

By Lora Weinstein

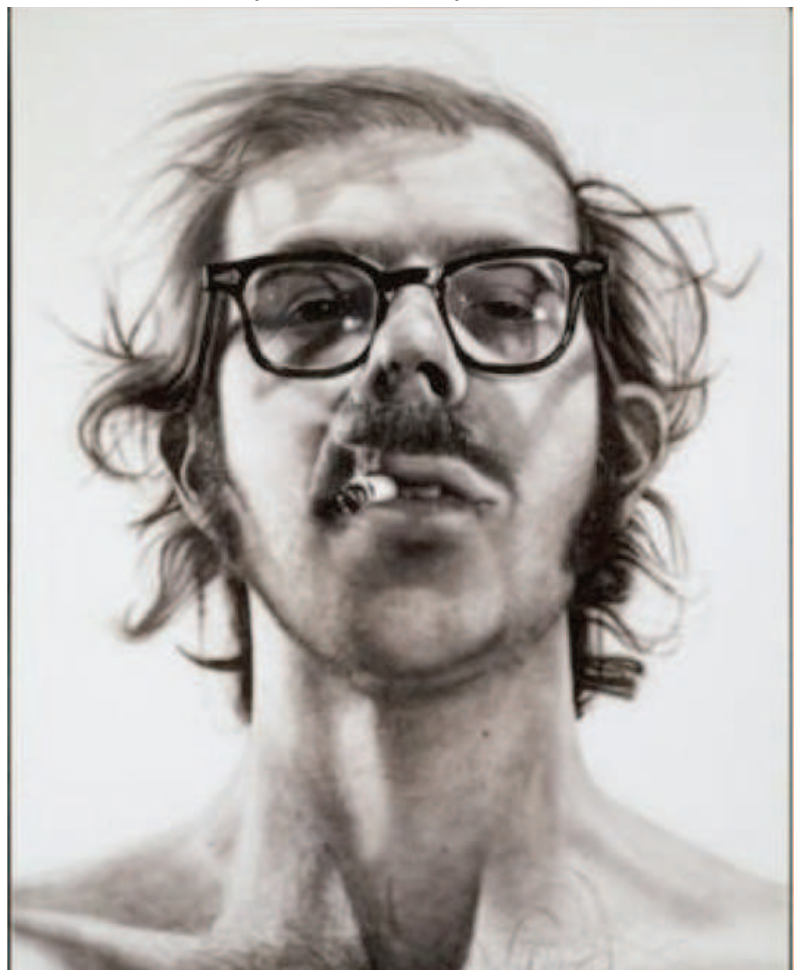
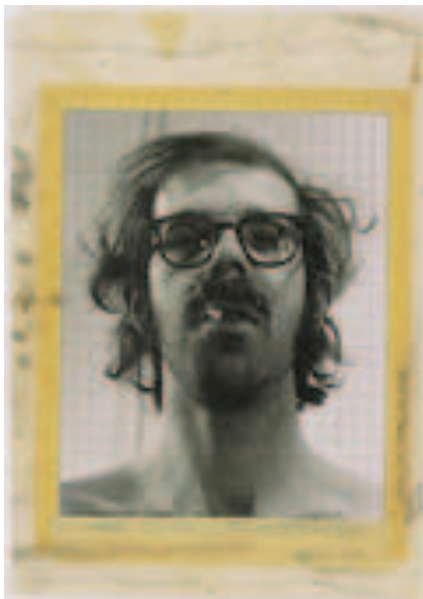
CHUCK CLOSE
(American, born 1940)

FRANK, 1969
Acrylic on canvas
108 x 84 x 3 inches



This painting by Chuck Close was one of eight black and white “heads” that he painted between 1967 and 1970. With the exception of self-portraits, the subjects of most of his paintings were friends like Frank. This type of painting was called by most (if not Chuck Close) Photorealism because the artists used photography to create a painting so realistic that it appears to be a photograph.

Chuck Close would take a photograph of his subject, then make a grid on the photograph. The canvas he was to paint would be gridded also. He then painted each cell separately. To give you an example, below is a maquette used to paint the *BIG SELF-PORTRAIT*, 1967-1968 to its right, that is in the Walker Art Center collection.



He painted using an airbrush, black acrylic paint and a razor. The paint was diluted with enough water to make any shade of grey and he is said to use only a few tablespoons of pigment for each of his large “heads”, applied so thinly as to appear like the surface of a photograph.

The painting of *FRANK* reveals enormous facial detail because of its bigger than life size (nine feet high). Since it is so large, it cannot be easily viewed in total but instead is looked at in pieces. Viewers can see the hairs on his face, the reflections in the glasses, the mass of curly hair, shadows on his face on so on. However much it tells us about Frank’s face, it is not intended to tell the viewer what Frank was thinking. Close’s paintings reflect the almost mug-shot like photographs he takes of his subjects and are not intended to portray sentiment, either his or the subject’s. This is an intentional departure from traditional portraiture and he is quoted as saying “When I do a portrait, I’m trying to present it flat-footedly, without editorial comment, very unemotionally”. These large black and white “heads” did not initially receive great critical acclaim, Photorealists were dismissed by the critic Barbara Rose in 1971 as “academic in the worst sense” and Close as “ the best of the worst”, perhaps because modern art was supposed to be difficult and here the message was clear. That he is now an “art star” with his work in most major museum collections as well as exhibitions at the New York Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Walker Art Center speaks for itself.

After graduating from Yale in 1964 where he received a MFA, his early painting reflected Abstract Expressionism and the influence of Willem de Kooning and upon meeting de Kooning, he told him that “It’s nice to meet someone who has painted more de Koonings than I have” . Hoping to try something different, he abandoned abstract painting, color, brushes and set out to use a photograph as a basis for a painting. After his black and white “heads” , he gradually introduced color, oil paint, thumbprint pictures, pulp paper pictures, changing the image, yet retaining the photograph maquette and sometimes representing the same subject in a new manner.

On December 7, 1988, in what Close calls “The Event”, he suffered a seizure that left him paralyzed from the neck down. After months of physical therapy, he achieved slight movement in his arms, but has remained wheelchair bound. Some feel that his work can be divided into before and after “The Event” blocks. Close feels there is truth to that thought saying “My new portraits have a celebratory aspect that wasn’t there before, and that’s because I feel so happy that I was able to get back to work after my illness”.

Whatever the case, his work now has an Expressionist feeling in his use of shapes and colors, reminiscent of de Kooning. While he requires assistants to move canvases, he continues to paint in his meticulous, labor intensive and time consuming style.

Below is a photograph of Chuck Close painting a self-portrait.

Chuck Close is perhaps the best known of the art movement known as Photorealism. The movement evolved from Pop Art in the late 1960s and early 1970s. While Pop Art saw absurdity in commercial imagery, the Photorealist wanted to honor the image. It is based on the photograph, which can be



gridded or projected directly onto the canvas, and then copied in a larger size. The movement was criticized for the use of photography, although artists going back to the 15th century has used visual devices. The height of the movement was in the 1970s.

Questions that occur to me are:

1. This picture is so big, that it is difficult to see it all at once. Let's focus on (you name it, chin, glasses, ears, nose) and describe what you see?
2. The artist doesn't give Frank any expression. How does that make the portrait unusual and what kinds of feeling does it give you?
3. How would you feel if someone made a painting like this of you?

My sources for this were:

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