

CHUCK CLOSE

SYNOPSIS

“CHUCK CLOSE” is a feature length documentary about the unmistakably American contemporary painter, produced and directed by Marion Cajori, completed in 2007. Since 1969, when his work was first shown at the Bykert Gallery in Soho, Close has been best known as the re-inventor of portraiture. As we hear this articulate and affable man discuss his personal journey, as we watch him create a self-portrait from Polaroid to final stroke after 82 days, and as we hear numerous interviews with his subjects — friends, artists, family who discuss their own work and life in relation to his — we come to understand how far Close has transcended categories like realism, process and abstraction, and what a profound influence he has had on his generation of art.

HISTORY OF PRODUCTION

Cajori began work on this project shortly after completing “Joan Mitchell: Portrait of an Abstract Painter” in 1993. She envisioned a feature length film with a personal, conversational style which would include in-depth interviews with Close and his contemporaries. After four years of shooting and editing she decided to cut the material into a short film for television which was shown as “Chuck Close: A Portrait in Progress” on PBS in 1998, and nominated for an Emmy. By securing continued funding through the Art Kaleidoscope Foundation she was able to return to the full-length Chuck Close project, now released in High Definition format. She interviewed many more artists, including Brice Marden and Elizabeth Murray, added insightful commentary by Museum of Modern art curator Kirk Varnedoe and art historian Robert Storr, and expanded the focus of the film to include not only Close’s working process but the intricate ways he influenced and reflected the concerns of painting after de Kooning and Warhol. Cajori completed cutting the film in the summer of 2006, weeks before she succumbed to cancer at the age of 56. Filmmaker Ken Kobland, Marion’s longtime collaborating cinematographer, stepped in to complete the fine editing and post-production.

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PRINCIPAL CREDITS

Produced and Directed by
Marion Cajori

Editor
Marion Cajori

Fine Cut Editor
Ken Kobland

Cinematography
Mead Hunt
Ken Kobland
David Leitner

Associate Producer
Kipjaz Savoie

A production of
The Art Kaleidoscope Foundation

With:
(in order of appearance)

Janet Fish
Robert Rauschenberg
Alex Katz
Leslie Close
Elizabeth Murray
Kirk Varnedoe
Philip Glass
Joe Zucker
Brice Marden
Robert Storr
Klaus Kertess
Dorothea Rockburne
Mark Greenwold
Lucas Samaras
Maggie Close
Georgia Close
Arne Glimcher
Kiki Smith

“Portrait of Chuck” Composed by **Philip Glass** Performed by **Bruce Levingston**

ADDITIONAL CREDITS

Sound

Bob Blauvelt
Judy Karp
Sean Kelly
Frank Tonehazy
Bill Wander
Merce Williams
Andrew Yarme

Camera Assistants
Amy Bostwick
Robert Ragozzine
Kipjaz Savoie

Dolly Operators
Jasper Johnson
Steven Mann

Grips
David Kaufman
Hector Toledo

Additional Editing
Grace Tankersley

Assistant Editor
Amina Megali

Production Assistants
Kevin Doyle
David Kaufman
Anya Popova
Gianna Scaralia

Image Research
Maya Rivers

Post Production
Ken Kobland

Post Production Coördinator
Ellen LeCompte

On-Line Editing
David Gauff /Du Art Film and Video

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Foundation

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MARION CAJORI ON CHUCK CLOSE

As she did not live long enough to describe the final film she struggled to make, here are Marion Cajori's thoughts on the subject at the beginning of the project. They indicate the depth of her analysis and passion for art, and ably demonstrate what drew her to this artist's work.



“Self-Portrait, 1993” (The Pace Gallery, November, 1993)

The canvas is not big. Other paintings in the gallery are larger and project a more defiant exuberance. The modesty of this recent “Self-Portrait” by Chuck Close is supported by the subtlety and range of its blacks and whites. The painting gives the impression of gentle and easy matter-of-factness.

The simplicity and repetition of the painted marks don't betray a volatile order of emotions. There are no sudden movements of the paint brush—no splashing, no lunging, no scraping, no abruptness, hesitation, or hurry apparent in the strokes of paint. The marks are carefully applied, deliberately placed and patiently layered in the quadrille spaces that keep them each, at once on their own, and all together. There is a sense that the labor of painting was done step-by-step, trusting in an order of things, one that includes a spontaneous dimension and allows for the strike of luck. The marks evolve and present themselves, on the canvas, completely naturally.

