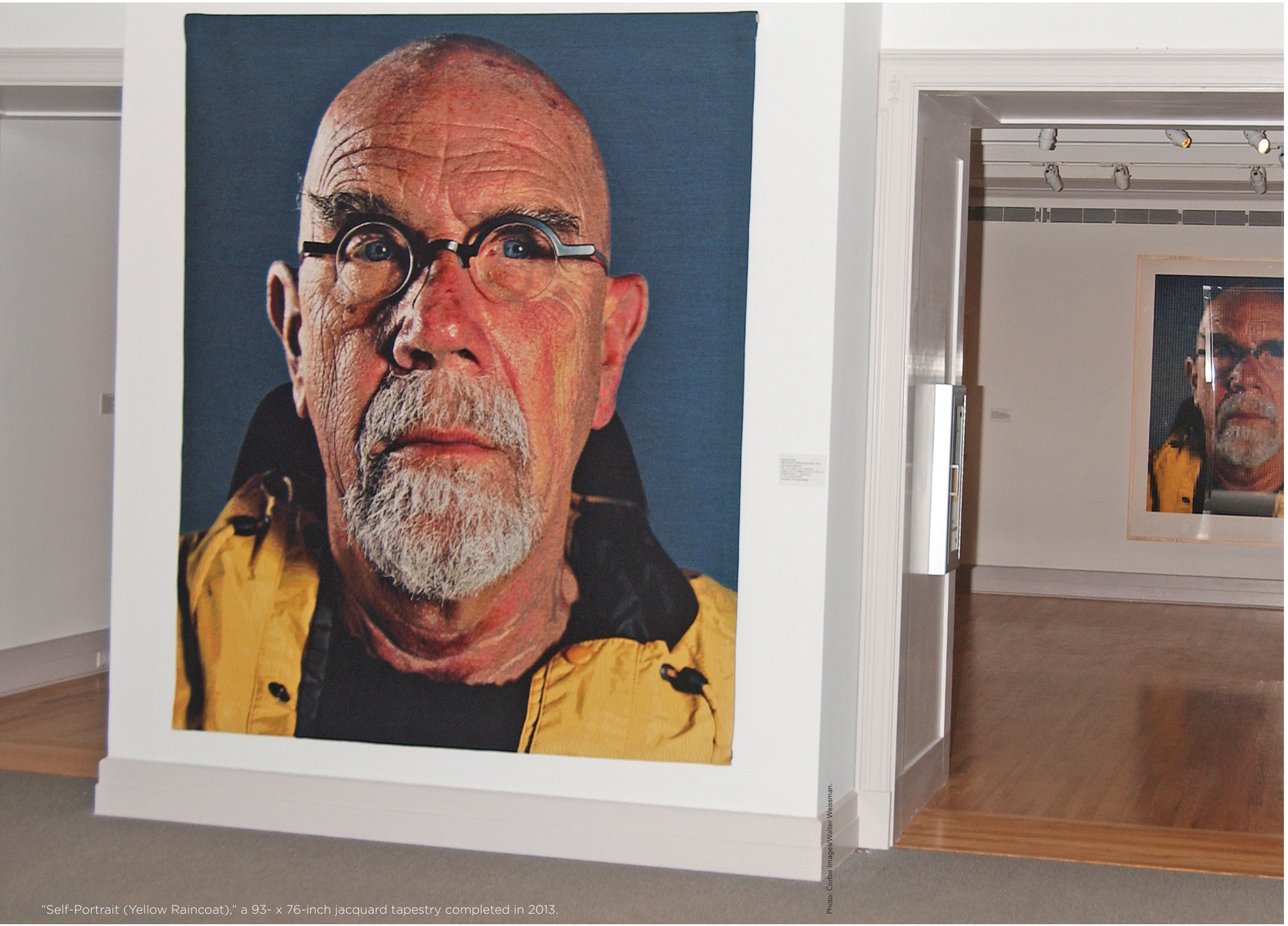


Photo: Corbis Images/Walter Weissman.

