



CHUCK CLOSE • INFINITE

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“To observe Close at work on one of the grid portraits is like watching a man who is patiently working his way through the world’s largest crossword puzzle. As the painting approaches completion, it’s as if the crossword has been miraculously transformed into biography, the components finding syntax that gives them cumulative meaning.”

—Christopher Finch

CHUCK CLOSE
(5.07.1940–19.08.2021)

A legendary portraitist and master of photorealism, Chuck Close was one of the most influential artists of his generation. Renowned for his meticulous detail and innovative techniques, he left a profound mark on both American culture and the international art world.

An artist shaped by an era of technological breakthroughs, Close blurred the boundaries between photography and fine art. Rejecting expressive impulse and academic tradition alike, he developed a methodical, rule-based approach that emphasized individuality as a subject of artistic inquiry. With a deep academic grounding, Close brought photographic realism to the forefront of painting and helped reframe portraiture as a powerful reflection of personal identity.

Over the course of a five-decade career, Close transformed the conventions of portraiture, working across diverse media—from Polaroid photography and oil painting to mosaic tilework and jacquard tapestry. He created portraits from tonal grids composed of fingerprints, pointillist dots, brushstrokes, paper pulp, and other unconventional materials.

Close was one of the first artists in the late 1970s to use the camera not only as a preparatory tool for painted portraits but also as a medium in its own right. His signature process involved placing a grid over a photograph and then transferring it, cell by cell, onto a large-scale canvas. As each cell was painted, concentric strokes in related hues were added to build up complex color fields. The result relied on “optical blending,” a perceptual effect in which the human eye merges adjacent colors into a unified tone. Close’s works depend on this dual mechanism: at the micro level, the eye blends color within each cell; at the macro level, it assembles these fragments into the image of a human face.

The rigor and mathematical precision of the grid led many critics to describe Close’s method as “scientific.” Yet this same structure produced an unexpected musicality. The repetition of forms generated rhythmic cadence, while color variations acted as chromatic modulations. “I’m working with the color equivalent of a musical chord—a kind of color chord,” Close once explained.

In the age of the selfie, portraiture often serves to mediate photographic reality. For Close, it went deeper. Art became a way to process physical and emotional hardship and a means to assert agency over adversity. In addition to a spinal condition that left him partially paralyzed and in a wheelchair from 1988 onward, Close also lived with prosopagnosia (face blindness), which made it difficult for him to recognize faces. Ironically, it was this condition that inspired him to paint portraits in the first place—to preserve the images of those most important to him. Despite these neurological challenges, he didn’t just succeed as an artist—he thrived because of them.

“A face is a road map of someone’s life. Without any need to amplify that or draw attention to it, there’s a great deal that’s communicated about who this person is and what their life experiences have been.”
—Chuck Close

In his downtown Manhattan studio, portraits filled the space: Kate Moss, Brad Pitt, Lou Reed, Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama—even Close himself. Actors, musicians, politicians, and fellow artists all sat for his lens. Many noted the duality of the experience: on one hand, the intimacy of a conversation with a close friend; on the other, the discipline of a meticulously structured photographic process.

“The immediacy of making the picture changes the relationship between the subject and the artist, who together witness the image come into being after the photograph is pulled from the camera and the chemicals perform their function. You both work together to get something that you want out of it. Your subject knows what you’re trying to do.”
—Chuck Close

Close’s portraits conveyed the gravity and dignity of each individual through a hyperrealist lens. A single photo shoot could take months to plan and execute; a painting might take 12 to 14 months to complete. His intention was never to flatter or idealize—every imperfection became part of the story. Each portrait reads like a biography rendered in color and form.

Chuck Close received the National Medal of Arts and was appointed by President Obama to serve on the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities. He was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and sat on the boards of several major arts institutions. His work has been exhibited in hundreds of shows and is held in leading private and museum collections around the world, including: the Museum of Modern Art (New York), Tate Britain (London), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), Centre Pompidou (Paris), the National Portrait Gallery (London), the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, the Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum (Aachen), and many others.

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