



Chuck Close

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(Documentary) An Art Kaleidoscope Foundation production. Produced, directed by Marion Cajori.

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With: Janet Fish, Robert Rauschenberg, Leslie Close, Alex Katz, Elizabeth Murray, Kirk Varnedoe, Philip Glass, Joe Zucker, Dorothea Rockburne, Mark Greenwold, Lucas Samaras, Arne Glimcher, Bruce Marden, Robert Storr, Kiki Smith.

By RONNIE SCHIEB

Marion Cajori's magisterial documentary on renowned painter Chuck Close, begun in 1993 and finally edited just before the filmmaker's 2006 death, unerringly focuses on the two most elusive qualities central to any portrait of an artist: process and context. Close's work, featuring huge human faces deconstructed from blown-up photographs, some self-portraits and others of fellow artists, allows Cajori to conjure an endless hall of mirrors that gives the term "talking heads" a whole new meaning. Docu, which bowed Dec. 26 at Gotham's Film Forum, reps a major contribution from a cinematic master who died at the height of her powers.

Cajori anchors her docu in artistic process, detailing Close's creation of an idiosyncratic self-portrait over 82 days (from the initial photo shoot to the division of the huge photograph into tiny squares, to the fragmentation of an immense blank canvas into matching boxes), mapping out the terrain of Close's work. Close, who has been paralyzed since his spine collapsed in 1988, utilizes assistants and various mechanical aids in the physical preparation, but the painting -- the meticulous detailing of each square -- seems oddly suited to his limited range of motion.

At the same time, the total unreadability of any particular section of canvas conveys a sense of alchemy, as the circles, ellipses, dots and squiggles only resolve themselves into a giant physiognomic likeness at a great distance. Both Close and Cajori resist the temptation to constantly pull back to view the larger picture.

Close's highly visual, labor-intensive process has been the subject of several docus throughout his 40-year career (including Cajori's much shorter, earlier version of this film, which aired on PBS in 1998) Cajori's inventive, endlessly fascinating two-hour take draws freely from those prior studies, and from footage featuring Close and his contemporaries. Since Close often

used photos of those contemporaries as raw materials for his art, Cajori can organically segue from photo to painting to painter (or, in the case of Philip Glass, composer), the resulting "talking heads" functioning simultaneously as artistic subjects and objects.

Their testimony not only explicates Close's oeuvre but places it in a vital, evolving milieu, as pieces by Robert Rauschenberg, Janet Fish, Alex Katz, Mark Greenwold, Kiki Smith, Bruce Marden or Elizabeth Murray fill the screen or casually punctuate the background (and Glass' composition "Portrait of Chuck" briefly infiltrates the soundtrack).

Cajori signally refuses to ascribe to a one-way artistic progression in Close's career output -- often revisiting his disturbing early pieces. A still shot of Close lounging between two gray-toned paintings, which creepily mime the uber-realism of photography, brings home the visceral shockwaves these works must have sent through the art world of the time. Cajori also eschews any "My Left Foot" vision of the artist as heroic survivor: Whatever the method, from airbrushing to meticulous thumb-printing, Close's vision remains remarkably, inventively consistent, in and out of a wheelchair.

Tech credits are superb, Cajori's collaborator and cameraman Ken Kobland ably following through on post-production after Cajori's demise.

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Camera (color, HD), Mead Hunt, Ken Kobland, David Leitner; editors, Cajori, Kobland; sound, Judy Karp, Bill Wander; associate producer, Kipjaz Savoie. Reviewed at Film Forum, New York, Dec. 20, 2007. Running time: 119 MIN.