"Self-Portrait (Yellow Raincoat)," a 93- x 76-inch jacquard tapestry completed in 2013.

Face Time with Chuck Close

This celebrated painter has not let extraordinary physical challenges prevent him from achieving one of the art world's most inspiring careers.

The artist in his East Village studio in New York City.

by JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN

Chuck Close was 48 and already one of the hottest artists in New York when he suffered a catastrophe that should have ended his career. It was 1988 and he was presenting an art teaching award at the mayor's residence when chest pains rapidly grew in intensity. A policeman accompanied him to a nearby hospital where he had a convulsive seizure. He remained conscious, but when the shaking stopped he told doctors he couldn't feel anything or move. Tests revealed that a collapsed artery had damaged the spinal nerve, leaving him a partial quadriplegic paralyzed from the shoulders down.

"The Event," as Close refers to it, might easily have concluded his life as a painter, but seven months in a rehabilitation facility enabled him to recover limited use of his upper arms. His former wife, Leslie, urged therapists to provide him with painting materials, and strapped to a wheelchair he struggled to make art again.

A quarter-century later, Close is an artist with a disability, but he is not a disabled artist. He not only resumed his vocation, but continued to evolve new stylistic nuances and technical forms, producing critically acclaimed artworks and flourishing professionally. His is one of the most remarkable comebacks that the art world—or any world—has ever seen.

Success has brought Close a long way from Monroe, a paper mill town north of Seattle where he was born in 1940. His father was a sheetmetal worker, handyman and minor inventor, and his mother a classically trained pianist who taught the instrument at home. They eked out a living, but their lives were marked by tragedy. His father was constantly in frail health with heart problems and Close himself suffered from dyslexia, a learning disability, and various illnesses.

