



Tracking Shots

Chuck Close

by Michelle Orange

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Chuck Close

Directed by Marion Cajori

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Film Forum

"I am tired of looking at myself; why do I keep doing self-portraits?" This from Chuck Close at the beginning of *Chuck Close: An Elegant Portrait of the Art World's Leading Portraitist*, and it's a question—and a tension—that keeps great artists toiling their entire lives. Director Marion Cajori began working on this documentary in 1993, and continued on it until her death last year. Unseen and unheard throughout the nearly two-hour film, Cajori alternates focus between Close, who is in the months-long process of painting a wall-sized self-portrait, and his artist friends, most of whom have been Close's subjects. The result is an open, vivid symposium on not just Close's career, but that of many artists of the same vintage: Kiki Smith, Philip Glass, Robert Rauschenberg, and Brice Marden speak eloquently about Close, but Cajori goes further, constructing a primer on the work of those individuals as well, who define their own aesthetics by setting themselves in relief to Close.

At once grid-specific (Close works from large, pore-invading Polaroids) and wholly intuitive, Close's piecemeal, coherent style is wonderfully, almost winkingly well suited to Cajori's: Hers is a portrait of a portraitist that follows the process of painting a portrait that is not about a person but a process. Lest your head be spun by the interviewees' arty-speak, Cajori regularly slows the gorgeously crisp, high-def film down to the brush-stroke, tightly framing the hands of the wheelchair-bound Close (who

has painted via an elaborate system of assistants, levers, and pulleys since an occlusion of the spinal artery paralyzed him in the 1980s) as he layers color upon color into box upon box in isolation. Although the painting montages become somewhat burdensome in their repetition, and an epilogue feels academic in every sense, when Cajori finally pulls away from the finished portrait, the sense of a job done to brimming satisfaction is acutely twofold.