The marks are dots, squares and circles. Their number and permutation evoke the rhythm of tantric graphics, of folkloric or mystical patterns of music, or even, of indigenous forms of craft and decoration. Improvisation and meditation spring to mind: processes in which the blind, purely sensual repetition of elemental sounds, movements of marks leads the self to experience oneness, infinity and joy.

But the discreet serenity emanating from the surface of this painting is thwarted by the untelling manner of the head's composition and stare. The face does not evince the state of mind of the self portrayed in the painting. Something is absent, withheld from the viewer's gaze. I am suddenly reminded that heads, of course, embody the mind and symbolize its inner life. The painting intends that I appreciate fully this almost too obvious, but still astonishing, fact of our organism.

Chuck Close's "Self-Portrait" frustrates facile psychological readings. The head's unfathomable expression resists that kind of entry and intimacy; it seems, instead, to insist that I not forget the material and hand-made origin of the painting. "Self-Portrait" is a picture of a man who is, literally and metaphysically, his painting; if the head could speak, it might declare: "I paint, therefore I am."

The painted marks cover the surface of the canvas never losing their identity as brush strokes. The image of the head floats through this surface, in no way beholden to the brush strokes that manage to give volume and line to it. This optical phenomenon has the delirious impermanent quality of a mirage: I feel caught in a moment inexplicably stilled between reality and illusion. I clearly see the elements of the painting's construction and recognize the artificiality of its image. Yet I also experience the head's strong life-likeness and its complete realism. In being made to observe the artifice and the materiality of the portrait's illusion, I must acknowledge the fictional nature of all reality and its perception.

An experiential shift takes place in my consideration of the painting. Each painted cell of the quadrille covering the canvas takes on the role of a molecule. Their multiplicity throughout the canvas area suggests a space of infinity. The head suddenly recedes behind the painting's surface. From this vantage point, it seems to be watching the very matter of its existence—the painted molecular surface it is staring at is its own substance. The artist has portrayed himself as a man who is not only self-made, but also self-aware.

The instability and fragility of the head's image suggest that the act of painting is existential. To lift the brush to the canvas and to paint a mark on its surface is an act of will. But the gesture which gives birth to the portrait could just as easily stop from doing so. The eyes that stare out from the shimmering surface of the painted face know the power of that gesture, the power of the hand that has painted them.

The "Self-Portrait" is suddenly suffused with vulnerability, anxiety, courage as it faces, and I face, the knowledge of its material dependency and impermanence—the knowledge that its being is a construct, an invention which with a brush stroke can be made to disappear. The lightness of the strike belies the tenacity of the hand that wields it and of the mind that is forged by both.

"Self-Portrait, 1993" impelled me to make this film about Chuck Close. I wanted to know about him and what went into the creation of this painting and others. My film traces the evolution of Chuck Close as an artist and the course his work has taken in becoming art.

QUOTES FROM THE FILM

Robert Rauschenberg, artist:

The early work had an uncontrolled rawness and the later work had a mystery that one may never decipher. It was like going into an Egyptian tomb and you don't read hieroglyphics.

Alex Katz, artist:

Chuck's work I thought of initially as amazing, the way it could control the space in a room from the up-close to the back. It was much more interesting than the story about the person... the story about the person is just another story about a person. You know, he's rich or he's handsome or he's powerful or he's weak or he's got soul. It seems very uninteresting next to the thrill of seeing an object that's magic.

Philip Glass, composer:

Chuck's work was always about...how the work was made and the result was the image. So the image became a kind of carrier for an idea, it became the occasion for the work to take place. If you think that the work is about a portrait then ...you've missed the work. ...Painting is about looking...music is about listening...dancing is about moving. ...What our generation did [is] we turned it around by introducing a very powerful concept which was the concept of process.

Brice Marden, artist:

There is something somewhat eerie about portraiture especially with that kind of intense focus where every little line and freckle is dealt with... ...It's almost as though you add up all the details and you get the soul. Whereas some people go for the soul... Chuck, in some sort of avoidance, can't help but getting it.

The harder he pressed the image away, the more the image comes up... It's this real struggle. It's way beyond the image. The image is a convenience.

Klaus Kertess, art historian:

He took photography to its most perverse conclusion when he started doing color paintings.

Dorothea Rockburne, artist:

When I first saw his work I didn't respond to it because it was big heads. ...Then I looked again. I looked a lot at the surface. Very few people have gotten past Matisse, and he was clearly doing that, pushing the parameters of every area, treating the head as a continent of art.

