

Phenomenologies of Impairment: The Self-Portraits of Frida Kahlo and Chuck Close

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Abstract

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The decision to represent oneself as the principal subject in a work of art raises questions as to the motivations governing the act of self-portrayal. Artists' self-portraits have often been constituted in relation to practicality or expediency, with the artist being viewed as his or her most accommodating model. But when the practice manifests in a life-long preoccupation, as it does among others with Frida Kahlo and Chuck Close, we must surmise that something more is at stake. To the extent that both artists' early lives were appreciably affected by impairment, disease, or physical or emotional trauma, their formative experiences were anything but conventional. If the reflexivity or protracted introspection that is also frequently associated with self-representation is even remotely connected to those concerns, their self-portraits would assume an added measure of significance relative to the study and interpretation of portraiture because the spectre of bodily impairment would infuse their work with the materiality of their embodied experiences. The question would then return to motivation, or what the artists would like us to perceive in their work, particularly if their work is based on their lived bodily experiences and less on the reification of inner subjectivity. The artists' impairments would then functionally destabilize portraiture's conventional honorific intentionality by imposing on representative likeness the dynamics of the individual's problematic lived bodily experiences.

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Introduction

This thesis combines an interest in portraiture and “disability” with a desire to understand the motivations that underwrite and sustain the production of significant bodies of work that directly or indirectly relate self-representation to the phenomenology of lived bodily experiences and impairment. It aligns the presumptive reflexivity commonly associated with self-representation with the conceptual need to mediate or regulate physiological or psychological impairment through work. It brings together the artwork of two North American artists: Frida Kahlo and Chuck Close, whose penchant for self-representation raises questions as to the rationale¹ behind their work, particularly when we consider that fully one third of Kahlo’s total production was self-representative and that a 2005 retrospective of Close’s self-portraits, jointly presented by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Walker Art Centre of Minneapolis, featured eighty-five separate works.² My interest in the Kahlo and Close self-portraits stems from a specific interest in self-portrayal, and from my belief that the artists’ respective practices challenge the conventions of representative portraiture.

My thesis relies on a number of theoretical perspectives that are drawn from writings by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty regarding phenomenology³ and the active role that the body plays in perception, creativity, and “lived” experience. From this

¹ In the Prologue to “Anam Cara” (1997) John O’Donohue observes: “It’s strange to be here. The mystery never leaves you. Behind your image, below your words, above you thoughts, the silence of another world waits.” The Kahlo and Close self-portraits stare back at us from the abyss. As human beings we are haunted by the mysterious spectre of death’s impassivity, its darkness and its light. Their works signify this battle, the confrontation with death, and the struggle to mark limited time with one’s unique and definitive grace.

² Christopher Finch, *Chuck Close: Work* (New York: Prestel Verlag, 2007), 292.

³ Given the relative importance of bodily impairment to my thesis, “Phenomenology... offers a non-dualistic means of combining a refusal to concede the impaired body to medicine with a resistance to the erasure of ‘the body’...”, as a viably discursive subject. *Sociologies of Disability and Illness: Contested Ideas in Disabilities and Medical Sociology*, Carol Thomas (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 129.

perspective, the artists' self-portraits will be discussed and contextualized in relation to impairment and embodied consciousness, and according to the paradox of their thematic bodies. Adopting a phenomenological perspective to the analysis and interpretation of the artists' self-portraits has as its principal motivation the revitalization of interpretive strategies too often given over to preponderant dualist assumptions at the expense of a unified view to the actuality of incarnated experience.

To the extent that human experience is incarnated, the artists' bodies are viewed in this study as irrepressible forces of objectification that hold significant philosophical and motivational implications for portraiture and self-representation. From this perspective the impaired body, whatever its configuration, is viewed as a generative force regulating the artists' lives, personal identities, personal relationships, and creative practices.

Although the concept of bodily impairment is central to this study, the artists and the works discussed herewith should in no way be considered representative of the broader social, cultural, historical, or political concerns that relate to a deeper understanding of the issues that dominate the field of Disability Studies.⁴ An overview of those perspectives reveals that "disability" should be understood in relation to culturally and environmentally imposed limitations governing access and social mobility, while

⁴ For information regarding the concerns of Disability Studies, see: David T Mitchell, and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000); Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*, (New York: University of Columbia Press, 2007); Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*, (New York: Routledge, 1986); Carol Thomas, *Sociologies of Disability and Illness: Contested Ideas in Disability Studies and Medical Sociology*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

impairment must be recognized as a particularized state of being in the world that in no way limits human potential or personal expression.

Impaired bodies are not depoliticized, asexual, or functionally disengaged – they are exemplars of universal processes that reflect the diversity of life’s experiences, if not a shared human inevitability; one that can be reconciled according to the phenomenology of lived bodily experiences as one issue among others that relate self-awareness and reflexivity to self-representation.

The discussion that follows focuses on the impaired body as the generative force that infuses the work of both artists, but it does so with the understanding that the mind rather than the body is often conceived of as the locus of creative activity and ingenuity. However, given my thesis’ position that bodily impairment is functional to reflexivity and formative of personal identities, determinate of self-expression and generative of work, I reconcile the prodigious output of both artists according to the functional regulation of their impairments, where anomalous personal circumstances are consciously engaged as the artist’s principle means of self-expression. Once reconciled to impairment, the motivational forces that spur the production of the artists’ self-portraits are presumed to be tied to a desire to establish and maintain critical peer attachments, even as the conceptual and ideological framework that determines the form and content of their work relates its chosen format to the mediation of the artist’s personal circumstances.

While Kahlo and Close actively engage the tradition of artists representing themselves in their work, their self-portraits function quite differently, either by allowing bodily impairment to materialize as the central theme of their work, or by de-centering it and restructuring its affects in the creation of a particularized form of self-expression that is infused by impairment but seems to make little overt reference to it. This would seem to cast the artists' respective practices at opposite ends of a continuum that in one way or another relates impairment to the body, to self-expression, and to work.

As I will argue, Kahlo's practice explores the phenomenology of her body's surfaces and interiority. Her self-portraits engage the consequences of physical impairment at the level of the body's ruptured hermetic boundaries even as they hint at the psychological repercussions of personal injury and trauma at the level of her emotions and intellect. Hers is an aesthetic that is at times vulgar and at times poetic, but it always probes subjectivity and interiority through a stoic expression or via the body's openly violated or incised surfaces.

On the other hand, Close's engagement with bodily impairment will be presented as being less evident but phenomenologically speaking equally intense if not spectacular. While his body rarely materializes as the subject of reflexive introspection, his practice functions entirely according to impairment and movement. In the process, his work engages temporal concerns, if only in relation to the viewer's capacity to comprehend the extent to which the artist's and their own bodies are jointly implicated in the completion of his work. In a manner of speaking, Close's work "...fuses two distinct but interacting

experiences of duration, of life frozen in a millisecond, and of life slowed to the pace of an activity by which it is gradually consumed.”⁵ Through process, the artist’s practice is either directly or inadvertently engaged with existential concerns that mirror the passage of time.

What functionally unifies and at the same time differentiates the artists’ respective practices is the degree to which their bodies are alternately present or absent in their self-portraits. In Close’s case, the body is present as “...a prior absence (a presence of something that has not yet appeared)...”⁶ While his body is not specifically represented in his work, it is sensed in the latency of movements and convolutions of media over the entire surface of his work. From this perspective, the revelation of Close’s impairment weighs heavily on the interpretation of his work. In Kahlo’s work, her body is the object of her self-portraits, whether overtly represented or subtly inferred in the allegory of an anthropomorphized fruit, plant, animal or insect. Even as we know that Kahlo’s body is no longer present, the spirit that infuses its representation is “...a posterior absence (an absence of something that was previously present)...”⁷ but has, or is still transitioning.

The Kahlo and Close self-portraits assume a heightened measure of significance relative to the study and interpretation of portraiture *because* of the artists’ bodily impairments, and *because* traumatic injury dramatically disrupts the individual’s unquestioned sense of bodily integrity and personal identity. The spectre of traumatic injury infuses the artists’

⁵ Robert Storr, *Chuck Close*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc. & the Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 55.

⁶ Thomas McEvelley, *The Exile’s Return: Toward a Redefinition of Painting for the Post-Modern Era* (New York: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1993), 82.

⁷ McEvelley, *Exile’s Return*, 82.

self-portraits with the materiality of their embodied experiences and the aura of altered sensibilities. More than that, impairment and trauma affirm the body's constitutive role in self-perception and conscious experience, functionally destabilizing portraiture's conventional honorific intentionality by imposing on likeness the dynamics of the individual's problematic embodied experiences. In this respect, the nature of the artists' impairments as much as their sense of personal identity determines the form and function of their self-portraits.

Portraiture, the Paradox of Representation

The decision to represent oneself as the principal subject in a work of art raises questions as to the motivation behind the act of representation, particularly when the practice manifests in a life-long preoccupation. The inordinate number of self-portraits in both artists' catalogues invites speculation as to the underlying functionality or intentionality governing their persistent acts of self-portrayal.

Artists' self-portraits have often been interpreted in relation to practicality or expediency; the artist being viewed as his or her most accommodating and convenient model.⁸ Other perspectives view self-portraiture as fundamentally autobiographical in intent, relating the self-fashioning of public identities to the construction of individual reputations or the determination of professional standings.⁹ Romantic interpretations link the practice with eccentricity or consumptive introspection, melancholia, solipsism and even narcissism.¹⁰

⁸ Simon Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Random House, 1999).

⁹ H. Perry Chapman. *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 6.

¹⁰ Frank Whitford, *Egon Schiele* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1981), 139.

The subject of self-representation is deceptively complex, yet it fits neatly into a general categorization of portraiture that can be described as the mimetic or illusionistic processes by which human form and identity are configured in relation to individualized acts of representation.¹¹ As a phenomenon of western culture, portraiture generally adheres to long-established philosophical or religious perspectives regarding the dualistic nature of human existence.¹² Consequentially, portraiture presents as a fundamental paradox, assuming the simultaneous representation of opposing conceptual fields: mind and body, the material and the immaterial, body and soul, self and other, subject and object, inner and outer. These opposing perspectives are intriguing yet exceedingly complex, as the dualistic principles they represent tend to encourage "...the value system that implicitly supports a disassociation from the body, the physical world, and the phenomenological experience of one's life."¹³ As a consequence, dualism has long since been assimilated into the conceptual framework that regulates the interpretation and analysis of portraiture.¹⁴ Whether contemporary artists continue to accommodate dualistic perspectives in the conceptualization and realization of their work is debatable, but the intellectualization of a spirit/matter divide remains conceptually accessible to most.

¹¹ Joanna Woodall, ed., *Portraiture: Facing the Subject* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1997).

¹² "Despite the difficulties which it posed, dualism preserved the notion of a self capable of existence after physical death, which is crucial to the efficacy of portraiture as re-presentation. Some kind of eternal or persistent dimension of identity is necessary if the viewer is to be satisfied that the person depicted is present, at least in a 'good' or 'authentic' likeness." *Portraiture*, ed. Joanna Woodall, (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 11.

¹³ Elisha, *Conscious Body*, .31.

¹⁴ "Portraits could either be theorized as exact, literal re-creations of someone's external appearance, or as truthful accounts of the artist's special insight into the sitter's inner or ideal self. Both could be assimilated to the concept of realism." *Portraiture*, ed. Joanna Woodall (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 5.

The significations attending portraiture would seem to continue to flow from the body to the mind or spirit, with the mind/spirit being regarded as the conceptual nexus of all human activity and purpose. To the extent that this is true, the body, and particularly the impaired body, assumes a somewhat diminished standing relative to the mind as a generative concern or a legitimized subjective position in the arts. That this sentiment persists, to a greater or lesser degree is reflected in the following extract from Virginia Woolf's "*On Being Ill*":

“Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change it brings, how astonishing, when the light of health goes down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to light...when we think of this... it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature...But no; with a few exceptions literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear, and, save for one or two passions such as desire or greed, is null, and negligible and non-existent. On the contrary, the very opposite is true. All day, all night the body intervenes; blunts and sharpens; colours or discolours; turns to wax in the warmth of June, hardens to tallow in the murk of February. The creature within can only gaze through the pane – smudged or rosy; it cannot separate off from the body like the sheath of a knife or the pod of a pea for a single instant; it must go through the whole unending procession of changes, heat and cold, comfort and discomfort, hunger and satisfaction, health and illness, until there comes the inevitable catastrophe; the body smashes itself to smithereens, and the soul (it is said) escapes. But of all this daily drama of the body there is no record. People always write of the doings of the mind; the thoughts that come of it; its noble plans; how the mind has civilized the universe. They show it ignoring the body in the philosopher’s turret; or kicking the body, like an old football, across leagues of snow and desert in the pursuit of conquest or discovery. Those great wars which the body wages with the mind a slave to it, in the solitude of the

bedroom against the assault of fever or the oncome of melancholia, are neglected.”¹⁵

Woolf’s reflections on the dualistic nature of human existence lionize the tribulations of the imperilled body as a universal process that is common to all and sorely neglected in the arts. Her sentiments reflect the dichotomous nature of human experience, but her observations strike a decisive chord because they reflect the paradox of embodiment: that the mind which conceptualizes its own existence, links events and gives meaning to the world of experiences, is at one and the same time also that which suffers in isolation and by association the humiliations of the unruly body and the perversities of fate.

From Woolf’s perspective the phenomenal body is an unfathomable and unfortunate predicament. It is an insufferable prison or an immutable force of nature that materializes to conscious experience intermittently through frustration, discomfort and pain.

Nevertheless, she lauds the body’s irrepressible resolve and the phenomenal kinship by which the body sustains the mind. Human consciousness is indeed embedded, and our bodies *are* what keep us, inform us, and tie us to the world of experiences. To the extent that this is true, the impaired bodies of the artists are what infuse their works with meaning.

Phenomenal Bodies

Even as the body shapes our perspective of the world and ourselves, it tends to vacillate experientially between absence and presence, between pleasure and pain, and as Woolf

¹⁵ Virginia Wolf, *On Being Ill* (Ashfield: Paris Press, 2002), 4-5

laments, between health and sickness. The paradox of human experience is that our bodies function in the background and are generally lost to conscious experience. While we live our lives from our bodies to the world, our bodies rarely form "...the thematic object of experience..."¹⁶ As Drew Leder, (a philosopher and medical doctor currently teaching philosophy at Loyola College of Maryland) observes: "Insofar as the body tends to disappear when functioning unproblematically, it often seizes our attention most strongly at times of dysfunction..."¹⁷ According to this logic, conscious experience is adversely affected when the body presents dysfunctionally through impairment, trauma or disease.

It is precisely because of its thematization through impairment, when the body becomes constitutive of the artists' lived experiences, that it becomes the focus of my thesis. The body of impairment is both an intuitively distinctive position and the medium through which the inner processing of the existential concerns associated with impairment find expression in the artists' self-portraits. From this perspective, impairment functions preconsciously as a primordial lifelong preoccupation governing the artists' identities and their lived relations to the world. Allowing for the premise of the phenomenal or lived body, the conjoined experiences of mind and body are integrated in the artists' self-portraits by virtue of the artists' bodily experiences, with their work reflecting the schematics of their objectified impairments. Human consciousness is embedded, but impairment is sensed and lived-through.

¹⁶ Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 1.

¹⁷ Leder, *Absent Body*, 4.

If, as Freud suggested in “*The Ego and the Id*”, “the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego”¹⁸ an evolving sense of selfhood is invariably tied to bodily experiences, and where impairment and identity are concerned, the regulation of anomalous circumstances occurs when the “...integration of this body self becomes a fundamental aspect of self-representation...”¹⁹ To the extent that the artists’ self-portraits represent the essence of the artists’ lived bodily experiences, they reflect the artists’ contingent and evolving circumstances. And yet because those circumstances are grounded in impairment, the thematically present or phenomenal body of impairment underwrites the production and interpretation of the artists’ work.

