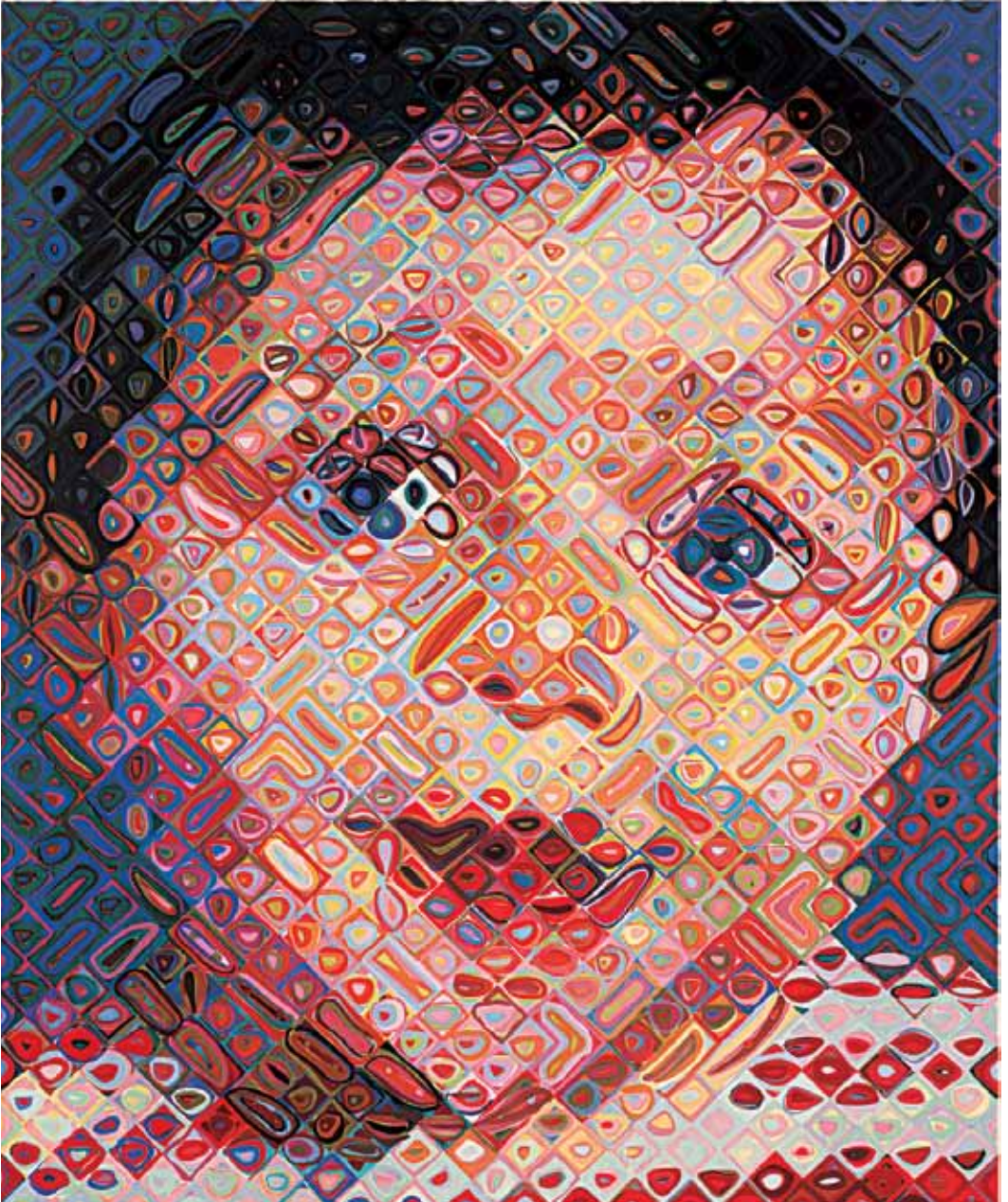
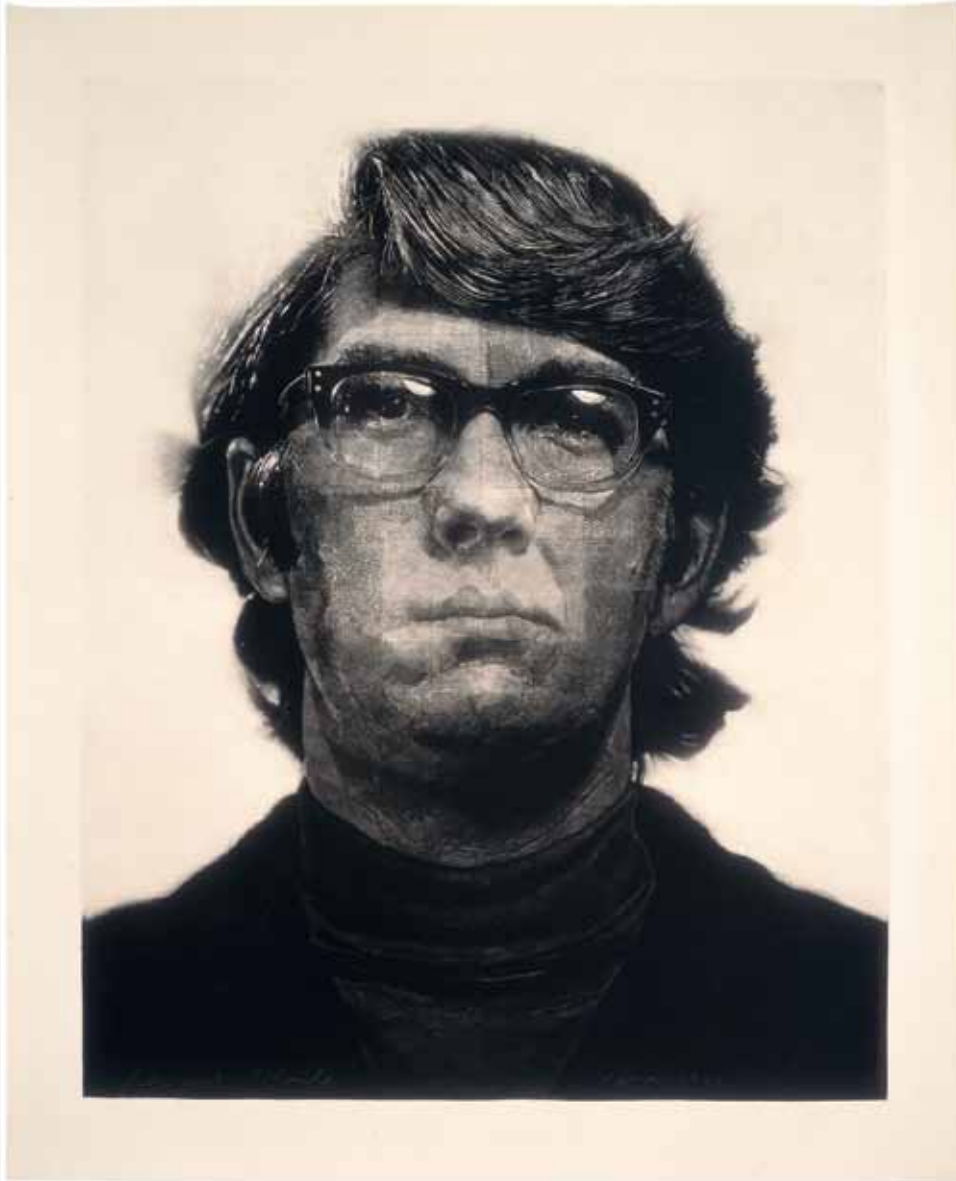


