

Close & company: a traveling survey of Chuck Close's prints and the devices used to make them offers insights into the collaborative processes of contemporary U.S. workshops – Prints

by Faye Hirsch

A wry exchange in the catalogue for the exhibition "Chuck Close Prints: Process and Collaboration" tells us much about collaborative printmaking at its most ambitious. It comes amid a handful of interviews conducted by curator Terrie Sultan with Close and some of the printers he has worked with over the past 30 years. Close is speaking with Yasuyuki Shibata, a master of the notoriously challenging technique of Japanese-style, or ukiyo-e, woodcut, used for *Emma/Woodcut* (2002), a print then in progress, based on a painting of Close's infant niece completed two years earlier (it is the only canvas in the show). "How long have you been working on this print?" asks Close. "One and one-half years," Shibata responds. "You know," says Close, "the painting only took three months to make." (1)

Emma/Woodcut is a work of great virtuosity that easily rivals any of Close's more "monumental" achievements (i.e., his paintings, including the one on which it is based). Here is the signature full-face portrait, though more unusually of a baby and--also uncharacteristically for Close--smiling. (2) As in the large gridded paintings that Close began to make from the late 1980s onward, the image disperses like glass in a kaleidoscope at close hand and coalesces from afar, flickering within a surface broken down into constituent multicolored donuts, lozenges and chevrons arranged in diamond-shaped cells. *Emma/Woodcut* is rendered light and buoyant by the execution and medium, the expert cutting and printing and the translucent, water-based inks. In the end, it took nearly two years (with Shibata spending many of his working hours in a humidified plastic tent to keep the paper damp), 27 blocks, 113 colors and 132 pressings per sheet to make each print in the edition of 55.

Such Herculean labors are not rare in the accounts of the 34 editions, in a variety of print mediums, which are on view in the exhibition, organized by Sultan at the Blaffer Gallery, Art Museum of the University of Houston (and presently at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, where it varies in some details). The show also features many of the blocks, plates and other devices used to produce the prints, as well as selected proofs and a few unique works--more than 120 objects altogether. (3) Close's printmaking career is replete with superlatives: *Emma/Woodcut*, with an image size of 36 by 30 inches, may well be one of the largest Japanese-style woodcuts ever made; the 51-by-41 1/2-inch *Keith/Mezzotint* (1972) the largest "mezzotint" to date. (4) *Alex/Reduction Block* (1993), a screenprint based on a giant linocut, might be among the most spectacular rescues in printmaking history (see below). The exhibition's five pulp-paper multiples are unprecedented in complexity and inventiveness: alone, the soldered brass grill used to make the pulp-paper *Georgia* (1984) is among the quirkiest art tools of recent invention, and it took the late Joe Wilfer (a renowned printer and papermaker who died in 1995) no fewer than 10 weeks to devise and fabricate it.

If seen by enough people, "Chuck Close Prints" should go a long way toward correcting many misunderstandings about prints, not least the misapprehension that they must be the handmaiden to painting, a kind of "quick fix." For Close, who has a penchant for the conceptual reversals requisite in printmaking, and who has from the start attracted adventurous and creative printers willing at every turn to meet the challenges he poses, prints have offered an unqualified extension of his practice, both expressive and technical. (5) In their reliance on incremental lactate, prints are inherently suited to his general approach to making art. And, apparently, to his character: printmaking offers, "with its arcane techniques, distinctive tools and equipment, workshop settings with master printers, and specialized publishers," as Deborah Wye wrote in her essay on the prints included in the Museum of Modern Art's catalogue of Close's 1998 retrospective, "an energizing 'friction' against Close's natural inclinations" as a self-described "slob." (6) Close is rare among contemporary artists in imagining a print project fearlessly, some might say foolhardily, without considering the obstacles to its production. Clearly he relishes the opportunity" to ratchet up the stakes.

The objects on view here can easily tempt at least one of the sort of "sympathetically intended simplifications" of Close's work articulated by Robert Storr in his essay for the 1998 retrospective. Compelled in no small measure by Close's own public and verbally articulate preoccupation with such matters, his critics can be too exclusively concerned (in Storr's opinion) with a "procedural or descriptive treatment of the work." (7) Printmaking invites anecdotes of procedural strategies and endurance; indeed, these are part of the pleasure of understanding the end result. At the Blaffer, descriptive accounts in wall labels and in the superbly illustrated catalogue were vividly documented by the physical evidence--something that could never happen with painting. And the evidence constitutes a fascinating display. Here, for example, are eight of Emma/Woodcut's large maple plywood blocks, each with amoeba-shaped stains left behind by the inks, and the jigsaw-cut silhouette of Lucas Samaras's head for the Western-style (i.e., using heavier oil-based inks) Lucas/Woodcut (1993), devised by printer Karl Hecksher. Here, too, the plastic fluorescent-light grill that Wilfer appropriated to fabricate the pulp-paper Phil III (1982), as well as his brass grill for Georgia. Close's own handiwork is evident in the large (48 by 39-inch) copper plate for a 1977-78 Self-Portrait, gridded into more than 25,000 tiny squares into which, in his own studio, and using as reference a photograph printed in reverse, he scratched number of diagonal lines to achieve varying levels of light and dark. It was eventually printed in two versions, one in white ink and the other in black, at Crown Point Press, then in Oakland.