In this way, the artists’ self-portraits are reflective of a particularized vernacular of the body that however idiosyncratic is tied to impairment and to the phenomenology of the artists’ lived bodily experiences. Moreover, I believe the artists’ self-portraits are made more readily accessible to interpretation when they are perceived according to first-person representations of embodied experience and not in relation to the reification of disembodied rationalities, presumed nationalist strategies, or gendered or medicalized stereotypes. While a phenomenological perspective endorses the significance of these systems to understanding, its emphasis is on the primacy of the view because “To return to the things themselves is to return to that world that precedes knowledge...”²⁰ What this means, is that my analyses of the Kahlo and Close self-portraits will be

¹⁸ David Krueger, *Integrating Body Self and Psychological Self: Creating a New Story in Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2002), 6-7.

¹⁹ Krueger, *Body Self*, 6-7.

²⁰ Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor, eds., *The Merleau-Ponty Reader* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 57

contextualized in relation to bodily impairment while focussing on what their work represents.

Why Phenomenology?

In their revision of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical perspectives, Toadvine and Lawlor assert that "Phenomenology is the study of essences; and according to it, all problems amount to finding definitions of essences....But phenomenology is also a philosophy which puts essences back into existence....It is a transcendental philosophy which puts the assertions arising out of the natural attitude in suspense, the better to understand them..."²¹

As a philosophical perspective, phenomenology encourages the viewer to reconsider the conceptual lens through which he/she might initially perceive or understand the artists' self-portraits. By affirming the act of perception and the viewer's disposition relative to the artists' self-portraits, a phenomenological approach temporarily displaces the cultural and social-historical perspectives commonly favoured by interpretation, thus allowing for a greater emphasis to be placed on experiencing the work in its perceptual context or as it is experienced *in the moment*. This emphasis on the essence of the act of viewing proffers an unencumbered perspective that restores a preconscious relationship to the work as it is encountered in time and space, thereby reaffirming the body as the place where perception and meaning inheres.²²

²¹ Toadvine and Lawlor, *Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 55.

²² Pamela M. Lee, *Object to be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (Cambridge & London: The MIT Press, 2000). James Attlee and Lisa LeFeuve, *Gordon Matta-Clark: The Space Between* (Glasgow & London: Nazraeli Press, 2003).

In this way a phenomenological perspective is less concerned with what or who is represented (although that *is* important) than with how what is depicted is inevitably perceived. Ideally, perception supersedes analysis to the extent that the experience of viewing is understood to be pre-reflexive or prior to interpretation. The essence of perception is lived-through and non-reflexive. As Merleau-Ponty suggests: “Vision is not a certain mode of thought or presence to self; it is the means given me for being absent from myself, for being present from the inside at the fission of Being only at the end of which do I close up into myself.”²³ What Merleau-Ponty describes is the viewer’s ideal disposition to the work; a perspective that allows him/her to become immersed in the temporal flow of perception through dehiscence while keeping whatever is extraneous to perception in abeyance until such time as reflection begins back in the body. “The enigma of vision is not eliminated; it is shifted from the ‘thought of seeing’ to vision in act.”²⁴

Dehiscence

A phenomenological perspective to the artists’ self-portraits determines the conditions under which the viewer encounters and then experiences the work. In the “*Intertwining – The Chiasm*” from “*The Visible and the Invisible*”, Merleau-Ponty refers to this ideal disposition to the work as dehiscence, describing its processes as follows: “With the first vision, the first contact, the first pleasure, there is initiation, that is, not the positioning of a content, but the opening of a dimension that can never again be closed, the establishment of a level in terms of which every other experience will henceforth be

²³ Toadvine and Lawlor, *Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 374.

²⁴ Toadvine and Lawlor, “Eye and Mind” in: *Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 366.

situated. The idea is this level, this dimension.”²⁵ Achieving this dimension relative to the experience of the artists’ self-portraits is either a function of the viewer’s position relative to the work or a consequence of artistic expression and the artist’s specific intentions.²⁶

The application of the concept of dehiscence to an interpretation of the artist’s self-portraits may seem odd until we consider that the term effectively describes the processes through which the inner contents of an organism or its tissues are revealed to the outside world by splitting or opening. While the term is usually associated with botany, biology or medicine, it also has metaphorical significance. To the extent that portraiture is aligned theoretically with the paradoxical revelation of inner subjectivities, the concept has particular relevance to my thesis and the interpretation of the artists’ self-portraits. Frida Kahlo’s self-portraits function in relation to dehiscence as her work exposes the sectioned contents of her body, expressing her existential concerns and the experiential character of her impairments. Her self-portraits will be discussed in this context.

While Kahlo’s self-portraits reflect the principle of bodily opening both literally and metaphorically, the concept’s application to Chuck Close’s self-portraits is less evident until we recognize the disorienting nature of his monumental practice. Close’s portraits destabilize perception and the viewer’s relationship to the surface of his work by disrupting pictorial depth. Where Kahlo’s impairments exude bodily depth from beneath the metaphorical skin of her paintings; depth radiates beyond the picture plane in Close’s

²⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Intertwining – The Chiasm in *The Invisible and the Invisible, Followed by Working Notes*, ed. Claude Lefort (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 151.

²⁶ Briony Fer and Betti-Sue Hertz, *Transmission: The Art of Matta and Gordon Matta-Clark* (San Diego: San Diego Museum of Art, 2006).

self-portraits, effectively extending the skin of his work to enclose the viewer within the space of his paintings. Dehiscence occurs in Close's portraits at the boundary between his work's illusionist and abstractionist intentions, when the viewer senses his/her body's complicity in the completion of the artist's work through movement.

If we allow ourselves the luxury of extending this principle to our conceptualization of the body's relations to the phenomenal world and the exchanges that define embodied existence, dehiscence can also reflect the temporal flow of the ideas and sensations that result as a consequence of our lived experiences. If we accept the principle that existence is incarnated, and affirm that there is no separation of mind and body²⁷, dehiscence presents a legitimate theoretical vantage point from which to engage in an interpretation of the artists' works through a conceptual linking of perception and intellection. In this context dehiscence would represent the theoretical opening of the viewer's mind and body to the experiences associated with encountering works of art and the experiences represented within those works.

In "*Eye and Mind*" Merleau-Ponty discusses the disruption of classical perspective through modernist painting's encroachment upon the superficiality of the picture plane.²⁸

This infringement lends itself to a broadening of the theoretical precepts that define conventional pictorial depth and the viewer's relationship to the work of art.

²⁷ "...Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach takes at its base the notion that human experience occurs in a physical body engaged in the world. It is a philosophical position that there is no actual separation between mind and body, but that reality is a dynamic play of inseparable qualities of mind and body." Perrin Elisha, *The Conscious Body* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2011), 130.

²⁸ "The entire history of painting in the modern period, with its efforts to detach itself from illusionism and acquire its own dimensions, has a metaphysical significance." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind* in: *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, ed. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 368.

The re-conceptualization of depth brings with it the revelation of space as the perceptual field of experiences within which the forms of art vibrate incessantly beyond their structural enclosures. Conceptually, as the viewer moves through the space of the work, depth is revealed to him/her through a "...deflagration of Being..." such that represented forms become "...secondary and derived..."²⁹ and what determines the quality of an object's experience is its capacity to reflect the inner dimensionality of the light of Being through dehiscence. In Kahlo's work the light of dehiscence exists at the margins of her flesh, between interiority and exteriority and between life and death. In Close's Self-portraits it exists at the limits of perception between his works' abstract and illusionistic qualities and within the viewer's capacity to recognize in movement, the body's implications to conscious experience.

What this means is that there is a lining to perception that is made available to thought, through the "ideality" of our carnal connectivity, and this ideality exists in the realm of our bodies and our intellection through dehiscence. When we consider as Merleau-Ponty suggests, that "...he who looks must not himself be foreign to the world that he looks at"³⁰ we realize our gaze upon the artists' self-portraits proffers a view to the self.

Impaired Bodies

That the body has been maligned or neglected as a legitimate subject of discourse is perhaps less evident in contemporary academic circles, but the politicization of the body as a consequence of, among other intellectual developments, feminist perspectives has

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Eye and Mind* in: *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, ed. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 369.

³⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 134.

contributed to a welcomed broadening of its intrinsic discursive possibilities. The impaired body *is* such a possibility because it provides an opportunity to approach the subject of self-representation from the intimate perspective of impairment's subjectivity, "...as an experientially based phenomenon"³¹.

By being reflective of their lived bodily experiences, the artists' self-portraits open impairment to an intrusive glare, not as we shall see through insipid exhibitionism or self-pity, but through intimacy, ingenuity and legitimate human concern. The artists' self-portraits implore the viewer to move beyond what indifference might allow, and to affirm in the artists' work what first impressions actually demand: that *our own* bodies are intimately implicated in the constitution of the artists' self-portraits, that human frailty is what underwrites embodied experience, that the act of perception is tied to the human body, and that an empathic perspective is central to an understanding of the artists' self-portraits.

To the extent that the artists' bodies can be conceived of as representing universal processes, the artists' self-portraits elicit empathy by bringing perception to light on the existential concerns of embodied experience. However, given the variability of the artists' representations, a phenomenological perspective to impairment proffers a view to what lies beneath the surface. "The painter's vision is no longer a view upon an outside; a merely 'physical-optical' relation with the world...the picture...is a spectacle...by breaking 'the skin of things'..."³² The artists' self-portraits can be viewed as an opening to the potentiality of our own lives, by breaking the skin of representation to reveal the

³¹ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), xiv.

³² Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 370.

experiences of impairment. In this way the phenomenal body's topography is cut, slashed, and bisected in Kahlo's self-portraits, where it is unitized, pixelated and reconstituted in Close's work.

Imagining Bodies

In his "*Proposal for the Completion of the Visible and the Invisible*", an attempt to resolve Merleau-Ponty's final and incomplete opus, Douglas Low observes that:

"Merleau-Ponty asserts that the painter paints with his or her body and not with his or her mind. Therefore, if we wish to understand the act of painting, we must begin with the painter's body – and this body must be conceived not as a physical object like any other but as a lived through synergy of vision and movement. Since the human body is *actively* engaged in the world, all perception is intimately tied to its movement."³³

The concept of bodily impairment is tied to a conceptualization of the lived body that is entirely consistent with a sense that one lives-through and is anchored in the body in a manner not unlike that described by Virginia Woolf. Thus, the body is the point where experience and perception coalesce. The body is experienced subjectively from within and objectively from without. It is lived-through as subject, and lived-out-of as object. The capacity to view oneself objectively, from the perspective of a disembodied knower, is to understand the body's relationship to the world and to others empathetically as the sharing of embodied consciousness.

³³ Douglas Low, *Merleau-Ponty's Last Vision: A Proposal for the Completion of the Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 57.

Inherent to this sense of embodiment is an imaginative skill that anticipates the body's alternating subjective and objective sensibilities. This imagining capacity is a faculty that can be understood in relation to body schema, or one's overall sense of the body as an object among other objects existing in the world. Couched within Merleau-Ponty's conceptualized phenomenal body, this imagining structure has the capacity to view itself and the world from alternative perspectives. This "...virtual body allows for 'a certain style of seeing, a new use of one's body'..."³⁴, and it is through this imaginative skill that the body opens itself to introspection and representation. The artist uses this intuitive skill to traverse the gaps between what is seen and what it felt.

By opening the body to the world of representation the artist's body becomes the line, form, and colour of expression. What mind and body know intimately is immediately given to self-expression. "This rethinking of the body and its lived-through perceptual relationship to the world puts it at odds with the scientifically conceived body as a thing with discrete parts in external relationship to each other and with the body conceived from the point of view of a disembodied knower."³⁵ The body thus conceived, is an integrated structure of physical and metaphysical perceptions that are self-contained, lived-through, and extended to the world through dehiscence.

The Body of the Artist: Frida Kahlo

Any analysis of Frida Kahlo's life and work must accommodate a view to the decisive role that physical and psychological trauma played in the configuration of the artist's

³⁴ James B. Steeves, *Imagining Bodies: Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Imagination* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2004), 22.

³⁵ Low, *Merleau-Ponty's Last Vision*, 13.

self-image and her reputation. To the extent that her life's work is so closely tied to narratives of personal injury and suffering, her self-portraits are frequently interpreted in relation to the legacy of her wounded body and her injured psyche.³⁶ And yet the critical timing of those injuries, occurring as they did so early in the artist's life, and their inconclusive post-traumatic processing are too often discounted in favour of analytical perspectives that relate the impetus for the production of her work to other concerns that include: a desire to fix her identity in relation to her mixed Indian and European heritage³⁷; Mexican nationalism; oedipal insufficiencies and feelings of maternal abandonment;³⁸ class struggle and political activism; solipsism; Munchausen's Syndrome, and most importantly, infidelity and betrayal given her on-again/off-again relationship with Diego Rivera. To the extent that early "traumatic memory is lateralized"³⁹, essentially hard-wiring the future processing of subsequent traumatic events, victims of trauma invariably revisit those events in an attempt to rationalize their past experiences or to achieve a measure of closure through self-analysis or through self-expression. Scholarship – in my view – should not elide this dynamic.

While my thesis is invariably informed by these perspectives it focuses more intently on the phenomenology of expressed pain and its attempted rationalization in the artist's

³⁶ Gannit Ankori, *Imagining Her Selves: Frida Kahlo's Poetics of Identity and Fragmentation* (Westport & London: Greenwood Press, 2002), Margaret A. Lindauer, *Devouring Frida: The Art History and Popular Celebrity of Frida Kahlo* (Hanover & London: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 1999), Salomon Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo: Song of Herself* (New York: Merrell Publishers Ltd. 2008),

³⁷ Cynthia Freeland, *Portraits and Persons: A Philosophical Inquiry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 185-8.

³⁸ "Grimberg believes that the key to Kahlo's personality is her deep sense of loneliness which was the result of an unfulfilling relationship with her mother." *Imagining Her*, Gannit Ankori (Westport & London: Greenwood Press, 2002), 6.

³⁹ David W. Krueger, *Integrating Body Self and Psychological Self: Creating a New Story in Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2002), 56.

work. By isolating a number of Kahlo's self-portraits that reify the experiential nature of pain, I will demonstrate how the artist's self-portraits reflect the psycho-physiological processing of trauma and its aftermath. In this respect, my analyses of Kahlo's self-portraits diverges somewhat from previous scholarship by associating the representation of impairment and pain with the artist's desire to more effectively process and communicate its phenomenal affects through work.

Two critical events marked Kahlo's early life experiences, forever altering her body image and self-perception. At the age of six she was stricken with polio which left her with a permanent limp and a severely atrophied right leg. Throughout her life she referred to her leg as "...the centre of my disgrace".⁴⁰ It has been argued that the shame, confusion, and emotional scarring that are associated with disease and disfigurement never leave the body. "There are physical experiences such as pain, exhaustion, and illness that bring about the emergence of the body as an explicit object. Corporeal alienation does not come to be solely through the social confrontation but from within the body-for-me."⁴¹ Kahlo's reference to her "disgrace" would seem to reconcile with such an understanding.

In her eighteenth year Kahlo was severely injured in a tramway accident that resulted in the fracture of her third and fourth lumbar vertebrae, a dislocated left elbow, eleven fractures of her previously damaged right foot, and most significantly she was impaled on a handrail from the streetcar that traversed her body at the hip and exited through her

⁴⁰ Martha. Zamora, *The Letters of Frida Kahlo* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995), 82.

⁴¹ Leder, *Absent Body*, 93.

vagina.⁴² She spent the better part of the next two years immobilized in body casts and isolated in her bedroom. Her injuries precipitated years of chronic pain and depression interspersed by periods of remission that were marked by drug and alcohol abuse, as well as repeated infections and additional surgeries on both her back and leg. Months before her death in 1954 her right leg was amputated just below the knee.

The decidedly autobiographical nature of Kahlo's work, coupled with its consistent thematization of bodily impairment, suggests that the painter adopted a "master narrative positioning"⁴³ to her body and to her painting that was designed to facilitate the psychic processing of her life's traumatic events.⁴⁴ "Making feelings conscious, putting them into words, and describing them to other people, are all part of the mechanism for regulating emotion."⁴⁵ While her self-portraits, letters, and journals reflect the protracted variability of her health and her states of mind, they also reveal the artist's preoccupation with the existential concerns of an inscrutable and frustratingly unstable body. In this respect, infidelity and alienation take on ominous proportions that are less dependent on Kahlo's relationships with other people than with her relationship to her own body. Kahlo's self-portraits reveal the introspection of an individual who was consumed by temporal concerns of the flesh.

