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FACE PERCEPTION AND REPRESENTATION: INVESTIGATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ARTISTS CHUCK CLOSE AND DEIDRE SCHERER

by
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Introduction;

The 'art' and 'craft' dichotomy for artists today comes down to questions concerning self-definition and self-perception, education, peers, institutional access and curatorial interest more than any hard-and-fast historical tradition of aesthetic division.

In this Thesis, I want to investigate the relationship between artists Chuck Close and Deidre Scherer both of whom represent the face as the primary subject of their work. For centuries, artists have recognised that interpretation and representation of the face, is central to the allure and power of portraiture and have reflected it in their work.

In the preface, I examine the factors that influence face perception and representation. Although Close and Scherer both work exclusively with the human face; Close uses a traditional 'fine art' medium; Paint whereas Scherer takes on both the weight and excitement of a traditional craft medium; Textiles.

Chapter one investigates the relationship between making and thinking in the work of Chuck Close. I also put his work in context from both Portraiture and Historical perspectives.

Chapter two investigates the thought process and the manner in which Deidre Scherer executes her work while at the same time examining it in terms of both Portraiture and Historical traditions.

Chapter three looks at the forces that both unite and alienate the work of these two artists. I examine the factors that classify their work and the steps which recent movements and the artists themselves have taken to both break boundaries and re-affirm their positions in contemporary art practice.

Preface

Face perception

"The human face is never at rest because the human mind awake or asleep is never still." [Close 1998]

This quote refers to the face as an extension of the most highly complex organ in the human body – the brain. Face perception involves several regions of the brain working simultaneously. Man shows traces of inborn responses to the face and physiognomic expression, even though the visual system is fairly immature at birth.

Fig a. What a face may look like to a baby aged 1 month (left), and 3 months (right)

Fig. *a* gives an impression of what a face might look like to a 1-month-old and a 3-month-old infant. This demonstrates both the initial immaturity of the baby's vision and its rapid development. The visual capacity of the infant is clearly limited in the first month of life. Nonetheless, research carried out by Andrew Meltzoff & Keith Moore in 1977 has shown infants who are only 2-3 weeks old can imitate facial movement including tongue and lip protrusion and mouth opening. This research concludes that the infant has inborn knowledge as to which of its own facial muscles correspond to those of another human being.

Mark Thomas and his colleagues (Johnson et al. 1991) have also supported evidence of inborn attentiveness to faces. Johnson's experiment revealed the following of face- like patterns by newborn infants; his test was performed on

babies whose average age was 43 minutes from delivery. The infant is lying down and one of the patterned boards [see Fig. 1.2] is moved around in front of its face. Johnson observed that the infant's eyes would follow the most face-like pattern longer than either of the patterns shown at the bottom of Fig. 2. Tracking of the slightly less face-like pattern (top right of Fig 1.2) fell somewhere in between. These studies of infants demonstrate the sophistication of the human brain and its ability to rapidly learn the art of face perception.
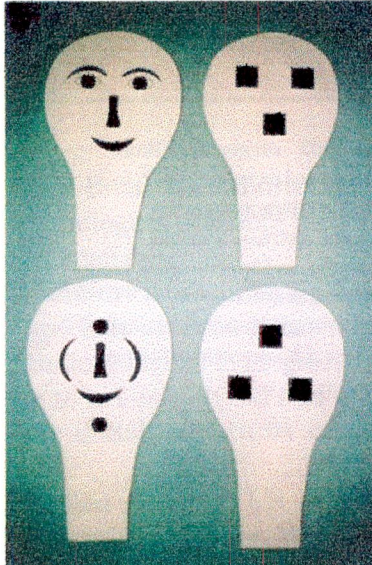

Fig *b. Th four patterns used to test inborn knowledge of faces in newborn babies*

All faces are essentially similar. By this I mean that all heads are built around the same basic template and individual differences between them can be very subtle. How do we recognise the identities of people we know? Galton [1883] gave a useful insight in how we achieve this feat:

"The general expression of a face is the sum of a multitude of small details, which are viewed in such rapid succession that we seem to perceive them all in a single glance. If any one of them disagrees with the recollected traits of a known face, the eye is quick at observing it, and dwells upon the difference. One small discordance outweighs a multitude of similarities and general unlikeness" [P. 3 Galton 1883]

Our visual system seems to describe and retrieve faces as wholes or as interrelationships between features. It is interesting to note that when we are asked to describe faces, we tend to describe a list of separate features such as "big blue
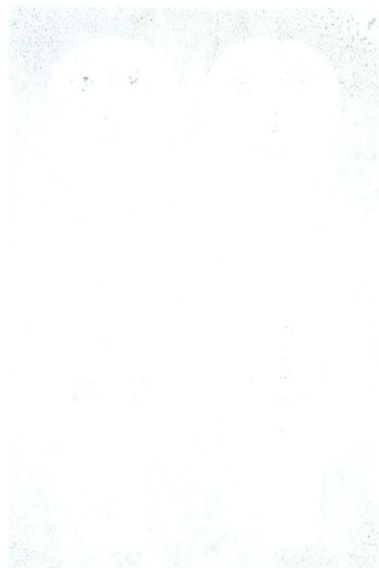
eyes" or "spud nose". This is more than likely to do with the fact that our vocabulary has been developed to deal with the different sensory functions which the physical features of the face serve.

This leads onto another interesting area – technology. The computer has been developed, programmed and operated by the human being. Yet, despite huge advances in computer technology, there is still not a computer capable of reproducing a reliable representation of a human face. Despite the fact that the computer has been designed to store vast quantities of information, it cannot tap the processes that the human brain uses to describe and retrieve faces.

The appearance of the face is determined in part by the shape and growth of the underlying bone, and in part by the other factors, such as age of skin, distribution of fat and the texture and pigmentation of the skin. These hard and soft tissues produce the individual variations in appearance, which are important for categorisation and identification. However, it is the movements of the face which are responsible for its ability to transmit a range of other social signals. Expressive movements produce information about expressive states, eye and head movements provide information about gaze direction and movements of lips, tongue and jaws provide information, which aids speech perception. All these movements are controlled by a huge number of muscles. If we look at the face as a framework, then expression is the ripples of changes that play on its surface. The face shows different expressions as its mobile parts respond to the impulse of changing emotions.

This framework, however, does not remain static. We all change throughout our lives, from day to day and year to year. Photography has made us fully aware of the effects of time. When we look at old photographs of family and friends we recognise that we have all changed much more than we have tended to notice in day to day living. In fact the better we know a person and the more often we see a face, the less we tend to notice these transformations. The proportions of the face change thoroughly throughout childhood. Again, in old age, many noticeable changes take place; our teeth fall out, our hair goes grey or falls out and the skin looses its elasticity leading to wrinkles and sagging. Yet despite these changes of

a lifetime, it is still possible to recognise that each person from one stage of their life to the next possesses some general dominant expression of which each individual expression is a modification.

It is not the permanent traits, but rather the expressions of emotions that allow us to read character. However, I have a lot of faith in the common sense theory i.e. that it is the mobile expressions that gradually mould a face. A cheerful expression will acquire a smiling face, whereas a person who is frequently worried will acquire a furrowed brow.

The complexity of the human brain is once again highlighted when we consider the role we each play in society. Society offers different role models which people aspire to. We each assume a mask and mould ourselves around the expectations of others. In many ways we are all actors playing the roles of different characters in a society which has the power to mould us, even down to our facial expressions and gestures. This is not the only type of mask that people tend to rely on to hide inner feelings. This also manifests itself in other ways, such as in the wearing of make-up and in posing for photographs or for other forms of portraiture.

Face Representation.

It is vital that the artist who chooses to portray the face clearly understands the factors that contribute to face perception. Only then can the portrait artist take responsibility for and control of the perceptual elements of their work, while taking the wider audience into consideration.

The need for portraiture emerged with the development of realism in the 15th century and its continuation before this century mostly occurred in situations that where the need for realism combined with wealth and patronage. The advent of photography in the 19th century freed the artist from demands for commissioned likenesses. In the 20th Century, the existence of traditional portraiture has also been overshadowed by radical changes of intention in art.

What we see as a good likeness in portraiture, is not necessarily a replica of anything seen. If this were the case, any snap-shot would serve the same purpose. In fact most snap-shots fail to satisfy us, not because the camera distorts, but rather because the camera makes static a single moment in time. A photograph is less likely to strike the viewer the same way as it does the sitter because real-life physiognomic impression rests on movement. Art, therefore, must compensate for this loss in movement by concentrating all the required information into one image.

It is very difficult to capture rapid movement or continual changing human expressions, as these will be over before the artist ever gets a chance to put pen to paper. The invention of photography in the late 19th century provided us with a mechanical instrument, the camera, which enables us to arrest movement and fix it forever. Although the snapshot has transformed the portrait, it has also made us aware of the problem of likeness. It has drawn attention to the paradox of capturing life in a still, of freezing the play of features in an arrested moment of which we may never be aware in the flux of events.

It must be noted that the film camera is the most accurate recorder of human physiognomies as it shows the continuous flow of information. Both photographs and other visual art media, on the other hand, abstract from movement, but can still produce a convincing likeness, not only of the mask but also of the living expression of the face. The beholder of the arrested image tends to supplement from their own experience what is not actually present.

