CHUCKCLOSE Interview with Cindy Nemser (1970)

NEMSEZ: Why did you decide to make photographic rather than life studies the subject of your paintings? '

CLOSE: The decision evolved partly out of a problem I had with making a paint-
about how my eyes focused on a still life. When I focused on the pitcher in the foreground,
it was too sharp. Then when I looked at the drapery behind the pitcher it was in sharp focus, too.
No matter where I looked all parts of the still life seemed to have equal focus. Now I knew
this phenomenon was not true of natural vision since peripheral vision is always blurred.
Suddenly it occurred to me that if I was really interested in the problem of focus, the best
thing was to work from a photograph where all the information was nailed down and I could
focus on blurred as well as sharp information.

CN: What made you choose photographs of heads?

CC: First of all, let me tell you the reasons that are *not* behind my decisions. I am not
trying to make facsimiles of photographs. Neither am I interested in the icon of the head as
a natural image. I don't want the viewer to see the whole head at once and assume that that's
the most important aspect of my painting. I am not making Pop personality posters like the
ones they sell in the Village. That's why I choose to do portraits of my friends——individuals
that most people will not recognize. I don't want the viewer to recognize the head of Castro
and think that he has understood my work.

CN: Well, if you are not interested in the humanistic aspect of the head, what are your
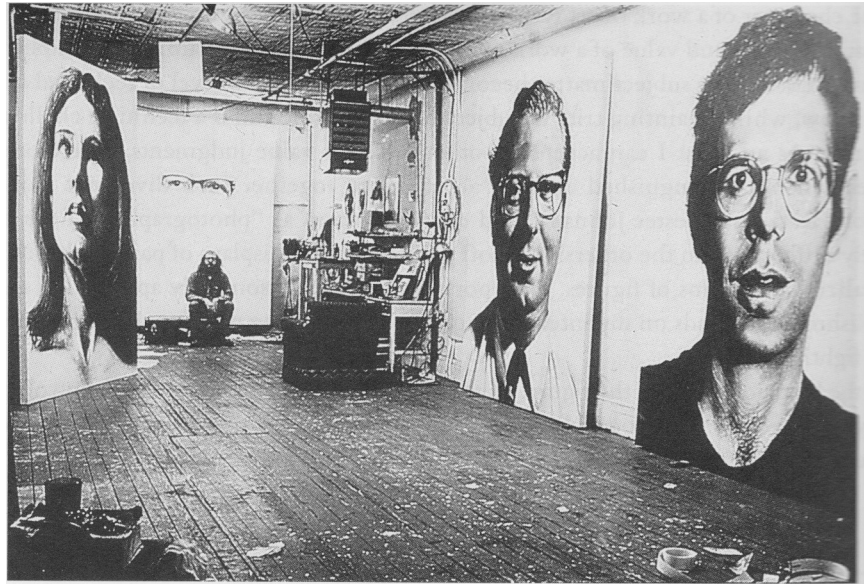faces all about?

CC: They have to do with the way a camera sees as opposed to the way the eye sees and
with the look of a small photograph. My main objective is to translate photographic informa-
tion into paint information.

CN: Could you clarify that statement?

CC: The camera is objective. When it records a face it can't make any hierarchical decisions about a
nose being more important than a cheek. The camera is not aware of what it is looking at. It just gets it
all down. I want to deal with the image it has recorded which is blackand white, two-dimensional, and
loaded with surface detail.

CN: You know the camera can be manipulated too. Lenses can be changed and the amount
of light adjusted.

CC: Right—but I never said the camera was truth. It is, however, a more accurate and
more objective way of seeing.

Chuck Close in his studio with (left to right): *Nancy*, 1968; *Keith*, 1970 (in process); *Joe*, 1969; and *Bob*, 1970 (all acrylic on canvas). © Chuck Close. Photo by Wayne Hollings-worth. Courtesy Pace Gallery, New York.