⁴² Salomon Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo: Song of Herself* (New York: Merrell Publishers Ltd., 2008), 116.

⁴³ Avril Thorne and Kate C. McLean, "Telling Traumatic events in Adolescence: A Study of Master Narrative Positioning," in *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative Self: Developmental and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Robyn Fivush and Catherine A. Haden (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc., 2003), vii

⁴⁴ "Self-defining memories are a central feature of the autobiographical self because they are essential for the development of the internalized life story, as well as for conveying one's personal past others" *Telling Traumatic Events in: Autobiographical Memory*, ed. Robyn Fivush and Catherine A. Haden (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc), 169.

⁴⁵ Krueger, *Integrating Body Self*, 94.

Kahlo's chronicling of her travails coincided with what appears to have been a desire to define a multifaceted identity; one that was overwhelmingly reconfigured in relation to disease, physical trauma⁴⁶ and the psychological aftermath of her injuries and repeated traumatization. In a recent book that considers the decidedly philosophical implications of Kahlo's art, Gannit Ankori suggests that the painter's art "...consciously investigated the possible definitions of the personal and generic Self..."⁴⁷ and that her "...quest for symmetry and balance, is connected to a profound...desire to balance her asymmetrical body..."⁴⁸ Not unlike Virginia Woolf's screed, Kahlo's self-portraits proffer alternating perspectives of health and sickness, equanimity and exasperation, surface and interiority, cohesion and fragmentation and temporality and immanence. More than this, they present a patient's phenomenological perspective of living with and through a body of painful oppositions and enigmatic dysfunctions.

Some scholars have argued that Kahlo deliberately sought to control or garner Rivera's attentions by feigning injury or by seeking unnecessary medical treatments, aligning the artist with hypochondria and Munchausen's syndrome.⁴⁹ The paradox of living with pain, and expressing it as Kahlo so often did in her work, is the degree to which pain's expression breeds doubt, impatience, suspicion and contempt. In this way, "The pain of an individual...may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to 'have certainty', while for the other person it is so elusive that 'hearing about pain' may

⁴⁶ Avril Thorne and Kate C. McLean, *Telling Traumatic Events*, 170.

⁴⁷ Ankori, *Imagining Her Selves*, 7.

⁴⁸ Ankori, *Imagining Her Selves*, 97

⁴⁹ "Even her physical ordeal, caused by a near fatal accident when she was eighteen, and by numerous subsequent ailments and surgical operations, is viewed by Grimberg as a manipulative device to gain attention and to satisfy her unquenchable need for love." *Imagining*, Gannit Ankori (Westport & London: Greenwood Press, 2002), 6.

exist as the primary example of what it is ‘to have doubt’. A translation of corporeal sensation to language, as required for diagnosis and cure, entails an attempt to erase doubt through speech.”⁵⁰ Tragically, Kahlo’s representations of impairment and pain have been misinterpreted in large part because of presumptive doubt, or perhaps more because of her presumptuous desire to reconcile the invisibility of pain by making it the subject of her art. As Kahlo herself admitted: “Since my themes have always been my sensations, my states of mind, and the deep reactions that my life has been causing in me, I’ve frequently materialized all that into my portraits of myself, which were the most sincere and real thing that I could do to express how I feel about myself and what was in front of me.”⁵¹

Kahlo’s penchant for self-examination and self-representation developed in relation to the trauma of her childhood illness, her disfigurement, and subsequent infirmity. As a consequence she adopted a subject/object relationship to her body, whose objectification in her art was reinforced by her near fatal traffic accident in 1925. As Ankori argues, “...Kahlo depicted her body as an external presence perceived by the outside world and identified as a specific person, but also as a subjective, internally ‘sensed’ entity. Thus, her ‘body’ is simultaneously an aspect of her ‘objective’ physical Self and one of the vehicles of her ‘subjective’ experiencing Self.”⁵²

⁵⁰ Carole Spitzack, “Foucault’s Political Body in Medical Praxis” in: *The Medical Body in Thought and Practice*. Drew Leder ed. (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992), 53-4.

⁵¹ Zamora, *The Letters*, 104-5

⁵² Ankori, *Imagining Her Selves*, 10.

My analysis of Kahlo's self-portraits hinges on what I believe is a patient's first-hand phenomenological representation of the physical and psychological consequences of personal injury and trauma. My impressions are mediated by my understanding that her work, her diaries, and her letters represent the composite processing of trauma and an autobiographical accounting of the events of her life, and that some of the artist's self-portraits may be characterized in relation to her efforts to reconcile inscrutable pain and suffering with the lingering affects of disease and impairment through work.

While a number of Kahlo's self-portraits rely on a dichotomous narrative structuring that is suggestive of a psychologically divided self and an objectified or alienated body, her paintings also represent the ruminations of an artist whose imaginative representations of impairment and trauma express a desire to communicate the experiential nature of pain to others, even as she struggled to integrate those experiences into an evolving sense of embodied existence. Kahlo "...exemplifies two facets of herself produced by the trauma of the accident by creating two personas – 'I' and 'she,' or Frida – and two perspectives – 'the world' and 'my world' – that reveal a detachment or distancing from certain aspects of herself, an act that paradoxically helps her in simultaneously observing and closing in on herself."⁵³

The theme of the twin runs persistently through Kahlo's practice, referencing the artist's penchant for self-reflection and objectification. The double in her work is often construed as an oneiric companion, a surrogate, or as the representation of the painter's alter ego.

⁵³ Claudia Schaefer, *Textured Lives: Women, Art, and Representation in Modern Mexico*, (Tucson & London: The University of Arizona Press, 1992), 20.

Using phenomenology, I prefer to consider the artist's objectification of her impaired body as a legitimate coping strategy that is less suggestive of psychological dissociation or ineffectual problem solving than an expression of the artist's imaginative capacity for invention, self-expression and reaffirmation.⁵⁴ The narrative of the artist's imbedded suffering affirms her body as a complex of sensations and experiences that leads to the conceptualization of the individual as the totality of mind and body and not a disjointed or dissociated being.

Frida Kahlo, the Self-Portraits

The paintings I will discuss in this section represent but a small sampling of the artist's total production of self-portraits, but they are conspicuous for what they reveal and for Kahlo's imaginative use of allegory to represent the psycho-physiological consequences of her repeated traumatization and altered body-image. That Kahlo used a circular format in two of the paintings to reiterate the experiential nature of pain and suffering, or that her body is violently transformed, disfigured, or mutilated in four of the six works discussed below is suggestive of the artist's preoccupation with the degenerative processes of her unstable existence. But these paintings in particular represent the phenomenological significations of bodily impairment and embodied experience, if not an assiduously innovative way of communicating personal angst, self-concern, frustration and entropy.

⁵⁴ "The disconnection of the acute register of pain is the mission of dissociation, which immediately, instantaneously, and, until an individual is aware of this invisible process, magically creates the illusion dissipating any discomfort. The state change may range from feeling 'zoned-out' or blank, to a distinctly different state as depression, obsession, reverie, or rage. An individual learns to create various ways to reconnect the mind and body by some somatic bridge, to use the body to exercise, to take warm baths, or to focus on breathing. Action symptoms of stimulation of the body, such as alcohol and drug use, or self-harm inflicted on the body, are often used as an attempt at bridging back to the body self as a foundation of affective experience and organization." *Integrating Body Self*, David W. Kruger (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2002), 138.

Kahlo's self-portraits represent the artist's posterior processing of the events that marked the various stages of her life, from early childhood to the period preceding her death.

"Girl with a Death Mask" 1938: oil on metal, 7.8 x 5.8 inches

This diminutive memento mori, roughly eight by six inches succinctly represents Kahlo's retrospective processing of the consequences of earlier traumatic events and the isolation associated with her traumatization. Kahlo depicts herself as a masked toddler standing alone in a barren landscape, the anthropomorphised mountainous backdrop of which resembles the profiles of a series of clamorous heads turned on their sides. The death-mask worn by the child is typical of masks worn during Easter celebrations in Mexico. The death mask is associated with the Resurrection while the tiger's mask at the child's feet references courage and perseverance, perhaps an indication of the artist's alternating impulse to give-in to, or persevere through pain.⁵⁵ The yellow marigold that the child holds in her hands is symbolic of the type of flowers customarily brought to gravesites at anniversaries or at the time of burial. Local mythology suggests that the translucent light of the flower helps guide the dead to other loved ones in the after-life. Significantly, the flower has analgesic properties and here references the child's anxiety and confusion with respect to her illness and altered physicality. The flower is frequently "...used for the treatment of *susto* o *espanto*, or fright, a complex syndrome caused by shock in which the person feels an 'initial loss of soul or spirit,' followed by physical symptoms."⁵⁶ Salomon Grimberg's seemingly innocent remarks concerning the flower subtly undermine the artist's real symptomatology by raising the specter of hypochondria.

⁵⁵ Prignitz-Poda, *Frida Kahlo: The Painter*, 39

⁵⁶ Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo: The Still*, 63-4.

The fact that the child (Kahlo) wears a mask is somewhat ironic given portraiture's imputed associations with the act of posing or the concept of portraiture's paradoxical dualities of facade and interiority. While the mask *may* be understood to represent the artist's feelings regarding both her past and her future, or perhaps how she felt she was perceived by others, it most certainly functions by concealing her identity. I believe that the mask acts as a metaphor for the artist's injured body and the psychic aftermath of her reconfigured identity. As an inverted mirror might represent the inner processing of the artist's mind and reveal her hidden identity as impairment or pain, the death-mask "...provides the point of mediation between what is perceived as purely internal and accessible only to the subject and what is external and publicly observable, a point from which to rethink the opposition between the inside and the outside."⁵⁷ The child's body may appear to be superficially intact, but her inversely configured ego is represented through the mirror of the mask such that the child is haunted by the conception of her own stilted mortality, a consequence of her traumatization by disease. The metaphor of the mask can also be understood as a shield that covers and protects the child's ego from the taunts linked to her withered right leg, or it may be interpreted as a spectre warding-off the curious, the superstitious, and the ignorant.

The mask insists upon the brilliance of Kahlo's adaptive strategies of camouflage and denial which were enacted in childhood through clothing in the layering socks and later as a woman when she took to wearing indigenous clothing. The stigma and humiliation associated with impairment is frequently aligned to the refutation of the offending

⁵⁷ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), 55.

appendage which leads to its objectification and rejection as determinate to personal identity. The mask functions by covering the child's identity and then by extinguishing her associations with impairment, the offending limb, and the taunts of her peers. Kahlo's deliberate linking of her persona to a death mask suggests that the artist engaged in the act of representing her self from the perspective of her imbedded bodily experiences.

"What the Water Gave Me" (1938) Oil on canvas; 38 x 30 inches

This is a very interesting painting for a number of reasons. First, because its vantage point, that of the artist in her bath, fuses with that of the viewer in the same way that the viewer's perspective of his/her own body would be available to them in a similar situation, that is, from the shoulders down to the feet. This is somewhat disconcerting as the viewer's perspective of the artist's body in *her* bath, is exactly that of the *artist's* view to her own body. In this way the painting presents the temporal relations that define the viewers' perspective to their own bodies, and that of another, echoing the complicated dynamics that inform a dualistic perspective to existence and an empathetic view to the experiences of another. This is important because the painting represents a number of different views simultaneously: that of the artist's view upon her "damaged paw"⁵⁸ and the screen of images that infiltrate her thoughts; that of the viewer upon the artist's unfortunate circumstances; and finally that of a subjective or analytical view upon the work of art.

⁵⁸ Raquel Tibol, *Frida Kahlo: An Open Life*. Trans, Elinor Randall, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983), 46.

The painting is intriguing because it echoes the subject/object relationships discussed above and because it confirms the dissociative processing that is incumbent to embodied experience. We see and feel our bodies from the inside, even as our bodies are perceived from the outside. “Kahlo often seems to observe herself as an object, not a subject, experiencing a detached consciousness of her own persona.”⁵⁹ More importantly, the painting offers a phenomenological perspective of that persona and a representation of the temporal flow of the artist’s pre-reflexive thoughts in her bath. Even as the artist’s view falls upon the edge of the tub and more deliberately on the fissure of her right foot, the viewer is offered an aqueous view to the daydreams and preoccupations of the artist’s meandering thoughts, memories, and feelings that seem to be conjured-up as she reflects upon her necrotic flesh.

In discussing perception, Merleau-Ponty seems to describe the very moments of Kahlo’s ruminations. “At each moment, my perceptual field is filled with reflections, noises, and fleeting tactile impressions which I cannot relate precisely to the preconceived context, and yet which I ‘place’ immediately in the world.... At each instant also I dream around things. I imagine objects or people whose presence here is not incompatible with the context, and yet they are not mixed in with the world: they are ahead of the world, upon the stage of the imaginary...”⁶⁰ Kahlo’s thoughts float freely before the viewer as the manifestation of the artist’s past experiences and misgivings about her future.

⁵⁹ Schaefer, *Textured Lives*, 27.

⁶⁰ Toadvine and Lawlor, *Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 58.

While the “preconceived context” that Merleau-Ponty describes functions in relation to the artist’s objectification of her impaired or dysfunctional body, the painting takes form coincidentally and pre-consciously behind the screen of the artist’s imagination, amidst the field of her not incompatible but transient emotions, past experiences, and oblique thoughts. The painting functions not unlike a phenomenological stage upon which the artist’s embodied memories play out. That it does so, is echoed in the references, past, present, and future that we discover in the painting and later in some of the artist’s other self-portraits.

Her parents feature prominently in the centre of the painting to the right of an image of the artist herself, half submerged in the water, a suggestion of her conflicted relationships with both. The figure’s movements are contorted and manipulated by a nefarious faceless loin-clothed figure that lies slumped on the shore of a fissure-like volcanic island. The noose serves as a tightrope for a group of insects, (alternately symbols of decay or internment) and a tiny ballerina, perhaps emblematic of the artist herself. The rope is suggestive of Kahlo’s tenuous hold on life, as if it were held only by a string. A boat with its sails fully deployed is an ominous reference to a death- ship that approaches. A conch shell oozes liquid through a series of perforations that appear deliberately spaced along its side, echoing the artist’s multiple surgeries or the festering ulcerations on her right foot. Finally, a dead bird, symbol of flight forms the petrified canopy of tree, a sign that the artist is tied to her body which is itself moored in the ground. A skyscraper descends into the inferno of a molten volcano of pain.

These iconic elements presage or reference other works from the artist's catalogue, most of which are apparent in other self-portraits. Critically, the painting functions as the artist's conceptualization of her inability to mediate the cycle of impairment's recurrent thematization. But the naked indigenous girl to the right of the image of the artist's parents is suggestive of her twin's detachment and self-consolation, the consequence of her parents' protracted absence from her bedside at the time of her accident.⁶¹ Less symbolic of dissociation the painting's surrealistic screen is a phenomenological representation of abandonment and isolation and the artist's conceptualization of the embedded and solitary nature of her existence.

"Still Life" 1942: oil on copper, 25 ¾ in. (63 cm) diameter

This lyrically contemplative painting forms one half of a diptych that was commissioned from the artist by the wife of the President of Mexico. It was destined to hang in the dining room of the presidential palace, but the painting's overtly suggestive sexual content scandalized the First Lady and it was unceremoniously returned to the artist. The painting is a finely crafted example of Kahlo's sardonic and imaginative expressivity, and a precursor to her late anthropomorphized self-portraits.⁶²

At just over two feet in diameter, this colourful vanitas still life, ripe in metaphorical symbolism, is dominated at its centre by a bisected seasonal squash whose hourglass

⁶¹ "Anna Freud remarked on how children with bodily injury, often deprived of maternal care learn to play the role of mother and child to their bodies." *In Her Own Image: Women's Self-Representation in Twentieth-Century Art*, Danielle Knafo (Cranbury: Rosemount Publishing & Printing Corp. 2009), 79

⁶² "In place of her own image, she now filled her canvases with dazzling arrays of sensuous, colorful fruits...they are... anthropomorphized objects that clearly symbolize her emotional state of being at the time." *In Her Own Image*, Danielle Knafo (Cranbury: Rosemount Publishing & Printing Corp. 2009), 86.

uterine-shaped fleshy tonality invokes the artist's stilted fecundity and ruptured vesicular interiority, which in the context of Kahlo's pathology references the repeated sectioning of her own flesh under the surgeon's knife. Suppliant and inclined the gourd appears compliant and ready for the taking.

