



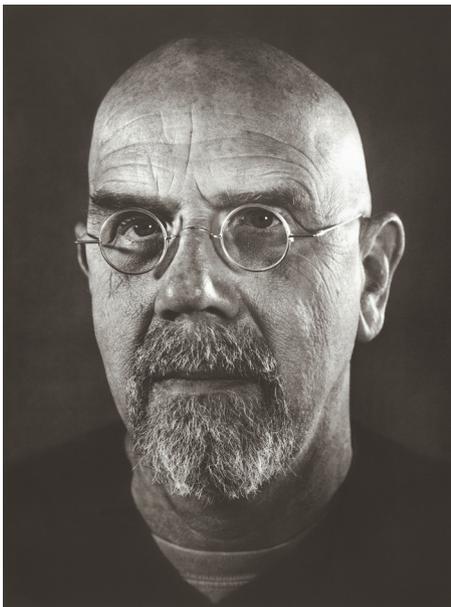
Chuck Close at work on *Elizabeth*,
1989 (photo: Bill Jacobson)
© Chuck Close, courtesy The
Pace Gallery

1 Facing Challenges

American artist Chuck Close (born 1940) is famous for painting giant portrait heads. He's also well known for facing some big challenges in his life.

Growing up, Close had severe learning disabilities that made it difficult for him to read. His talent for drawing and painting helped him to compensate for his academic struggles. He impressed his teachers by creating elaborate art projects to show he really was interested in his school subjects.

In 1988, when he was almost fifty years old, Close suffered a severe spinal artery collapse. As a result, he has only partial use of his arms and legs, and he has to rely on a wheelchair. He now uses a chair lift and motorized easel that raises, lowers, and turns the canvas to allow him to work on all parts of a painting.



Chuck Close, *Self-Portrait*/
Photogravure, 2004/2005,
photogravure on Somerset
Textured white, National Gallery
of Art, Gift of Graphicstudio/
University of South Florida

“Almost every decision I’ve made as an artist is an outcome of my particular learning disorders. I’m overwhelmed by the whole. How do you make a big head? How do you make a nose? I’m not sure! But by breaking the image down into small units, I make each decision into a bite-size decision. I don’t have to reinvent the wheel every day. It’s an on-going process. The system liberates and allows for intuition. And, eventually I have a painting.” Chuck Close

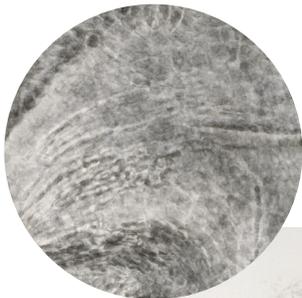
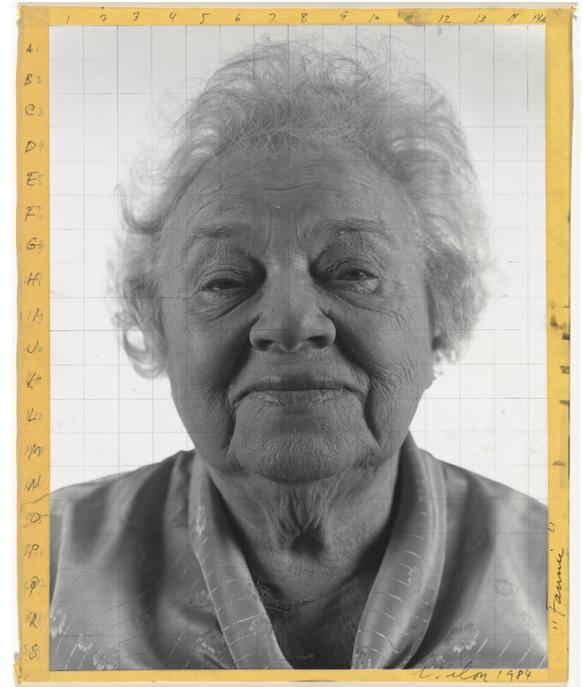
2 Friends and Family

Chuck Close paints close-up views of his family and friends. Every detail, every wrinkle, every strand of hair is magnified. People in Close's portraits don't show much expression or personality, much like a passport or driver's license photo.