Kiki Smith, artist:

It is this sort of enormously vulnerable situation to be in, having people looking sort of through your pores into you body.

Georgia Close, daughter:

He has always symbolized for me the power of finding something that you love.

Kirk Varnedoe (1946-2003) art historian:

Chuck exacted a terrible price on himself, inflicted a terrific astringency: knocked color out of the work, decided that it was going to be incredibly piecemeal, without the touch of the hand, that he was going to use an airbrush, he was going to use minute amounts or droplets of ink. Everything about those early portraits have this extreme minimalism. And they have a toughness, a rawness and a grittiness. They seemed, I think, at the time, colossally dumb. It was an extremely rote task to paint this giant, seemingly inexpressive mug-shot on this scale. There was something inexplicable: why one would want to give over so much time to create this much raw information. And now when we look at the lush, brilliantly colored canvasses, there is something incredibly released about this work. Having sucked what seemed to be all the life out of his art, this new art is the miraculous repetition of the promise of what the twentieth century can deliver.

Robert Storr, art historian:

You would think that a Close painting, by virtue of its frontality and its bigness would push people away. People go in close to those painting and they look at them inch by inch as if the were doctors in an office... a dermatological approach to art. ...Once the marks begin to dissolve, if you will, the sort of fantastic painting is what you see... you get these series of double meaning. You get a big aggressive picture that pushes you away, but simultaneously draws you in... and ugly thing that draws your attention and as you are drawn in becomes a more beautiful thing... All these double meaning or contradictory responses are what the paintings are about. The paintings are not about realism. They are realism in use. They're not about psychology, but they provoke psychological responses and invite psychological guess work on the part of the viewer... even if you don't know who these people are.

Chuck deals with sections of the body rather than with the whole body. But the section he's chosen is complete unto itself.

It's not whether there's a picture or not a picture. It's whether there is harmony or disharmony, whether there is completeness or incompleteness, whether the world can be made whole or whether it is inevitably fragmented. ...Chuck clearly belongs in the category of artists who may deal in fragments but it's in order to construct something that [the work] finally announces itself.

MARION CAJORI BIO

Excerpted from the obituary

By ROBERTA SMITH (New York Times. August 29, 2006)

Marion Cajori, an independent filmmaker who chronicled the creative process in documentaries about artists, died on Aug. 8 in Manhattan. She was 56 and lived in Manhattan and Setauket, N.Y.

Over her career, Ms. Cajori worked as a director, producer and writer. She came by her interest in artists naturally, as the child of two New York painters, Charles Cajori and Anne Child. Her parents separated when she was young, and she grew up in art circles in New York and Paris.

Ms. Cajori studied painting and filmmaking at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, earning a B.F.A. in 1974. She was a member of the feminist editorial collective Heresies in the early 1970's.

Her first film, "Sept. 11, 1972," was a Minimalist portrait of sunlight in her studio, made with the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth. She also collaborated with the video artist Joan Jonas and the director Lizzie Borden. "White Lies," her narrative short-form film of 1981, gave Willem Dafoe one of his first cinematic roles.

In 1990 she established the Art Kaleidoscope Foundation, which was co-producer, with the independent filmmaker Christian Blackwood, of her first widely known film, the award-winning 1992 documentary "Joan Mitchell: Portrait of an Abstract Painter." The film presented an unusually intimate view of this famously private, intractable painter, whom Ms. Cajori first met when she was 9.

In 1998, PBS broadcast Ms. Cajori's Emmy-nominated special, "Chuck Close: A Portrait in Progress." She recently completed a second full-length feature about Mr. Close and the artists and curators whose portraits he paints, which is to be released this year.

Since 1992, she had been working on a feature-length film about the sculptor Louise Bourgeois with the art critic Amei Wallach. Ms. Wallach said she expected to complete the film (working title, "Louise Bourgeois: The Spider and The Mistress") by the end of 2007.