Changes in the structure of society over the last 100 years have emphasised the importance of all individuals, not just the royal, rich and famous. With artists Chuck Close and Deidre Scherer, the portrait as a private interest has developed with little concern for accepted or traditional ideas. This has enabled the artists to focus their artistic intentions on individuals without the pressure or constraints of the official commission.

Chapter 1

Chuck Close; Big Heads - Small Parts

Since the early 1970's Chuck Close has been a leading figure in the N.Y. art world. In this time he has been dealing with one subject – the human face. His images are enthralling, large in scale and closely cropped. In his early work Close used himself, his family and friends as his subjects. More recently he has concentrated on portraits of artist friends including, Roy Lichtenstein, Lucas Samaras, Alex Katz, Cindy Shermann, Kiki Smith and Robert Rausehenberg.

Since he executed the first of his colossal "head" paintings in 1968, Close has explored countless approaches to representing his subject, and has found new ways of challenging himself in the process.

From the beginning, Close works have been based on his own Photographs. First, he made air brushed black and white images. These were followed by the three-colour process derived from colour printing. He then began to make airbrushed dot drawings – introducing the grid-system as part of the image. Experiments with fingerprint drawings then led to pulp-paper collages. His recent works in oil demonstrate bolder, though unique marks that fall into place next to each other and shift into a recognisable image.

Although Chuck Close has chosen the human face as his subject his paintings have less to do with individual subjects than with perceptual systems. The only information, which is allowed to enter our field of vision, is that which he translates from his photographic source. By working extremely large scale he makes that information not merely accessible but unavoidable. What Close captures in his paintings is not the nobility but the artificiality of the photographed subject.

In the late sixties, Close's working process began with the selection of one of his black and white close-ups, which he carefully gridded, transposing it unit by unit onto a canvas of enormous size (107½" x 83½") [See Fig. 1.1]. For Close, the

photo became the criteria against which he could judge his paintings. With this self-portrait, Close established the basic elements of his style - large scale, all-overness, formula composition and photographic accuracy.
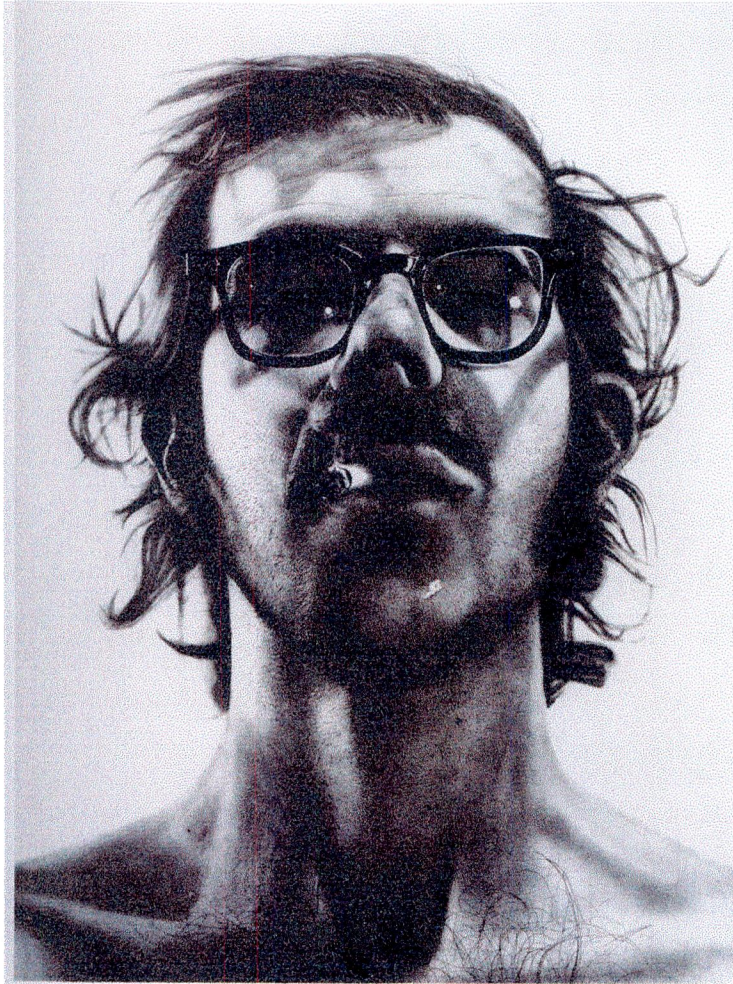
Fig. 1.1 Self Portrait: 107 ½" x 83 ½" 1967-68

Close – Portraiture perspective.

Chuck Close refers to his paintings as "heads" rather than portraits. In fact when he started painting faces in the early 70's he "denied any tradition of portraiture" [P. 86 Close interview with Robert Storr 1998]. He was, however acutely aware of his artist peers, Andy Warhol, Alex Katz and Philip Pearlstein who were also wrestling with large format head and figure compositions in the 60's. Warhol also worked from photographs, creating images, which comprised of one silk screen squeegee stroke. [See Fig 1.2] Warhol was particularly important in for close "in terms of building of an image that is also a painting." [P. 87 Close 1998]

Fig 1.2 Lita Curtain Star – Andy Warhol, 1966

The history of portraiture strongly suggests the puzzling obtrusion of the artist's own likeness into the portrait. There is no evidence of Close's physical likeness in the painting of his subjects, apart from his self-portraits of course. I'm sure this is because the information that Close transcribes onto the canvas comes directly from his photographic source.

However, when the artist became more involved with the physicality of the painting process in the late 70's, a strong sense of his own presence became apparent in the work, He began to paint directly with his hand, dipping his fingers in paint and generating the marks with finger tips. For Close this was "the ultimate physical experience of painting. You could feel how much paint you were picking up with your skin and exactly how much pressure you were applying to the surface" [P. 92 Close, 1998]

Fig 1.3 Keith – Random fingerprint version 1979

In a 1979 drawing of *Keith* [See Fig 1.3] Close stamped his fingerprint unit into a grid. He created numerous impressions on the paper surface changing their tonality by varying the pressure of his hand. His series of finger print drawings literally bear the mark of the artist's hand.

Unlike traditional portrait painters, Close has no need of live models. His paintings are portraits of photographs of his subjects, never the subjects themselves. For Close the camera produces a means of capturing a frozen moment in time. However he also uses the camera as a distorting device. While photographing his subject, Close uses a very shallow depth of field that blurs the traits nearest the lens. His snapshots are the blueprints for his paintings, which he executes in giant scale and further distorts.
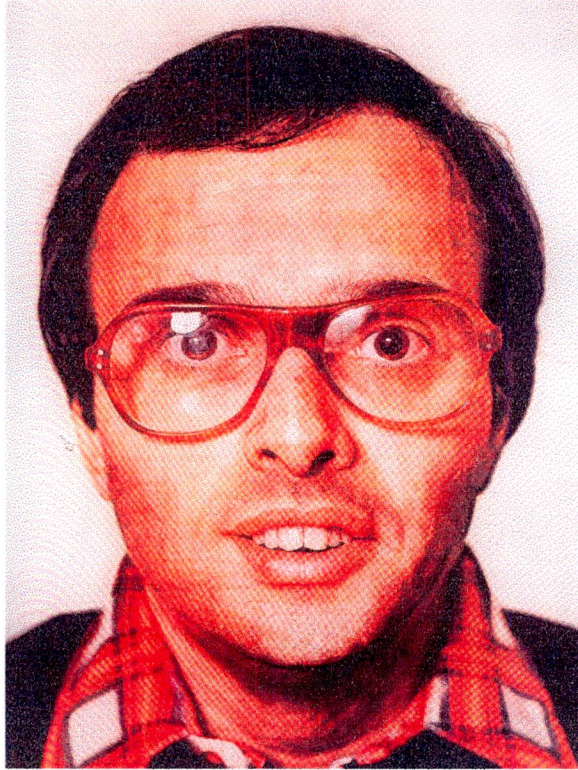
Fig. 1.4 Mark 1978/79

Chuck close has spent the last thirty years painting "heads". His style has steadily evolved. His earlier works are pore by pore dissections of his subjects. [See Fig 1.4 *Mark* 1978/79.] In his recent works close has distorted his subjects by inventing a variety of abstract marks. The grid is still present but the painterly energy that fills each unit has become more animated, each unit demanding equal attention. [See Fig 1.5]
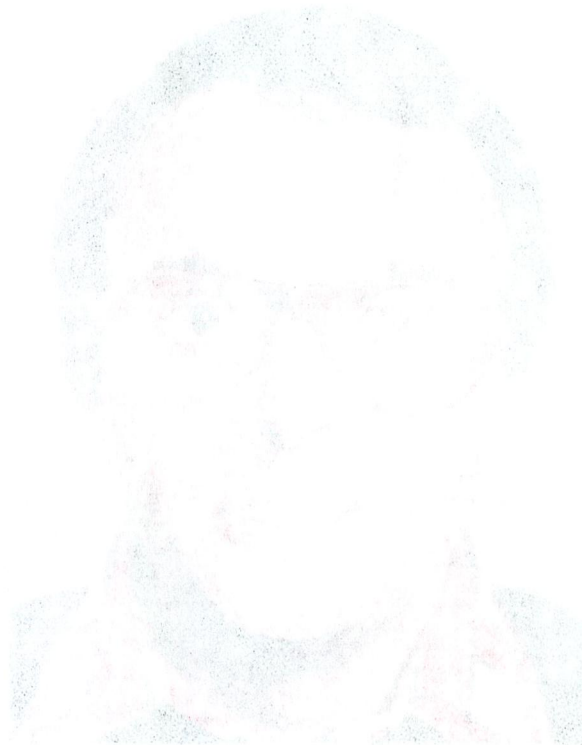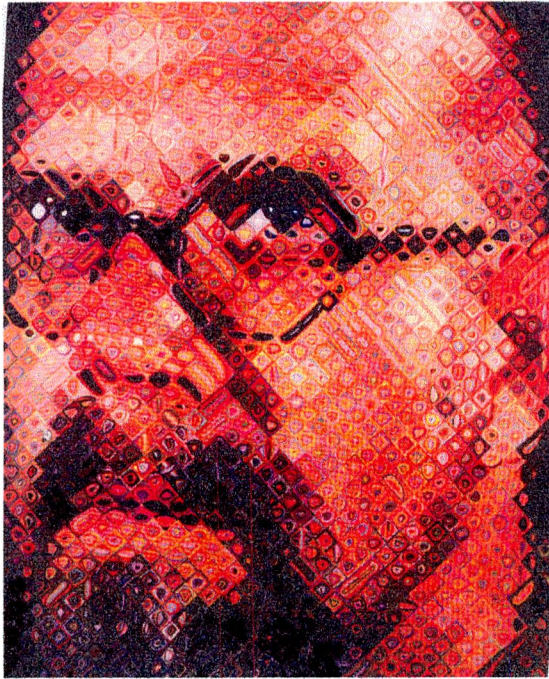
Fig 1.5 Self Portrait 1997