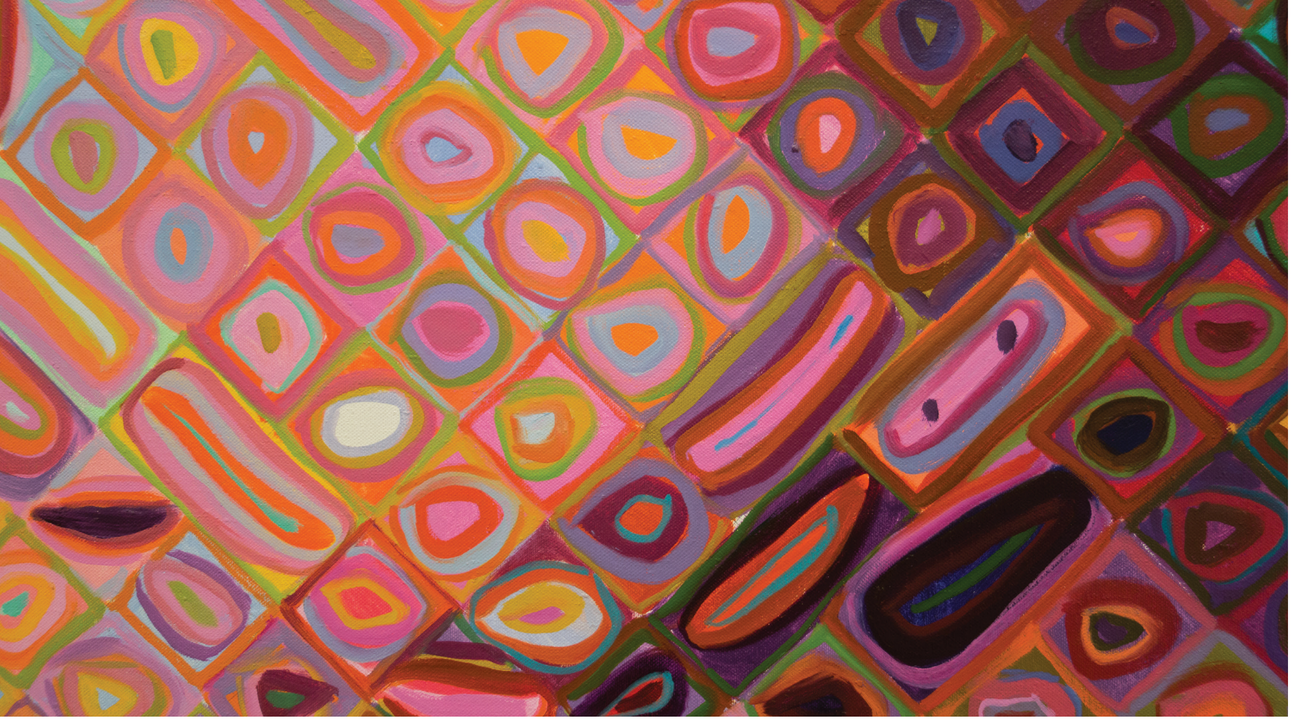
When he was 10, bedridden with a kidney

A custom-designed leather harness with Velcro straps and a metal ring helps the artist grip his brushes.

inflammation, he saw his father fall down in the next room where Close found him lying in a pool of blood and tried without success to revive him. Soon afterwards his father died of a cerebral stroke at 48, the same age at which his son would suffer the near-fatal artery collapse. "You learn when you lose someone at such an early age that you will be happy again and that you can survive almost anything," Close says, adding that the experience later helped him accept his own debilitating medical issues. ▷

A corner of the studio with a portrait of artist Cindy Sherman in progress.

Photos: Jason Kaufman.



A detail shows the mosaic of tiny abstractions that make up the “prismatic grid” oil painting “Robert.”

Faces and Fame

Close’s elder daughter Georgia says her father embodies “the power of finding something that you love.” And what Close loves is making pictures of heads. He never depicts landscapes, still lifes, action scenes or abstractions. His sole subject is the human figure, typically shown from the shoulders up, in paintings, prints and photographs.

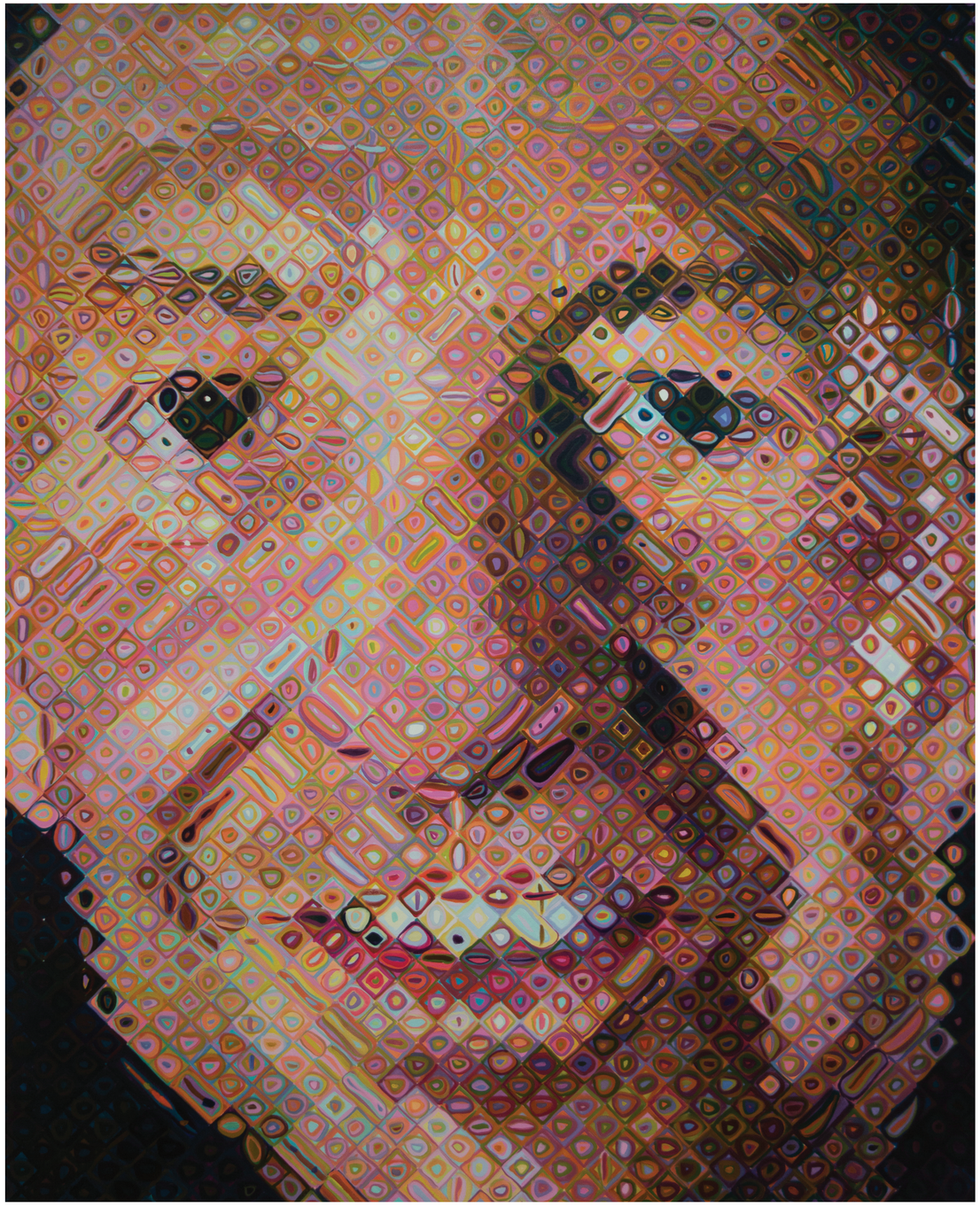
Close believes his obsession with portraits is a way to compensate for faceblindness (prosopagnosia), a condition that prevents him from easily recognizing people. (His friends Brad Pitt and psychologist Oliver Sacks also have prosopagnosia.) “If you turn your head a half an inch it’s a whole new head I haven’t seen before,” he says, but he can memorize a face when it is flattened out into a two-dimensional image.