Fanny/Fingerpainting depicts Fanny Lieber, the artist's grandmother-in-law. Fanny was the only member of her large family to survive the Holocaust, and Close admired her strength and optimism.

Chuck Close, *Fanny*, 1984, polaroid photograph mounted on board with masking tape border; squared in ink for transfer, National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund

At 8 1/2 by 7 feet, the painting of *Fanny* is more than five times larger than the photograph.



Chuck Close, *Fanny/Fingerpainting*, 1985, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Gift of Lila Acheson Wallace



3 How Does He Do It?

Close typically starts with a photograph. Instead of asking someone to sit in front of him while he paints, a slow process that could take days or months, Close takes several photographs of his subject. He then carefully selects one photo. He uses a grid to divide it into smaller units and to maintain the proportional scale between the photo and the much larger canvas. Often applying a grid to the canvas as well, he transfers the image square by square from photo to canvas. It's an exacting and painstaking process that Close has used throughout his career.

Although Close continues to employ his photo-grid process, he always looks for new challenges. At different times he has experimented with an airbrush, colored pencils, watercolor, fragments of pulp paper, printing inks, and oil and acrylic paints to create his portraits. He even used fingerprints! For *Fanny/Fingerpainting*, Close applied the paint to the canvas with his fingers, pressing harder to apply more pigment and pressing lightly for less. He placed fingerprints densely in some places and more sparingly in other areas. From a distance, the painting looks like a black-and-white photograph; up close her face dissolves into a sea of fingerprints.

explore more

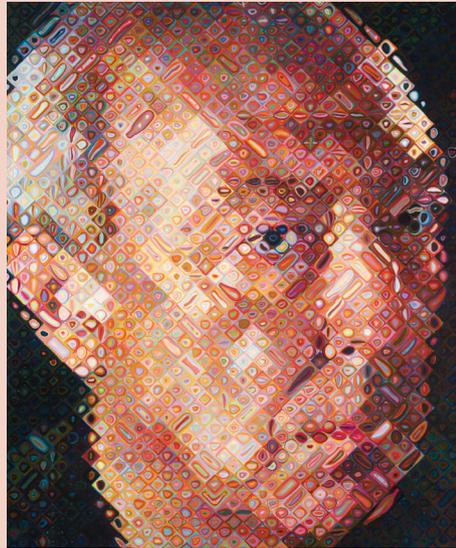
"I think problem-solving is generally overstressed. The far more important thing is problem creation. If you ask yourself an interesting question, your answer will be personal. It will be interesting just because you put yourself in the position to think differently." Chuck Close

Up Close

Compare *Jasper* and *Fanny/Fingerpainting*

How are they similar? How are the two paintings different? Look closely and list as many similarities and differences as you can find.

- Both are close-up, larger-than-life portrait heads. *Fanny* faces forward; her neck and the top of her shoulders are visible. The head and neck of *Jasper* are turned slightly to his left, and his image extends to the edges of the large canvas.
- Both are organized using a grid system. Close varies the placement of the grid. Sometimes it's horizontal-vertical, as with *Fanny's* grid; sometimes it's oriented diagonally, as with *Jasper's*.
- *Fanny* is painted in black and white; *Jasper* is in color.
- An important distinguishing characteristic of Close's portrait heads is how he fills the squares or diamonds of the grid. In *Fanny/Fingerpainting* he used subtly shaded fingerprints to replicate the tones of a black-and-white photograph; the grid lines cannot be seen. His approach to *Jasper* was completely different. Each unit in the grid is composed of multicolored concentric rings, with no two units alike. When viewed up close, each diamond begins to look like a tiny abstract painting. When seen from farther back, however, the colors, shapes, and lines come together to form the image of the artist Jasper Johns.



Fanny/Fingerpainting was created before Close became paralyzed. After his spinal artery collapse, Close lost fine motor control in his hands, and he could no longer make fingerpaintings. For *Jasper* and similar paintings, Close attached a paintbrush to his hand and moved his arm to apply the paint onto the canvas.



Chuck Close, *Jasper*, 1997–1998, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Gift of Ian and Annette Cumming

The detail above comes from *Jasper's* forehead.

"There's a real joy in putting all these little marks together. They may look like hot dogs, but with them I build a painting." Chuck Close