. Rather than “portraits,” Close prefers the term “heads,” suggesting a certain emotional distance (the works are titled by first names only). His prints show how his interests are truly formal: how scale, marks on the paper, and color affect perception. Close says he considers a face to be a roadmap of human experience. But “human experience” can refer beyond the landscape of the sitter’s face to Close’s own artistic experiences and to the viewer’s own experience in looking. This exhibition shows how Close’s roadmaps lead in many directions.

What is a print?

Paintings and drawings are unique works of art, but a print is made in multiple. To create a repeatable image, printmaking generally involves putting the image onto an intermediate structure called a “matrix” (such as an etching plate or linoleum block) or onto silk screens. Close has worked with an astonishing variety of printmaking techniques, including etching, aquatint, lithography, direct gravure, silk screen, traditional Japanese woodcut, and reduction linocut.

The marks on the matrix can be made either by the artist himself or by highly skilled artisans working under the artist’s approval. The matrix is inked and placed against a sheet of paper; pressure is then applied, transferring the ink to the paper. Most of Close’s prints involve numerous matrices or



Emma, 2002. 113-color Japanese-style ukiyo-e woodcut, 43 x 35 in. (109.2 x 88.9 cm). Edition of 55; Pace Editions Ink, New York, printer (Yasu Shibata); Pace Editions, Inc., New York, publisher.

screens (for example, a different block of wood for each color in a woodcut), all of which have to be printed on the same sheet of paper to create the final image. Sometimes the number of colors involved is staggering: the woodblock print *Emma* (2002) involved one hundred thirteen colors and about twenty-seven blocks. Included in the exhibition are individual state and progressive proofs to demonstrate a print’s successive stages.

For some painters and sculptors, prints are an occasional side project. Not so for Close: for him printmaking is an ongoing activity. Although his paintings can take months to finish, some prints take years from conception to completion. Often two separate prints or editions are in process at the same time at different publishers. Also in the exhibition are works that technically are not prints: handmade pulp paper editions, a tapestry, even a silk rug. “Editioned” works like these are created as multiples, but are not printed on paper. The fact that Close works in such a variety of prints and editioned works testifies to how far he pushes the limits of the medium.

Close collaboration

Close works alone for long hours when he paints, usually keeping company with a radio or television. Every single artistic decision he makes belongs to him. In contrast, printmaking is collaborative. It requires him to work with a community of master printers, which means managing

personalities as well as artistic styles, giving up control, and occasionally (though not often) compromising. For their part, the remarkably skilled artisans involved in these projects have to meet Close's exacting demands and learn how to translate the spirit of his art into new form. Since his first major print in 1972, Close has continually set printmaking challenges for himself and his collaborators. "I am always pushing the envelope," he says. In this way, both he and the printmakers have to find solutions together, neither one has the upper hand.

Sometimes these artisans – chromists (trained to choose and mix colors), block cutters and screenprinters – spend more time with the print than Close himself. That is not easy for an artist as precise and in control as Close, but with time, he has learned that it makes the best prints. Collaboration has expanded Close's horizons, resulting in prints and editions he never could have made on his own.

How can we look at these prints?

Close's prints have been a constant source of inspiration for the rest of his work. As he says, "Virtually everything that has happened in my unique work can be traced back to the prints." The most significant instance was with his first major print, *Keith/Mezzotint* (1972). Close, who in his paintings used a grid to transfer information from a photograph to his canvases, had always painted the grid away so the images looked seamless. But when *Keith's* mezzotint plate began to wear down, the grid accidentally showed through. Close liked the effect – the way the "building blocks" were revealed – and soon the grid became a visible element in all his art. After *Keith*, he began displaying all kinds of "building blocks" – checks, dots, fingerprints, diamond-shaped boxes – in his prints, paintings, and drawings.

Close never tires of revisiting the same subjects – "Phil," "Leslie," "Lucas" and the rest – because his interest lies in the process: the route to the finished product. He often invokes the comparison to golf: you always know where you'll finish, but it's how you get there that makes the game. Consider *Phil/Fingerprint* (1981) and *Phil Spitbite* (1995) (Close has recycled his 1969 photograph of friend Philip Glass over thirty times). From a distance, they basically resemble each other. But close up, *Phil/Fingerprint* shows detailed whorls and swirls where the artist touched his inked fingertips to the lithography stone. In contrast, *Phil Spitbite* seems to dissolve into watery, fuzzy-edged dots characteristic of the spitbite process.

