



CHUCK CLOSE

ART KALEIDOSCOPE FOUNDATION/Color/???:116 Mins./Not Rated

Featuring: Chuck Close, Brice Marden, Robert Storr, Dorothea Rockburne, Lucas Samaras, Robert Rauschenberg, Philip Glass, Arne Glimcher, Kiki Smith, Elizabeth Murray, Alex Katz, Janet Fish, Kirk Varnedoe.

Credits: Produced and directed by Marion Cajori. Directors of photography: Mead Hunt, Ken Kobland, David Leitner. Edited by Cajori, Kobland. Music by Philip Glass, performed by Bruce Levingston. An Art Kaleidoscope Foundation production.

Through the famous portrait artist's subjects, filmmaker Marion Cajori crafts a clever biographical documentary of Chuck Close.

Marion Cajori died before completing *Chuck Close*, her documentary portrait of an artist known for *his* unique portraits and self-portraits. In what could only have been a conscious nod to her subject, Cajori's cinematic construct cleverly imitates Close's signature hieroglyphic boxes, which he paints and superimposes upon a photograph. Abstract artist Brice Marden says in the documentary that with Close's portraits "you add up all the details and you get the soul," and the same can be said for Cajori's film—through a series of vignettes, interviews with Close's friends and family, the filmmaker reveals the soul of the portraitist.

Cajori pursues Close and his work in the same way that someone might approach one of his portraits, which are large canvases of his subject's heads. She leans in to show Close bringing the brush to the paint, and Close painting an uneven line or a protozoa-like shape on the canvas. Then she steps back to show completed portraits, and the actual faces of Close's subjects, and sometimes a long shot in the studio where Close, in a wheelchair, is the focal point of the shot. Facing the painting in progress, the camera behind him, Close's bald head seems to pop up from the black chair and then to become part of a mosaic that includes the unfinished painting, the other objects, the painterly tools, the hoist that positions the painting, and the bare floor that separates the artist and his

canvas. It's a symbolic distance, the nearest stance from which the artist—and, by extension, the filmmaker—can struggle for objectivity.

Cajori's longtime collaborator Ken Kobland, also credited as a cinematographer, finished *Chuck Close*, so it is hard to know how much of the documentary represents his sensibilities as opposed to Cajori's. Regardless, one consistent and unusual quality of this finely wrought film is its erudite conversation, among the subjects and between the filmmakers and their audience. Even in the sequences that feel staged, where the filmmaker or Close gathers a few friends in his studio, or where the artist attends one of his friend's shows or a friend visits his, the talk is about artistic influences, the nature of the work on view, or the genesis of Abstract Expressionism. Also, there are the reactions of Close's subjects to their portraits: Nearly everyone interviewed in the film has fallen under Close's brush. It's not a documentary for dilettantes.

When Close says of his work that he had to break with de Kooning, and artist Alex Katz, in discussing the value of Close's work, comments that today few people have an "optical experience," or Marden explains that the image in a Close painting is a "convenience," the audience isn't allowed its usual passivity. At first, Cajori's methods of portrayal seem odd: During the interviews, Close's fellow artists talk about him, but they also explain their own work. Sometimes, an entire sequence appears to be devoted, visually, to the work of the artist being interviewed, as is the case with Janet Fish, and we feel ourselves drifting into a tangent.

Biographies of artists, writers, composers and anyone else who leaves an artistic record are, in some way, anachronistic. It's the work itself that speaks most authoritatively of the life. The composer Philip Glass says in the documentary that the generation from which he and Close emerged—Glass was born in 1937 and Close in 1940—introduced the "concept of process" to art. He insists that Close's portraits are not portraits at all. "Painting is about looking," Glass says. *How* to look is the first question the biographer must consider. In the case of an artist's biography, different from that of a person who invents a vaccine, for instance, the biographer needs to decide how to *look* at the person and the work, which are essentially inseparable.

Cajori's answer to that conundrum is not only perspicacious, it's a perfect merger of form and content. She goes off on tangents because in contemplating the tangents, we may get at the meaning of Close's "portraits." Close stretches the boundaries of photography and of painting, and of photography as biography. When he alters the skin of his subjects, and their eyes, he codes them. Symbolically, he strips them of their skin, their protective coating, replacing it with one of his own creation. It's savage, really, and in the

end, his subject becomes an object of ritual. Like Australian Aborigines who paint their bodies in order to assume the identities of their ancestors, we can also imagine Close's subjects as nearer to their primeval memory.

Cajori's brush is the camera. Here, it's clear-eyed and in mostly conventional positions. Cajori's subjects seem to appear as they do in real life. The camera sits at respectful middle distances, almost always with paintings as the backdrop for people. In the scenes in Close's studio, he's applying paint to the canvas. Sometimes he talks, but most of the time he doesn't. In fact, everything Close says about his work is eclipsed by what other people say about it, so that the artist in the end belongs only to Cajori's pastiche of friends, critics, curators and such. Nevertheless, as in Close's work, there is the photograph underneath—Cajori's unblinking camera image, the glint of objectivity. That compels an up-close look which, in the case of Cajori's art form, is a contemplation of process—all the biography any artist needs.

—Maria Garcia