

Art Enrichment

Artist Biography

Grade 5

*****Please do not read the biographical information word for word to the class. Paraphrasing would be best.**

Chuck Close

American, 1940-present

Painter

Chuck Close was born on July 5, 1940 in Monroe, Washington. His father was a sheet metal worker and inventor. Chuck's dad made many of his toys, such as a bicycle, a pedal-powered Jeep, a model railroad mountains and bridges, etc. His mother gave piano lessons in their home. When Chuck was 11, his dad died. Chuck's mom took a full time job in sales.

When he was young, Chuck's family did not realize he had learning disabilities or dyslexia which made it difficult to read, spell, concentrate, and pay attention in school. He was very good at drawing and spent many hours doing just that. He said "Art saved my life". It made him feel special. He knew he had to figure out a way to study. Sitting in a bathtub of hot water, he'd place a board across the tub that would hold his book. Then he could shine a flashlight on the book with the lights off. Sometimes he'd stay up all night reading each page out loud five times so he could hear it. It was enough so he could pass his tests.

He went to a junior college with a great art department where he decided to be a painter. Eventually, he went to Yale University School of Art. Because of his learning disability, Chuck is overwhelmed by the whole. So he takes apart bigger images and divides them into smaller parts. This system allows him to incorporate his intuition and soon he has a painting. He went to Europe after college and when he came back to the U.S., he began teaching at the University of Massachusetts but realized he really wanted to be a painter. He met his wife, Leslie Rose, a sculptor, and they moved to New York.

Close is known for his large scale 'portraits'. His first was 'Big Self Portrait'. He faced the camera on his head and snapped a photograph. He divided it into grid squares and made a larger grid on a 7' x9' canvas in pencil. Then, with paint, he would translate each grid of the photograph onto the correlating grid square on the canvas. Through this process, he found that his nostrils were lima bean shaped. He created perfect facial hair by scratching the paint with a razor blade and an electric eraser to make the reflections on his glasses. This painting took four months and became his signature style. Sometimes, he uses finger painting; other times, a paper mache style. His paintings are so large to maneuver around, he built a chair attached to a forklift and named it "Big Joe".

In 1988, Chuck was diagnosed with a rare spinal artery collapse that left him paralyzed. Everyone thought his career was over, but again they were wrong. After a long, painful rehabilitation, he fought back and began painting again. He is in a wheelchair and his wheelchair is attached to a new 'Big Joe'. This time, the grid squares looked like bursts of color, like he was celebrating the ability to paint again.

Today, Chuck Close continues to paint. He is very successful and has had over 100 solo shows, as well as at the Museum of Modern Art in NYC and at The Art Institute of Chicago.