MARION CAJORI, director

STILLS FROM **CHUCK CLOSE**



KLAUS KERTESS



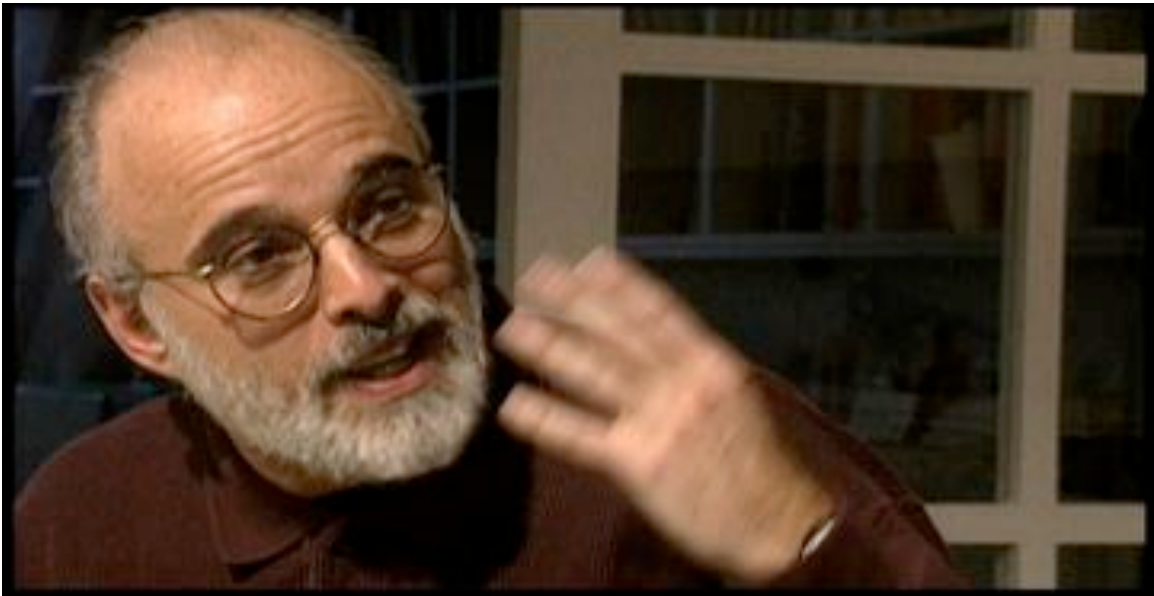


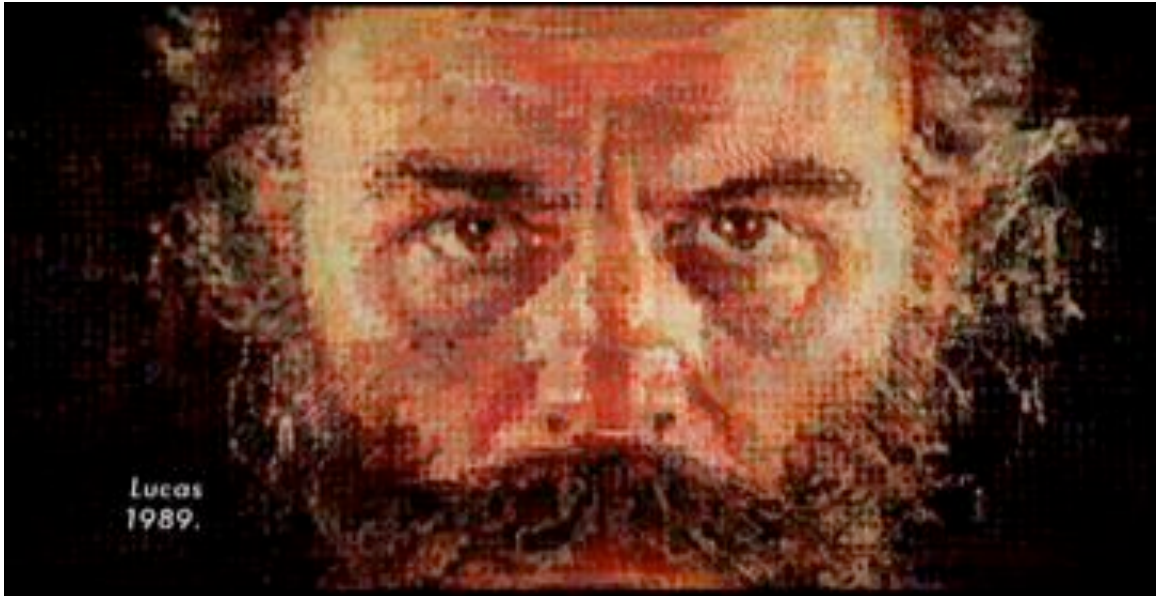
DOROTHEA ROCKBURNE





MARK GREENWOLD





LUCAS SAMARAS





ELIZABETH MURRAY



CHUCK CLOSE



PHILIP GLASS





ROBERT STORR



BRICE MARDEN



KIKI SMITH





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