American artist noted for his highly inventive techniques used to paint the human face. He is best known for his large-scale, Photo-Realist portraits.

Close began taking art lessons as a child and at age 14 saw an exhibition of Jackson Pollock’s abstract paintings, which helped inspire him to become a painter. He studied at the University of Washington School of Art (B.A., 1962) and at the Yale University School of Art and Architecture (B.F.A., 1963; M.F.A., 1964), and in 1964 he won a Fulbright scholarship to study in Vienna. While teaching at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (1965–67), he gradually rejected the elements of Abstract Expressionism that had initially characterized his work.

Close’s first solo exhibition included a series of enormous black-and-white portraits that he had painstakingly transformed from small photographs to colossal paintings. He reproduced and magnified both the mechanical shortcomings of the photograph—blurriness and distortion—and the flaws of the human face: bloodshot eyes, broken capillaries, and enlarged pores. To make his paintings, Close superimposed a grid on the photograph and then transferred a proportional grid to his gigantic canvases. He then applied acrylic paint with an airbrush and scraped off the excess with a razor blade to duplicate the exact shadings of each grid in the photo. By imposing such restraints, Close hoped to discover new ways of seeing and creating.

Throughout his career, Close continued to concentrate on portraits—from the neck up—based on photographs he had taken. In addition to self-portraits, the portraits were usually of friends, many of whom were prominent in the art world. These images represent a very human, flawed view of the subjects, given the scale of attention given to imperfections, while also presenting a rather grand, iconic view of the sitters, given the monumental and confrontational quality of the works. During the 1970s and ’80s, Close began to use colour and to experiment with a variety of media and techniques. One technique involved simulating the printing process: he used only cyan, magenta, and yellow and applied one layer of colour at a time to the canvas. He developed one of his most innovative techniques for his “fingerprint series,” in which he inked his thumb and forefinger and pressed them to the canvas to achieve a subtle range of grays. Viewed up close, the whorled patterns of his fingerprints can easily be seen; from a distance the method is unidentifiable, and the fingerprints combine to create an illusionistic whole.

In 1988 a spinal blood clot left Close almost completely paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair. A brush-holding device strapped to his wrist and forearm, however, allowed him to continue working. In the 1990s he replaced the minute detail of his earlier paintings with a grid of tiles daubed with colourful elliptical and ovoid shapes. Viewed up close, each tile was in itself an abstract painting; when seen from a distance, the tiles came together to form a dynamic deconstruction of the human face. In 1998 the Museum of Modern Art in New York City mounted a major retrospective of Close’s portraits. Close has been called a Photo-Realist, a Minimalist, and an Abstract Expressionist but, as the 1998 retrospective proved, his commitment to his unique vision and his evolving techniques defy any easy categorization.

The remarkable career of artist Chuck Close extends beyond his completed works of art. More than just a painter, photographer, and printmaker, Close is a builder who, in
his words, builds “painting experiences for the viewer.” Highly renowned as a painter, Close is also a master printmaker, who has, over the course of more than 30 years, pushed the boundaries of traditional printmaking in remarkable ways.

Almost all of Close’s work is based on the use of a grid as an underlying basis for the representation of an image. This simple but surprisingly versatile structure provides the means for “a creative process that could be interrupted repeatedly without... damaging the final product, in which the segmented structure was never intended to be disguised.” It is important to note that none of Close’s images are created digitally or photo-mechanically. While it is tempting to read his gridded details as digital integers, all his work is made the old-fashioned way—by hand.

Close’s paintings are labor intensive and time consuming, and his prints are more so. While a painting can occupy Close for many months, it is not unusual for one print to take upward of two years to complete. Close has complete respect for, and trust in, the technical processes—and the collaboration with master printers—essential to the creation of his prints. The creative process is as important to Close as the finished product. “Process and collaboration” are two words that are essential to any conversation about Close’s prints.

**Style/Significance:**
In the time of Abstract Expressionism, Chuck Close went against the mainstream style and redefine portraiture like no other artist. Chuck Close is a photorealist who took realism to a whole other level. Close paints strictly from photos, transferring the photo on to canvases that are typically three meters high. He uses grids to transfer images from photographs to the canvas, enhancing details along the way to create a shockingly lifelike image. His earlier work captured the photographic feel. He even went as far as to blur out things farther away from the face the way the lens blurs out the background in a photo.