Close believes that a photograph taken in a fraction of a second can offer more insight into a subject's personality than a traditional portrait painter will reveal through many lengthy sittings; "live models change. They gain weight, they loose weight; one day they're happy, the next day sad; one day they're awake the next they're tired. All these things happen and as a result the painting becomes the mean average of all these experiences. The thing I like about a photograph is that it represents a frozen, poem like moment in time. [P. 30 Lyons – Chuck Close 1987.] Close's works give an insight into the physiognomy of his subjects.

Close has always been aware of the relationship between the artist, his subject and the viewer, who watches them watch each other. I saw a portrait of Kent at the *Art Gallery of Ontario* in Toronto last September. [See Fig. 2.6] At first I mistook it for a huge amazingly detailed photograph. I was forced to move back. From a distance I was aware only of the head itself and it's convincingly modelled form. At very close range I was confronted by the abstract marks that were used to create a pore by pore account of this face which suddenly resembled a road map.

Fig 2.6 Kent 100" x 90" 1970

Part of the irony of Closes project is that he is interested in both closing the gap between subject and viewer, and, at the same time emphasising and distancing the distorting effects inherent in photography. Close's paintings are twice removed from the subjects themselves; firstly through the effects of the camera and secondly through the further distorted information which the artist transcribes onto the canvas.

Close once said that he wished his viewers to confront his work "as paintings first and portraits second" [P. 29 Lyons 1987] In more recent years Close has extended his subjects to artist friends who specialise in self-portraiture. The interaction with his subject in the studio has provided a new focus in his work. While close continues to distort his subject's image using the camera, they in turn use the painting space he allots to them to create a picture in their own self-image.

According to Close, Richard Sierra was one of the first to change his image – appearing at the photo session looking as gritty and hard as one of his sculptures.

The artist's most recent portrait of the painter Janet Fish takes the idea of costumed role-playing to new heights. Dressed up in oversized plastic earrings and cheap looking 50's style glasses, Fish demonstrates the truth of the Harold Rosenberg phrase, "An artist is a person who has invented an artist." [Auping in Art Forum Pp. 66-71 Oct. 1993]. It is by focusing on other contemporary artists such as Lucas Samaras, Francesco Clemetine and Cindy Sherman who wrestle control of their images from the camera, Close tries to regain the upper hand by examining their identities from without.

Close is continuously expanding the limits of portraiture.

Historical perspective.

Born in Monroe Washington in 1940, Chuck Close was an only child who suffered from poor health and severe learning difficulties. It wan not until 1985 that he discovered the problem with reading, spelling, memorisation and ironically face recognition which haunted him all his life were symptoms of dyslexia.

Chuck close received a formal education in fine art painting. He entered the University of Washington in the 1960's at a time when abstract expressionism had dominated American art for almost twenty years, and he produced works in this painterly style. Having received his Bachelor's degree, Close began graduate-painting studies at Yale University in 1962. Reflecting on his time at Yale, Close recently remarked; "At Yale we learned to talk are before we could make it. It was absolutely essential that you be able to defend on your ideas." [P. 87 Close – Interview 1998.]

Key figures who taught at Yale during the 50's and 60's were Josef Albers, Jack Tworkov and younger though already established artists such as Alex Katz and Philip Pearlstein. Students entering Yale at this time surely found themselves amidst a diverse group of personalities with conflicting ideas. The aim of the

university was to expose the students to the widest possible range of competing ideas and potential choices. Sampling multiple viewpoints and experimenting with many different approaches was encouraged.

Most of Chuck Close's works are massive at around 100" x 84". He has created smaller pieces however but these are mostly experimental works. His most successful pieces have been executed in large scale. Large scale has been the hallmark of American painting ever since the abstract expressionists abandoned the easel to create mural sized works. Closes Portraits are within this tradition. However when the paintings of the abstract expressionists became larger, so did their brushwork. As a result the scale i.e. the relationship of part to whole actually remained the same. The 70's and 80's by contrast saw Close making works of extremely large size without increasing the size of his marks. By the late 80's, however each small unit, which contributed to the overall image, became in itself a small abstract expressionist painting. These marks emanate as much from the imagination as from the photograph.

The two godfathers of Close's art from an earlier generation were Willam de Kooning, from whom he learnt much about making a painting and Ad Reinhardt, who did not so much influence the way Close painted, but rather the way he thought.

Close's historical and contemporary influences are both wide and varied. Both his fingerprint and more recent works are reminiscent of late 19th Century pointillist painters. Close has often been described as a photorealist, but he has expressed discomfort at an association with the movement. Although his earlier portraits may contain some connection with realism, his more recent works are far removed from this tradition. The process-orientated nature of his work links him more appropriately with minimalist or system artists such as Sol Le Witt, Nancy Graves and Richard Serra. Since the Renaissance, the grid has been a standard way for enlarging and transferring a drawing to a canvas. Close consistently employs the grid technique in his work, transposing each section, unit by unit onto the Canvas.

Close contributes the "all overness" (i.e. there are no focal points, all parts are of equal importance) of his work to Frank Stella. However I think this can also be linked to the "action paintings" of Jackson Pollock.

In Close's works, technique is as important as content. But his art involves much more than this. Possessing the power to dazzle not only the eye, but the mind as well. Close engages not only in the issue of what we see, but also how we see. Close's paintings are paradoxical in character representing a fusion of late 19th century pointillism, conceptualism, minimalism and realism.

Process and Evolution of Style.

Chuck Close's paintings are very time consuming. (It takes anything from four to fourteen months to complete a single canvas.) The artist becomes completely emerged in the making process. Chuck Close has spent the last 30 years working on the same project. By constantly analysing and challenging his motives, his work has undergone dramatic change. Fig 1.7 shows the evolution of style from the late 60's to the late 90's.

Fig 1.7 Evolution of style – Seven paintings spanning 30 years - Close
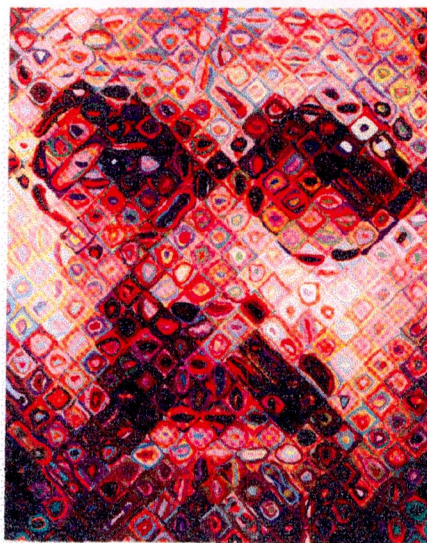
In 1988 Close suffered a collapsed artery in his spine which left him partially paralysed and in a wheelchair. He managed to regain enough movement in his arm to paint with a brush strapped to his hand. Despite these unusually restrictive circumstances Close's works have continued to evolve with no apparent interruption. Close feels that "the work is probably not all that different from what I would have made anyway had I not had this event happen to me where I ended up having to strap the brushes to my hands and work in a wheelchair." [P. 96. Close (interview) 1998.]

Close continues to work from his own Polaroids. His current subjects are both himself and his art-world acquaintances. He still begins work by gridding the canvas, although the grid and the brush marks have increased in scale. The reason why Close made each individual square larger was in order to "find the colour in context in the triangle rather than making all the decisions out of context." [P. 93 Close interview 1998]

Close starts the painting by putting a different colour in each square. Although his method of painting may appear limiting this allows him to respond intuitively in applying the next layer of paint. He tries to make the decisions in three or four moves. Close has compared his painting process to a game of golf.

Golf is the only sport in which you move from the general to the specific in an ideal number of connecting moves. The first stroke is just out there, the second corrects that, the third stroke corrects that. By then you are hopefully on the green and you can try to place the ball in this very specific three and a half inch diameter circle that you couldn't even see from the tee. So, it was a different way of thinking about finding what you want, like walking through the landscape, rather than going straight for something. [P. 94 Close interview 1998]

Close claims that his new paintings are not freer than his old paintings. "They look freer" Close remarks, "but they are not as free as they look: No painting ever got made without a process" [P. Close Interview 98.]