Immediately to the left of the squash, the tentacle-like ovarian arms of a choral fungus seem to fold back on the seeds of the gourd as if drawn by some primitive urge to insemination, referencing the artist's multiple aborted pregnancies, repeated infidelities, and her notorious promiscuity. At the upper right of the gourd, a halved cherimoya⁶³ which resembles female genitalia leans against a bunch of conspicuously blotched or ripened bananas, bunched together as if awaiting their turn at penetration, perhaps a reference to Kahlo's numerous affairs. To the lower right of the gourd, the underbelly of a sectioned de-stalked mushroom seems to suggest both male and female genitalia, perhaps a reference to Kahlo's vaunted bisexuality.

A floral wreath that clings to the edge of the wooden frame threatens to envelope the picture's contents as if overcome by the rapture of intercourse. The wooden frame is conspicuous for the bulbous protrusions that appear at its centre top and bottom, once again referencing the artists' genitalia and anus. A Polyphemus moth, symbol of loss and decay⁶⁴, and a yellow butterfly, a Pre-Columbian symbol of fire, death and sacrifice, blend into the top section of the painting, both subtle inferences to the contemplative nature of the image. Both are allusions to rebirth, metamorphosis, or transmutation,⁶⁵ a suggestion that their role in the painting affirms the painter's preoccupation with

⁶³ Prignitz-Poda, *Frida Kahlo: The Painter*, 184.

⁶⁴ Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo: The Still Lifes*, 82.

⁶⁵ Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo: The Still Lifes*, 82.

temporality. The Moth's brightly coloured monocular design brings to mind the pineal eye that Kahlo believed represented insight, a quality she affirmed in Rivera; a "stock" characterization that frequently highlighted the foreheads of her subjects and her self-portraits. According to Salomon Grimberg, the butterfly's brightly coloured wings connote a painful death by fire, presumably a metaphor for Kahlo's tortuous existence and her spiritual liberation through cremation. The moth, according Grimberg, represents promiscuity, a quality ascribed to both the artist and her mate. The centrally configured squash casts this painting in the light of the artist's desire to metaphorically identify its bisected form with that of her own body's repeated sectioning under the surgeon's knife.

"The Flower of Life" 1943: Oil on Masonite, 11 x 7 ¾ inches

"The Flower of Life" is a poignant reminder of the ruinous physical and psychological consequences of the hip and back injuries that the artist sustained in the traffic accident that almost ended her life and that presumably affected her ability to carry pregnancy to term. The painting represents the artist's metaphorical re-conceptualization of her entire reproductive system as an anthropomorphized mandrake plant that appears solicitous to insemination. The Mandragora series of plants or herbs, and the mandrake plant in particular has been mythologized from antiquity as a potent remedy to infertility.

"References to the mandrake root as a cure for infertility are found as far back as the book of Genesis (30:14-16), when Rachel uses it to cure her sterility."⁶⁶ The plant has a bifurcated root system that has been likened to the legs and torso of the human body and as such, its mythological potency was seen to be reflected in its unusual and suggestive

⁶⁶ Salomon Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo: The Still Lifes* (London and New York: Merrell Publishers Inc., 2008), 92-3.

shape. The potency of the plant's symbolism is tied in the painting to Kahlo's rumoured multiple abortions or spontaneous miscarriages, and the artist's subsequent compensatory fixation on Diego Rivera as her child. However, the painting's size and content align it with the tradition of ex-voto works as a supplication for the reversal of her body's inherent impairments, in this case her barrenness or infertility. Generally, votive works represent the affected or injured part of the body and are left as an offering "...with the petition to be cured taken as a vow".⁶⁷ The painting's intimate proportions and curiously configured and anthropomorphized contents are solicitous of the proximate view.

Turned upside down with the cervix buried within a mass of foliage, the bulbous shape of the body of the plant takes-on a uterine-like form with the limbs or branches on either side of the plant referencing stilted fallopian tubes that are missing their ovaries.⁶⁸

The plant's bright red colour suggests a swollen blood supply that is synonymous with the artist's fervent desire for the reconstitution of her fecundity if not a ravenous sexuality.

However, the painting's oddly inverted reconfiguration of the plant's structure and foliage; its outstretched fallopian-like arms and overflowing cervical walls, bring to mind the contra postural pose in the artist's "*The Broken Column*" 1944. The plant's uterine bulb overflows from ejaculation, but a molten sun and charging lightning bolt suggest painful or unfulfilling coitus,⁶⁹ the residue perhaps of the artist's repeated venereal

⁶⁷ Jeanette Zwingenberger, "Frida Kahlo's Human Landscape" in: *Frida Kahlo Retrospective*, Martin Gropius-Bau and Bank Austria Kunstsforum ed. (New York: Prestel Verlag, 2010), 70.

⁶⁸ Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo: The Still Lifes*, 93.

⁶⁹ Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo: The Still Lifes*, 91.

infections or the consequences of the misalignment of her pelvis and spine resulting from her accident. That being said, “*The Flower of Life*” presents as a brilliantly conceived sardonic criticism of portraiture’s vaunted impulse to represent what is inherently invisible to the eye: subjectivity. Kahlo presents a vital aspect of what arguably constitutes her interiority and potentially her identity by tearing open her impaired body and wilfully displaying the psycho-physiological torment of her fruitless core.

“The Broken Column” 1944: oil on Masonite, 15 ¾ x 12 ¼ in.

Perhaps the most blatant representation of Kahlo’s exasperation and disillusionment with her lot, “*The Broken Column*” (1944) depicts a truncated and transfixed Kahlo alone in a barren landscape, the background of which is as gnashed as her flesh. One can easily imagine Kahlo painting this diminutive bombshell while lying immobilized in her bed-prison accompanied only by her mirrored reflection and her pain.

Margaret Lindauer’s 1999 “*Devouring Frida*” elaborates a feminist account of the hegemonic view of patriarchy that interprets the painting as a paradox; an immodest display of overt sexuality and predictable feminine culpability. Lindauer asserts:

“She impassively allows her physical condition and voluptuous body to be viewed and evaluated by innumerable anonymous voyeurs. The painting therefore confronts the viewer with the disturbing and contradictory visual experience of gazing at Kahlo’s torso, attractive and available, while standing witness to horrifying pain and inexplicable physical abuse. The fact that Kahlo herself produced the portrait, combining her detached stare, sensual breasts, and maimed body, implicitly constitutes the evidence of the artist’s culpability, for she created the association of sexuality and pain without depicting anguish, remorse, or shame. In essence, it is assumed that because

she produced the portrait it represents an actual masochistic tendency. Indeed, connecting her self-depiction and her self-regard seems logical, until an analysis of 'woman's' disease' is introduced and recognized as remarkably compatible. Kahlo's imprudent sexuality and 'social infidelity' (betraying patriarchal prescription) tacitly are suggested as indirect 'causes' of the 1925 accident."⁷⁰

From this perspective, the artist is both victim and perpetrator of her own circumstances for wantonly "acting-out" her pretensions as an artist, a traditionally masculine domain, and as a sexually inclined independent woman. Patriarchal proscription holds the artist responsible for the accident that almost ended her life while linking her victimization and suffering to an ascribed promiscuity, neurasthenia and obstinacy. Kahlo's body represents the paradox of her own undoing, an ironic contradiction that manifests in the fullness of her breasts and the barrenness of her hollowed-out body.

I should like to suggest that if the viewer momentarily suspends the narrative of the artist's life, or contemporary theoretical criticism long enough to focus on what the painting re-presents, the painter's body can be thought of in terms other than as an object of titillation or a brazen sexuality, and more as an allusion to the paradox of embodied existence and the temporality of pain and suffering. Kahlo's eviscerated and denuded torso is not an immodest solicitation of the viewer's attentions or the presumptuous refutation of an imposing and maniacal patriarchy, but an invitation through dehiscence (and the intimate dimensions of the painting), to imagine the painter's constricted and tormented experiences through the lived reality of her ruptured flesh.

⁷⁰ Margaret A. Lindauer, *Devouring Frida: The Art History and Popular Celebrity of Frida Kahlo* (Hanover & London: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 1999), 59.

Kahlo's catatonic expression is not the customary lack of expression⁷¹ frequently sought-after in portraiture. It is however emblematic of the resignation of the medicalized, scientific body of the patient who is alternately fondled, stabbed, and prodded, and who invariably becomes inured to the shame and self-consciousness of repeated examinations and unending fruitless speculations, x-rays and blood-work. Kahlo presents herself *not* as self-pitying but as the tragic victim of circumstance. She presents herself frontally, exposing a metaphorical Corinthian column that supplants her fractured and crumbling spine. Her body *is* the detritus of the trolley accident that almost twenty years earlier crushed her bones and punctured her body. "As a 'classical' element, the column...points to an old injury, one sustained, as suggested by the capital, in her childhood."⁷² "The column that is fractured along its length connotes the pain of physical and psychosexual penetration."⁷³ And yet it seems that her body is held together at her chin only by the weight of the artist's intractability, as if the preponderance of her will alone is what sustains her physicality.⁷⁴

The self-styled object of vivisection Kahlo's naked torso is braced by a constricting corset of horizontal ligatures whose formfitting brazier-like tightness reflects the tensions and immobility of her constricted movements. Arms splayed to the sides with her breasts fully exposed and crimped, Kahlo's body is inert; neither sexual nor inviting. Her pensive

⁷¹ "On the whole, portrait artists eschew the representation of strong expressions of feeling because traditionally they are thought to reflect transitory states of being and are therefore an obstacle to the artist who seeks to capture the essential stability of the self, existing beneath the flux of emotions." *Portraiture* Richard Brilliant (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 112.

⁷² Helga Prignitz-Poda, *Frida Kahlo: The Painter and Her Works* (Munich: Schirmer/Model, 2010), 210.

⁷³ Lindauer, *Devouring Frida*, 58.

⁷⁴ "Accordingly, Herrera evaluates Kahlo's entire oeuvre, and her late twentieth-century popularity, in terms of bipolarities subsumed within the overarching battle between surrendering to pain and struggling for survival..." *Devouring Frida: The Art of*, Margaret A. Lindauer (Hanover & London: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 1999), 4.

and stoic expression is a reflection of the numbing reverberation of unremitting consciously experienced pain. Her body is sectioned, open and accessible not to sexual penetration, but to a phenomenological inspection. Kahlo's exposed interiority imparts the deceptive vulnerability of a mind that is tethered to a body of questionable sustainability. She paints from the gaping hole in her body and its crumbling materiality to reveal the extent to which experience is incarnated; to show how her body's inner machinations are fraught with mystery, deception, and disillusionment. Her impairments preclude anything but intermittent contact with the outside world. Like Woolf, and the little girl with the death mask Kahlo's pane of glass is tainted and tilted inwards.

The artist's use of Christological symbolization invokes the artist's almost unbearable suffering and transcendence, just as the hollowness of her torso would seem to suggest a vacated spirit. However, the true paradox of the painting is to be found in its ironic use of these symbols and in the painting's inherent questioning of dualist precepts. Kahlo is abandoned and dejected, and yet she is tied to her body. The gaping and irregular incision that divides and widens as it descends from her chin ends in a blanket or loin cloth that she alternately opens or pulls from around her. Her body is bestrewn with stigmata of various sizes, as if she was caught by a round of buckshot. Tears or perspiration well up on the surface of her skin, a muted testament to the physicality of unremitting embodied pain.

“The Circle, I am Disintegration” 1951: oil on sheet metal, 6 in. diameter

Painted just three years before her death, this miniature, just six inches in diameter uses a circular configuration to deliberate effect, the painting’s shape quite literally referencing the unremitting cycles of the artist’s inconsolable pain and her existence as tenuously self-enclosed in perpetual suffering. “An archetypal symbol of unity, harmony, and wholeness, the circular shape amplifies the disharmonious process of dissolution.”⁷⁵

Pictured in isolation in a barren lunar-like landscape beneath an uncharacteristically darkened sky that undoubtedly reflected the artist’s sombre mood, her body’s explosive disintegration protests the ineffectual role of medical science and pharmacology in alleviating her anxiety and pain. More explosive than torn or incised as the body of “*The Broken Column*”, Kahlo’s body ruptures uncontrollably in this painting, spewing-out its contents to the upper edges of the painting where they drip slowly downwards; dangling like menacing stalactites. The painting’s muted and earthy tonality affirms its subject’s affinity to the realm of its mortal coil.

Notably absent in this self-portrait is Kahlo’s characteristic exotic face, arguably her most distinctive attribute. It is as if the body’s all-encompassing phenomenal experience as pain subsumes all other aspects of the artist’s identity, her persona and her individuality. Her headless, armless, and legless body is unaccompanied, ineffectual, and unadorned. No longer able to communicate or ambulate she is less extended to the world than immersed in a world of unfathomable sensations and uncontrollable eruptions.

⁷⁵ Ankori, *Imagining Her Selves*, 118-19.

Kahlo's body is the unified subjective and iconic body of pain, not its mirrored facsimile with its pensive stare, bird-like eyebrows, and exotic accoutrements. Here, she represents the very essence of pain's phenomenology as it is lived-in and through the body, in fatal desperation and isolation. In stark contrast to the body of somatoform disorders, the vertically configured psychoanalytic⁷⁶ body of the hypochondriac, the neurasthenic, or the hysteric, Kahlo's explosive body is the genuine material body of raging synapses, of oozing putrefied substances and unctuous unearthly smells. Hers is the body of existent, not imagined pain; hardly the symbolic feminist body of protest or the sensual body of misguided and presumptive intentions that Lindauer ascribes to prescriptive patrimony.

Where Kahlo's self-portraits frequently represent the artist's evocative sexuality and her brooding and introspective exoticism, the paintings discussed above reflect a side of the artist that can be more readily linked to her existential concerns and her impaired body. This small grouping of Kahlo's self-portraits seem to address the issues raised earlier in this study regarding the paradox of representation by affirming the decidedly embedded nature of human experience. Kahlo's self-portraits impart the lived character of impairment and the psychological torment that is associated with traumatization. Where words are frequently inadequate in representing sensation; Kahlo's own words elucidate the motivations that underwrite the force of these paintings: "How I wish I could explain to you, minute by minute, my suffering."⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Elisha. *Conscious Body*, 5.

⁷⁷ Martha Zamora, *The Letters of Frida Kahlo* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995), 29.

The Body of the Artist: Chuck Close

As with Frida Kahlo, two things immediately come to mind when we begin to reflect on the enormity of Chuck Close's work. First, we are incredulous that the artist who produces these enormous self-portraits is paralyzed, and second, that he is "face-blind". By any stretch of the imagination it would be difficult to dream-up a more challenging set of circumstances for a portrait artist; particularly when we consider the monumental size of his paintings, the breadth of his catalogue, and most importantly, the physical dexterity that is required to finesse both implement and media to create a discernable image, let alone a work of art.