Emma/Woodcut is exceptional in Close's print oeuvre in that the artist was not physically involved in the day-to-day production of the block. In fact, he has generally been very hands-on, more skillful at carving or incising than most artists for whom prints are not their primary focus. He has, from the start, resisted too great a reliance on others, a tendency that continues to this day. Approached by the publisher Bob Feldman of Parasol Press in 1972 to make what turned out to be Keith/Mezzotint, his first published print, Close went to Oakland for three months to work with Kathan Brown at Crown Point Press. He had been an assistant to the printmaker Gabor Peterdi (1915-2001) in graduate school at Yale and knew more than a little about the medium and about collaboration. His decision to work in mezzotint was partly perverse, as it was an antiquated medium so labor-intensive that it was only rarely practiced. (Close seems to enjoy reviving archaic mediums, like the daguerreotypes he showed at PaceWildenstein last spring.) Moreover, he asked that this mezzotint be made at a large scale unheard of for the medium. Close had been working on his monumental paintings of heads, black on

white. He liked the idea of working in the opposite direction, as mezzotint demands, beginning with a dark ground rather than a light one. But he also did not want the printers to be more adept than he.

Sure enough, Brown found herself tackling problems that she had never before encountered. For mezzotint the plate is "rocked" with a special tool to create a rough surface that prints black and is burnished to create white areas. Rocking is a time-consuming process that would be absurdly challenging, Brown knew, in a plate this size. She solved the problem by photoetching the ground from a dense dot matrix (meaning, in fact, that this is not a true mezzotint). And there was the problem of the press: Brown had to order a brand new one, custom-made to accommodate the plate, and it had not been adequately tested by the time Close arrived, which happened to be the same day the press did. There were so many glitches proofing that the final edition was just 10--each one of which is now as valuable as one of Close's paintings.

The production of Keith/Mezzotint was so fraught with difficulties, so ambitious and so miraculous in its result--a work enormously rich in tone and shocking in its dimensionality--that this was the first contemporary print to be given its own exhibition at MOMA (with 19 proofs, in 1973). Keith is not a seamless image. Because the plate wore down too easily, it began to reveal the compositional grid at the center of the face, where most of the proofing was done. Yet this "weakness" had enormous ramifications for Close's work, for it led him to begin exposing the grid in his paintings, where he had hitherto kept it hidden. This development, so much a signature of Close's work today, might not have come about had he not begun making prints that tested, and unintentionally broke, the limits of the medium.

There are many such stories in this exhibition, some of which have achieved near-mythic status in the print world: about how, for example, in his first spitbite etching, *Self-Portrait* (1988), Close asked the printer Aldo Crommelynck, who had worked with Matisse and Picasso, to use the printer's own spit in the acid mixture. "I think it was all those Gauloise cigarettes Aldo smoked. My spit newer seemed to work as well." (8) Or about his first encounter with a ukiyo-e master, Tadashi Toda, in Japan. in 1986, Close was invited by Kathan Brown, who had set up a workshop in Japan, to work with Toda, who was sent a gouache, Leslie. When Close arrived, the print was well under way, and he was not entirely pleased. He spoke to Toda through a Crown Point printer, Hidekatsu Takada:

"Tell him it is too green." [Takada] started talking and talking, and there was an intense reaction from Mr. Toda. Finally I asked, "Why is it taking so long?" Takada said, "Yon don't understand, what I have to say is 'Chuck is thrilled with what you have done, he thinks you are a genius. He thinks it is perfection. Beyond his wildest dreams. Nothing could be done to improve it. However, in the interest of intellectual curiosity, not that it would be better than what you have done, just to see what would happen, could you possibly make it a little less green?'" We had to go through this process every time. I needed to be positive about any correction I wanted to make. I found it strange yet interesting to let someone interpret the work, to make decisions about color and separations. I realized we had to work together to get a good print. (9)