The scanning patterns of the human eye are crucial to the perceptual experience of Close's more recent paintings. From a distance the head on details tend to hold

their place. On closer examination, however these details become more animated. Close talks about this himself in his interview with Robert Storr; "Well in a way it's not unlike the way we look at people. When I look at you, I pick one eye to look at and then I sort of dance to the other one and back. A painting duplicates that gaze. You're looking at it, it's looking at you" [P. 95 Close interview with Robert Storr 1998]. Close operates in the tension between two extremes. For him there are times when "it's just the sheer joy of marks falling next to each other and then 'Oops' it shifts into an image and so what was flat ends up spatial." [P. 96 Close interview 1998]. It's that dichotomy shifting from one to the other that really interests him.

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Chapter 2

Deidre Scherer –Faces in Fabric and Thread

Addressing issues of aging and mortality, the human face has remained the subject of Deidre Scherer's work for the past twenty years. Like Close, she has also used herself, her family and friends as her subjects.

The aging face however, has become her most significant subject matter. Her aim is to make the elderly more visible and accessible. Images of aging she believes "have the power to influence social change by aesthetically and psychologically challenging ageism" [P.8 Scherer 1998.]

Deirdre Scherer studied painting at the Rhode Island School of Design in the mid 60's. It was while raising her family that Scherer developed her distinct textile vocabulary and she has worked with fabric and thread as her primary medium since the late 70's. By focusing on portraits of the elderly, Scherer is confronting her own fears of aging and death. Born in 1944, Scherer was a child of the Nuclear Age, where death by illness, accident or catastrophe at a young age was the accepted norm. Surrounded by an entire society with no sense of aging, Scherer saw that people were living as if there was no tomorrow. [P.46 Scherer 1998.]

Scherer did not set out to make portraits of the elderly. She was searching for one thing and accidentally found another. While working on a series of queenly faces based on playing cards in 1980,she felt that she needed live models to pose for these faces, so she started drawing the people around her. The first piece in this series *Anna* [See Fig 2.1] exhibits an early modeling attempt using solid coloured fabrics similar to the queens.
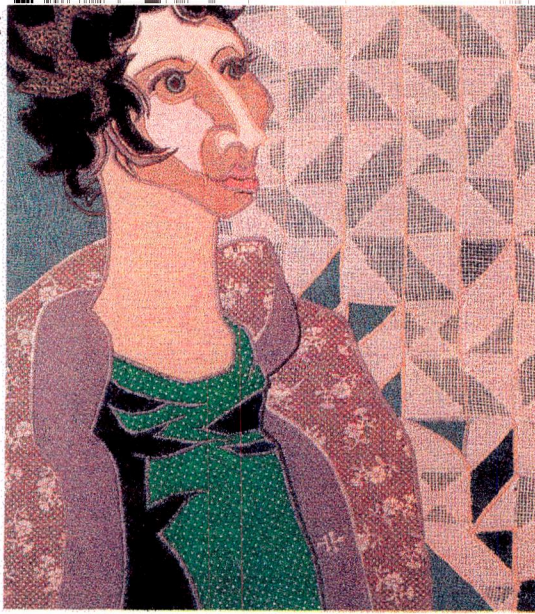
Fig 2.1 Anna 20 ½" x 16 ½" 1981

In the same month Scherer started work on a piece based on Steve, a woodworker. She experimented with pointillist printed fabrics to describe his Facial features. She discovered how accurately she could model the features using tiny prints and textures. The transitions between the fabrics in the piece appear abrupt but since this time, armed with scissors and sewing machine, Scherer has continued to explore and experiment with the pointillist effects inherent in her found fabrics.

Determined, however to find models who had wisdom and experience in their faces Scherer sought permission to sketch the residents at Linden Lodge, a local nursing home. The drawings, which she translated into fabric, became so important to her that she never went back to the queens. She became focussed on all issues of aging, and how age related issues impact the way we live. She has made portraits of the elderly ever since.

Portraiture perspective

Scherer's portraits of the elderly are not portraits in the traditional sense. Living and working in a culture that idolizes youth, strength and physicality; Scherer examines age, weakness and deterioration. Although she does capture the likeness of her models, this is not her main objective. Drawings are the blueprints for her works. She spends up to three hours with her model, capturing through graphite their personal essence and soul, while at the same time exchanging stories. For Scherer that "person's likeness is secondary to finding their universal quality" [P. 16 Scherer 1998].

Because her drawings unfold over a period of two or three hours, the model undoubtedly moves from their starting pose. In this time frame Scherer manages to capture more than one profile, creating a sculptural and energetic sensation in her drawings [See Fig. 2.2]. Scherer is not commissioned by her models, nor does she draw to flatter them. Her observations and witnessing of the models are working drawings, which allow for many interpretations, moods and emotions to spring from the same drawing. Scherer often reuses her drawings, moving them through some of these translations and interpretations. If she does not have the time and space to share with her model she will work from a photograph. Photos, she believes, "are a window into someone's spirit and I have learned how to read and use them." [P.13 Scherer 1998]

Fig 2.2 Drawing of Alice – Graphite on paper 1998.

Scherer's faces are lined with living; the eyes look as much inward as outward. Her models are plainly people who have lived full lives. Her subjects remain anonymous and the titles of her portraits seldom contain the identity of her subject. Fig. 2.3 shows a piece entitled *Stories*. The title of this portrait refers to the page on the old woman's lap, and how she is looking in remembrance. Each portrait tells it's own story. Although Scherer, concerned for the privacy of those she portrays, is reluctant to tell these stories. The portraits reflect a universality of experience. Scherer discovered that those who view her work "are reminded of

their own stories, possessed of a beauty and intensity equal to those that actually inspired the work. [P. 70 Lee Smith, 1991]
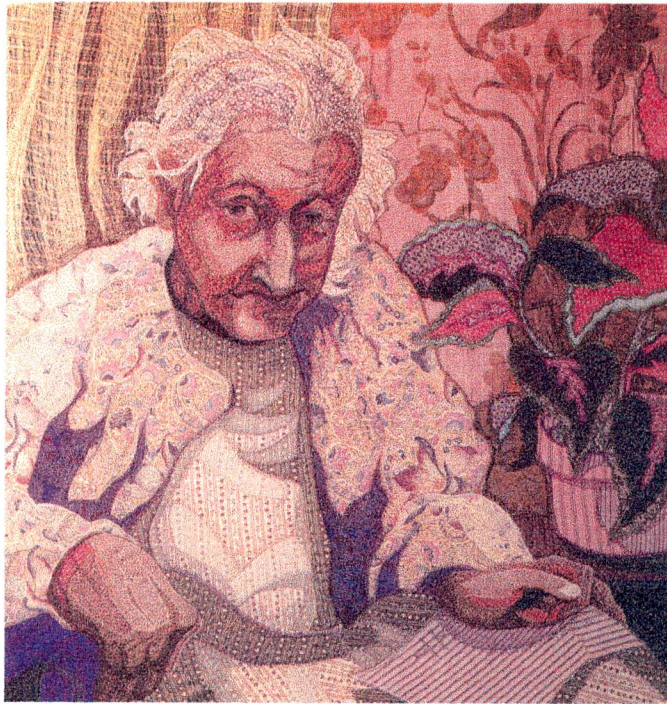
Fig 2.3 Stories 21" x 21" 1986

Scherer's portraits range in size from 7"x6" to 40"x33". Although intimate in scale however, the portraits each posses a powerful presence. In a society so tuned into the preservation of youthfulness, Scherer makes us aware of the elderly- the reality, the people we will become if we reach old age. Each of us has parents and grandparents, Scherer's portraits not only draw us into them, they also reflect back onto us, our own experiences and thoughts on aging and death. The portraits are not frightening in any sense of the word. They are weak and frail, yet beautiful and powerful. Their lines and wrinkles are symbolic of wisdom and experience. These aged faces are so expressive – questioning, comforting, mocking, conspiring, laughing, and living. The strength that emanates from Scherer's images is not physical, but spiritual.

Historical perspective

Deirdre Scherer found her way to fabric while working in the domestic environment while her children were still young. She had a formal education, with an emphasis on drawing at the Rhode Island School of Design. In the ceramic studio and printmaking, illustration and painting departments she experimented

with a diverse range of mediums, but interestingly not textiles. As a young artist Scherer studied first hand the unframed drawings of Van Gogh and Cezanne at the art institute of Chicago. Scherer's visual language with its swirling lines in fabric and thread are reminiscent of Van Gogh's painterly marks. [See Fig 2.4 – Van Gogh's portrait.]

Fig 2.4

Scherer has also absorbed the works and words of Matisse. Scherer's act of cutting fabric is redolent of Matisse's paper cutouts. However a piece written by Matisse demonstrates an even closer link to her work;

"The character of a face in a drawing depends not upon its variations proportions but upon a spiritual light that it reflects. So much so that two drawings of the same face may represent the same character though drawn in different proportions. No leaf of a fig tree is identical to any other, each has a form of it's own, but each one cries out 'Fig Tree'. [P. 51, Flam 1995.]

Scherer has also been influenced by the works of many women artists including Paula Modersohn – Becker, Kaethe Kollwitz, Suzanne Valadon, Georgia O'Keeffe, Alice Neel and Faith Ringgold. Interestingly, each of these artists has played a significant part in the emancipation of women artists.