Unlike Frida Kahlo, the limitations and motivations that underwrite Close's practice do not initially play-out in his work, even as the artist's practice is entirely dependent upon the processional regulation of his bodily impairments. Close's work is no less remarkable however for its phenomenological significations but it is distinguished from Kahlo's practice in its gradual progression towards a more graphically perceptible form of self-expression.⁷⁸

I have elaborated on some of the concerns both physical and psychological that affected Kahlo's life. I explained how those concerns found expression in her work, even

⁷⁸ "His self-portraits conceal as much about him as they reveal."... "There is an undertone of emotion in the ways he describes himself – alternately apprehensive, a touch defiant, or decidedly vulnerable. Along with control, the term 'avoidance' comes to mind in relation to these paintings, but avoidance of what? Allowing emotion to take over from formal invention? After all, such expressionistic excess was anathema to the purist theology Close subscribed to early on and was therefore to be avoided. Easy enough to say but not to accomplish, because personal experience has a way of pervading even the most austere conceived work." *Close Reading: Chuck Close and the Art of the Self-Portrait*, Martin Friedman (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 2005), 174.

influencing the way that her life's work is perceived and interpreted. I suggested that Kahlo's preoccupation with self-representation was functional to the psychic processing of the consequences of her injuries. I also explained that the form and content of her self-portraits suggest that Kahlo adopted a "master narrative" position to the telling of her life's story, and that her self-portraits present a phenomenological perspective of the artist's lived bodily experiences. Lastly, Kahlo's self-portraits were discussed in relation to the existential concerns of an artist who was preoccupied with the nature of her embodied existence.

By comparison Chuck Close's work features none of the anguish that distinguishes Kahlo's practice. There is little in his self-portraits to betray the traumatic events of his life; no obvious narrative element and even less sentimentality. We never see Close's body represented below his shoulders in his self-portraits and the most we can discern in his work is an increasing level of expressivity that develops over time. Much like the inter-locking pieces of a puzzle the sum of his self-portraits reveals what the individual parts obscure.

In many ways Close's pictorial practice is paradoxical. While his work is reliant upon, and has always functioned in relation to the incremental subdivisions that underwrite a completed project, his portraits are somehow less concerned with the singularity of those subunits than with what they contribute to the totality of his work. In this sense it helps to view Close's portraits according to the sum of their separate parts or his individual self-

portraits as subunits of an ongoing contemplative study.⁷⁹ From another perspective, the artist's portraits function at the boundary where the incomprehensible subunits of his paintings break apart in abstraction or then suddenly coalesce into a coherent image. To the extent that Close's entire practice functions in relation to the viewer's position relative to the artist's work, the viewer is complicit in the configuration of his portraits.

Most discussions of Close's work begin by trumpeting his virtuosity and the ingenuity through which he gleaned the theoretical precepts of the generation of artists that immediately preceded his, deftly assimilating its most enduring attribute (monumentality) to his practice, even as he purged his own work of his predecessors' by-then anachronistic expressivity. "An assertive young artist in a reactionary mode, Close set off in search of an *anti*-expressive posture through which he could free himself from the conventions and traditions of a very recent past."⁸⁰ Close's practice represents the synthesis of his primary pre-occupation: figuration, with his generation's principal theoretical concerns: process, minimalism, and conceptualism. By combining these concerns in his practice, Close reinvigorated portraiture at a time when the ethos of Abstract Expressionism still held sway as his era's leading pictorial aesthetic. What is far less evident is the degree to which the fusion of those elements in his practice facilitated his working methodology and how smoothly that methodology complements and regulates his bodily impairments.

⁷⁹ "It is possible to view his entire production as a single, ongoing work, for Close conceives of his subjects as basic themes to be explored in continuing variations." *Close Portraits*, Lisa Lyons and Martin Friedman (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1980), 27.

⁸⁰ Madeleine Grynstejn and Siri Enberg, *Chuck Close: Self-Portraits 1967-2005* (San Francisco and Minneapolis: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Walker Art Centre, 2005), 109.

Close suffers from two cognitive disorders: dyslexia and prosopagnosia⁸¹. Cognitive issues rather than visual anomalies affect a dyslexic's focalization, concentration, reading and writing. People with prosopagnosia have difficulty recognizing people's faces. Even slight movements of another person's head can prove a disorienting experience for a person with face-blindness. In order to regulate both disorders, Close works exclusively from photographs⁸² that are superimposed with diagonal, horizontal/vertical, or concentric grids that are then numbered along their outside vertical and horizontal axes to facilitate the artist's transcriptive methodology. The grids convert what for Close might otherwise be unintelligible information into manageable static bits of information that can then be transcribed onto whatever surface he happens to be working. His methodology also facilitates the scaling-up of his photographic-maquettes to his portraits' monumental proportions.

These compensatory techniques form an integral part of his methodology and are thought to have developed in adolescence, as Christopher Finch has contended. Close "...learned to break information down into small bites that could then be incrementally reassembled into a whole that was in fact a fresh synthesis."⁸³ The sequencing and unitization of work into smaller and more manageable bits may arguably represent the content of his work, if not simply a sensible prosthetic solution to his primary impairments. By fixing time,

⁸¹ V.S. Ramachandran, *A Brief Tour of Human Consciousness: From Imposter Poodles to Purple Numbers* (New York: PI Press; Pearson Education Inc. 2009), Oliver W. Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (London: Duckworth, 1985).

⁸² "...I can remember things that are flat, which is why I use photography as the source for the paintings...photography is the perfect source, because they have already translated three dimensions into something flat." Lisa Yuskavage and Chuck Close. "Chuck Close," *Bomb* no. 52 (1995) 30-35.

⁸³ Christopher Finch, *Chuck Close: Work* (New York: Prestel Publishing Ltd., 2007), 19.

Close's photographs become iconic templates that can be reused or reconfigured through various media at different times as the artist sees fit.

In the context of this study Close's *prosthetic* photo-maquettes represent an indispensable didactic tool that facilitates the regulation of the artist's impairments even as they present as a characteristic aesthetic feature of the artist's completed work. Outside their structural function, the superimposed grids effectively subdivide Close's work into hundreds of individual miniaturized paintings that according to his current methodology interrelate with one another through the vibrancy and superimposition of colour or the juxtaposition of oddly configured geometric shapes.

The coincidental alignment of Close's basic biological impairments with the principal theoretical concerns of his generation's avant-garde was for Close a fortunate if ironic twist of fate. The Conceptual and Process Art Movements of the 1960's and artists such as Richard Serra and Sol LeWitt esteemed the systematic and repetitive movements required to produce works of art in a machine-like or impersonalized manner.

"...authenticity lay not in mining inner emotion but in giving intensified outward expression to workmanlike tasks and processes that would be totally visible and self-evident on the surface of every inch of the artwork."⁸⁴ Process became exemplary of the underlying intrinsic value of art at precisely the time that Close began to reconceptualize the direction and form that his work would take. Even as he abandoned the abstraction and expressionistic gestures that had previously characterized his work for a dramatically

⁸⁴ Madeleine Grynshzjenj and Siri Enberg., *Chuck Close: Self-Portraits*, 110.

less expressive mode of representation, his work maintained the characteristic modernist format of monumentality.

In keeping with the concept of a processional approach to work, Close initially discarded the sensitivity of his paint brushes for the tactile detachment of air-brushing, an industrial process then used in the production of billboards. He also adopted the monochromatic black-on-white tonality of his photographic source material, which for all their lack of warmth accentuated the emotional detachment and sterility he sought in his paintings. Anecdotally, Close insisted that all his models maintain a “deadpan” emotionless expressivity while they were photographed, a gesture that he applied to his self-portraits as well. From a theoretical perspective, Close’s work must be understood principally in relation to the reproduction of his photographs⁸⁵, and not in terms of the protracted interchange that is associated with conventional portraiture with the artist working directly from his model in the studio or in the case of a self-portrait, from a mirror.

As to the hundreds, if not thousands of hours required to complete his work, we can well imagine that the techniques Close adopted in the regulation of his cognitive impairments were not on their own sufficient to see his process through. “Tenacity of technique equals tenacity of spirit: more than any mimetic approximation, it is Close’s aesthetic *practice* that points to a personality, an ethos... that placed an emphasis on the *work* of art.”⁸⁶ If nothing else, Close’s pictorial practice signifies a monumental commitment to process and the phenomenal nature of perception.

⁸⁵ Shearer West, *Portraiture: Oxford History of Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 215.

⁸⁶ Madeleine Grynsztein, and Siri Enberg, *Chuck Close: Self-Portraits*, 110.

The Close Self-Portraits

Painters' reputations are often discussed in terms of their mastery of one of two skill-sets: draughtsmanship or painterly expressiveness. While it is not unusual for an artist to be blessed with both abilities, some would argue that neither quality on its own amounts to much unless it is tied to an imaginative mode of invention and reflexivity. Close's work combines these qualities and more. In fact his consummate virtuosity is mirrored in the growth of a diverse skill-set that reflects his mastery of a variety of techniques that include Japanese woodblock, etching, pastel and watercolour on paper, acrylic and oil on canvas, conte, ink, and pencil on paper, photography, and ink-pad and thumb-print painting on paper or canvas, and two unusual techniques: pulp-paper and pulp-paper collage on canvas.

Close's experimentation with the techniques mentioned above married well with the artist's desire to extend the perceptual range of his practice in relation to the structural constraints of his methodology. The re-configuration of his self-portraits through various media and grid systems has yielded startling phenomenological results that undoubtedly have some emotional significance. In this sense, Close's mature practice has evolved in relation to a slackening of his earlier adherence to the theoretical precepts of minimalism and conceptualism.

Close's pictorial practice has gradually moved from a system of self-imposed limitations towards a more openly expressive and vibrant painterly style that is framed in the context of his maturation as an artist and his paralysis in 1988. This suggests that Close's post-

paralytic self-portraits are suggestive of a more reflexive sensibility that is less evident in his earlier work, and that this new-found openness is attributable to more urgent temporal concerns that are the consequence of his paralysis.⁸⁷ This heightened expressivity represents a tectonic shift in the conceptual basis of Close's practice.

Due to its life-altering implications, Close's paralysis in 1988 represents a critical juncture in the artist's life and work. Because his paralysis divides the artist's oeuvre between its pre-paralytic and post-paralytic intentions, his paralysis bears heavily on this study and on the interpretation of his work. As a result, I will discuss the evolution of his practice from both sides of this pivotal divide and according to a number of self-portraits that represent his stylistic progression from a preoccupation with the rote transference of information to a more interpretive form of self-expression that according to my thesis is primarily concerned with the body and the phenomenology of perception.

"Big Self-Portrait" 1967-68 Acrylic on Canvas 107 ½ x 83 ½ inches

That Close's work is synonymous with monumental portraiture might to some degree be attributed to his renowned first sale to the Walker Art Center of Minneapolis, and the fact that his minimalist, photo-realistic, continuous-tone, black on white, "*Big Self-Portrait*" (1967-68), (Fig.7a) was instrumental in first bringing the artist to the public's attention.

At the time, Americans were deeply divided by the traumatic events of the 1960s, and a

⁸⁷ "But, I would like to think that my work has a celebratory quality. A celebration of paint, the joy of pushing it around...But I didn't realize that until I looked at myself in the hospital...It was always there, but I never realized this until it all got taken away." Lisa Yuskavage, and Chuck Close. "Chuck Close," *Bomb* no. 52 (1995) 30-35.

generation gap that had as much to do with the length of a person's hair as their politics or their position on the War in Vietnam.

Aside from its enormous proportions, (see Figure 7b) this remarkably illusionistic airbrushed painting is conspicuous for its depthless planarity, its shortened depth-of-field and its muted but suggestive expressivity. The painting was the first in a series of monolithic heads of other artists and friends that the artist produced through the 1970s. But the work is of particular importance to this study because it generated a series of separate monochromatic self-portraits that demonstrate the progression of Close's methodology towards the revelation of its underlying prosthetic grid-structure. The works in this first series of self-portraits include: "*Self-Portrait*," 1968; pencil on paper, 29 x 23 inches (Fig. 8); "*Self-Portrait/58,424*," 1973, ink and pencil on paper mounted on canvas, 70 ½ x 58 inches (Fig. 9a); "*Self-Portrait*," 1980, Charcoal on paper, 43 x 30 ¼ inches (Fig.9b) and; "*Self-Portrait*," 1980, thumb-print stamp pad ink on grey paper 15 ¾ x 11½ inches (Fig. 10).

Even though Close was still erasing any evidence of the grids through the production of this series, the group is remarkable for the impact that the different grid sizes have on the look of the finished works. The numeric moniker associated with "*Self-Portrait/58,424*" indicates the total number of tiny dots that fill the separate grid units within the drawing. The greater the number of grid units; the finer or more defined is the finished image. The title is an interesting if ironic reminder of the artist's underlying dyslexia and the grid's prosthetic role in his practice.

Significantly, the last piece in the series, the diminutive stamp-pad thumb-print self-portrait, is the first somewhat abstracted and openly expressive self-portrait by the artist. The work is striking not only because of the ingenuity of its technique, but because the image is based on a mug-shot-like prototype that echoes a police line-up identification scenario that is associated with finger-printing. But the direct evidentiary implication of the artist's body in the confection of the work raises interesting conceptual and minimalist concerns as to what constitutes a self-portrait; the sign or its referent? Once again the status of the portrait is challenged in Close's practice by the body's direct and paradoxical implication in the *work* of art.

Self-Portrait Series 1975

In 1975 Close began another series of self-portraits that were based on a more recent photograph. The series is remarkable because it represents the first time the grids appear fully exposed in his self-portraits, but also because the revelation of the grids functionally distorts the images. By the early 1970s,⁸⁸ Close began to toy with the idea of allowing the underlying structure of his portraits to show in his finished portraits, more than likely realizing that the revelation of the grid would enhance their visual mutability.

The 1975 series features a number of techniques that once again present Close's strategic preoccupation with the nature of perception and the role that the mind plays in the re-

⁸⁸ "In his early black and white paintings, where the surface is 'continuous,' we are less conscious of this enlargement process, but since 1973, the horizontal/vertical grid underlying the subject's head and shoulders has become an assertive component...of the pictures..." *Close Portraits*, Lisa Lyons and Martin Friedman (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1980), 13.

constitution of de-constructed imagery. The series includes: “*Self-Portrait/Dot*,” 1975, ink and pencil on paper, and “*Self-Portrait/White Dot Version*” 1976, white ink and pencil on black paper, both 30 x 22 inches (Figures 11 a and 11 b); “*Self-Portrait/Conte crayon*,” 1979, 29 ½ x 22 inches (Fig. 12); “*Self-Portrait/Manipulated*,” 1982, handmade paper on a ½ inch grid, 38 ½ x 28 1/8 inches (Fig. 13); and “*Self-Portrait*,” 1983, liquid pulp paper on canvas, 58 x 40 inches (Fig. 14).

It is important to recognize that the sum of these works represents the evolution of the artist’s thinking over time, some eight years, and his willingness to gradually broaden the expressive dimensions of his practice in pursuit of a more dynamic or phenomenal vocabulary. As bare-boned as Close’s 1979 “*Self-Portrait/Conte crayon*” (Fig. 12) appears, the medium’s greasy consistency contributes to the amorphous quality of the work, diffusing the image and giving the portrait an atmospheric quality that is absent in his earlier illusionistic self-portraits. The pulp paper “*Self-Portrait/Manipulated*,” 1982 (Fig. 13), and “*Self-Portrait*,” 1983 (Fig. 14) go further in this direction, introducing the gesticulated or stochastic deposition of media (in this case liquid paper pulp) to the work-surface, alternately accentuating the works’ planar surface and grid-like artificiality. On close inspection, there is a superficial depth evident in these works that is both material and illusory. At the very least, the images contribute to a conceptualization of the formal concerns that define the role that abstract marks and light and shadow play in the composition of a portrait, if not in facial recognition. But the works’ oneiric qualities point to the phenomenological basis of perception and the disorienting bodily experiences of prosopagnosia and dyslexia. Close’s pictorial practice explores the boundaries of

perception in such a way as to challenge the limits of description and abstraction.⁸⁹ In this way his portraits expose the nebulous and illusive qualities that define perception, just as they point to the mind's miraculous capacity to engage complex visual stimuli.

