

ART IN REVIEW; Chuck Close -- Recent Works

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Published: December 27, 2002

Pace Wildenstein Gallery  
Pace/MacGill Gallery  
534 West 25th Street, Chelsea  
Through Jan. 11

Chuck Close's gigantic photo-based portrait paintings operate within such a narrow set of parameters regarding size, image, color and technique that any semblance of change can seem like wishful thinking on the viewer's part. It takes time to get beyond the seen-one-seen-them-all stage in his current show, which, as usual, concentrates almost exclusively on portraits of other artists. But it does happen here and there, and not just because Mr. Close has painted an infant's face for the first time, as if to keep up with Gerhard Richter.

In the strongest works here, Mr. Close is animating his gridded scaffolding by expanding the concentric doughnut rings of color that normally fill each square into hot dogs, éclairs and even triangular Danishes that occupy multiple squares and incorporate as many as six colors, if not more. These amoeboid, subtly pneumatic units increase the woozy, molecular, lenticular visual motion of his surfaces, which break more emphatically into autonomous signs and motifs. Now, intimations not only of foodstuffs but also of eyes, mouths and tiny masks or faces wah-wah visually in and out of focus, in competition with the larger image.

There are features within features. "Lisa" has a fishy school of mouths, "James" a lower lip that can read as a row of masks. The mouth in "Leslie," a portrait of the artist's wife, seems to include a heart. In "Robert" the left eye suggests a sideways sock-monkey face, and in a new self-portrait Mr. Close has all but given himself a third eye. The constant motion creates an invigorating visual experience that can be amplified by the personality or mood of the subject, as it does in "Lisa," the grisaille "Cecily" and the self-portrait.

But greater change, even within Mr. Close's strict limits, doesn't seem beyond expectation. Possibilities include markedly looser or tighter paint handling, greater surface viscosity, a different ratio of image to grid and perhaps a few fewer portraits of artists. A Chuck Close portrait has become too much of an art world rite of passage, a sign that one has arrived.

Mr. Close's latest daguerreotype portraits -- which are so refined they resemble holograms -- are installed in a second, darkened gallery. The faces feel dimensional, like boxed specimens. Their graphite sheen also makes them seem burned or prematurely aged. Imperfections like freckles, moles and wrinkles are exaggerated. Unlike the paintings, the daguerreotypes achieve magnification without enlargement, but the artistic process is similarly assertive. Once again, it interferes with vision by distorting the surface. But the surface here remains skin and the process that sticks in the mind is its incessant decay. It's an impressive way to maintain a degree of Closeness, but not much more.