For Scherer the act of making and thinking remain closely linked. She essentially draws each image three times, firstly in graphite chalk or craypa, then with the scissors and finally with her sewing machine. The first drawing is done directly from the model. Scherer describes in this observational drawing how the light is hitting and how the form and structure is occurring. Scherer experiences a sense of freedom when she draws because she knows that her "own level of satisfaction and confidence is all that counts" [P. 20 – Scherer 1998]. She does not feel the need to live up to the expectations of others.

Half of the artist's time in the studio is spent actively cutting, pinning, sewing or manipulating the fabric. The other half is spent looking. The time that Scherer takes to critically analyze what it is she has done paves the way towards the next step, and what she is about to accomplish. (In making the pieces, the visual elements always come first.) While her pieces evoke strong emotions, she notes that some may "fall apart if she works only from an emotional component." She is first and foremost a visual artist. "It takes a lot of trust to believe the visual will deliver you" [Interview with author - 1999]

Cloth proved an especially appropriate medium for Scherer's work. The tactile qualities associated with stitching mimic the rich texture of lines and wrinkles that skin acquires as it ages. This is apparent in "Recognition" [See Fig. 2.5], where a small square of fabric offers a close-up image of an elderly woman's face. Scherer utilizes the magnifying effect of the close-up in this image to purposefully reveal every detail of her subject's face. Stitches fold into a multitude of wrinkles, crows feet and laughter lines.
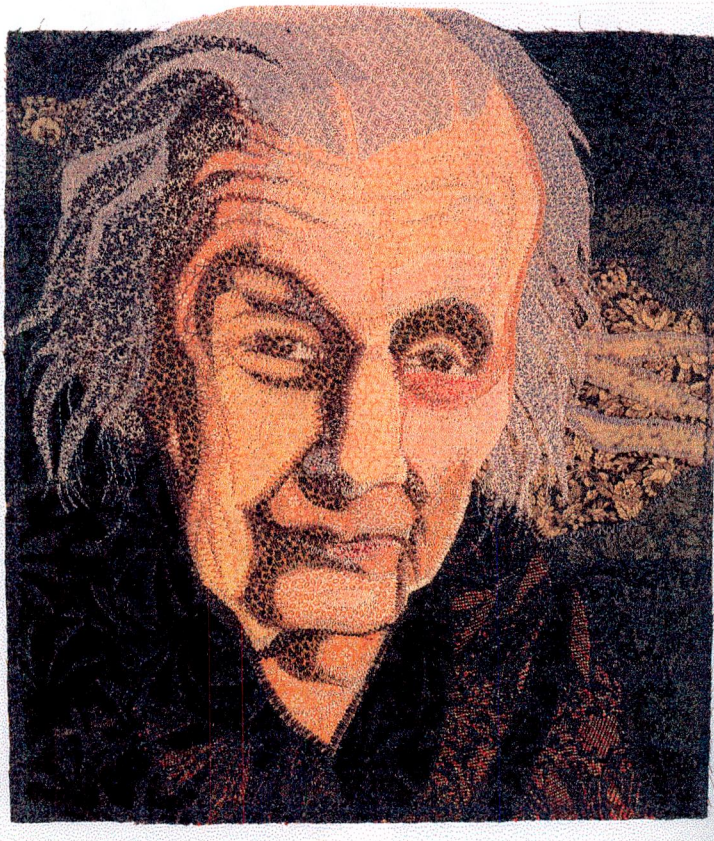

Fig 2.5 10" x 9" 1992

Scherer realizes that those who view her work also share the experience of cloth. We have cloth next to our bodies from the time we are born until we die. We understand it, are warmed by it and have layers of associations with it, all of which adds to our appreciation and understanding of her work. Scherer speaks with tenderness about cloth. "You can say just about anything in fabric field that you've created. People always want to touch the stuff, and they will if it's not behind glass. The fact is that we've had it on our bodies and we have a deep memory of fabric in us." Scherer [P. 70 Barbara Lee Smith – 1991]

Deidre now frames her work using plexi-glass and an unstained wooden frame. When she started showing her work initially she told me that people would touch it even if she was standing beside it. [Telephone interview – Author 12/2/99.] The experience of freedom which Scherer encounters while drawing Cries over into the act of cutting fabric. With her drawing in full view, she holds the fabric at a distance, rotating it freely as she cuts. Scherer begins each piece by choosing a specific pallet of colours, a certain figure and emotions. Working from her drawing of Pam, she created the fabric and thread image 'Clearing' in 1997 [See Fig. 2.6]. Having spent a long time analysing her drawing, Scherer began this piece based on her drawing of Pam by choosing a colour palette of 22 fabrics. By considering the reverse side of each fabric, the colour range increases twofold. Selecting the colour is an emotional choice, although she says, "I am sure that the greens and the blues are influenced by my model's love of the forest and the natural world." [P. 102 Scherer 1998]
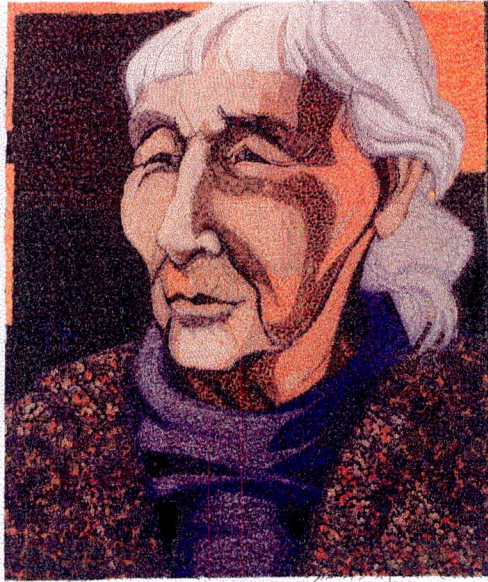
Fig 2.6 Clearing 13" x 11" - 1997

I find this very interesting as it reflects back to the connection between artist and model in traditional portraiture. Scherer gathers her fabrics in close alignment to the shapes and movements she sees in her drawing. On a ground of unbleached muslin she pins rough shapes and outlines them with a zigzag stitch on her sewing machine. She uses very fine pins, as thicker ones cause both puckering of the fabric and also breakage of sewing machine needles.

After much consideration she overlays smaller bits of fabric and drawing onto these with machine stitches, she regulates the visual transition between one colour field and another. She can both shade and soften or highlight and sharpen, depending on the colour of thread she is using and the length and width of the stitch. By continually changing the settings on her sewing machine, a line can be emphasized by the thickness of the stitch or diffused by a more open and lighter application. These drawing and shading lines simultaneously secure the fabrics. Scherer is essentially using the sewing machine as a drawing tool. Whereas other drawing tools, such as a pencil or brush, leave the mark along the same line as your action, with the sewing machine she notes, "The mark is happening between my fingers as a result of a complex manipulation." [P. 23 Scherer 1998]

Like breathing, art is crucial to Deidre's life. Her fabric and thread work is the non-verbal language that connects her to the miracle that is life. "Although I use