Particularly innovative and playful was Close's relationship with Joe Wilfer, "probably the most creative problem solver I have ever worked with," as Close puts it. (10) Their experiments in pulp-paper--a material that Close originally resisted as being too readily associated with craft--helped to radicalize it as an artistic medium. With Wilfer, one pulp-paper innovation led to another. Having collected, from the first of them, "meadow muffins the size of Pringles potato chips," as Close is fond

of describing the splats of pulp that lay around the floor, he collaged them together on canvas to form Georgia (1982). Then, tracing the unique collage, he made a pulp-paper multiple of the same subject (Georgia, 1984), this demanding Wilfer's invention of the soldered grill, to accommodate the curvilinear shapes of the splats. By this time, Close was hooked on pulp, and he has continued, post-Wilfer, to make pulp-paper works with Ruth Lingen, Mae Shore and Paul Wong at Dieu Donne Papermill in New York.

Then there's Alex/Reduction Block (1993), another Wilfer/Close adventure, which began as a reduction linocut and wound up as a screenprint. Close has an affinity for reduction prints, which, to the layperson, seem inconceivably complex. Invented by Picasso, reduction linocuts are made by cutting away a single block in stages and printing it at each stage so that in the end there is nothing left of image on the block. It takes planning--you have to know, for example, how large the edition is going to be, and print that number at every stage--but its advantage is in an ease of registration not possible in multiple-block printing. Close and Wilfer decided to print the linocut at Tandem Press in Madison, Wisc., a workshop equipped with a press large enough to accommodate a 6-by-12-foot print (again, an unprecedented scale). For the material, Wilfer settled on (of all things) linoleum used for battleship flooring; the roll was accidentally gouged, and destroyed, by a forklift during its unloading. Reluctantly, they turned to vinyl flooring mounted on Plexi, an unwieldy combination, as it turned out. Close drew for eight hours, and a big crew carved for eight hours at a time. Close asked that the block be rotated so that there would not be personal quirks in the carving by so many assistants, and then they printed from eight hours at a stretch--one color a day for eight days. But the paper was not right, and time was running out. Having printed a transparent Mylar at each stage, they finally gave up on the linocut and brought the Mylars to Robert Blanton and Thomas Little at Brand X, a silkscreen workshop in New York, to be printed as a screenprint. "[Screenprint] saved the day," Close has said. (11)

This exhibition--including so many large prints, so many of their proofs and their matrices--demands a lot of wall space. Alex/Reduction Block, the largest print in the show at 79 3/8 by 60 3/8 inches, was accompanied at the Blaffer by seven state proofs (showing each of the colors separately printed) and seven progressive proofs (in which the colors are layered onto each other, one by one), requiring around 500 square feet altogether. Yet how intriguing it was--a kind of cinematic experience--to see them crescendo to the maniacally vivid detail of the finished Alex! A similar sensation was provoked by the display of two other big projects, the screenprint John (1998), exhibited with its 10 state proofs, and Self-Portrait/Pulp (2001), with its single state proof, six progressive proofs, 10 Mylar stencils and brass grill. At a more modest scale (18 1/4 by 15 1/4 inches) is Self-Portrait/Scribble/Etching Portfolio (2000), with 24 proofs that are actually included in the finished portfolio. All of them were on view along with a hinged apparatus that allowed Close to scribble the various colors on a sheet of paper laid over a plate prepared in soft ground.

Yet this is no mere pyrotechnical display. As a metaphor for Close as a painter, Storr borrowed a quotation from Isaiah Berlin (who took it from the ancient Greek poet Archilochus), "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." (12) For singularity of purpose and the exhaustiveness and profundity of his pursuit, Storr saw Close as a hedgehog. Yet, in looking at the prints, or indeed at Close's works on paper taken as a whole, one is tempted instead to spot the fox, so cunningly inflected are the works from one to the next in medium and technique, and so drastically different from each other in atmosphere and mood. This is especially apparent in prints Close made in

many variants over the years: his self-portrait, for example, or the famously multiple "Phil" (Philip Glass), of which there are more than 20 versions, four in the Blaffer display (a 1981 fingerprint lithograph, a 1982 pulp-paper piece, a 1991 silk tapestry and a 1995 spitbite etching). For his sitters, the proliferation--so much encouraged in printmaking--can be disconcerting. Glass remarked on it in an interview:

[The] Phil series is around a lot. I can't tell you how many times people have come to a concert and said very provocative things like, "There is a picture of you hanging over my bed," or in the dining room or something like that. Many, many, many times. (13)

The self-portraits are amply represented here, 15 altogether. Close told Wye that he "almost wished" he had devised his whole printmaking career as self-portraits, though "that probably would have been nauseating ... that many Chuck Closes." (14) The 1998 MOMA catalogue ranged six self-portraits on a single page for comparison's sake. Sultan's catalogue trumps that with a breathtaking gatefold of nine full-color details of the same area of Close's face in nine different print mediums. Here one moves from the bleary painted spots of a spitbite etching to the drilling tesserae or glittering daubs of paper pulp, the painterly fluidity of screenprint, the calculated bird-scratches of hard-ground and gestural motility of soft-ground etching, and the draftsmanlike precision of a relief print in which a Sharpie drawing was scanned into a computer, fed into a laser that cut into a plastic plate and then printed on a specially dyed handmade paper (with David Lasry at Two Palms Press in New York). In these details the artist's identity is persuasively fused with the marks comprising his face, which is at once physiognomy and signature.