# Chuck Close Prints

PROCESS AND COLLABORATION





**Fig. 1.** *Keith/Mezzotint*, 1972. Mezzotint, 51 x 42 ½ in. Edition of 10. Crown Point Press, Oakland, California, printer (Kathan Brown, Patricia Branstead). Parasol Press, Ltd., New York, publisher. Courtesy of the artist

**T**his exhibition contains prints and multiples produced since 1972 by Chuck Close, one of America's most renowned living artists. Presented as both single works and in progressive series, the images in the exhibition reveal the intellectual clarity and technical inventiveness required for the artist to adapt photographic portraits into various print mediums.

As a child growing up in Washington State, Close (b. 1940) struggled with academics while excelling at drawing. It was not until he became an adult that he discovered he has a form of dyslexia, which made it difficult to learn in a conventional way, but led him to devise systematic means of memorizing his lessons. This provided a rigorous mental discipline that has helped him as an artist.

Close received his BA degree from the University of Washington in 1962, and his MFA from Yale University in 1964. After graduating, he moved to New York City, where by the late 1960s he began to gain recognition for his large-scale, photorealist paintings exploring the subject of the human face. Close prefers to call them heads, emphasizing his wish to objectively analyze the form of the subject rather than create an emotional identification through the face. These paintings were made by manually transferring the colors and tonal qualities contained in gridded sections of a photographic portrait, cell by cell, onto a canvas bearing a corresponding grid. In his early paintings especially, all traces of this painstaking process were eliminated, so the works appear to be large, richly detailed photographs.

In 1972 Close made his first major print, *Keith/Mezzotint* (fig. 1). In this early work, one can already see how his graphic innovations came to influence his subsequent paintings. Before creating *Keith/Mezzotint*, Close typically eliminated all signs of the grid in his paintings so they looked purely photographic. During the many test proofings involved in the process of creating *Keith/Mezzotint*, however, the plate began to wear down, especially near the center, where the individual grid-squares became softer and lighter. The ever-analytical artist decided he liked how the reference to the grid helped the viewer understand the printmaking process. Later prints and paintings often show the structure of the grid and explore the relationship between the individual mark and the overall perception of the head.

