

Art in America

F R O N T
P A G E

Close Ready for His Close-up

This has been an exceptionally fruitful season for Chuck Close. His name has appeared recently on everything from theater marquees to wine labels. A version of his exhibition of paintings and tapestries, "Family and Others," which appeared last fall at London's White Cube, is currently on view at the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg [though Apr. 13]. A comprehensive monograph by Christopher Finch, *Chuck Close: Work*, was recently published by Prestel. Close also created the label for *Musée*, an inaugural Merlot blend from New York's Bedell Cellars, in a design that features one of his daguerreotypes of grapes.

Perhaps the most revealing look at Close and his work is *Chuck Close*, a feature-length documentary produced and directed by Marion Cajori that screened in art houses across the country this winter. Cajori spent four years filming Close at work and at home, but she died in 2006 of cancer, at age 56, during the picture's postproduction phase. Ken Kobland, Cajori's longtime collaborating cinematographer, completed the project.

An insightful study, the movie centers on Close's working process. It chronicles his method as he completes a large self-portrait over the course of 82 days. Close and his assistants grid up a large color Polaroid image. Close then transposes onto the corresponding squares of the canvas grid the tones in the photo, using multicolor circles, ovals and polygonal shapes. In many scenes, the artist appears in his New York City studio seated in a wheelchair before an enormous canvas hung on a movable easel. With a special contraption affixed to his nearly paralyzed arm and hand, Close executes dazzling, evocative brushwork as the image comes ever closer to fruition, stage by stage. Listening to Nina Simone and other jazz vocalists while he works, he exudes a youthful exuberance and energy.

Interspersed with scenes of the artist at work are interviews with his friends and colleagues, including Philip Glass, Janet Fish, Kirk Varnedoe, Mark Greenwald, Elizabeth Murray, Arne Glimcher, Dorothea Rockburne, Lucas Samaras, Brice Marden and Robert Storr. A number of the artists interviewed offer rare glimpses into their own studios and working methods. Some of them, as well as Close himself, recall his early years, when he was one of the few figurative painters to make an impact on Man-

hattan's avant-garde scene in the 1960s and '70s. He made his solo debut in 1970 at Bykert, a gallery with a stable of almost exclusively abstract artists. The meticulous, large-scale, black-and-white portraits he showed early on were unlike anything being done at the time. Some of the talking heads in this film are rather redundant in their gushing praise of the artist and insistence on the importance of his unique path and singular achievement. Accolades from friends are hardly

necessary when the many works by Close that appear throughout the film make these points stunningly clear.

Close's wife, Leslie, provides some personal details about the artist and offers a few private glimpses into their many years together. These are among the best and most moving scenes in the film. She gives a vivid account of Close's health crisis in 1988, when a spinal-column blood clot suddenly left him partially paralyzed and permanently wheelchair-bound. She insisted to the doctors and nurses that the way to set him on the road to recovery was by means of a paintbrush. Recent scenes of the couple in their Hamptons summer home and studio impart a kind of idyllic gloss to the film. One of the most memorable images, with Philip Glass's luscious score wafting in the background, shows the artist's barnlike studio from across a field of sunflowers, with a giant, half-finished portrait of Paul Cadmus visible through the open door.

—David Ebony

[*Chuck Close (2007)*, an Art Kaleidoscope Foundation production, was produced and directed by Marion Cajori. Directors of photography: Mead Hunt, Ken Kobland and David Leitner. Music by Philip Glass performed by Bruce Levinston.]



The artist at work, from the film *Chuck Close*.