Though most of his sitters are family or friends, his portrayals of them are not flattering or sentimental. Close gives us expressionless faces in extreme close-up, replete with blemishes and wrinkles, eyes staring straight at us—more clinical mug shots than vivid portraits of loved ones or admired colleagues.

He has painted a pantheon of New York artists—Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, Richard Serra, Lucas Samaras, Alex Katz, Kiki Smith and his longtime friend Mark Greenwold, among others—all based on his own photographs. Though he refuses to make commissioned portraits, he could not turn down a request in 2006 from the National Portrait Gallery to paint President Bill Clinton, who had awarded him the National Medal of Arts. (Close made images of Bill and Hillary Clinton, Al Gore and Barack Obama to raise funds for their campaigns.) He has portrayed musician-friends Lou Reed, Paul Simon and composer Philip Glass. But he is perhaps best known for the dozens of self-portraits that chronicle his bespectacled visage from wild-haired youth to bald sage with a wizened goatee.

Nearly every major museum of modern art has acquired his work and five have organized traveling retrospectives, including The Museum of Modern Art. He has had more than 150 solo exhibitions and participated in some 800 group shows, including two editions of Documenta, three Venice Biennales and five Whitney Biennials. Private collectors pay upwards of $2 million to own an important piece; in 2005 billionaire Eli Broad bought an early painting at Sotheby’s for $4.8 million. ▷

Photos: Jason Kaufman.



1997 portrait of artist “Robert Rauschenberg” in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

The Artist at Work

Close has mastered a stunning range of media, including over-lifesize paintings, drawings and virtually every graphic medium, as well as tapestry, Polaroid photography and the 19th-century Daguerreotype process.

When I visit his cavernous first-floor studio in downtown Manhattan, large-format color Polaroids of President Obama lean against a wall. Woven tapestries of Lou Reed and a self-portrait hang side-by-side facing a painting of model Kate Moss. The end wall is dominated by a 10-foot canvas on which a blurred image appears within a pattern of colored squares. It's a work in progress, based on a delicate watercolor of artist Cindy Sherman that hangs to one side. Brushes are in a plastic container on a stand to the left, and paint tubes are arrayed on a rolling table to the right. This is where Close works.

