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Looking at Alice

Acrylic on canvas, water-based ink on paper

My work for this project was heavily inspired and influenced by Chuck Close, a portrait artist who worked from the late 1960s till his death in 2021. His paintings were enigmatic, expressive, and larger-than-life, just like the man himself. Close was a beloved figure in the art world until 2017 when 7 accusations of sexual assault came out against him. Before I heard of these accusations, I had admired Close's work. I thought of him as an art hero, someone to look up to and emulate. Afterward, I was torn; I still loved Close's paintings but I could no longer look up to the man behind them. For me, this project was a way of coming to terms with my feelings surrounding Chuck Close. I took inspiration from him while also focusing my artistic process inward, something that I showed by the rather obvious subject of my work. I chose to title my work *Looking at Alice* because this was a very introspective piece, and I wanted to give insight into my process through the title. I worked in styles that Close was famous for, with materials that he favored, all while making each piece as personal as I could.

Chuck Close: The Man Behind the Portraits



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This essay delves into the life and times of Chuck Close -- an influential, larger-than-life portrait artist in the 20th century. It tries to put his artwork into context by looking at the controversies surrounding him. Close was a man who changed the art world, and his work deserves to be seen in museums around the world. The women that Close hurt also deserved to be listened to. This essay will try to create a symbiosis between these two very important ideals.

At some point when I was quite small, I remember being in a museum with my family. My feet were probably tired, and I was probably thirsty, but at that

moment I wasn't thinking about any of those things. I was staring at a painting. It had lots of blobs and colors, and I loved it immediately. I can't tell you what museum I was in, only that there was a doorway to my left and a wall in front of me with only one painting on it. Even then, the rest of the day seemed to pale in comparison to this painting. It seemed ridiculously huge, but then again I was very small. As I stood there staring, I heard my dad telling me: "Stand back, you'll see what it is a painting of."

I was mesmerized, but when I did stand back I saw a person, a person who was not there before. Except they were. I just wasn't looking from far enough away. I remember hair, wildly flying about a face, and a million colors that all inexplicably became one skin tone. And eyes. Piercing, radiant eyes that should not have had the power they did. I thought that I could stand for hours looking at the eyes on that portrait. Eventually, however, I had to move away. My sister was hungry, or our parking time was almost up, or we had to get to a dinner reservation, I can't remember. When I did pull myself away, I regretted it. As I was walking down the next corridor of that museum, I knew that I had found something special in that painting. I do not remember anything about that day except for the painting and my father's voice. I did not know it at the time, but that was my first interaction with Chuck Close.

“By taking action in the form of canceling an exhibition or removing art from the walls, a museum is creating an understanding of an artist’s work only through the prism of reprehensible behavior” (Pogrebin, Schuessler). This quote, said by Sheena Wagstaff the modern and contemporary art chairman at the MET, accurately described how some people in the art world perceived the famous portrait artist Chuck Close in 2017 after seven women came forward with sexual harassment allegations against him. Without context, this may seem too lenient a view to have on a person who is allegedly a sexual harasser, but taking into account the great impact that Close had on art and the ways that people viewed and defined it in his lifetime, it is an apt conclusion to make. Since he started his career in the late 1960s, Close redefined the way that people viewed portraiture and the artistic process. To take his paintings off the walls and erase his narrative from the story of art history would be to discredit all of the change and growth that art had gone through because of Chuck Close. Now the question is, can people still look at and admire Close’s work without further alienating and traumatizing the women he hurt?

Some would say no. Some would say that looking at Close’s work while knowing what he did is too close to “separating the art from the artist,” which is just another way to excuse abusers and misogynists. Some advocate for many different paintings to be taken off walls, not just Chuck Close’s. They say that any artist who hurt anyone cannot be considered a genius because of their behavior. They would

rather have bare walls in a museum than walls showing the work of bad men. This is an overreaction. Just because Picasso was abusive to his muses does not mean that the public does not deserve to see his works. Museums should be focused on what the public deserves, not the artists. Art can only be contextualized by the viewer's own experiences and knowledge. So, it is knowledge that the museum-goer should pursue. Knowledge of the work, knowledge of the artist, and knowledge of the circumstances in which the art was made. It is better to have an asterisk by an artist's name than to have that name erased completely.