A large part of this earlier realism is the emphasis. Unlike traditional artists who focus on the eyes, Chuck Close pays a lot of attention to the skins and wrinkles as well as details in the hair. By capturing every wrinkle and every pore, he brings out the undeniable realism in the painting. The series of images done in this technique started off as black and white images and eventually evolved into color during the 1970’s. In the 1980’s, he started towards abstraction. His best known technique is the fingerprint paintings in which he used an inkpad and his own fingerprints to fill in the grid of his canvas. The canvases got bigger, but the realism was still there, in fact, if a person were to stand at a distance where he/she could see the entire image, it would be very difficult for that person to tell that the piece was created with fingerprints. Once the person gets close enough to see the fingerprints, it is very unlikely that he/she can get a good view of the piece as a whole.

His most current stage of abstraction is one developed after he became partially...
paralyzed. He fills each of his grids with an oval composed of a few rings of bright colors. The style is still realistic, but not to the degree of Superrealism. Average paintings done with this technique is typically smaller than his earlier work.

Chuck Close
February 26-May 26, 1998

A retrospective of the work of American artist Chuck Close (b. 1940), whose monumental, psychologically charged portraits of distinguished fellow artists and anonymous sitters fundamentally redefined the genre of portraiture, opens at The Museum of Modern Art on February 26. Comprising some 90 paintings, drawings, and photographs, Chuck Close provides the first opportunity to view the important body of painterly canvases the artist created during the past 17 years in the context of his earlier work, which eschewed expressive gesture. This exhibition reveals the broad variety of techniques and mediums the artist has deployed throughout his highly influential career and also demonstrates that Close’s images, which are often associated with Photo-Realism, are more strongly grounded in the Minimalist, Conceptual, and Process aesthetics of the late 1960s.

Organized by Robert Storr, Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, remains on view at MoMA through May 26, and then travels nationally (see schedule, page 5). A print component of the show, entitled, Focus: Chuck Close Editioned Works was organized by Deborah Wye, Chief Curator, Department of Prints and Illustrated Books. Including about 35 works, this exhibition is on view in the Museum’s Print Department galleries. This exhibition is made possible by Michael and Judy Ovitz. A generous grant is also provided by Banana Republic. The Museum gratefully acknowledges additional support from Jon and Mary Shirley. Installed chronologically, Chuck Close traces the artist’s career from his Big Self-Portrait (1967-68), the first signature painting he produced, to Self-Portrait (1997), the vivid oil painting that is one of his most recent works. Together these works constitute an ongoing experiment in rendering the particulars of the human form by using rigorous technique and strict format. “Each picture is a kind of isolation chamber in which a contest has been staged between structure on the one hand…and, on the other hand, the organic contours, masses, textures, and tints that compose a person’s singular presence,” writes Storr in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition.

As a young artist in the mid-1960s, Close, like many artists then active—Ad Reinhardt, Richard Serra, Jasper Johns, and Sol LeWitt—turned away from the model of Abstract Expressionism to develop a simple but severe working method. Denying himself expressive gesture, Close built shapes and tonal variations within a working grid by repeated bursts of mechanically sprayed paint.
Chuck Close’s paintings are labor-intensive and time-consuming, and his prints are more so. While a painting can occupy Close for months, it is not unusual for one print to take upward of two years to complete, from conception to final edition. And with few exceptions—separating the Mylars for silk screens or carving the woodblocks—Close insists on a decidedly interactive and “hands-on” approach to the creation of his prints. He carves linoleum blocks, draws on and applies acid to his etching plates, and personally directs all the intricate handwork involved in pulp-paper multiples. He also revels in his collaboration with master printers: “Like any corporation, I have the benefit of the brainpower of everyone who is working for me. It all ends up being my work, the corporate me, but everyone extends ideas and comes up with suggestions.” “It is a very different attitude than coming into an atelier, drawing on a plate, and giving it over to printers to edition. My prints have been truly collaborative even though control is something that I give up reluctantly.” (Excerpt from “Introduction of Chuck Close Prints,” by Terrie Sultan) The works of Chuck Close shown on this page are products of this collaboration. By clicking on each image, you will be able to view the print at various stages in the process of its creation.

October 6, 2009 through January 10, 2010

Close made his first print as a professional artist in 1972, and his innovation in printmaking is now legend. In addition to including finished prints, this exhibition featured full suites of Close’s preliminary proofs and various states of editions. The exhibition also included woodblocks and etching plates for several of Close’s more complex images. Chuck Close Prints premiered at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; the San Jose Museum of Art was its only northern California venue.