this specific medium to speak of human conditions, I am moved by the magic that is moving between the threads," she says. "The energy awakens me – art is where the material and spiritual worlds touch." [P. 138 Scherer 1998]. Just as life is built from layers of experience Deidre builds her images from layers of cloth.
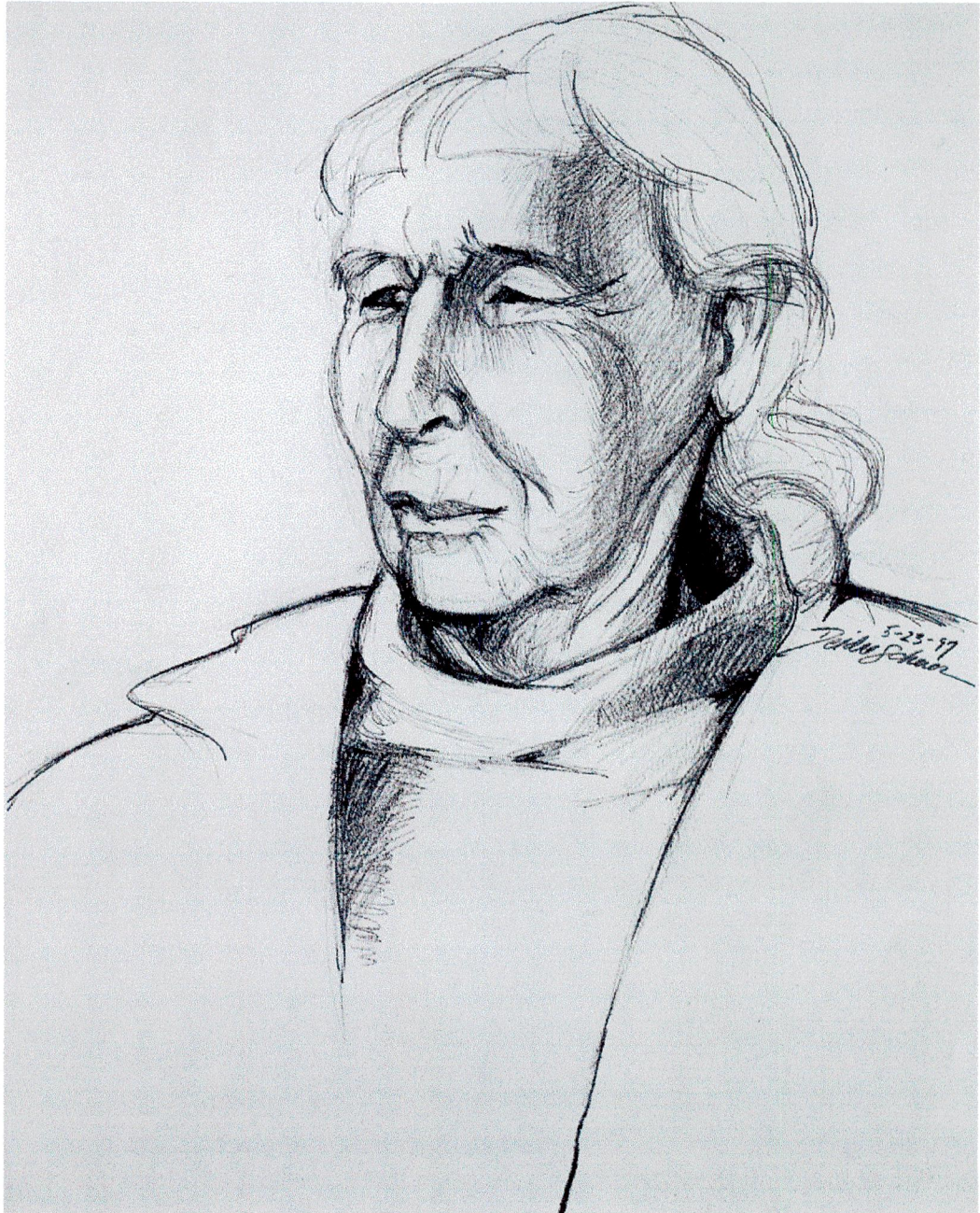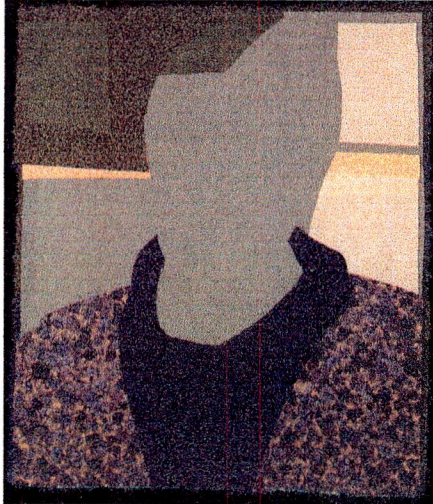
Drawing of Pam

Fig 2.7 illustrates the artist's creative process demonstrating the transition from the graphite drawing of Pam to the fabric and thread image of 'Clearing'.


STAGE 1. Working on unbleached muslin as her base fabric, Scherer overlays a soft mossy green fabric. She cuts and arranges the first layer of fabrics. The success of the piece will rely on this early division of space.
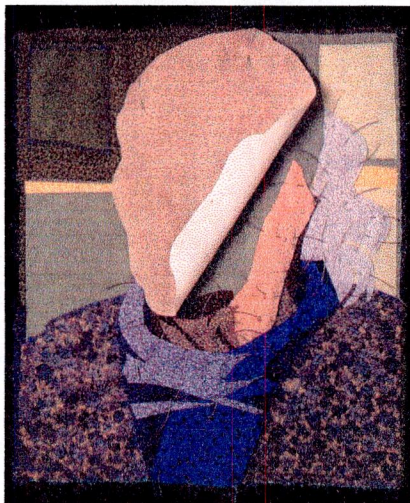

STAGE 2. She sews the fabric in place with a long and wide zigzag stitch, which both positions the fabrics and prevents the edges from fraying. She prepares for the second sewing by blocking in the head shape and thus determining the position of the model's neck collar and hair as well as the shapes that will fall in the background
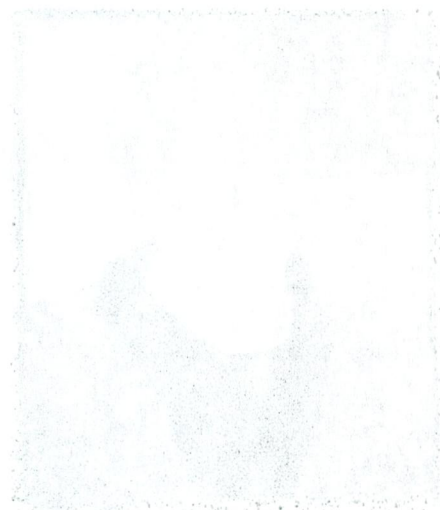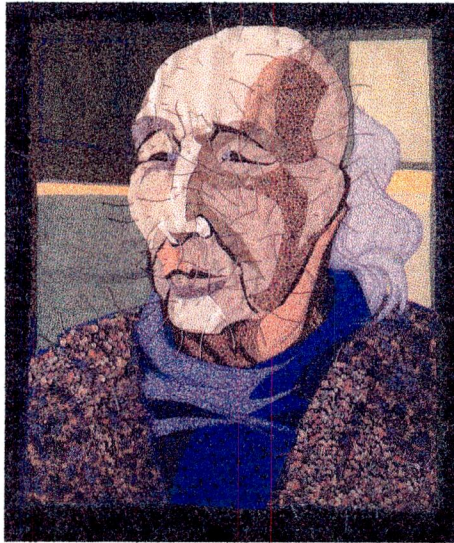
STAGE 3 The Basic structures of the facial features are cut next. The lighter fabrics are used as highlights, the deeper shades as shadow. The artist has cut away as well as added. We can see that the spirit of the piece is starting to come through at this stage.
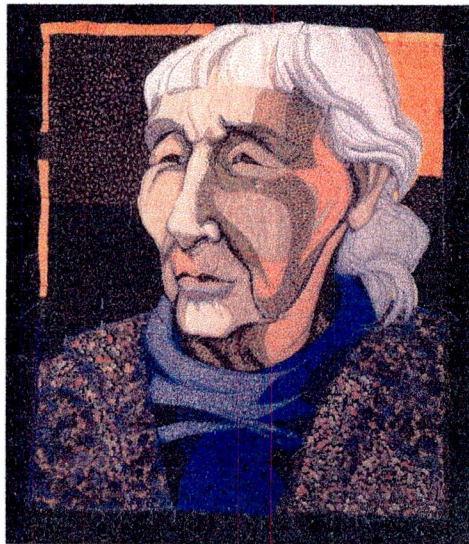
STAGE 4. Different colour threads are used to either blend or sharpen adjoining areas. A warm colour is introduced into the shadows on the left side of the face. The background colours are changed, adding greater contrast and the face becomes the most prominent feature.
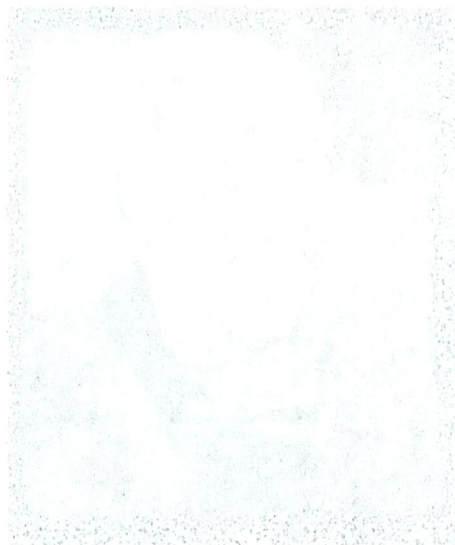
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Chapter 3

United by Intention, Divided by Classification

Why do Close and Scherer not just portray the face through photography? What is important about the media they use?

Although Close exclusively utilises his own Polaroids of his subjects as the blueprint for his works, it is not the photographs, but rather the relationship between the mechanically generated image and the manual action involved in painting that interests him. When Close first began to work with photographs he "recognised that camera images might provide precise models against which he could measure his accomplishments objectively." [P. 27 Lyons.] For Close the camera is important as a distorting device. However it is the painstakingly physical processes involved in painting which fascinates him. Close's work is about setting limits for himself, by using only the information provided in his photographs to explore and experiment with his medium, to make marks which further distort the photographic images of his subjects. Close's works are very large in scale. This allows him the freedom to explore many different approaches to the craft of painting. Close strives to narrow the gap between painting and photography. To photograph his subjects alone therefore would defeat the purpose of his work.

Deidre Scherer works from photographs occasionally, but only when she does not have the time or the space to make observational drawings of her models. Scherer says, "Photographs are a window are a window into someone's spirit, and I have learned how to read and use them." [P. 13 Scherer 1998] However Scherer stresses the importance of drawing. Her drawings are usually the blueprints for her work. Scherer's drawings allow for many interpretations. The textile medium, which she uses to create her work, is very important. Fabric is best known for it's flexible tactile and universal qualities, all of which are important elements of her work. Scherer was first lead to textiles as a medium through necessity. However

she soon became aware that she could find in fabric a visual vocabulary that was similar to that of any other art medium.

What forces unite the work of Chuck Close and Deidre Scherer?

They both portray the face. Scherer's more recent works represent the elderly, dealing with issues of old age, death and dying. Close's recent paintings, on the other hand represent art world acquaintances. His work however in not so much concerned with his subjects as with perceptual systems.