He explains that he has no grip, and demonstrates how he uses his hands and mouth to maneuver a brush handle into a metal ring attached to a Velcro-strapped splint on his right wrist. He also tapes brushes and pencils directly to his hand. From early on he worked on a large scale and used a forklift to reach the top of his canvases. Now he has a custom-made motorized apparatus that allows him to raise, rotate and lower the canvas through a slot in the floor, so he can always paint at wheelchair level. Assistants squeeze out the colors he needs, then Close mixes the pigments and uses two hands to control the brush, rarely dragging it more than a few inches in any direction.

Despite his disability Close's use of assistants is minimal. "They stretch canvases and grid them off, put them on the lift and bring them up. But no one ever makes a stroke that I didn't make myself," he says. "I love Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, but I don't understand why anyone would want to be the chairman of the board of an artmaking factory. The fun part is making the paintings. No one gets more pleasure day in and day out from what he or she does for a living than I do."

He paints three hours in the morning and three after lunch, wearing a telephone headset and whistling along to jazz, opera, Bob Dylan or his friend Paul Simon. A painting takes three months or more to complete; he has made only approximately 185 paintings in his entire career. Every few years, he has produced enough material for a show at Pace gallery, which has represented him since 1977. The next show is slated for 2015. ▷

At home Close displays his own portraits alongside others by modern artists from Man Ray to Picasso.

Photo: Jason Kaufman.

The artist at work on “Cindy II,” an oil-on-canvas portrait of Cindy Sherman completed in 1988.