Chuck Close Prints: Process and Collaboration was organized by Blaffer Gallery, the Art Museum of the University of Houston. The exhibition and publication have been generously underwritten by the Neuberger Berman Foundation. Additional support was made possible by the Lannan Foundation, Jon and Mary Shirley, The Eleanor and Frank Freed Foundation and Houston Endowment Inc., Jonathan and Marita Fairbanks, Dorene and Frank Herzog, Andrew and Gretchen McFarland, Carey Shuart, The Wortham Foundation, Inc., Karen and Eric Pulaski, Suzanne Slesin and Michael Steinberg, and Texas Commission on the Arts.

Chuck Close Prints: Process and Collaboration

September 13 through November 23, 2003

For more than 30 years, Chuck Close—renowned as one of America’s foremost artists in any media—has explored the art of printmaking in his continuing investigation into the principles of perception. This exhibition provides a comprehensive survey of the full extent of Close’s long involvement with the varied forms and processes of printmaking, and the first such investigation in more than twelve years of what can only be termed a prodigious accomplishment in the field.
Featuring images ranging from 1972 to the present, Chuck Close Prints shows the artist’s range of invention in etching, aquatint, lithography, handmade paper, direct gravure, silkscreen, traditional Japanese woodcut, and reduction linocut, among others. The exhibition includes approximately 125 images, and is designed especially to highlight several series of state and progressive proofs to provide viewers with a seldom-seen view of the technical and creative process required to realize these complex images.

**Chuck Close Prints: Process and Collaboration** was organized by the Blaffer Gallery, the Art Museum of the University of Houston. The exhibition and publication have been generously underwritten by the Neuberger Berman Foundation. The exhibition was made possible, in part, by a major grant from Lannan Foundation and Jon and Mary Shirley, and by generous grants from The Eleanor and Frank Freed Foundation and Houston Endowment Inc. Financial support has also been provided by Jonathan and Marita Fairbanks, Dorene and Frank Herzog, Andrew and Gretchen McFarland, Carey Shuart, and The Wortham Foundation, Inc., with additional funds from Karen and Eric Pulaski, and Suzanne Slesin and Michael Steinberg.

**Chuck Close** is associated with the style of painting called *Photorealism* or *Superrealism*. In this style, artists in the early 1970s created a link between representational systems of painting and photography. *Photorealism* developed as a reaction to the detachment of Minimalism and conceptual art, which did not depict representational images. *Photorealists* frequently used a grid technique to enlarge a photograph and reduce each square to formal elements of design. Each grid was its own little work of art. Many of the *Photorealists* used the airbrush technique.

Big Self-Portrait, in black and white, was the first of Close’s mural-sized works painted from photographs. This painting took four months to complete. To make this work, Close took several photographs of himself in which his head and neck filled the frame. From these he selected one of the images and made two 11 x 14-inch enlargements. On one of the photographs he drew a grid, then lettered and numbered each square. Using both the gridded and ungridded photographs, he carefully transferred the photographic image square by square onto a large canvas measuring 107 1/2 x 83 1/2 inches. He used acrylic paint and an airbrush to include every detail.
When Close was making his painting he was concerned with the visual elements—shapes, textures, volume, shadows, and highlights—of the photograph itself. He also was interested in how a photograph shows some parts of the image in focus, or sharp, and some out-of-focus, or blurry. In this portrait the tip of the cigarette and the hair on the back of his head were both out-of-focus in the photograph so he painted them that way in Big Self-Portrait.

Artists frequently change their style of work and Close experienced a tragedy that subsequently influenced his painting style. In 1988, he had a spinal blood clot, which left him a quadriplegic, unable to move either his legs or his arms. With a paint brush clamped between his teeth, he developed a new way to paint. His portraits, the photos, and canvases were gridded off by assistants and then he used his mouth brush to paint, using the techniques of grisaille and pointillism within the grids. This is similar to technique used by the Impressionists and Pointillists. The result was still a canvas of mini-paintings, which when viewed from a distance are seen as a single or unified image.

Select Timeline

- **2002** – After Close works with master printer Yasu Shibata for over two years, the Japanese woodblock print Emma is completed.
- **1997** - RISD Honorary Doctorate form the Rhode Island School of Design, Province
- **1996** – Received Honorary Doctor of Fine Art from Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.
- **1995** – Receives Honorary Doctor of Fine Art from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.
- **1992** – Close is elected a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, New York.
- **1986** – creates his first Japanese-style woodblock print, Leslie, working in Kyoto with Japanese master printer Tadashi Toda and master carver Shunzo Matsuda
- **1983** - Begins fingerprinting in color, the first work being John/Color Fingerprint.
- **1977** – Chuck Close works for several months in his studio creating the plate for Self-Portrait
• **1962-1964** – Close attends graduate school at Yale University, where he serves as assistant to master printer Gabor Peterdi. He received an MFA.