Both Chuck Close and Deidre Scherer are American artists of the same generation. They each received college education in fine art at American art institutes in the mid 60's. The main aim of the American art education system at this time was to make students aware of current trends, while encouraging them to develop independent thinking and individual approaches to their work. Although both Close and Scherer developed their Styles and approaches independently, under the influence of different artists and movements, common influences however are also apparent. The most obvious of these I feel is influence of the late 19th century pointillist painters. If we look at a painting by Seurat from this period, we can see the obvious connection. [See illustration Fig 3.1 a, b & c P.165 Close, P. 86 Scherer & P. 545 The Story of Art.] We can see that Close and Scherer, through different concerns & processes have created a similar sense of illusion; - Scherer through her use of pointillist fabrics, Close through his unique painterly marks.

Fig 3.1 a Sunpoint 1994 D. Scherer
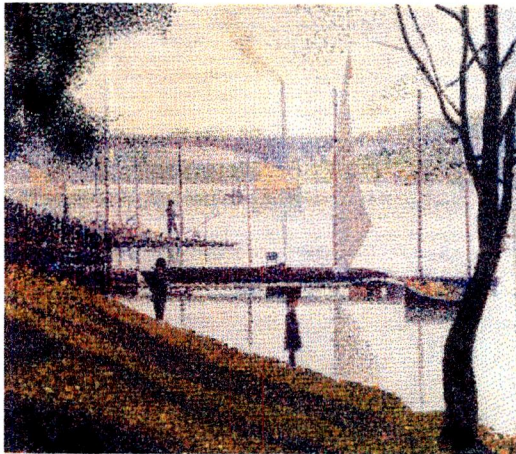
Fig 3.2 The Bridge at Courbe Voie – Seurat 1886

Fig 3.1 c Self-Portrait – Chuck Close 1986.
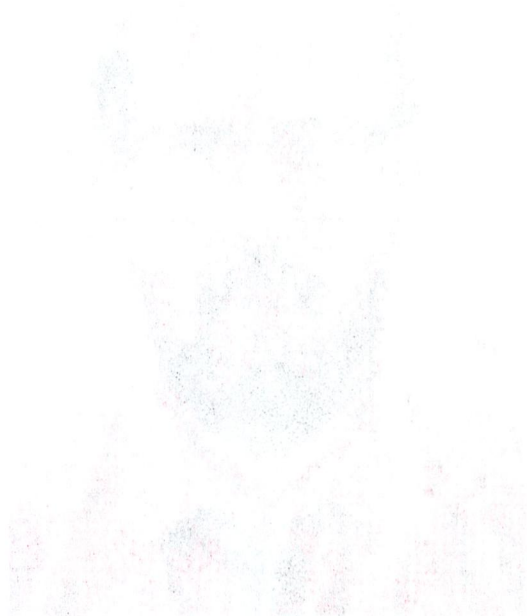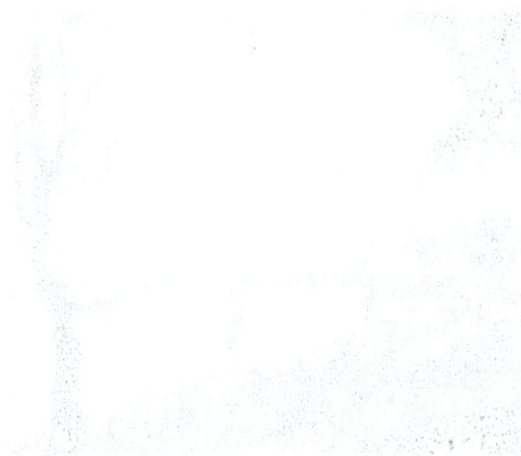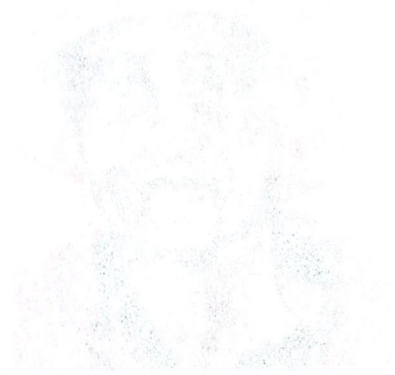
Both of there artists are involved in time consuming works. Although they are both full-time studio artists, the time commodity has limited the amount of art they can produce. Both Chuck Close and Deidre Scherer have produced fine art prints of their work, helping to achieve a higher public profile. The original works of both these artists lend themselves well to this medium [See Fig. 3.2 and 3.3] The fact that Scherer's fabric and thread works should be produced as fine art prints is not without irony. By translating her fabric and thread images into fine art prints, Scherer is continuing to redefine the apparent boundaries of textiles.

Fig 3.2 Tree on Paper – Photogravure D. Scherer 1989

Fig 3.3 Self Portrait Screenprint C. Close 1995
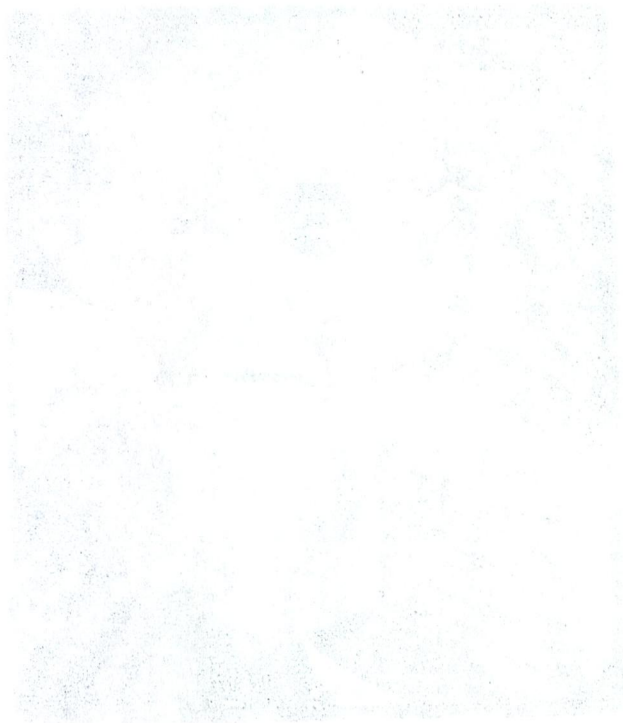
Art Versus Craft

The Key issue that divides the works of Scherer and Close are not related to their artistic intentions, but rather preconceived notions of what constitutes craft as opposed art.

Craft places little emphasis on autodidacticism. Instead it holds to the idea that most technical skills are objective knowledge which can be passed from one craftsman to another. This has played a major role in creating separate histories for each of the main media, each of which now has it's own tradition.
[P.94 Smith 1986]

Chuck Close is a male artist whose primary medium is paint. Deidre Scherer on the other hand is a female artist whose primary medium is fabric and thread.

Embroidery has been traditional been defined as a craft medium. In her book, "the Subversive Stitch", Rozsika Parker demonstrates how the Victorians thought of the link between embroidery and women as entirely natural. [Parker 1996]. By the mid 19th century textiles in the western world were either a mass-produced industrial product or a domestic craft. In the former case textiles had become functional fabric, in the later " women's work".

The range and diversity of 20th century embroidery however, is enormous. It is practised professionally by artists and designers, and millions of women as a "leisure art". Rather than trying to encompass each of these areas, I will concentrate specifically on how embroidery became part of a move to transform the relationship of art to society and the place of women within society.

The counter-cultural trends of the 60's and 70's such as the hippies, however also saw the return of the traditional textile crafts. Craft became extremely popular,

and was sold at rural craft fairs all over America. For the hippy era embroidery symbolised love, peace, colour, personal life and rejection of mass-produced materialism; everything in fact that embroidery and femininity had connoted since the late 19th Century.

The 1960's and 70's saw an increasing number of trained artists choosing textiles as their medium to explore the myths of functionality, of maker anonymity and of domestic kitsch. These new developments which explored the limitations of traditional textile forms and techniques declared that textiles, like painting and sculpture could be used as a medium expressive of individual emotions and ideas.

The counter-cultural trends of the 60's and 70's did however have other positive results. In 1971, the Whitney museum of American art in New York staged a major exhibition of antique quilts entitled "Abstract Design in American Quilts", which for the first time presented quilts as an art form. This shift from home to art museum and from bed to Gallery wall signified a leap in status for this particular textile craft. However several feminist historians took it on board to highlight the differences between quilting and contemporary painting. They pointed out that quilts needed to be seen and valued as *domestic art rather than fine art, since they have been made at home, by women in the fulfilment of domestic duties. Quilt making has also become a communal and social activity, and therefore contradicted the popular myth of the solitary male genius as contemporary artist on several counts. Quilts were also an important medium of communication between women.* [P. 106 Colchester, 1991.] For these reasons quilting and sewing became popular media in the works of a number of feminist artists. In the 70's both crafts remained unsullied by men.

Quilting and embroidery came to be seen by women as political media. Judy Chicago's feminist art project, *The Dinner Party*, completed in 1979 carried so-called craft into the art domain. It was first exhibited in '79 at the San Francisco Art Museum. *The Dinner Party* consisted of a banqueting table ornately laid with 39 table settings for an imagined gathering of famous women from history and mythology. Chicago employed two hundred women and men to execute the piece.

Faith Ringgold, an Afro-American artist also incorporated quilt making in her art to express her commitment to feminism and her solidarity to her Afro-American roots. Ringgold's idea that the medium itself contains a message is central to much of 20th Century art. In the 1980's textiles were used by women to express their opposition to Nuclear Armament. In 1985, American women registered their feelings in the creation of the *Pentagon Peace Ribbon*. This was a strip of fabric ten miles long made up of thousands of embroidered and appliquéd banners from all over the United States, which was tied around the pentagon in a vast collaborative protest for peace.

