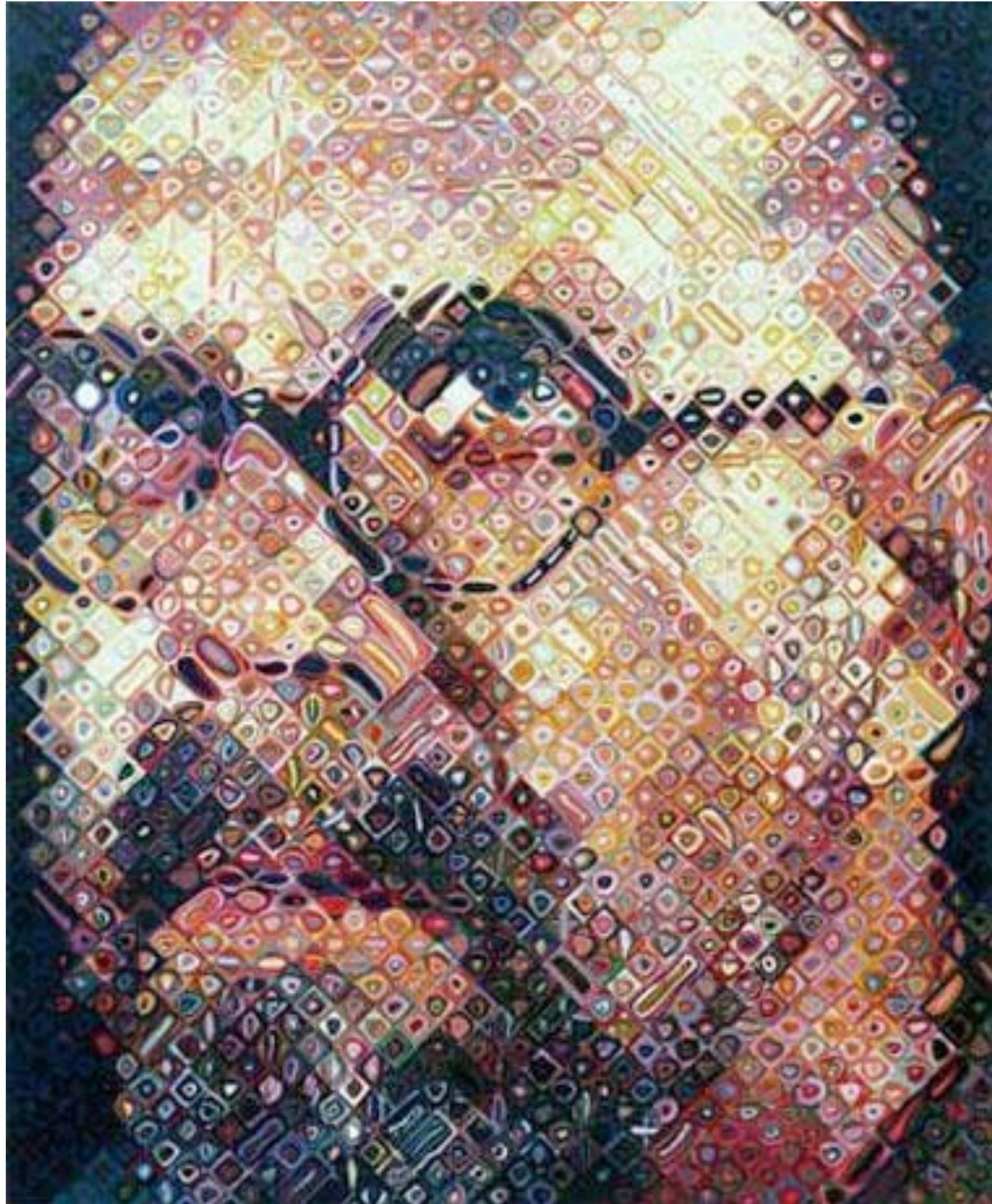