"Self-Portrait" 1987 Oil on Canvas, 72 x 60 inches

The final period leading up to Close's paralysis in 1988 is marked by two self-portraits "*Self-Portrait*" 1986 and "*Self-Portrait*" 1987, that are noteworthy because they reflect a series of decisions that led the artist back to his brushes and his roots in Abstract Expressionism. "*Self-Portrait*," 1987, (Fig. 15) marks Close's dramatic return to the luminosity and expressivity of oils, and the culmination of twenty years of experimentation. It is clear from his last pre-paralysis self-portrait that Close had resolved to "...explore the nature of reality by probing well beneath illusionistic surfaces. His approach shifted from a more or less rote use of information extracted from the photo-maquette to a systematic translation of what he saw into abstract marks."⁹⁰ The self-portrait demonstrates a pronounced concern for the atmospheric surround of the artist's head and shoulders, which contrasts with the uniformity of the backgrounds of Close's continuous-tone, black on white acrylics and watercolours from the 70s and early 80s. Rendering this ill-defined space with the same concern for his own likeness firmly situates the artist's body in two-dimensional space. More importantly, the artist's attention to the figure's surrounding space contributes to the diffusiveness of the image, giving the portrait an added measure of depth and materiality.

⁸⁹ Lyons and Friedman, *Close Portraits*, 35.

⁹⁰ Martin Friedman., *Close Reading: Chuck Close and the Art of the Self-Portrait* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 2005), 121.

The painting is based on a color photograph that was sectioned according to a tightly configured horizontal/vertical grid structure. However, it relies on the freely articulated pointillist application of multiple layers of pigment over the entire surface of the canvas. Thus, while the painting adheres to the functional structure of its grid-units, the vibrancy of colour and the vitality of its impasto application reveal a much looser and expressive sensibility than had previously existed in Close's work. The stuttered application of colour over the breadth of the canvas results in the dissolution of the edges of the artist's figure. The painting is perhaps the last of his self-portraits to be configured in relation to such a tightly constricted grid system but not the last within which the atmospheric surround is given as much attention as the artist's features.

Catastrophic Body

The most recent phase of Close's career began in December 1988 when he became paralyzed as the result of an occluded cervical artery at levels C6 and C7. While catastrophic, it is fortunate that the incident occurred in New York City where Close was able to walk himself into the emergency room of Doctors Hospital before collapsing. After two days in the ER, he was transferred to Tisch Hospital of the New York Medical Centre where it was determined that he had suffered what is euphemistically described as a "spinal stroke," a "...spontaneous occlusion of the anterior spinal artery..."⁹¹ He "...would be an 'incomplete' quadriplegic; meaning that the best he could hope for was limited movement in all four limbs."⁹² Close's paralysis left him with only limited use of his hands and forearms and virtually no sensation in his legs and torso. Fortunately the

⁹¹ Christopher Finch. *Chuck Close: Life*, (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2010), 253

⁹² Finch, *Chuck Close: Life*, .261.

shoulder and elbow of his painting arm and his left arm remained strong enough that with considerable rehabilitation and retraining, he became adept at executing the exacting movements that allow him to continue to paint with the use of a fitted Velcro prosthetic brace. (Fig. 24)

Self-Portraits 1991, 1993 and 1995

Perhaps it should not come as too much of a surprise that the first series of self-portraits that Close produced after becoming paralyzed in 1988 were painted in tones of muted grey.⁹³ As with the last of the pre-paralysis self-portraits, all were executed in oil. Close's eyes are positioned roughly two-thirds of the way up the picture plane which allows the artist's gaze to align directly with that of the viewer. In the first two paintings from this series of four, "*Self-Portrait*," 1991, 100 x 84 inches (Fig.16), and "*Self-Portrait*," 1993, 72 x 60 inches (Fig.17), Close's head is posited against alternating dark and then light backgrounds. Both paintings are configured under alternately sized horizontal/vertical grid structures whose contents of stuttered and abstracted loops and swirls elaborate the first true expression of a proprietary aesthetic vocabulary that has since come to be closely associated with the artist's mature practice.

In the more sombre of the two, "*Self-Portrait*" 1991, Close's body seems compressed under the weight of the painting's darkened background. The canvas' solemn local colour evens-out the highlights emanating from the right side of the artist's face, casting a pall

⁹³ "...they portray Close more emotionally exposed than in prior works...I was a changed person – but, at the same time, I didn't think I had changed that much at all. That's the paradox of something major happening to you. Many of my friends marvel at how much the same person I am, except for the fact that I am confined to a wheelchair.'" *Close Reading: Chuck Close and the Art of the self-Portrait*, Martin Friedman (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 2005), 131.

over the entire painting. The nervously scattered mosaic-like modelling of the artist's face, beard, and neckline accentuates the darkened contours of the artist's shirt collar and shoulder area, which take on an almost sculptural quality. Each separate grid-unit (there are 924 in all) is filled with alternating dark and light shades of amoebic-like and coffee bean swirls and ovals that vibrate intermittently as the viewer's eyes move about the work, just as the patterns within the grid squares stretch or ooze around the contours of the artist's face and neck.

The larger grid-size (480 units) and lighter background of the 1993 self-portrait results in a greater degree of distortion of this image's hard edges than the 1991 version, giving the painting a diffusive luminosity. Less hazy than fluid, the artist's body dematerializes behind an amorphous atmospheric screen that is evocative of the moistened translucency of a mottled glass shower-door. But as energetic as the abstract marks are that define Close's image, it is his attention to the surrounding indecipherable backdrop that disrupts the painting's depthless planarity. Every edge of the painter's form seems in flux as the body's contours seem extruded through the gritty mesh of the painting's merciless grid. Even the atmospheric surround in the portrait seems to oscillate around the edges of the artist's ears and cranium as Close deliberately toys with the shape and size of the circular forms within the grids adjacent the head as if to suggest the heat that is dispersed from the artist's body. By attending more deliberately to the phenomenal structure of the

depthless and nondescript backdrop of these self-portraits, Close “...gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible...”⁹⁴

The last two paintings in the group, “*Self-Portrait I*” (Fig. 18) and “*Self-Portrait II*” (Fig. 19) oil on canvas, both 72 x 60 inches, were painted in 1995. Both paintings are configured in relation to equidistant *diagonal* grid systems that give their spectre-like heads an eerie quality of otherworldliness. The framing of the portraits is very tight, so much so, that the artist’s head appears locked within boxes just large enough to contain them. Close’s face takes on a mosaic appearance as it looms from under the grids’ oblong squiggles and loops. The artist’s nose, ears, and bearded chin dematerialize around their edges as do the top of his head and rounded shoulders. In both works the grid-units seem to lock into place even as the strange multi-layered tile-like forms within the grids threaten to pop loose. What emerges from this group of self-portraits is a sense of an altered sensibility that is tied less to the artist’s constricted body movements and impairment, than to the deliberate decisions that were taken before the artist became paralyzed in 1988. Suddenly the logic of the artist’s technique takes form in the abstracted diagonals and gesticulated amoebic-like squiggles of his self-image.

This group of self-portraits represents a critical stage in the evolution of Close’s practice not only because they signify a demonstrative shift in the formal appearance of his work, but because they reveal the artist’s capacity to successfully engage the uneasy accommodations wrought by his paralysis. While there can be no question that the artist’s

⁹⁴ James M. Edie, ed., *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, The Philosophy of Art History and Politics* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 166.

impairments inhibit his physical dexterity, Close's practice is by no means diminished by his paralysis. While the formal organization of the artist's self-portraits is indicative of the structural systems that were progressively and more openly integrated into the content of his work, the timing of his paralysis coincided with a dramatic shift in the functioning of those structures, giving his portraits a diffusive energy that is more engaging and than his previous work because it is atmospheric.

What begins to insinuate the conceptualization and interpretation of Close's self-portraits is their deliberate incitement to movement. From a distance, the individual sub-units of the paintings coalesce intuitively, but as the viewer naively approaches his works they begin to dematerialize into distinctly abstracted forms whose odd geometric shapes, colours, and textures break apart into distinctive chromatic fields, each representing a tiny abstracted painting unto itself. The convolutions of media within the separate grid units of his paintings reveal the extent to which the artist's body is implicated in the production of each self-portrait. The grid-units expose multiple layers of individually superimposed depositions of pigment, and the rich syntax of abstracted proprietary signs at the artist's disposal. Not only does the artist's body imbricate in the entire surface of the canvas but now the viewer's body is more openly implicated in the work's constitutive variability.

As has been observed, "The move from portrait to paint and back again unfurls at our self-selected pace, in an orchestration of our own devising. Thus the traditionally passive visual absorption of painting is thoroughly contravened, for such is the pleasure of engaging in either process or illusion (it is impossible to experience both simultaneously)

that the works exert a gentle, kinaesthetic demand on the body to advance, retreat, and advance.”⁹⁵ Such is the phenomenological ingenuity of Close’s elaborated mature practice, for in its monumental proportions and generously configured surfaces, the viewer experiences the marvel of perception’s variability through the temporal discontinuity of his/her own thoughts.

Much like the superficial screen in Kahlo’s “*What the Water Gave Me*” (Fig. 3), or the oppressive shock of “*The Broken Column*” (Fig. 4) and its evocation of penetration, Close’s disruptive pictorial methodology places the impulses of reflective interpretation in suspense through the body’s transcendental implication with his work. Perception and the perceived slip away from each other in the oneiric processes of visualization, as mind and body conspire at the boundaries of illusion and abstraction to alternately compose and then decompose the artist’s self-portraits through movement.

Self-Portraits 1997, 2001, 2004-05, and 2005

The *diagonal* grid structures that Close began to exploit more fully from the mid 1990s onwards give his more recent self-portraits an ephemeral quality that is accentuated by the artist’s disruptive use of colour and expressive brushwork, while the inherent diffusiveness of the groupings’ diagonally configured grid structures give them an air of added instability and temporality that is less evident in the continuous-tone works of the 70s and early 80s. The tightly cropped “*Self-Portrait*” 1997, oil on canvas, 102 x 84 inches (Fig. 20); “*Self-Portrait*” 2000-1, oil on canvas, 108 ½ x 84 inches (Fig. 21), and “*Self-Portrait 2005*” also oil on canvas, 108 ¾ x 84 inches (Fig. 23), owe their elusive

⁹⁵ Madeleine Grynsztenj, and Siri Enberg, *Chuck Close*, 115.

structural integrity to the disrupted lattice-like structures of Close's earlier diagonally configured monochromatic "*Self-Portrait I*" and "*Self-Portrait II*" from 1995.

Although they were painted over an eight year period, the paintings track alternating views of the artist's head as it turns from the three-quarter claustrophobic view of the '97 self-portrait, to the frontally configured slightly elongated view of the 2000-1 offering.

In the 2005 self-portrait, Close's head turns slightly back to the left which suggests that the contemplative exercise of viewing his head from these separate angles was complete. The intense cropping of the works and their images' amorphous borders contribute to the impression of the heads' dysmorphic variability, and the body's diffusiveness within their respective chromatic fields. The artist's eyes peer into or down upon the viewer invoking Close's inaugural monochromatic "*Big Self-Portrait*" (Fig. 7), but the air of truculence and self-confidence that distinguished the earlier self-portrayal is replaced in these paintings by a weariness that is invariably tied to the artist's body, to impairment, and to temporal concerns relating to the artist's advancing age.

The 2000-1 (Fig. 21) and 2005 (Fig. 23) self-portraits, and "Self-Portrait" 2004-05, oil on canvas, 102 x 84 inches (Fig. 22) share a mottled blue, or blue/green atmospheric backdrop of abstracted non-descript abstract forms that pickup the rhythms of the shapes that define the anatomical structure of the artist's head and physiognomy. In these self-portraits, Close pushes the two-dimensionality of his canvases by attacking the phenomenological integration of his paintings' perceptually constituted integration of form and atmosphere. He uses colour, depth of field and geometric abstraction to disrupt

the illusory foundations of his self-portraits, modeling form through the use of hue, highlight, and shadow. As a result the artist's nose, brow and chin feature prominently in these late works even as the artist's eyes are what demand the viewer's attention.

All three works are organized so the eyes predominate at a two-thirds elevation from the bottom of the canvas. In the 2004-05 self-portrait (Fig.22), Close returned to a horizontal/vertical grid structure of 441 squares with four sub-units per grid which gives the painting a sharp and angular firmament that is suggestive of the artist's intractability. The multi-faceted planarity of the portrait's lush chiaroscuro, and its supple blending of coral, brown, orange, peach, and red are all held in check by the painting's tepid abstracted background of muted blues, and the black of the artist's turtleneck. In stark contrast to the flawlessly executed but expressively muted continuous-tone paintings of the '70s and '80s this recent series of self-portraits revel in their brilliance of execution and in their open celebration of the artist's virtuoso brushwork and expressive propensity.

Close's late self-portraits are simultaneously minimalist and monumental, depthless and atmospheric, illusionistic and abstract, expressionless and verbose. Their execution belies the artist's impediments and yet they are entirely structured according to his impairments. The machine-like bravura and self-satisfying rote replication characteristic of the first half of Close's career has given way to a more visually gratifying form of self-expression that actively engages perception. The paradox if not the genius of Close's methodology is that it conceals as much as it reveals: that perception is embodied and tied to movement,

that impairment defines rather than impedes self-expression and that the imagination defies expectations.

Much like the discussion of Frida Kahlo's life and work that preceded it, my analysis of Chuck Close's practice focused on bodily impairment and the catastrophic event that changed his life. I pointed out how Close regulates impairment through systems that are integrated directly into his working methodology, and I explained how the structure of his self-portraits activates the phenomenal fields that surround his paintings and the viewer.

Critically, I related my analysis of the artist's practice to philosophy and I explained that his work disrupts the conventions of portraiture by directly implicating the viewer's body in the functioning of his portraits. I suggested that Close's works generate temporal displacements at the boundaries between illusionism and abstraction where his portraits threaten to dissolve or coalesce. I also asserted that Close's work instigates dehiscence as a consequence of his work's monumentality and its functional variability. Finally, I affirmed that Close's practice should be viewed in relation to phenomenology, and that the *act* of viewing like the *work* of art, are vitally integrated into the realization and the experience that is the artist's self-portraits.

Conclusion

This study brought together a number of concerns under the rubric of self-portraiture, the most important of which ties the insights of phenomenology, a type of philosophy, to impairment and the lived bodily experiences of the artists. My thesis relies on philosophy

because portraiture tracks the dynamics of western civilization's shifting views regarding the dualistic nature of human existence and its evolving understanding of incarnated experience. That portraiture somehow sustains the paradox of dualist oppositions requires a philosophical perspective that functionally reiterates the embedded nature of human experience in the analysis and interpretation of works of art.

Human experience *is* in fact incarnated, if at times paradoxical. Even as we live our lives from our bodies to the world, our bodies rarely form the object of conscious experience.⁹⁶ Yet when the body manifests to consciousness in sickness or in pain – through physical or psychological trauma, or through impairment, age or dysfunction – it then becomes constitutive of lived experience. Impairment and trauma functionally disrupt the body's conventional experiential absences, leading to its thematization as an object of reflexivity and concern. That creativity and self-representation are linked by limitation through the materiality of the artists' bodies suggests that impairment underwrites and motivates protracted introspection and as I have demonstrated, the artists' respective practices.

My analyses of the artists' self-portraits focused deliberately on what their works present experientially and less on what presumptive rationalist strategies might anticipate. The phenomenal and at times shocking nature of the artists' self-portraits incites us to reconsider what is perceptibly at play in their work. In Kahlo's case, impairment is perceived empathetically according to alternating views that relate to the body's inevitable corruption and disintegration. In Close's case, the body materializes by implication alone and then only as a function of the viewer's deliberate movements.

⁹⁶ Drew Leder, *The Absent Body*.

And yet in both cases the body and impairment are available to the mind as conceptually realizable elements of our own experiences, if not in terms of what we see deliberately represented on the surface of their work, then in relation to what we unavoidably read through the functioning of our own bodies and our imaginations.

I began this thesis by questioning the rationale and the motivations behind the artists' self-portraits and have concluded that the impetus that sustained their practices is tied to the body and to impairment. And yet time is an essential element that determines human activity. In a very real sense it links all human experience. How we spend our time is often determined by circumstances that are beyond our control. What we do with our lives in relation to time is a measure of how we see ourselves and the choices that are available to us. The decision to persistently represent themselves in their work suggests that time is unavoidably a solitary experience that can attain significance through conscious effort and deliberate activity, and so perhaps the answer to my question is surmised in Kahlo's own words: "When asked, as she frequently was, why she painted herself so often she replied...because I am all alone."⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Martha Zamora. *Frida Kahlo: The Brush of Anguish* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1990), 102.