CN: If your primary concern is dealing with photographic information, from a small photograph, why are your paintings so gigantic?

CC: The large scale allows me to deal with information that is overlooked in an eight-by-ten inch photograph without becoming excessively fussy. The large scale forces the viewer to read the surface of the painting differently. He has to scan the painting and look at it piece by piece in order to arrive at a feeling of the total head. It makes it difficult for the viewer to see the head as one whole image. In certain ways my work is related to that of the caricaturist who exaggerates particular differences between people to the point that one cannot ignore specific characteristics of the individual head.

CN: But, you are most concerned with sticking to a strict transmission of photographic fact.

CC: Yes, but to some extent I contradict this direct translation by blowing up my image. It is so large that it is impossible to ignore differences in features. Now a nose is not bent a fraction of an inch, but several inches. You can't ignore acne if it's spread out over three or four inches.
　　My large scale forces the viewer to focus on one area at a time. In that way he is made aware of the blurred areas that are seen with peripheral vision. Normally we never take those peripheral areas into account. When we focus on an area it is sharp. As we turn our attention to adjacent areas they sharpen up too. In my work, the blurred areas don't come into focus, but they are too large to be ignored.

CN: Anton Ehrenzweig states that we are indebted to the artists past and present (and today also to the art of photography) for the limited awareness of perceptive distortions and the chiaruscuro distortions of tone we now possess. Do you feel your paintings are adding to our perceptual knowledge?

CC: I don't know if I'm supplying any totally new information or whether it's just putting the focus on a new aspect of that information. You certainly know something about a forest by flying over it in an airplane, but it's not the same information you would get if you go through the forest and bump into the trees. In viewing my work, you can, by stepping back and looking at my paintings, get pretty much the standard, normal understanding of a head and whole image. However, by including all the little surface details and enlarging them to the point that they cannot be overlooked, the viewer cannot help but scan the surface of the head a piece at a time. Hopefully, he gets a deeper knowledge of the forest by knowing What the individual trees look like.

CN: Scale is an important means for you to transmit photographic images into paint images. What other methods do you use to make this transformation?

CC: In order to come up with a mark-making technique which would make painting information stack up with photographic information, I tried to purge my work of as much of the baggage of traditional portrait painting as I could. To avoid a painterly brush stroke and surface, I use some pretty devious means, such as razor blades, electric drills and airbrushes. I also work as thinly as possible and I don't use white paint as it tends to build up and become chalky and opaque. In fact, in a nine-by-seven foot picture, I only use a couple of tablespoons of black paint to cover the entire canvas. I also have eliminated color from my work as it has too many associations with traditional Western art. However, I do intend to use color photographs as subjects in the future.

CN: Why did you feel it was necessary to eliminate so many elements from your paintings?

CC: I wanted to get past my own and the viewer's preconceived ideas as to what a painted head looks like. I don't want handed down, traditional concepts to interfere with the content of my work.

CN: Considering the size of your canvases, how do you establish the focus of your paintings?

CC: I start a painting by dealing with something that is in very sharp focus. This section will establish the focus for the rest of the work. From there, I move on to adjacent areas and establish the focus as I go. I rough in the greys till I see how the focus reads and gradually take it darker and darker. That's the advantage of spraying————you can get darker and darker in little jumps. The technique lends itself to a gradual transition of values from light to dark.

CN: With such large paintings, it must be hard to keep the tonalities and surface treatments consistent. . . . Don't you step back from time to time to see what is happening?

CC: No. I work very close and seldom step back as I'm not interested in the gestalt of the of the whole head but rather in getting involved in the process of translating its photographic parts into paint and blowing it up. I'm trying to find a way to get very small marks to become very big marks and read.

CN: You're almost a pointillist on a grand scale.

CC: Yes. Except that I'm much more interested in the kind of image produced by the photographic printing process than in the kind of image produced by the pointillism of Seurat.

The surface of a photographic image is so consistent and yet the dots of which it consists nothing to do with the images they project.