Charles “Chuck” Thomas Close was born on July 5, 1940, in Washington. He described his family as one that “aspired to the middle class” (Close, Yuskavage). His mother was a trained pianist and his dad was a struggling inventor with an eighth-grade education. Close’s dad died when he was 11 and his mum encouraged and supported his interest in art as a child. He grew up with undiagnosed dyslexia and a neuromuscular disease that made him a chronically ill and weak child. Because he was too weak to play sports he turned to magic and art to help him make and keep friends. As a high-schooler Close was chosen from a nationwide contest to attend Yale Summer School of Music and Art. After his summer there, Close returned home to do his undergraduate studies at the University of Washington. In 1962, Close returned to Yale School of Art for his graduate studies, for which he received a Master of Fine Arts degree. When speaking of his time at Yale in an interview

Close remarked: “At Yale, we all learned to talk art before we could make it...[so] when you do get a great idea at least you can recognize it, articulate it, and exploit it” (*Chuck Close* 30). Yale School of Art in the time of Chuck Close was an institution that did its best to spit out identical, talented artists. They made their students replicate the works of successful artists again and again. By the time he graduated in 1964 Chuck boasted he could “[make] Hans Hofmanns easily as good as Hans Hofmann made Hans Hofmann’s and sometimes better” (*Chuck Close* 30).

Just after graduating, Close moved to one of the biggest and most prolific art scenes in America: South Houston, also known as SoHo in New York City. There, he found that “the dilemma that [he] found [himself] in after having gotten out of graduate school [was] enjoying making art but not liking what [he] made” (Chuck Close 31). In short, he was feeling uninspired. In his first big piece after grad school, he painted a nude portrait of his acquaintance. At 21 feet long and almost ten feet tall, this portrait was aptly named *Big Nude*. he created it by layering black paint over itself to create highlights and shadows, but when it was finished he found himself dissatisfied. It was a portrait, yes, but it had a clear focal point: the face. Close wanted each section of his portraits to be equally as important and therefore as unimportant as the last, so he resolved to use only the face in his next painting venture. Thus, in 1968 Close created the piece that launched him into the art scene:

Big Self Portrait. At nearly nine feet tall and seven feet wide, the portrait lived up to its name.

During the early years of his career, Chuck rejected every box that the art community tried to put him in. Everything he did had to be new and different. When he started making his hyperrealistic portraits, people tried to put him into the box of realism. Close was wary of this label in part because of how subjective it was. In the 1960s when he was painting, realism was anything that did not conform to the abstract expressionism that was so popular at the time. When Close started using grids and boxes in his portraits, he was put into the *avant-garde* category. Again, he refused to be cornered. Close's rejection of these boxes both helped and hindered his career. Because he refused to conform, curators had a hard time putting his paintings into specific exhibitions. His early portraits were recognized and sometimes put into galleries; most notably *Frank* and *Phil*, two Close portraits made in 1969, were hung in the "22 Realists" exhibit held at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1970. Despite these challenges, Close held strong; he utilized many different mediums in many different styles throughout his career, which made his art and life all the more enigmatic.

In December 1988, Chuck Close suffered an injury that would stop almost anyone in their tracks. A weak blood vessel in his spinal column ruptured, and he was paralyzed from the neck down. Whilst painstakingly regaining movement in his

arms, Chuck devised a way to strap a paintbrush to his forearm and continue painting. He never let the injury change his art, despite what some might say. Although his style changed after his injury, going from hyper realistic, extremely detail-oriented portraits to more abstract, brightly colored portraits made from cubes, this was a predestined change. His art was already moving in that direction long before he was paralyzed. Chuck Close himself spent the rest of his life in a wheelchair, but his artistic vision was never dampened.

In 2017, well into the twilight years of Chuck Close's career, seven women came out with accusations of sexual harassment against him. Most said that they had been in his studio, allegedly posing for portraits, when he asked them to strip nude and then asked inappropriate questions about their genitals. These accusations rocked the art world. It had often been said that Close "innovated how the portrait could be seen" (Pogrebin, Schuessler). Artists, museums, and news-readers alike knew Close as a charismatic, dedicated artist who overcame every struggle that the world threw at him. When these accusations came to light, they had to reckon this new version of Close with their previous knowledge of him. The first statement that Chuck made in regards to these accusations was to call them "lies" and say that he was being "crucified" (Pogrebin, Schuessler). When the backlash he was receiving did not calm down he apologized, saying "If I embarrassed anyone or made them feel uncomfortable, I am truly sorry, I didn't mean to. I acknowledge having a dirty

mouth, but we're all adults" (Sayej). This was a very poor apology because it trivialized what the women said and came off as condescending. His weak apology was not enough for Chuck Close to be forgiven, nor should it have been.