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Figures



Figure 1 Frida Kahlo, Girl with Death Mask 1938 Oil on Metal, 7 ¼"x5 ¼" Nagoya City Art Museum, Nagoya, Japan.



Figure 2 Frida Kahlo, What the Water Gave Me, 1938, oil on canvas, 38" x 30", Private Collection, Paris, France.



Figure 3 Frida Kahlo, Still Life, 1942 Oil on Copper Plate, 24³/₄" Diameter, Frida Kahlo Museum, Coyoacan, Mexico



Figure 4 Frida Kahlo Flower of Life 1943 Oil on Masonite, 11 x 7 ³/₄ inches



Figure 5 Frida Kahlo, *The Broken Column*, 1944, oil on canvas mounted on Masonite, 15 ¼" x 12 ¼", Dolores Olmeda Patino Museum, Mexico City, Mexico.



Figure 6 Frida Kahlo, *The Circle*, 1951, oil on sheet metal, 6" Diameter, Dolores Olmeda Patino Museum, Mexico City, Mexico.

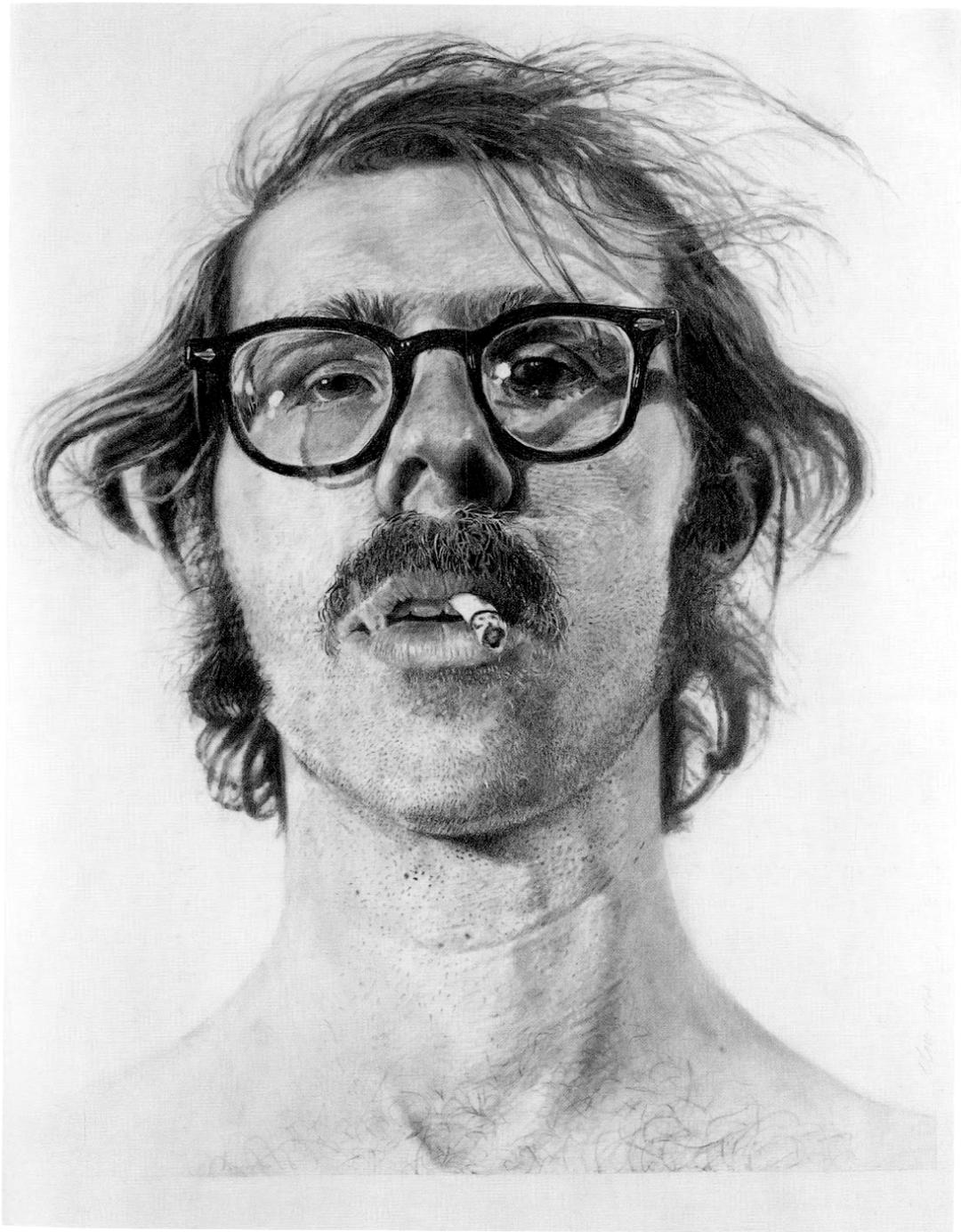


Figure 7(a) Chuck Close, Big Self-Portrait 1967-68 acrylic on canvas, 107 ½" x 83 ½", Walker Art Center Minneapolis, Minnesota U.S.A.

Figure 7(b) Chuck Close, Portrait of the artist standing next to Big Self-Portrait 1968.



Close standing next to the Big Self-Portrait, 1968



Self-Portrait, 1968. Pencil on paper, 29 x 23". Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; gift of Susan W. Paine in memory of Stephen D. Paine and in honor of Clifford S. Ackley

Figure 8 Chuck Close, *Self-Portrait* 1968, pencil on paper 29"x 23" Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Mass. U.S.A.

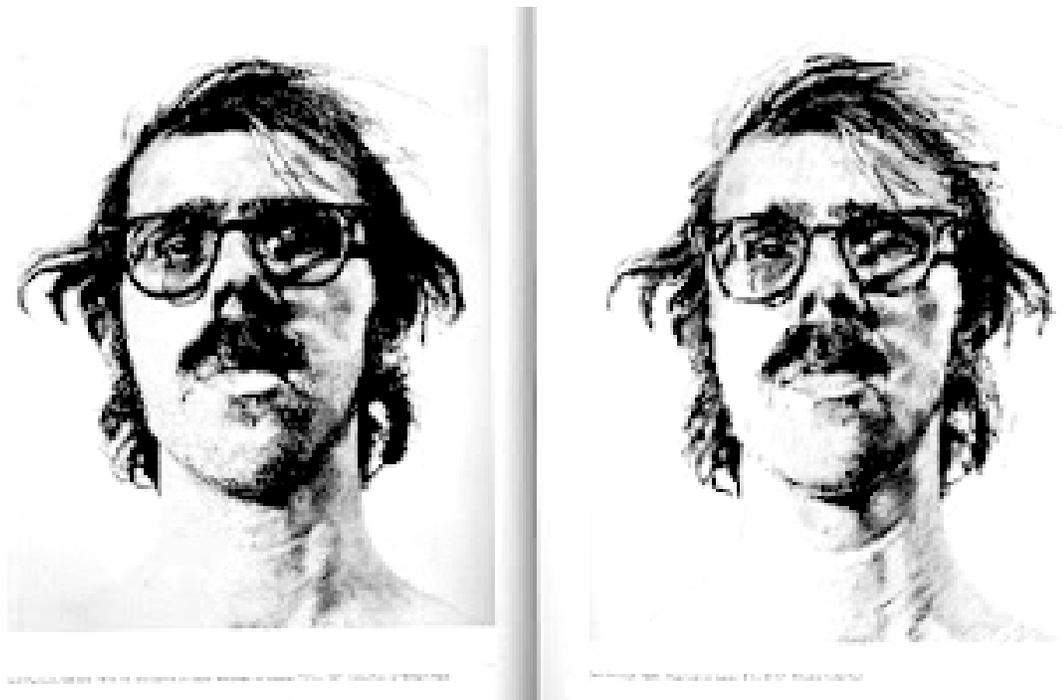


Figure 9a (left) Chuck Close, Self-Portrait/58, 424, 1973 ink and pencil on paper mounted on canvas, 70 1/2" x 58", Private Collection. Figure 9b (right) Chuck Close, Self-Portrait, 1980, charcoal on paper, 43" x 30 1/4", Private Collection.



Figure 10 Self-Portrait 1980 Stamp Pad Ink on Grey Paper 15 3/4" x 11 1/2" Private Collection.

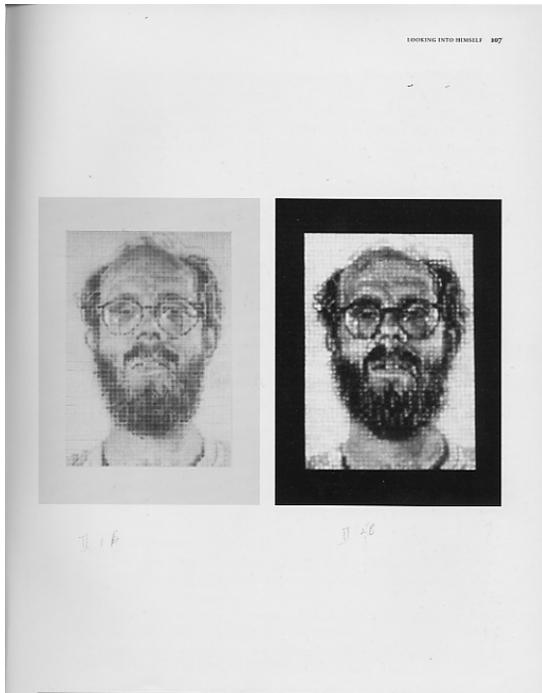


Figure 11 (a) Self-Portrait/Dot 1975 Ink & Pencil on Paper, 30" x 22"
Figure 11 (b) Self-Portrait White Dot Version 1976 White Ink & Pencil, on Black Paper
30" x 22"

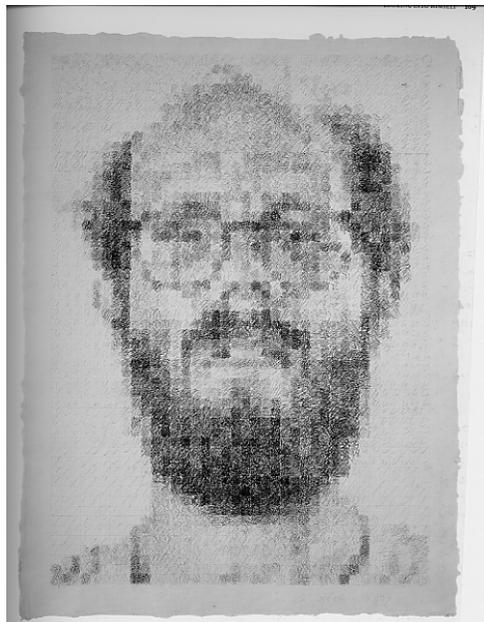


Figure 12 Self-Portrait Conte Crayon 1979 Conte Crayon & Pencil on Paper 29 ½" x 22"
Private Collection



Figure 13 Chuck Close, Self-Portrait Manipulated, 1982, handmade grey paper, 1/2" grid, manipulated and air dried, 38 1/2" x 28 1/8"



Figure 14 Chuck Close, Self-Portrait 1983, Pulp paper on canvas, 54" x 50" Museum of Modern Art, Wakayama, Japan.



Figure 15 Chuck Close, Self-Portrait 1987, oil on canvas, 72" x 60", Private Collection.



Figure 16 Chuck Close, Self-Portrait 1991, oil on canvas, 100" x 84", The Museum of Modern Art, New York. U.S.A.

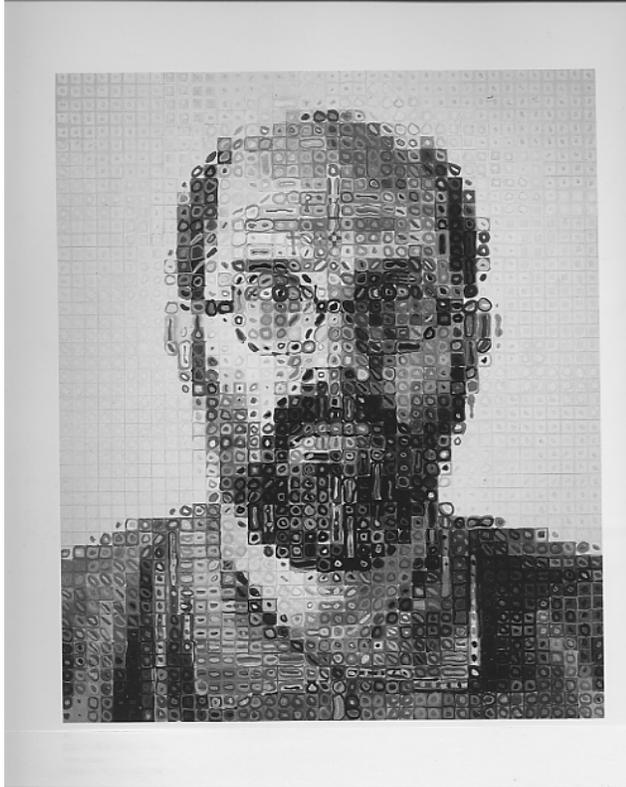


Figure17 Self-Portrait 1993 Oil on Canvas 72"x 60" Private Collection

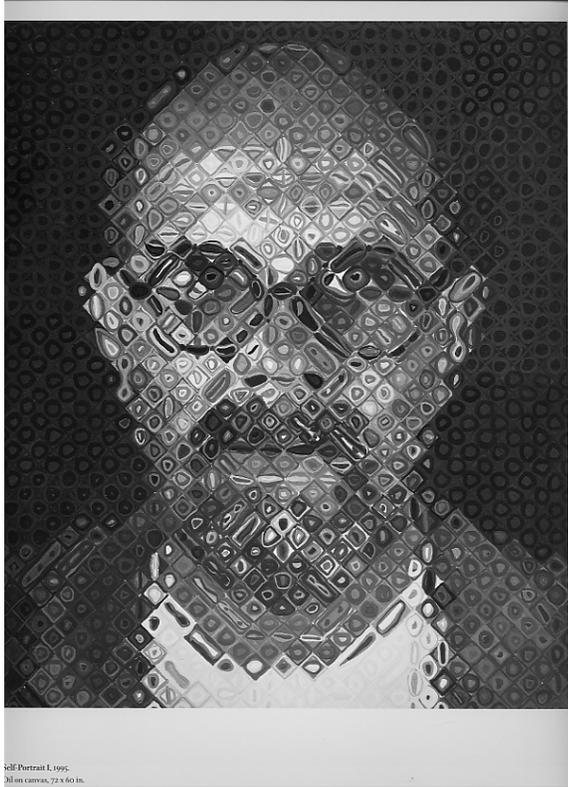


Figure 18 Self-Portrait I 1995, Oil on Canvas 72'' x 60''

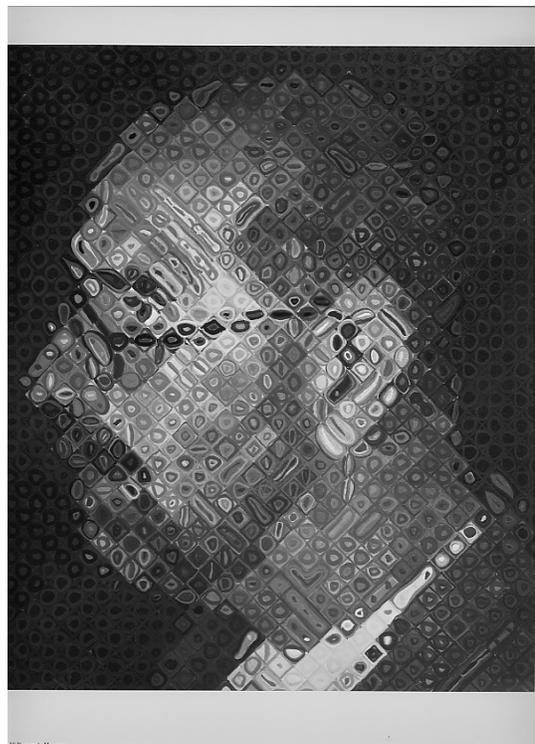


Figure 19 Self-Portrait II 1995, Oil on canvas 72'' x 60''

