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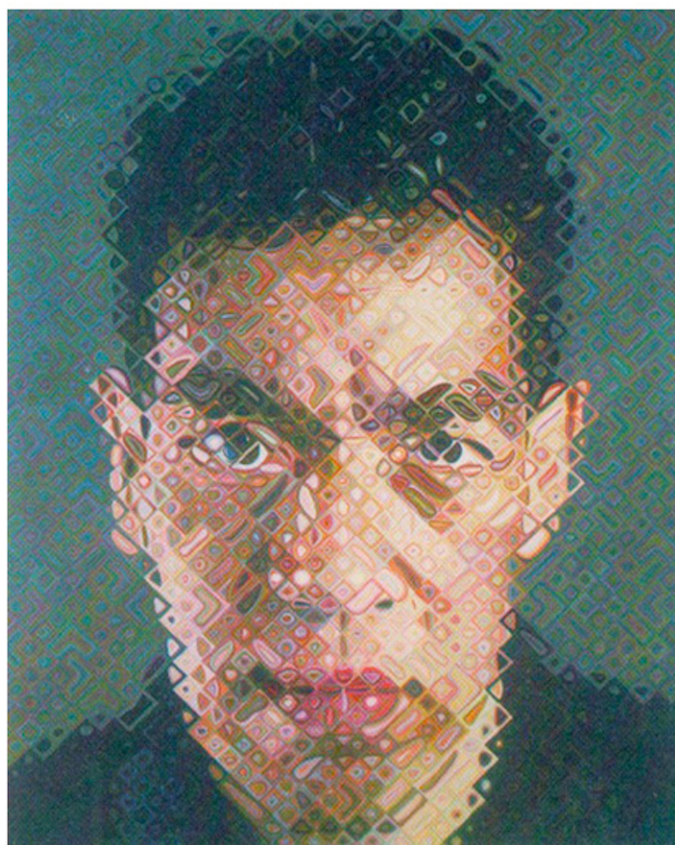
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## New York

### Chuck Close: Recent Paintings

PaceWildenstein

10 MAY - 18 JUNE



With their celebrity subjects and signature compositional grid, Chuck Close's portraits are by now so fixed in the mind of the artworld – if not of the general public – that we have all but stopped looking at them. The novelty of Close's breakthrough technique – photographs deconstructed into unitary, painted shapes – has been pored over and absorbed to the point that exhibitions now approach his work glancingly, as a foregone phenomenon, such as the solid but deferential *Chuck Close Prints: Process and Collaboration* currently touring the US.

For art's sake, neither artists nor viewers should tolerate such reverence. In Close's case, this blind respect is in fact a measure of the work's success – Close captures our current moment too well, and as a result risks becoming transparent or invisible. A similar case would be Warhol, whose perspicacity was taken for granted in the 1980s, only to become essential again in the 90s.

Close's cultural 'moment' could be observed on a recent afternoon at the cavernous PaceWildenstein gallery in West Chelsea, which showed six portraits and three self-portraits. Herb Kramer, a Close family friend and one of the show's subjects, was seated on a stool, posing for a team of professional photographers in front of his painted likeness (itself based on a Polaroid).

'Who's that?' mouthed gallery-goers, giving this hushed spectacle a wide berth. Looking at the giant Kramer portrait hanging near those of choreographer Merce Cunningham and artist Lynda Benglis, who could blame them for wondering? Just as Close breaks down photographs into their constituent parts, which are then made new, so does the artworld parse and reparse its leading figures. Close's subjects matter – they are larger than life, or rather their celebrity is, which is both downplayed and emphasized by the artist's approach. Yet these public identities remain fugitive, carried on the media winds of fame and gossip that blow through the artworld, nowhere more so than the gusty streets of West Chelsea.

Close began pixelating photographic images long before everyone else grew tired of playing around with Photoshop. In considering Close's portraits now, it is perhaps more fruitful to ask how they operate in their surrounding context rather than how they strike the optic nerve. For example, the portrait of painter Inka Essenhigh – whose face is less well known than that of, say, Merce Cunningham – is otherwise lost on the average viewer who fails to ask, 'Who's that?'

Close's portraits of Andres Serrano are the most successful in this regard. The direct gaze, forward tilt of the head and pixelated style suit Serrano's position – a mid-career art star whose place in the pecking order is still provisional, a sensation but not yet canonized. Unfortunately for Close, canonization and the artworld's increasing commercialization make his own work harder to see. JE