Similar perceptual changes can happen in our own lives. We recognize someone across the street by his or her basic form. But as we approach the person, we become aware of small details – shadows on the face, beard stubble, or lipstick. Once we are face to face, the sun might emphasize freckles, crow's feet, or pores of the skin. Close's prints call attention to how we recognize people, what draws our attention, and what makes up a face. Many of his prints are gigantic by printing standards (some even required custom-made presses). The largest prints tend to exaggerate features so much that we can get lost in the details, sometimes forgetting the



LEFT: *Phil/Fingerprint* (detail), 1981. Lithograph, 58 x 38 in. (147.3 x 96.5 cm). Edition of 36; Vermilion Editions, Minneapolis, printer (Steve Anderson); Pace Editions, Inc., New York, publisher.
RIGHT: *Phil Spitbite* (detail), 1995. Spitbite etching, 28 x 20 in. (71.1 x 50.8 cm). Edition of 60; Spring Street Workshop, New York, printer (Bill Hall, Julia D'Amario, Ruth Lingen, Pam Cooper); Pace Editions, Inc., New York, publisher.

individual marks add up to someone's face. Many prints – such as the color woodcuts and silk screens – use bright colored marks to construct a head. Those individual marks can look very abstract.

"Old-fashioned" ways

Close works from photographs he takes of his sitters. In nearly every photograph he takes, the head is viewed frontally, like a driver's license or even a mug shot. His subject is not the sitter, but a photograph of the sitter. Once in a while, a print will copy another unique work or another print, as in *Georgia* (1984) or *Self-Portrait/Pulp* (2001), respectively. But the original source is always a photograph. Partly because of his eye for details and partly because of his dyslexia, Close is acutely aware of subtle changes in people's appearances. A live model will look very different to him from one day to the next. A photograph acts like a guide, freezing the ever-changing features and hair of a sitter into a single moment.

Despite his starting point in a photograph, every aspect of his prints is hand-made. Close is adamant about "not trying to make reproductions." Even when photographic processes are commonly used in print studios to translate images onto a matrix (as in silk screen or photogravure), he insists it be done by hand. This means, of course, that his collaborators must learn to make marks like Close's, to render the spirit of his style in woodblock, silk screen, or pulp paper. As he says, "We make art the old-fashioned way."

The old-fashioned way takes a lot more time, and time is a notion that becomes confounded in Close's prints and editions. The works themselves evolve slowly and deliberately over a long period of time, though they are based on photographs that were created in an instant. And a photograph that is thirty years old (for example, "Phil" and certain self-portraits)

can be recycled into something brand new and fresh. Time plays a major role in the viewer's perception as well. At a quick glance, some prints may look like photographs. But when we take time to examine them, what we see changes – some dissolve into softly modulated lights and darks, others are composed of jarringly bright colors and biomorphic forms. And almost all of Close's prints look different when seen from nearer, or farther away. As a printmaker, he actively investigates how our perception is affected by time, distance, and the intensity of looking. As 21st-century viewers, we are accustomed to fast-moving, digitally-reproduced images of all varieties. *Chuck Close Prints: Process and Collaboration* offers a chance to slow down, to look carefully, and to see for ourselves where Close's "roadmaps" lead.

– Adapted from a text by Katie Robinson Edwards for Blaffer Gallery, the Art Museum of the University of Houston.

Chuck Close Prints: Process and Collaboration was organized by Blaffer Gallery, the Art Museum of the University of Houston. The exhibition and publication have been generously underwritten by the Neuberger Berman Foundation. The exhibition was made possible, in part, by major grants from the Lannan Foundation and Jon and Mary Shirley, and by generous grants from The Eleanor and Frank Freed Foundation and Houston Endowment Inc. Financial support has also been provided by Jonathan and Marita Fairbanks, Dorene and Frank Herzog, Andrew and Gretchen McFarland, Carey Shuart and The Wortham Foundation, Inc., with additional funds from Karen and Eric Pulaski, Suzanne Slesin and Michael Steinberg, and Texas Commission on the Arts.

For more on Chuck Close Prints: Process and Collaboration, please go to www.chuckclose.coe.uh.edu

At MAM, the exhibition is coordinated by Peter Boswell, Assistant Director for Programs and Senior Curator.

In Miami, the exhibition is made possible by Lehman Brothers and Neuberger Berman, a Lehman Brothers Company.

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Additional support is provided by MAM's Annual Exhibition Fund.

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As of April 30, 2004



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Accredited by the American Association of Museums, Miami Art Museum is sponsored in part by the State of Florida, Department of State, Division of Cultural Affairs and the Florida Arts Council, and the National Endowment for the Arts; with the support of the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs, the Cultural Affairs Council, the Mayor and the Miami-Dade County Board of County Commissioners.

COVER: *Self-Portrait*, 2000. 111-color silk screen, 65 1/2 x 54 in. (163.8 x 137.1 cm). Edition of 80; Brand X Editions, printer (Robert Blanton, Thomas Little); Pace Editions, Inc., New York, publisher. All works are copyright © Chuck Close. All works are reproduced courtesy of Chuck Close, Pace Editions, Inc., New York, and PaceWildenstein, New York.