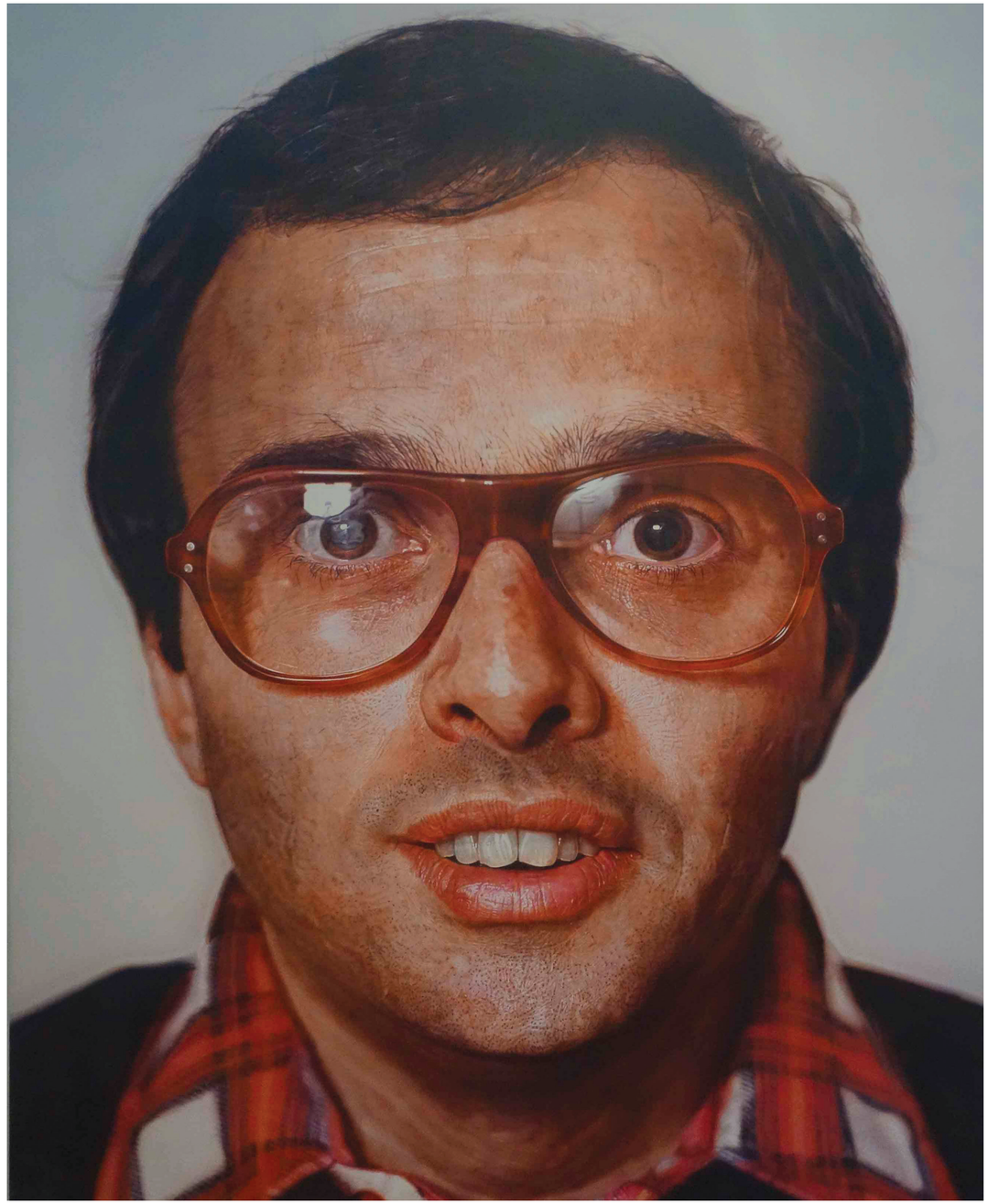
Learning to Paint

Close says it was easy to find his metier. “I had no other skills,” he says, explaining that dyslexia and memory problems limited his academic prospects, and neuromuscular issues made him unfit for sports or manual labor. He was told to aim for trade school, but what interested him was art. When he was 5, his father made an easel and bought him oil paints from a mail-order catalogue. A few years later Close took lessons with an academically trained woman in Tacoma. “We were drawing from nude models when I was 8 years old, which made me the envy of the neighborhood,” he says, noting that the models were the teacher’s roommates and that he believes the house doubled as a bordello.

After junior college he wound up in the art program at University of Washington, making Abstract Expressionist canvases in the manner of his idol Willem de Kooning. He graduated in 1962 and entered the MFA program at Yale where classmates included Richard Serra, Brice Marden and other artists whose faces he would later paint. A grant funded post-graduate study in Vienna, then after a brief stint teaching art at University of Massachusetts in Amherst, in 1967 he married his former student, Leslie Rose, and moved to SoHo where they had two daughters.

To advance his career Close needed to abandon his derivative Abstract Expressionism. He decided to paint enlargements of photographs—about as far from de Kooning’s action painting as he could get. Nothing could have been more radically out of step with current trends. Critics were declaring that painting was dead, Pop artists were appropriating images from consumer culture, Minimal and Conceptual art were on the rise and a portrait painter seemed positively retrograde, especially one who relied on photographs. He wasn’t entirely on his own—the so-called Photorealists were painting exact replicas of snapshots and critics saw Close as part of the group, although he never considered himself a member. His later work would more freely explore the intersection of craft and technology. ▷

Photos: Getty Images/Margaret Miller; (facing) Jason Kaufman.



“Mark,” 1978–79, a colossal 9- x 7-foot acrylic painting of Close’s longtime friend, the artist Mark Greenwold, hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

Rigorous Method

Close photographs his sitters with a large-format Polaroid camera, chooses an image, then overlays a grid on a transparent sheet and shifts it around until he likes the way the lines organize the facial features. Assistants tape the transparency onto the photograph, number the columns and rows, and draw a scaled-up grid on a canvas that is placed on the motorized easel.

Close then uses several distinct painting techniques to attain his results. One replicates by hand the way that color photographs are printed, and involves superimposing a red, yellow and blue paint layer based on color separations of the source image. The Cindy painting—he always titles works by his sitter's first name—is an example of this "continuous tone" process.

