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Chuck Close Rediscovered the Art in an Old Method

By LYLE REXER

FROM the moment in 1839 when Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre announced that he could capture an image of the seen world on a silver surface, the daguerreotype both threatened and enthralled visual artists with equal force. The first form of photography, it drove an industry of miniaturists virtually out of business. Yet its delicate precision fascinated such painters as Eugene Delacroix, who collected daguerreotypes and recommended them to his students as an aid for



improving their rendering of the human body. Both Daguerre and the man who brought news of his process to the United States, the inventor of the telegraph, Samuel F. B. Morse, were painters, and they viewed the "silver canvas" not as a threat to art but as a new art form.

Nearly a century and a half after the daguerreotype's demise as a popular process, it is being revived by Chuck Close, who sees in its special qualities untapped possibilities of expression. In a collaboration with the contemporary daguerreotypist Jerry Spagnoli, Mr. Close has produced an extensive series of daguerreotype self-portraits, as well as front and back views of nudes in close-up, for an exhibition at Pace/MacGill Gallery that opens Wednesday and runs through April 22.

Their effect is as unexpected as opening a beaded purse and finding a cell phone. In a photo session at Mr. Spagnoli's studio in Chelsea recently, Mr. Close said, "I am trying to banish the nostalgia from something old to make it about our time."

Reinventing the past is nothing new for Mr. Close. In the 1960's and 70's, he revolutionized the idea of the painted portrait by creating images of himself and his friends in overwhelming dimension: the mug shot writ large. He also led a movement to erase the boundary between painting and photography by basing his work on large-format Polaroid photographs and eliminating any trace of a brush stroke from his canvases. His early airbrush techniques inspired the development of the ink jet printer. He saw his first daguerreotypes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art while he was still in graduate school in the 60's, and he never forgot them. "I have always attempted to create images that deliver the maximum amount of information about the subject," he said. "I was fascinated by the clarity and detail of the daguerreotype. Nothing gets lost."

The daguerreotype's ability to capture fine details was the source of its instant popularity. Within two years of its demonstration in 1839, the streets of Paris were crowded with tripod-toting

picture takers. The cumbersome cameras sold like hot cakes as painters laid aside their brushes and chemists their retorts to become “daguerrean operators,” as they were called. The daguerreotype even inspired one commentator to cry, “Steel engravers, copper engravers and etchers, drink up your aquafortis and die! . . . All nature shall paint herself.”

Although the daguerreotype’s chemistry is complicated, the process of making one involves only a few steps. A silver-surfaced copper plate, usually 8-by-10 inches or smaller, is carefully polished, then coated with a solution of iodine and bromine to make it light sensitive. It is exposed in the camera and then developed by “fuming” with mercury vapor. The result is a one-of-a-kind image rather than a negative for reproducing photographs. Its visual effect is unlike any other photographic process. In conventional photographs, the silver particles are embedded in the paper and absorb light. In essence, they “stain” the paper. In a daguerreotype, the silver crystals sit on a reflective surface and don’t absorb light but scatter it. To see the image, the viewer has to tilt the plate until it is at the proper angle to reveal the pattern of scattering. This inconvenience is one reason the daguerreotype fell out of favor, and also why it is so hard to reproduce in print. In Mr. Spagnoli’s opinion, a daguerreotype is not a photograph at all but an “optical system” involving the plate, the viewer and light.

This paradox of precision and evanescence also attracted Mr. Close. “A daguerreotype has a dimensionality, a depth that makes it very close to a hologram,” he said. In the forthcoming Pace exhibition, his holograms and daguerreotypes are exhibited in the same room. The exhibition also includes large digital ink-jet photographic prints.

“My work is all about focus and scale,” he said. “The closer you get to a daguerreotype, the more you see. In some ways it’s the opposite of a painting, which breaks down into brush strokes.”

BUT admiring a daguerreotype and making one are very different things. The commercial replacement of silver plates by paper photographs, which could be easily reproduced, meant that by the 1990’s only a handful of people in the United States knew how to make daguerreotypes. Mr. Close would never have begun the project if Colin Westerbeck, an associate curator of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago, had not had an interest in the process. In 1995, he used a grant from the Lannan Foundation to bring Mr. Close together with Grant Romer, director of conservation at the George Eastman House. Mr. Romer is one of that handful of daguerrean operators. “The daguerreotype is a direct positive image like the Polaroids on which Chuck’s paintings are based,” said Mr. Westerbeck. “I knew its detail would grab his interest. Besides, he loves any medium that entails knotty technical problems.”