Printmaking suits Close's temperament; he enjoys the slow pace at which images in various print mediums are generated because it enables him to concentrate on the details that compose the whole while exploring subtle variations in touch, color, and approach. Printmaking can be described as the art of making consistent replications of inked images. This usually starts by creating an image on a stable intermediate structure called a "matrix" (such as an etching plate or linoleum block). Using various techniques, which enable the image on the matrix to hold ink, the printmaker applies ink to the matrix then places a piece of paper onto it, often using a printer's press to force all the ink onto the paper. When the paper is removed, it contains the mirror of the image on the inked matrix. This process can be repeated numerous times to create an edition.

When Close paints, every decision is his alone to make. As a printmaker, he works with a team of master printers. Although he is accustomed to being in control, this requires flexibility, and occasionally even compromise. For the chromists (color specialists), block cutters, and screen printers with whom he works, the goal is to translate the artist's ideas into a new medium while maintaining his vision and expectations. Close remarks that in a collaboration: "Always something goes wrong. Always, always. And there is always a solution..."<sup>1</sup>

Because his primary interest is in exploring creative processes, Close does not hesitate to reuse the same photographic source in a variety of mediums. Each version of a given image has a recognizable structure, yet each contains tones, marks, and techniques that distinguish it from the others. A case in point is *Phil/Fingerprint* (1981) (fig. 2) and *Phil Spitbite* (1995) (fig. 3), both derived from a 1969 photograph of his friend, the composer Philip Glass. *Phil/Fingerprint* invites close viewings of its intricate linear swirls, made by the artist's inked fingertips as they touched the lithography stone. The marks composing *Phil Spitbite* seem softer, more painterly; indeed they result from a paintbrush dipped in a combination of acid and human spit applied directly onto the aquatint ground.

In creating his most complex images, Close often requires numerous stages. The screen print *John* (1998) (fig. 4), for example, involved 126 colors. While each individual stage of the print may seem abstract, when seen together in state proofs, as they are in this exhibition, they demonstrate the consecutive buildup toward the completed work, showing how each stage affects the next.



**Fig. 2.** *Phil/Fingerprint*, 1981. Lithograph, 50 x 38 in. Edition of 36. Vermillion Editions, Minneapolis, printer (Steve Anderson). Pace Editions, Inc., New York, publisher. Courtesy of the artist



**Fig. 3.** *Phil Spitbite*, 1995. Spitbite etching, 28 x 20 in. Edition of 60. Spring Street Workshop, New York, printer (Bill Hall, Julia D'Amario, Ruth Lingen, Pam Cooper). Pace Editions, Inc., New York, publisher. Courtesy of Pace Editions, Inc. and the artist



**Fig. 4.** *John*, 1998. 126-color silk screen, 64 1/2 x 54 1/2 in. Edition of 80. Brand X Editions, New York, printer (Robert Blanton, Thomas Little). Pace Editions, Inc. New York, publisher. Courtesy of Pace Editions, Inc. and the artist

As he did in *John*, Close often uses colorful dabs and splotches to construct a vibrantly expressive image of a head. Seen in isolation, these marks can look like tiny abstract compositions within the larger whole. Interestingly, Close's earliest professional work, dating from the mid-1960s, was in the manner of the Abstract Expressionists. Although he was clearly not comfortable with a style that emphasized impulsiveness and psychological revelation, woodcuts such as *Emma* (2002) (front cover) appear to transcend the printmakers' need for control through a profusion of brilliant colors that have the immediacy of the spontaneous brushstroke.

In all of Close's works, the subject is not the sitter, but the transformation of the sitter's photographic image into a set, or code, of rhythmically applied marks. While he emphasizes planning and objectivity in the adaptation of mechanically produced images, Close also insists that every aspect of his prints is made by hand. Even in the age of digitization, with its construction of pictures out of electronic information, he relies on physical touch to construct what he calls "roadmaps of human experience." Beyond reflecting the detailed topographies of the sitters' faces, this phrase suggests Close's own role in remapping the information in a photograph into a system of metaphors for the relationship between vision, process, and time. In their dissolution of the head into series of dots, fingerprints, and other marks, Close's portraits offer astute reflections on the ever-changing nature of identity, which unlike a photograph, is not frozen in time.

Mark Scala, *Chief Curator*

Notes:

1. Terrie Sultan. *Chuck Close Prints: Process and Collaboration* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003), 92.

Printmaking interactive: What is a Print? at

<http://www.moma.org/interactives/projects/2001/whatisaprint/>

**Front Cover:** *Emma*, 2002. 113-color Japanese-style ukiyo-e woodcut, 43 x 35 in. Edition of 55. Pace Editions Ink, New York, printer (Yasu Shibata). Pace Editions, Inc., New York, publisher. Courtesy of Pace Editions, Inc. and the artist



**Fig. 5.** *Self-Portrait I (Dots)*, 1997. Reduction linoleum cut, 24 x 18 in. Edition of 70. Spring Street Workshop, New York, printer (Ruth Lingen, Jona Markgraf). Pace Editions, Inc., New York, publisher. Courtesy of Pace Editions, Inc. and the artist

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