A second technique involves using ink dots of various densities applied with fingerprints or stamp pads, sometimes using a projection of the photograph as a guide. "I discovered that about 150 dots is the minimum number to make a specific recognizable person," he says, but most are far more intricate: One of his drawings contains more than 100,000 individually marked squares.

His most impressive achievements are dazzling mosaic-like portraits. Each quadrant of the grid contains colors and shapes that miraculously combine to depict his subject. To create these "prismatic grids," Close draws on his singularly refined understanding of color. Working from top to bottom and left to right, he begins by methodically filling each square with purple, orange, blue, green and other tones unrelated to the face he plans to portray. Then he overpaints each monochrome quadrant with squares, concentric circles, and amoeboid ellipses in colors that may or may not correspond to the skin, lips or hair he is representing. He refers to the original gridded photograph to judge the relative light and dark he needs in each quadrant. The result is a pixellated patchwork of miniature abstract paintings that from a distance reads as a photograph of the sitter.

How he pulls this off is a mystery. "I just do it out of my head," he says. "I know what color and value and intensity that square is supposed to be, but it's more fun to give myself a challenge. If I put down pink or peach, that's not so far from skin. So to make it more interesting and complicated I purposefully make it turquoise or purple or mustard," then he adds strokes of other colors until he has the desired result.

"The metaphor I use is golf," he says, "because golf is the only sport in which you move from general to specific with any number of midcourse corrections. I wouldn't be able to pick the colors first and predict what's going to work," he says, "but once I have one color and a second, I can see where it's going—if I made it too red maybe the next color's going to be blue or green. It's always swinging back and forth from a little too much this way and that. Each little square is a little journey that moves it towards what I want."

It is tempting to see fate at work in Close's having adopted painting from gridded photographs as his signature method. Had he not done so he might have been unable to continue to work after his paralysis. But working square by square, each quadrant requires little extended motion to complete, making it possible for him to continue the arc of his development as if uninterrupted by The Event. In fact, he might be painting similar works today even if he had not been paralyzed. ▷

Photo: Jason Kaufman.

A close-up of the thousands of individual marks that fill the gridded portrait "Lucas," 1986–87, a depiction of artist Lucas Samaras, in The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Recently completed tapestries portray musician Lou Reed and artists Lucas Samaras and Roy Lichtenstein.

The Reluctant Portraitist

Despite his penchant for depicting faces, Close long denied that he was a portrait painter. He saw himself as dealing with theoretical issues having to do with Conceptualism, Miminalism and Process art. His subjects were just "heads" that served as a motif to work with. But he has come around to appreciate that his art belongs to the portrait tradition.

When he brings me to his nearby apartment he shows off a sizeable collection of portraits, old and new. A hallway is lined with dozens of portrait prints, drawings and photographs by Picasso, Matisse, Max Beckmann, Diane Arbus, Andy Warhol and lesser-known artists. The living room is hung with Old Master paintings, including a Trecento Florentine triptych, a portrait attributed to Tintoretto, and other Italian and Dutch paintings. Each conjures a figure from the past as Close's own pictures will present future generations with figures from our time.

On the Horizon

Along with paintings, prints and photographs, Close is currently creating colossal mosaics for the West 86th Street station of the Second Avenue subway line, now under construction, using portraits of Jasper Johns, Zhang Huan and other artists to reflect the diversity of the ridership.

At this stage of his life, he enjoys the sort of existence that hard work and success can yield. He is a member of the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Letters, President Obama's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities and, until recently, the New York City Cultural Affairs Advisory Commission. He frequently sits on panels and speaks to the media on everything from arts funding to tax legislation.

He lives with multimedia artist Sienna Shields, age 37, dividing his time between the city and a beachfront home and studio that he designed in Long Beach, a middle-class community 45 minutes from Manhattan. He often attends exhibition openings wearing colorful suits made of printed textiles that he and Shields purchase in Paris and have tailored to her designs. He says he wants people to know how happy he is. Being able to work is something of a miracle. "Thank God, if there's one thing I can do," he pauses. "Aside from my family and friends, painting is the thing that means the most to me." ◆

Photo: Corbis Images/Walter Weissman.