The results, however, were maddeningly inconsistent. One reason was the nature of the process. The silver surface has to be unblemished, the mix of chemicals and timing just right. As Mr. Spagnoli lamented: “You can be going along blithely convinced that everything is wonderful and in the end have a complete failure because of some subtle error. There’s no way to monitor your progress.” No wonder daguerreotype studios guarded their techniques and innovations. In addition, the long exposure required for a daguerreotype increases the likelihood of movement blurring the image. As Mr. Close said, “Bodies breathe.”

Enter Mr. Spagnoli, an artist and photographer turned daguerreotypist. Mr. Westerbeck saw Mr. Spagnoli’s work and suggested another attempt. Mr. Spagnoli did not say so, but he was not sure he could achieve success in the quantity Mr. Close wanted -- more than 40 full-plate images. But just before their sessions began last summer, Mr. Spagnoli improved his technique of polishing and sensitizing the plates and managed to eliminate much of the inconsistency.



Watching the two men work is to step back into a world of hands-on artistry and speculative tinkering. While Mr. Close directs the arrangement of the model against a black background cloth, Mr. Spagnoli polishes the plates with a long buffing stick coated with fine red polishing powder. He disappears into a small darkroom to coat the plates, and Mr. Close says, “I am used to collaborating in my work, and Jerry opens doors for me.” Then he adds with a laugh, “He’s so wedded to the ritual of the process that if I’m not here to watch him prepare the plates, I feel guilty, as if I don’t deserve to make them.”

The camera is a large-format, wooden machine with a fixed lens and a cloth hood. Mr. Spagnoli, who has organized an exhibition of antique daguerreotypes currently on view at the Sarah Morthland Gallery, had to build most of his equipment, including the container for mercury developing. The fumes are deadly, and it took him a long time to overcome his qualms about safety before he began to learn the process.

Both Mr. Spagnoli and Mr. Close dart in and out from under the hood to check the focus. Mr. Close is concerned that as much of his subject as possible be in the focal plane to avoid any softening of the image, not an easy task given the dramatic contours of the nude human body in close-up. Early daguerreotypists were limited to working with natural light, but Mr. Spagnoli has developed a technique for using high-intensity strobe lights that captures the image instantaneously and increases its sharpness. Uncertainty, however, is a constant companion. One of Mr. Close’s current subjects appeared light complexioned, but her skin contained slight reddish pigments. Since the silver surface is sensitive to certain light wavelengths, her image darkened so much that her tattoos, which Mr. Close especially wanted to capture, nearly disappeared. In the finished 8-by-10-inch daguerreotypes, old and new collide. After being developed, the images emerge gradually, like ghosts caught unawares in daylight. Shiny, light-reflecting surfaces like those of jewelry and fingernails appear first, then the rest of the body. Mr. Close has deliberately focused on torsos, and at first glance their physical clarity seems painful. It is easy to sympathize with the poet of 1841 who wrote of the daguerreotype, “Truth is unpleasant/ to prince and to peasant.” Yet most 19th-century nudes have a soft, sculptural quality, closer in spirit to Fragonard and Boucher. And they have heads. The dispassionate, almost clinical style of Mr. Close’s anonymous torsos betrays an unmistakably modern sensibility. And yet as the viewer moves from side to side, the shimmering surfaces catch different colors -- reds and blues -- and the bodies seem to come to life. “They involve us intimately in the poignancy and elusiveness of seeing,” Mr. Close said.

That poignancy may also spring from his subject -- bodies of people Mr. Close knows, ranging in age from the early 20’s to the late 60’s. In 1988, Mr. Close nearly died from a collapsed spinal artery. Now confined to a wheelchair, he has a heightened sense of both the frailty and majesty of the body.

“A body is a road map of a person’s life,” he said, “as unique and expressive as any face. The wrinkles and effects of gravity are beautiful.” He added, “This work is my celebration of the body, and the daguerreotype is the perfect medium of that celebration.”