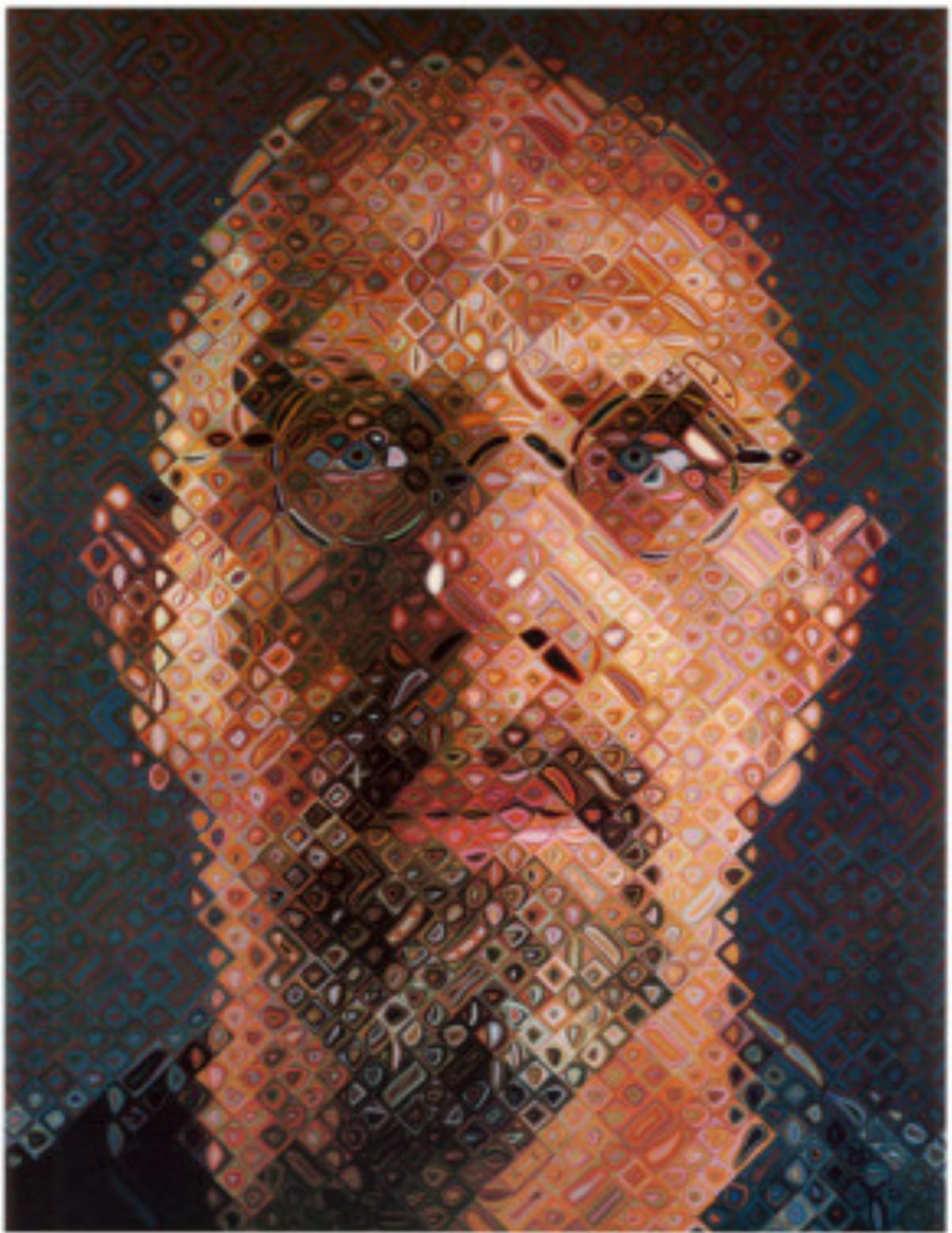


