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.

“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 ongoing process. The system liberates and allows for intuition. And, eventually I have a painting.” Chuck Close
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.

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.
“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