When Close first began to paint his friends and family, they were relatively unknown. Now most of the faces are familiar, and newer art-world celebrities are appearing in his works all the time. Close's portraits represent a network of relationships and alliances, evidence of a discursive dimension in the turn-of-the-century New York art world. Eloquent and gregarious, Close speaks readily and easily about his work, and about art, with others. Even more pronounced is this sociable tendency in the prints, where not only the subjects but the production itself evinces a milieu. For a little while, at least, the unsung heroes of a neglected niche in the art world will have their day. Confident in his own abilities and at the peak of his form, Close generously shines a light on them in this exhibition, and in doing so reveals much that is essential to print collaboration in the United States today.

(1.) Terrie Sultan, *Chuck Close Prints: Process and Collaboration*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, and Houston, Blaffer Gallery, Art Museum of the University of Houston, 2003, p. 119. The interviews/chapters are organized according to medium: Mezzotint (with Kathan Brown of Crown Point Press), Pulp-Paper Multiples (with Ruth Lingen and Mac Shore of Pace Editions and Paul Wong of Dieu Donne Papermill), Spitbite Etching (with Bill Hall and Julia d'Amario of Pace), Reduction Linoleum (with Lingen of Pace, and Robert Blanton and Thomas Little of Brand X Editions), Silk Screen (with Blanton and Little), Japanese-Style Woodcut (with Shibata), European-Style Woodcut (with Karl Hecksher, and Scribble Etching (with Hall and d'Amario of Pace).

(2.) Close made a fingerprint drawing of his own infant, Maggie, in 1984, somewhat more subdued and thoughtful-looking than Emma/Woodcut. His daughter Georgia smiles in her portraits.

(3.) The exhibition is not all-inclusive. Close has made more than 60 editions since 1972. Thirty-Three were included in a 2002 exhibition, "Chuck Close Prints," curated by Dede Young at the Neuberger Museum at SUNY Purchase. The last comprehensive retrospective was in 1989, at the Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio: "Chuck Close Editions: A Catalogue Raisonne and Exhibition." There was a decision at the Blaffer show not to include any prints that were made using primarily photographic processes, even if they were editioned: this excluded, for example, the photogravure *Lorna*, completed at Graphicstudio/USF in 2002--perhaps the largest photogravure ever made--as well as Close's inkjet prints.

(4.) Though burnished from dark to light, as in mezzotint, this print is not a true mezzotint. See my discussion of *Keith/Mezzotint*, below.

(5.) In this, he follows the precedent set by Jasper Johns. As Sultan writes, p. 10, "Close credits Jasper Johns as one of the primary inspirations of the printmaking renaissance that began in the 1960s: 'Jasper elevated the print from ugly stepsister status to princess of the ball. It was clear in his prints that he was serious about creating a physicality and quality of visual experience that was different from, but equal to, his paintings.'" Like Johns, too, Close makes expensive prints. Notoriously slow at producing paintings, he has said that he likes the idea that his prints are more readily available. This does not mean, however, that just anyone can buy one. *Emma/Woodcut*, for example, at the time of the writing of this article, was listed on the Pace Prints Web site at \$20,000.

(6.) Deborah Wye, "Changing Expressions: Printmaking," in Robert Storr, Chuck Close, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1998, p. 72. There were 30 prints, as well as the copper plate for *PHIL*, 1995, and the brass grill for *Georgia*, 1984, included in the MOMA retrospective, which mainly focused on his paintings. Some of the prints were displayed with the paintings; others were shown in a separate gallery. When the exhibition traveled, it included 11 self-portrait prints, the *Georgia* brass shim, paper multiple and an earlier handmade paper collage of the same subject.

(7.) Storr, "Angles of Refraction," *ibid.*, p. 23.

(8.) Sultan, p. 78. Close's stories are like fireside yarns, told again and again, with variations. One encounters this and so many others like it in the literature and at his lectures. They are not unlike the repeating heads, encountered over and over, but always a little different.

(9.) *Ibid.*, p. 111-12.