Before these accusations, Close had an upcoming exhibition with the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. The museum then decided to "indefinitely postpone" the exhibit in response to the allegations. His work was taken down in libraries and museums around the US as all of them tried to show their support for the brave women that had come forward. Other institutions had a different approach. The Pennsylvania Museum of Fine Arts (PAFA) already had an exhibition of Close's photographs up at the time that the allegations against him came to light. They decided to leave it up. Along with the existing exhibition, however, they added an exhibition of work made by exclusively female artists. In that exhibition was a wall with a timeline of art history that museum-goers could write on with post-it notes (Sayej). PAFA wanted to know the opinions that their patrons had on Chuck Close and the art world as a whole. PAFA's decision to leave up their Chuck Close exhibition was met with both backlash and support from the art community. People thought that PAFA, by leaving up their exhibition, was showing support for Chuck Close. Brooke Davis Anderson, the director of PAFA, disagreed. When asked for her thought process on leaving the show up she said: "We wanted to make sure we didn't just close the show. We wanted to deal with it," (Sayej). Davis Anderson

thought that by taking down PAFA's exhibition, they would be ending the conversation too soon. Instead, she wanted to hear from the people and women whose voices really matter: the museum-goers themselves.

After the sexual assault allegations came out against him, Close's career withered. He still had supporters, but public opinion of him was largely negative. The National Gallery of Art never rescheduled his exhibition, a decision that has been likened to taking an Oscar away from an actor. The art community still revered Chuck Close's paintings, but they no longer revered the man behind them.

On August 19, 2021, Chuck Close passed away from congestive heart failure caused by an enduring illness. He was 81 years old. Many people mourned his death, but no one forgot the allegations against him. Obituaries and museums alike made sure to have some mention of the women he allegedly hurt in their stories of him. In 2021 The National Portrait Gallery at the Smithsonian held a memorial exhibition for Chuck Close. On their website in the description of this exhibition, they said "several women accused Chuck Close of sexual harassment, though no charges were brought against him. The museum recognizes the positive and negative impacts that individuals represented in our collections have had on history"(In Memoriam). The museum made sure that even after his death, viewers of Chuck Close's works knew about the way the artist was in life.

In December 2013, Close received an Alzheimer's disease diagnosis, which was later changed to a diagnosis for Frontotemporal Dementia in 2015. After Close's death, his neurologist, Dr. Thomas M. Wisniewski said of Close that "He was very disinhibited and did inappropriate things, which were part of his underlying medical condition. Frontotemporal dementia affects executive function. It's like a patient having a lobotomy — it destroys that part of the brain that governs behavior and inhibits base instincts" (Pogrebin and Johnson). Dr. Wisniewski went on to say that this diagnosis could be a reason for Close's behavior towards the women who came forward against him. He likened Frontotemporal Dementia to "having a lobotomy" and said that "Sexual inappropriateness and disastrous financial decisions are common presenting symptoms" of the disease (Pogrebin and Johnson). Although this information is important to take into account, it does not change much about the way that people should approach Chuck Close and his work. The fact that he made women feel uncomfortable and threatened should be enough for the public to not make any excuses for him.

I had forgotten about Chuck Close until after his death. If I ever heard about him, I did not connect his name or face with the maker of the portrait I had loved so much when I was younger. Just a few months ago, I found a book about Chuck in the library. When I read that book, I was ensnared anew by his captivating and emotional portraits. I devoured the book, looking through the progression of his

paintings from the 1960s, all black and white moodiness, to the early 21st century, the style and period of portrait that I had seen in the museum. The book did not have anything past the early 2000s in it, so I took to the internet to learn more about Chuck Close.

I was already feeling inspired just looking at the portraits in the book, so when I read about Close's sexual harassment allegations I immediately felt betrayed. I had been through this situation before, where a prominent male celebrity or artist that I looked up to did something misogynistic or predatory, and I was dejected to see it happening again. I had to make the conscious decision to allow myself to still like Chuck Close's portraits, but I knew my perception of him would never be the same. I was torn. I wanted to still be able to admire his work with a clear conscience, but I did not know if that was possible. In the end, I decided that keeping in mind both the good and bad things I knew about him, I could look at Chuck Close's portraits not through a "prism of reprehensible behavior", as Sheena Wagstaff said, but through the lens of knowledge that my research had given me.

Throughout the course of his life, Chuck Close showed resilience and conviction in everything he did artistically. He painted portraits for over 50 years, despite becoming a quadriplegic. He completed everything he did to the best of his abilities and changed the art world while he did it. Arne Glimcher, the owner of the gallery in which Chuck showed most of his work, said that he "was honored to know

him and to show his work, which [he believed] is inextricable from the greatest achievements of 20th-century art”(Pogrebin and Johnson). Maybe if Close’s work had not been so “inextricably” tied to artistic creation in the 20th century, it would have been easier to condemn his work to anonymity after the allegations that came out against him in 2017. Then again, maybe he would have been more easily forgiven if he was not already put on a high pedestal. Whichever way you think about it, Chuck was who he was, and his art had the impact that it did. That impact cannot be taken away because of Close’s actions. The only way to continue with a clear conscience in regards to Chuck Close is to have knowledge about who he was, so his art can still be appreciated and revered in context.

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