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## "Art Saved My Life." - An Intimate Conversation With Chuck Close

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Image: Max Cook

Before he became a world-renowned artist, Chuck Close spent his childhood conjuring tricks. He would don the traditional top hat and cane of a magician for his performance but he had an unusual finale.

"I broke the cardinal rule of magic and I told people how the trick was done," he said Wednesday during an intimate discussion at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. "If you still see the illusion after it is made, then you've really done something."

The same could be said about Close's art. During a revealing conversation with biographer Christopher Finch, Close explained his techniques in detail, but the lifting of the curtain didn't detract from his compelling work on display in *Chuck Close Prints: Process and Collaboration* (<http://www.corcoran.org/close/index.php>).

"Most people have no idea how art happens," Close said. "I wanted to show my interest in process and a record of decisions made."

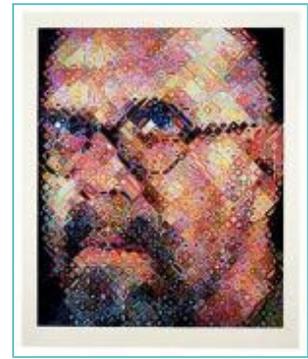
The exhibition, which opens July 3 at the Corcoran, showcases Close's collaboration with printers who have pushed the boundaries of their own craft to create new visions of his iconic portraits. More than 100 works are featured with paintings and etchings displayed next to prints, proofs, and grids. The show offers a lesson in printmaking by revealing the intricate technical complexities involved in making a 203-color silkscreen or a 113-color Japanese woodcut.

While sitting in an electric wheelchair, Close spoke about the many hardships in his life with undying optimism and a remarkable sense of humor. He grew up in a "classic dirt-poor" environment in Monroe, Washington, where he lived in a small rundown house with white clapboards and red trim. His father died when he was 11 years old and his mother struggled with cancer and heart disease. Close had his own troubles in school.

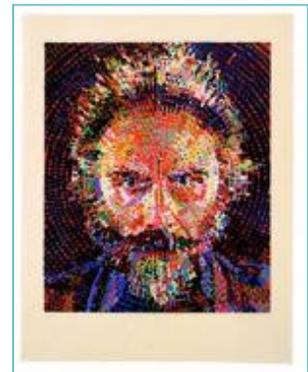
"Art saved my life," he said. "I was so severely learning disabled. There was no such thing as dyslexia in the '40s or '50s. You were just dumb."

Close couldn't learn multiplication tables and still can't add or subtract so he uses the dots on a pair of dice for simple arithmetic. But he could draw and paint so he brought his work to class to show his teachers that he cared about his studies even if his grades said otherwise.

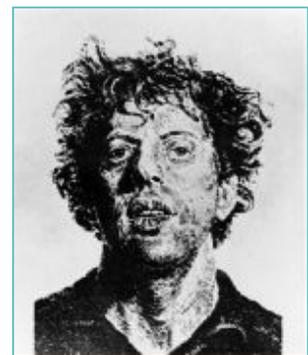
Close also suffers from a rare condition called prosopagnosia or face blindness, so he has great difficulty recognizing people's faces and committing them to memory. "It's not an accident that I was driven to make portraits," he said.



(<http://www.pinklineproject-1.jpg>)



(<http://www.pinklineproject-2.jpg>)



(<http://www.pinklineproject-3.jpg>)

After taking photos of his subjects, he breaks down the image into a grid and flattens it onto the canvas which makes the faces more recognizable. Close attended the University of Washington in Seattle and received his MFA from Yale in 1964, but his early work mirrored famous abstract expressionists of that era. "I was enamored of their work and that's what I was taught," he said "We weren't just appropriating other people's work. We were stealing it."

Many years later, Close met his idol Willem de Kooning and jokingly told him, "It's good to meet someone who has made more de Koonings than I have." But Close wanted to develop his own style and purge his work of imitation so he set strict ground rules to force himself into new territory. "Every time you don't do something, that opens the door to other possibilities," he said

Since he was known at Yale for having a good hand and sense of color, he decided to work from photographs and paint solely in black and white. For his first series of eight large-scale portraits, he used only one tube of Mars black acrylic that cost 60 cents. The first self-portrait completed in 1969 depicts a shirtless Close with wild hair and horn-rimmed glasses, a cigarette burnt to a stub dangling from his mouth while he gazes down with disdain at the viewer. "I was trying to look like an angry young artist. I had seen a lot of James Dean movies," he explained.

His early hyperrealist works used a grid system but the grid was naked to the eye. Later, Close became interested in the grid itself and enlarged the squares, filling them with layered loops and circles of color that inject abstract, fractured qualities into work that had been more representational. The amazing technique creates paintings that constantly shift with the distance of the viewer, moving like a kaleidoscope that clicks through swirls of color until it locks on a solid image and a recognizable face. Standing directly in front of the painting, we all suffer from face blindness until you move backward to embrace a wider view and the chaos suddenly makes sense.

After exploring black and white, Close shifted back to color and created oversized portraits by combining layers of red, yellow, and blue. He sprayed more than 100,000 dots of paint from an airbrush for a single painting that would take more than a year to complete, leading to arthritis settling in his trigger finger.

As his technique evolved, Close dropped the airbrush and created incredibly detailed paintings using only his fingers. "Normally, you have to feel through a brush, feel through a tool," he said "Now your body is the tool."

Close painted the face of his wife's grandmother, a Holocaust survivor who still had an optimistic view of life despite the horrors she had seen. The work revels in her serene expression and the wrinkles and creases of her face that wax and wane before gathering in ripples under her chin.

Close believes his portraits are landscapes in a sense, like Lilliputians climbing across the hills and valleys of a giant's face without realizing that the wild terrain is united in a singular vision. "A face is the roadmap of the life you've led," he said. "If you've laughed your whole life, you have laugh lines. If you've frowned your whole life, then you have a furrowed brow."

In 1988, tragedy struck again and Close suffered a seizure from a spinal artery collapse that left him paralyzed from the neck down. He spent eight months in a New York City hospital struggling to sit upright and regain control of his arms. His wife insisted that he return quickly to painting to cope with his condition so he used a brush holder to strap a brush to his arm for a new portrait. But he kept falling into the painting, stabbing it with jabs of color and breaking down in sobs for days that turned into months.

Somehow Close persevered and has kept creating memorable work in the decades since his injury, showing a remarkable tenacity to overcome obstacles that would leave less steely souls broken in the dust.

The Corcoran exhibition explores the evolution of Close's work as he creates worlds with his paint-stained fingerprints or simple etched lines. He transforms circles of pulp paper into the face of his pigtailed daughter and brings the bearded visage of artist Lucas Samaras to life in an ornate silk tapestry.

With more artists using graphics software to create pixel art, Close joked that people may not believe he still creates his meticulous paintings by hand. He said he resembles a computer because he averages colors within a systematic grid, but the indescribable human condition emerges when he shifts techniques as he gets bored and introduces new and arbitrary combinations into his work.

A computer can crank out an image in seconds, but it can't convey the inexplicable joys and sorrows of a life lived with abandon.

"I predate pixels," Close said. "I'm a Luddite and would not be good at labor-saving devices."

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