CN: Why is the consistency of the surface so important to your work?

CC: If the surface information is consistent enough then the surface of the painting will disappear. Inconsistency draws attention to the surface itself and again interferes with the content of the work. It seems to me that the lesser Abstract Expressionists were so concerned with imitating the surface of Abstract Expressionist paintings, getting drips and splashes of color, that they could never get beyond the surface of the paint. The more important Abstract Expressionists never allow you to stop at the surface and look at the paint. Their painting marks always stacked up on some level to mean something else.

CN: What about other artists who work from photographs?

CC: Most of them have similar problems. In copying a flat surface, they get so involved with it that they can't get beyond it. I could never work like those artists who turn their photographs upside down and paint square by square. Their work becomes strictly a surface translation and because it's too difficult to sustain a consistent attitude towards a surface alone some of the areas are painted differently from others. Then they call attention to themselves and the surface of the painting. They say, "Look at me—see how beautifully I'm painted."

CN: But you do not concern yourself with the image as a whole either. You also work from piece to piece and let the work grow out of the process.

CC: True, but even if I don't know what the finished painting will look like exactly, I'm still not going to stray too far from the information in the picture. After all, those big heads are real people from which the camera gets certain information.

CN: Then you would agree with E. H. Gombrich when he, says that " . . . the problem of illusionist art is not that of forgetting what we know about the world. It is rather inventing compositions that work"?

cc: Exactly. I'm very interested in a nose as a shape. I'm also interested in its edges and the surface information scattered across it. Nevertheless, no matter how nice the shape or the tone, or how interesting the distribution of its surface information, if it's not like a nose and more specifically a particular person's nose, then it's wrong. That's one of the reasons I paint my friends' faces. They are yardsticks which help me to measure how well my marks read.

CN: Then capturing a likeness is an important part of your work?

CC: Well, I'm making a translation, and I want it to be as accurate as possible.

CN: Are there any artists working today whose art particularly interests you?

CC: It seems to me that the most serious work being done today is not figurative. Stella, Noland, Judd, Serra, Morris, Sonnier, and Saret are some of the painters and sculptors I most respect.

CN: Do you think that your work is related to theirs in any way?

CC: Yes. Even though my work looks very different, I feel a kinship with those artists
who have rid themselves of painterly language, who have taken the sculpture off its pedestal,
and who have allowed material to flop around on the floor. Like them, I am also more concerned
with the process of transmitting information than in filling out a check list of the ingredients a portrait
painting is supposed to contain. I too want to strip the viewer of the comfort of thinking that the
traditional concepts of art he has been dragging around are automatically going to make him
understand what art today is all about.

 CN: But as a realistic artist don't you feel any kinship with other figurative artists?

CC: I have very little sympathy or interest in the figurative art being shown today, and I
object to the lumping together of everybody who works from life or from photographs
under the title of realism or superrealism. The term is too vague and I see very few common
denominators.

CN: But you still choose to make your statements via realistic images. How do you reconcile that fact
with your antipathy towards realistic art?

CC: Don't get me wrong. I don't dislike the notion of figurative art, and I think it would
be very wrong to conclude that the figure as a valid art form is no longer viable. However, I
think it is useless to try and revive figurative art by pumping it full of outworn humanist notions.

CN: Well, if you see no hope for a return to the figure on a humanist basis, what importance does the
figure have for you in terms of today's art?

CC: It seems to me that theifigure can be used as a new source of information, but only if new devices
and techniques are found which will bring another focus on it through new ways of realizing form.
Without fulfilling this prerequisite, there is no chance for fresh figure painting
no matter how many "return to the figure" exhibitions are assembled by basically anti-avant-garde
museum curators or critics.

CN: What do you think are the necessary conditions to encourage a rebirth of figurative art?

CC: I believe that if the people who care to work with figuration could be left alone to work out their
own problems, we may yet see some worthwhile art.