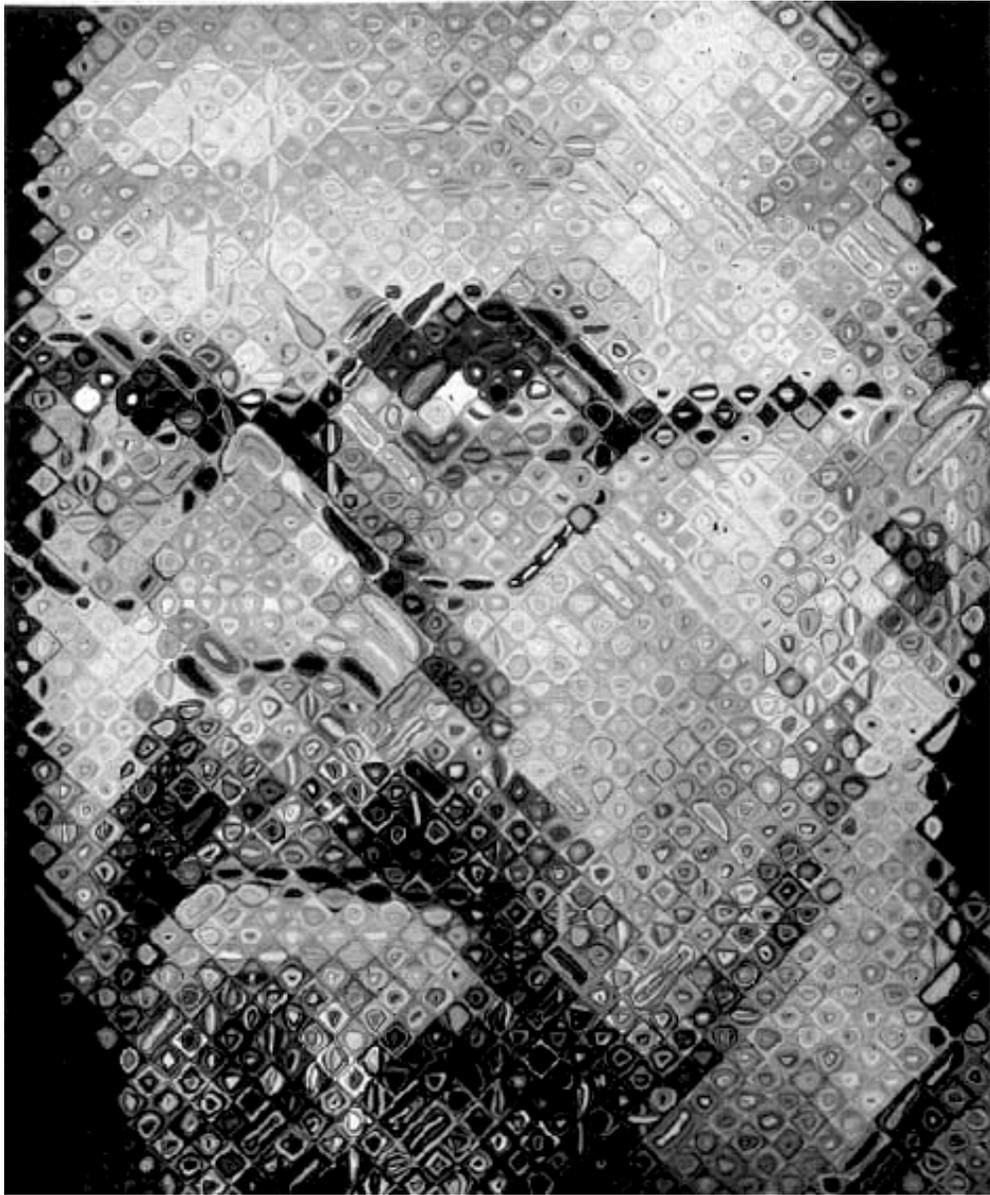


Figure 20 Chuck Close, Self-Portrait, 1997, Oil on Canvas, 102"x 84", The Museum of Modern Art, New York. U.S.A.

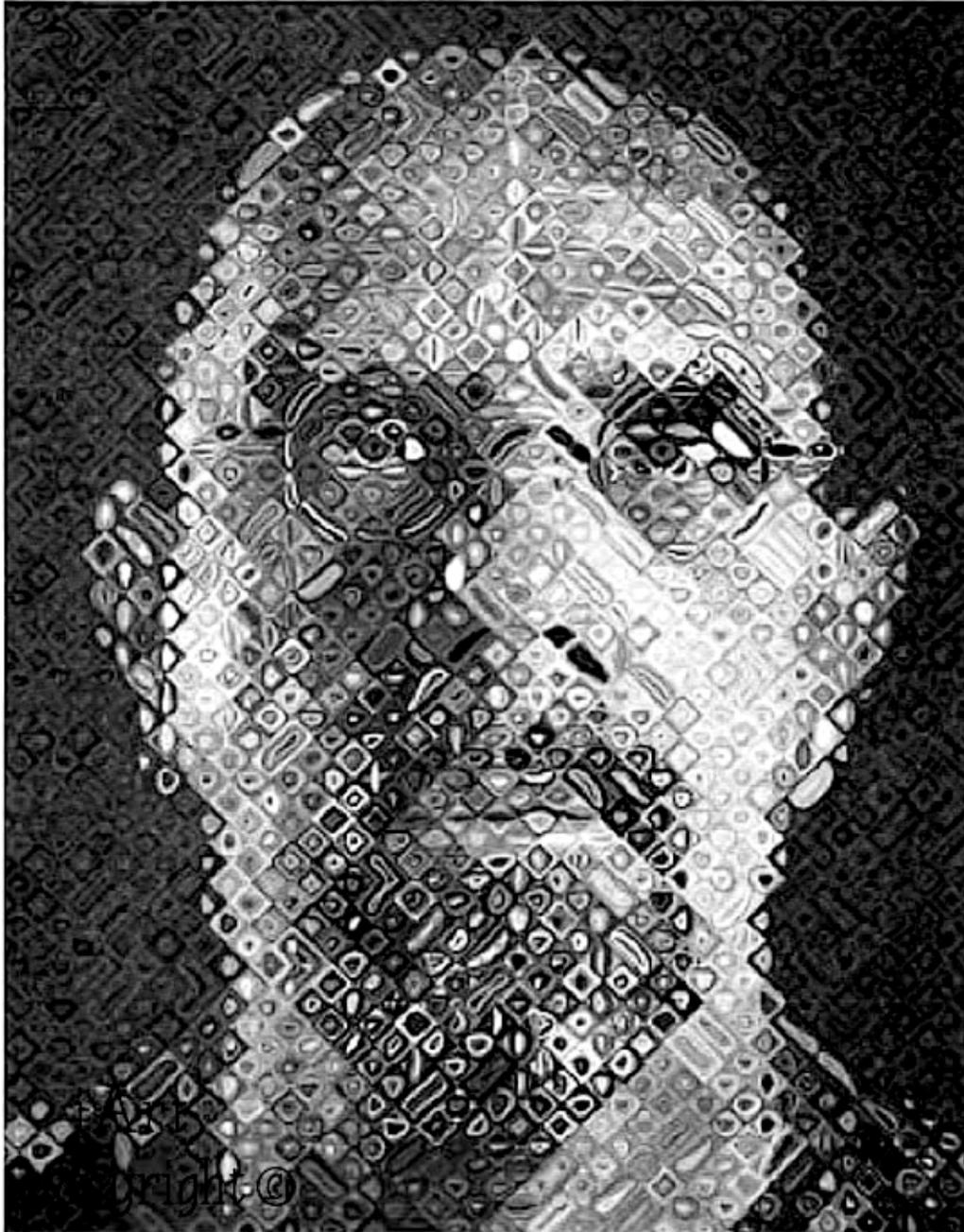


Figure 21 Chuck Close, Self-Portrait 2000-1, Oil on Canvas, 108 ½"x 84", San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, U.S.A.

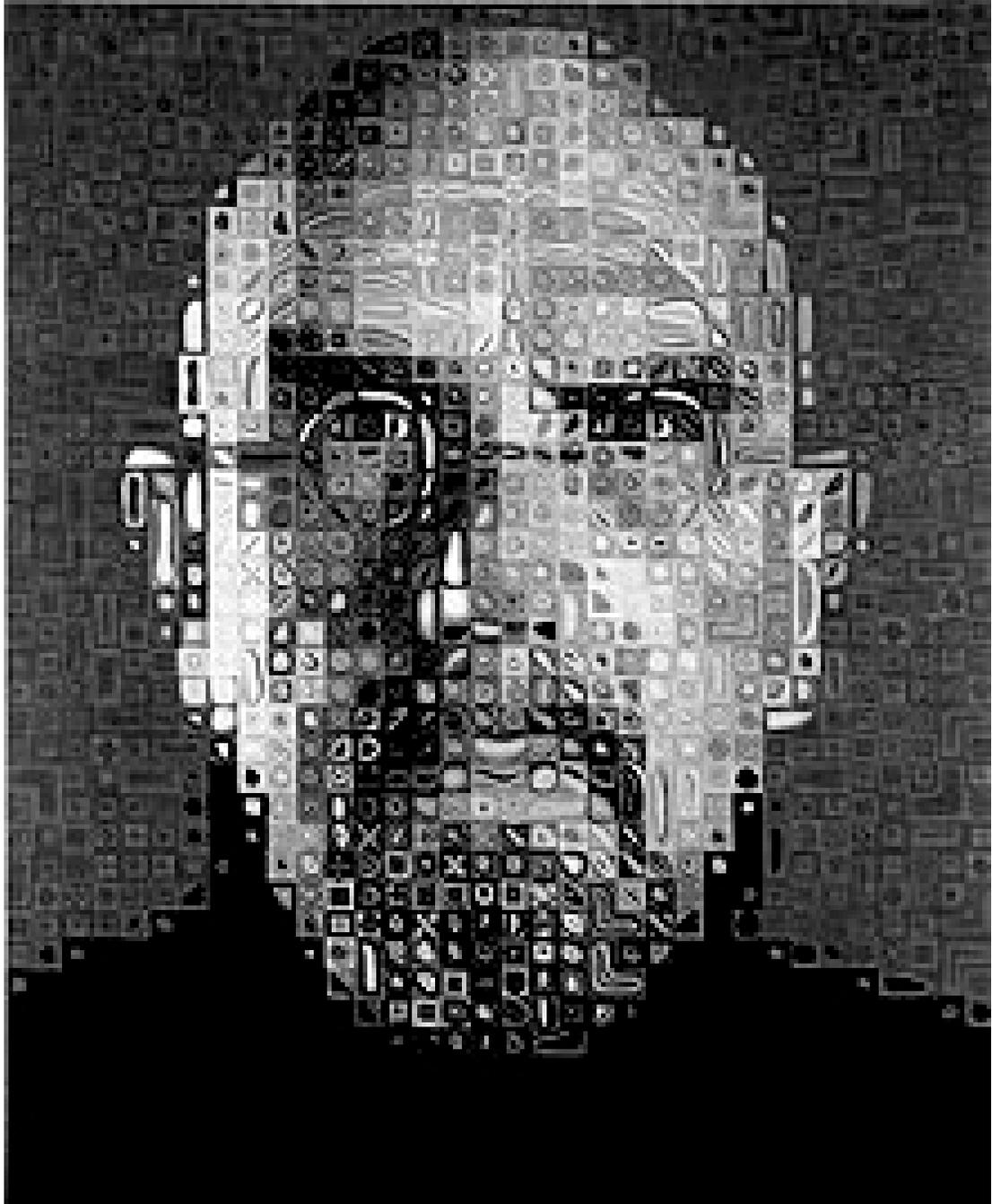


Figure 22 Chuck Close, Self-Portrait 2004-2005, oil on canvas, 102"x 84"

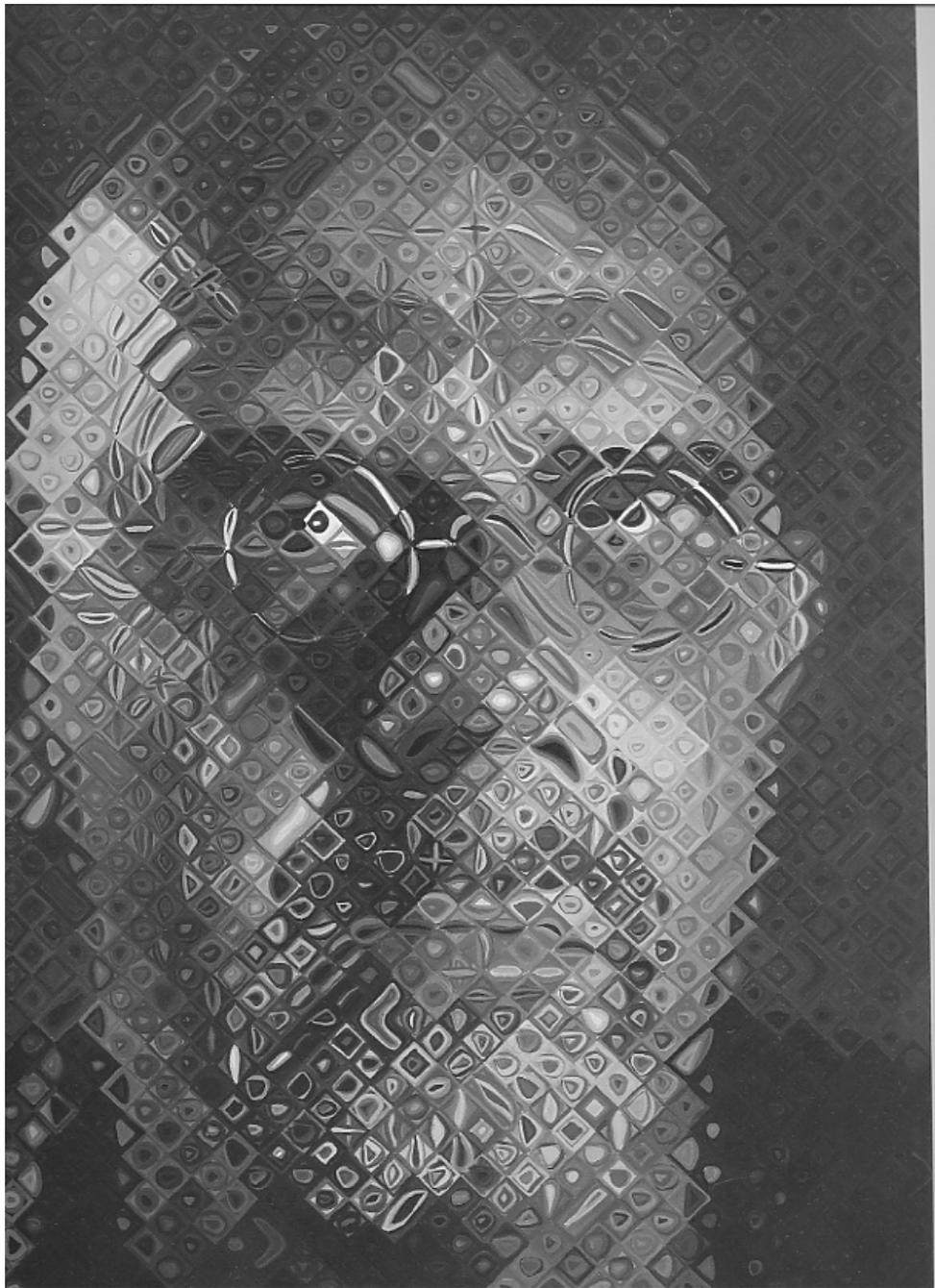


Figure 23 Self-portrait 2005 Oil on Canvas 108 3/4" x 84"



Figure 24 Chuck Close working on Self-Portrait 2004-2005