ART REVIEW

ART REVIEW; Savoring Chuck Close By Savoring The Process

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN
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TO marvel is the beginning of knowledge, and not to marvel, the first step toward ignorance. So the Greeks said. You can test this axiom in the Chuck Close print survey now at the Metropolitan Museum.

In a digital age, the ubiquity of technological images may accustom people to the old-fashioned miracle of illusion in art. But as Mr. Close once put it, there is still "something about the smearing of colored dirt on a flat surface and denying the flatness through the illusion of depth that retains its original magic from the days of the cave painters, and which can never be denied." What's true of paint on canvas, he might have added, is true of printmaking.

Mr. Close, who likes to point out that he loved magic as a boy, has sometimes wondered aloud whether magicians, when watching other magicians, "see the illusion, the device that makes the illusion or perhaps a little bit of both?" His show, which has come by way of the Blaffer Gallery at the University of Houston, where it was organized by Terrie Sultan (Nan Rosenthal has installed it at the Met), gives us both varied objects of dizzy illusion and the devices by which they were achieved.

For anybody curious about how art gets made, this exhibition is a model of eloquent didactics, including a few tools of the printing trade, which are themselves oddly riveting. The prints are compelling, on a par with Mr. Close's paintings, from which they are inseparable. At the same time, the show graciously acknowledges many of the creative helpers without whom he could not have pulled off his various printmaking exploits.

Big-time printmaking today is a collaborative business. The lone artist in a garret with a woodblock, ink and spoon is a quaint notion that bears no resemblance to Mr. Close's modus operandi. His partners have included master printers like Joe Wilfer and Kathan Brown and Tadashi Toda, experts, variously, at the ins and outs of spitbite aquatints, reduction linoleum cuts, screen prints, handmade paper pulp multiples and other arcane techniques seemingly impenetrable to the uninitiated.

Mr. Close, whose work has always had so much to do with elaborate systems and processes of operation, has needed these printers as they have needed him. Achieving a balance of authority is itself part of the art of printmaking.

A generous colleague but not the passive type -- good artists aren't passive, generally -- Mr. Close has typically erected constructive obstacles for himself and his collaborators, the conquest of which can bring about something special or new. To make "Keith" (1972), Mr. Close chose to take his established painting style of copying photographs via a grid and adapt it to the antique engraving technique of mezzotint, at first confounding Ms. Brown, his printer on that project. Then to make matters more difficult, he decided to make the mezzotint very large.

"I didn't want to go to a print shop where they would have all the expertise and would act as if I didn't have any, and where they would tell me that something had to be done a certain way, just because that was the way they did it," he explained to the curator, Ms. Sultan, in a conversation in the show's catalog. "I wanted to do something that would require both Kathan and me to figure out how to do it at the same time. I love that kind of problem solving."

Their work resulted in a milestone of contemporary printmaking, which in turn led Mr. Close to new ideas for drawings and paintings. It was the first work that explicitly displayed the incremental building blocks of the picture, the grid of marks. People sometimes assume prints are just art's poor cousins, copies of paintings or drawings, afterthoughts, but Mr. Close's prints are at the heart of his achievement.

Or, you might say, his collaborative achievement. It took him three months in 2000 to paint "Emma," a portrait of his niece. It took two more years for Yasu Shibata to produce the Japanese-style woodcut version of the painting, a coup of verisimilitude and complexity. Mr. Shibata broke down the image into 113 separate colors and 27 woodblocks, which on their own (7 of them are in the show) look like inchoate Rorschach blots. Combined, they recreate the picture exactly. Mr. Shibata even made water-based printing inks pass for viscous oil paint. Talk about magic.

1 | 2 NEXT PAGE >