Fifth Grade Art Print

Self-Portrait - by Chuck Close





CHUCK CLOSE

SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Background Info:

Chuck Close is an American painter living and working in New England. He is known for his large portrait paintings of his friends, which he calls “heads”. Many of his paintings are in the size range of 6 to 7 feet by 8 to 10 feet. Close up, they are beautiful abstractions and, from a distance, they are realistic portraits. He has worked with the figure and the portrait almost exclusively for thirty years.

He began his career with an interest in photography and printmaking as well as painting. His paintings continue to resemble close-cropped photographs with no background or depth and no commentary, much like driver’s license photos. His approach of creating a highly structured grid creates a kind of detachment from the individual, yet these are his family members and friends. Much of Close’s work is paradoxical in this way.

Each work is a highly abstract composition developed by the artist and a finely rendered image held together by a tightly woven network of shapes and colors. No one part of any of his paintings, which are built up of carefully constructed grids, is made more important than any other.

In many ways, his art is tough and mute. There is a directness to most of the poses of his heads. He has most often worked from a photograph that he has taken, rather than from a live model. The gaze is straight into the viewer’s eyes. There is an informality to the painting (certainly unlike George Washington). He presents the ordinariness of the people he paints, who are all his friends (he does not accept commissions for paintings). We are almost forced to stare at them, much as a child would stare at any strange face.

“Chuck Close is an American success story of opportunity seized graciously, but unequivocally.” In the prime of his career, in 1988, he was paralyzed from the neck down by a ruptured blood vessel. By force of will and mind, he recovered some movement and adapted himself to his new condition. Chuck Close paints from a wheelchair. He has a special glove which holds a paintbrush to his hand. He has a motorized lift to move him up and down over his large canvases, and the paintings themselves are moved and hung from different angles for him to paint. He relies on the help of his friends and students for the physical force he does not possess, but works with the same dedication to his vision of portraiture.

An interesting fact about the artist that you might want to mention to the students is that he suffers from prosopagnosia or “face blindness”. This disorder causes the person to be unable to recognize faces of people that they have met, even after knowing them for a long time, even family members. It is interesting that he has chosen to focus most of his artistic work on faces, even though he has this disorder. Maybe that is why he is so interested in doing portraits.

Discussion Ideas:

What is this a picture of? Children easily identify that this work is a face. Stage it first so they see it from a distance and then let them see it up close, or perhaps it would be more fun to isolate part of it, maybe turn it upside-down, and let them guess what it is a picture of. They need to know that it is a painting; in fact, a large one (about 4x5 feet in size). Give them an equivalent in the room for that size.

Once it is established that it is a face, let them explore how it was created. Ask them how it is like Impressionism or even the comic strips which are made up of small dots of color on close inspection (perhaps bring in some comics from the newspaper).

Do you think it is a portrait (you could print a photo of Chuck Close from the internet to show what he looks like in real life)? What does it take to be a portrait? How is this self-portrait different from other self-portraits they have seen? How it is the same? Do they think it is ‘as good’ a portrait as more realistic ones (you could show them something as a comparison, like George Washington or the Mona Lisa)? Are these colors what real skin looks like?

What do you know about this man, Chuck Close, from his self-portrait? What do you see? He is balding, wears glasses, and has a mustache and beard. Can you tell anything about his thoughts and feelings from the painting? Do you know anything about his personality? Is there any message here to be conveyed? Can you tell from this painting what he really looks like? With all of these questions, remember to ask the children what makes them think so.

If Chuck Close paintings are not about making the picture look exactly like him, what are they about? Some people would say they are about relationships – units and unity, and parts to a whole. Chuck Close is as concerned about the anatomy of a picture as with the human forms he is painting. He keeps us absorbed with the surface of the painting as a way of drawing us into the interior of these people.

Project Idea:

Find a fairly simple close-up picture of a face (could be a photo of the teacher or someone famous) and enlarge it to about 16 x 24 inches (or to an appropriate size to where enough rectangles can be cut for each student). [Remember: DO NOT show the kids the whole picture or tell them who it is supposed to be!]

Cut the picture into enough rectangles for each student to have one (if there are a few extras, students that finish theirs first can work on another one so that all of them will be completed). Number the rectangles so that you will be able to put them back together in the proper configuration at the end of the activity. TIP: The squares are easier to work with and easier for the kids to draw when they are at least one square inch - slightly larger would probably be better (up to two square inches).

Give each child a rectangle and an 8" x 11" piece of white paper (if you think that will be too big, cut the white paper in half to an 8 x 5.5"). Remind them to write the number of their rectangle on the back of their white paper for reassembling later. Have them try to duplicate what they see on their rectangle, in the same proportion but on the larger size paper, onto the sheet of paper (they can sketch and then put in colors - maybe colors not exactly like their original, but close - remember, when you look at the individual sections of a Chuck Close, some of the colors are "off").

When they are finished, piece together the pictures (based on the numbers) on the floor to create a really large reproduction of the original face, but in the grid-like, mosaic style of Chuck Close. You will probably need to clear a space in the room for this. Be sure that the students do not see the original photograph or picture before the project is completed. See if they can recognize who it is. Here is a photo of a completed project - this class obviously did Thomas Jefferson!