Not all quilts and embroideries express a political message. Artists such as Nancy Crow and Pauline Burbage are two quilt artists who approach quilting by tackling the constraints imposed by patterning head on. Artists from all over the world continue to explore textiles as an expressive medium.

The issue of scale is in many ways central to the art / craft debate. During the 1960's and 70's, large-scale art was in vogue. Up until 1990, the minimum dimensions of entries required by the *Lausanne Contemporary Tapestry Biennale* was 5 square meters, a size that implied, almost by definition, state funded work designed for civic spaces. Of course, since the early 1990's the word *tapestry* has also been dropped and the event now incorporates all areas of textiles. However in response to these conventions concerning scale, Ann Sutton at the British Crafts Council staged the first international exhibition of miniature textiles in 1974. In this case the maximum size of entry was 20 square centimetres. This exhibition received a positive response and as a result similar shows were staged in America and Europe. These exhibitions opened up the domestic market for the fibre arts. Deidre Scherer's work is intimate in scale and does not dictate it's potential environment. Her style allows her to capitalise on the labour intensive qualities of her medium. However her work challenges embroidery as a conventional medium, her subject matter is both contemporary and universal.

Chuck Close has continued to work within the "large scale" tradition of American painting. His work is not suitable for domestic environments, both because of the scale and also the fact that it needs to be viewed from a distance. His work

immediately dictates its environment – Gallery or civic spaces. I feel the large-scale nature of Closes work, combined with his most recent subject matter, (art world acquaintances) are a means by which he can reaffirm his position in the New York art world.

The topicalities regarding current social issues and political positions have increasingly become the subject of work done in the early 90's. The subject matter of textiles has become more difficult to extricate from the message of work in other media. However the history of art, written by men, defines painting as a masculine activity, associating it with words such as *creator* and *genius*. Our history for the most part has failed to acknowledge the work of women.

In her essay *Why have there been no great women artists?* Linda Nochlin discusses the issue of women's location in the society established and supported by the white "preferably middle class" male. She writes;-

The question of woman's equality – in art as in any other realm, devolves not upon the relative benevolence or ill-will of individual men, nor the self confidence or objectiveness of individual women, but rather on the very nature of our institutional structures themselves and view the of reality which they impose on human beings who are part of them. [P. 152 Nochlin 1988]

Our society is structured around institutions. From the moment we are born into this world of symbols, signs and signals we are influenced by everything that happens to us. Linda Nochlin looks at the way the most important questions are posed as a means of examining to what extent our consciousness of how things are in the world has been conditioned. We tend to take it for granted that there really is a Poverty Problem a Black Problem and a Women Problem. Nochlin points out that these so-called problems "are rapidly formulated to rationalise the bad conscience of those with power." The so called poverty problems she suggests, might be more appropriately addressed as a "Wealth Problem" by denizens of urban ghettos or rural wastelands. The same irony twists the Black Problem and Woman Problem into their opposites the White Problem and the Man Problem. What these so-called human problems involve Nochlin writes, "is reinterpretation of the nature of the situation, or a radical alteration of the stance or program on the part of the 'problems' themselves."

Nochlin proposes the following strategy to overcome discrimination in our institutions and education;

Women and their situation in the arts, as in other realms of endeavour, are not a 'problem' to be viewed through the eyes of the dominant male power elite. Instead women must conceive of themselves as potentially, if not actually, equal subjects, and must be willing to look the facts of their situation full in the face, without self pity, or cop-outs; at the same time they must view their situation with that high degree of emotional and intellectual commitment necessary to create a world in which equal achievement will not only be made possible but actively encouraged by social institutions [P. 151 Nochlin 1988]

What implications have these gender and social issues had for Chuck Close and Deidre Scherer?

Chuck Close *is* the white "preferably middle class" male, working within the painting tradition, which Linda Nochlin mentions in her essay. But has this contributed to his success as an artist? I believe Chuck Close was not easily accepted in the N.Y. art world. He was working against the grain, confronting the personal and the aesthetic issues that all artists must ultimately confront. People thought his paintings were outrageous in the 60's. They got under the skin of so-called Eyeball Realists, and as he himself says in an interview with Robert Storr, "People thought I was the anti-Christ for working from photographs." [P. 90 Close 1998]

The fact is that Close was working in a new and exciting territory and as a result his work has been accepted and acknowledged internationally. His work has frequently been exhibited throughout the U.S.A. and has also travelled to Europe and Japan. Close's work has been extensively reviewed in many magazines and in the New York Times. Both curators and critics alike have contributed to both the books and the catalogues, which provide access of his work to the public. I feel the attention or publicity that he has received is well deserved. In his interview with Robert Storr last year, Close himself expressed gratitude for all this attention and recognition; "I've always been extremely fortunate to have gotten attention. I think it would be especially whiny and unattractive of me to complain about the nature of the attention I got because I have received an inordinate amount. Far

more than many people whose work I can think of which is as deserving of it as mine" [P. 98 Close 1988]. Personally I think Chuck Close's paintings would lend themselves superbly to the medium of textiles, in which case, I wonder if they would have achieved similar success?

Deidre Scherer is essentially a fine artist who has chosen to work in a textile medium. In the textile circle, fine artists are commonly perceived as outsiders who 'raid' textiles for a number of purposes [P. 10 Pamela Johnson. Crafts Council Catalogue – under construction 1996]. In *Craft Today – Poetry of the Physical*, Paul J. Smith also comments on fine artists who work with a craft medium. He writes, "Judged by their command of a craft, contemporary fine artists often look crude and sloppy" [Smith, 1986.]

Whoever this is not always the case. When Deidre Scherer adopted textiles as her primary medium, she addressed the true nature of the material itself. In doing so she has developed a highly skilled, creative and individual language. Essentially, she has taken on the weight of both the art and craft traditions. In a telephone interview with Deidre Scherer, I asked her what it was like when she first adopted textiles as her primary medium. She told me that she felt the negativity was very intense. She was laughed at and ridiculed by her own peers. They would say, "What are you making, another Baby quilt? Why are you using a sewing machine?" She felt awkward about not being skilled in what she was starting out to do. She says the way that she took her work "because a hybrid from between the art and the craft world."

The reaction of the Newbury St. Galleries in Boston clarified this hybrid nature. When Deidre approached the fine art Gallery she told me they would look and shift uncomfortably, and then redirect her to the Craft Gallery across the street. The staff in the Craft Gallery would greet her work with the same uncomfortable look and shift and say; "You should go back to across the street." In her own words she spent a long time *on that yellow line* that ran down Newbury St. between the Art and Craft Galleries.

Deidre pointed out that in one way working with a textile medium could hurt access of the work, but on the other hand, people who began to realise that there was something going on with the work, liked the controversy. For her, this controversy is good news. She says, "Getting People to argue over your work and trying to figure it a much better place to be than gliding by without any interest." [Interview – Author 12/2/'99]

However she undoubtedly experiences frustration filling out application forms for grants or exhibitions, whereby you must categorise your work as art or craft. Although Deidre Scherer's work could be categorised as art *or* craft (she exhibits in both art galleries and craft shows), at the same time it is independent of both.

Scherer now feels that she has not only taken on the burden, but also the excitement of both the art and craft traditions. For years she did feel burdened by it. Getting her work reviewed has proved very difficult. Deidre talked about a review that she once received in 'The Baltimore Sun' newspaper during her biggest *solo* exhibition at the Baltimore Museum, Baltimore. The author of the review constantly pushed and pulled, saying (as she put it to me) "I like it, I don't like it, but go and see it." As far as Scherer is concerned it is up to us to push and define the traditional boundaries that we see in our medium or in our work.

Deidre Scherer is aware of but not particularly interested in Feminist issues. She feels that "there are times when *the studio art quilt movement* and the *fibre art movement* can help us as artists, and there are times when we can turn around and help them. She is involved in a women's artist group. With the support of other women she can confront and deal with the issues of bias towards women, which concern her. She takes on board the feminine associations attached to embroidery. She says; "It is a wonderful and beautiful medium, it touches me deeply in my woman's heart."

Scherer has been amazed to find that much of the bias can come from other women. In the course of giving a lecture she was once asked by a woman; "What does it feel like to shift from real art materials to fibre?" To which she replied, "Well that's a good bias! But you are not alone, many people feel that way."

[Interview – author 12/2/98]

The terms "Textile Art" and 'Fibre Art' amongst many others of a similar nature are commonly used to categorise artists who work with textiles as their primary medium. Most of these artists are women. I have a strong objection to this terminology. I feel that in the combination of words such as a 'textiles' and 'art', the latter appears to serve as a defence mechanism for the former.

When I asked Deidre Scherer if she had a problem with the terminology associated with textiles, she replied, "Yes, yes, yes!" Scherer has a strong aversion to such labels. The fact that we have to define art as 'Fibre Art' or 'Textile Art', to her sounds like an apology.

I believe it is completely patronising to define artists according to the medium they use. I have never heard of the terms 'Oil artist' or 'Watercolour artist'!

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Conclusion

Both Chuck Close and Deidre Scherer illustrate how representation of the face continues to hold an important position in contemporary art practice. They also prove that the artist is not confined to any particular medium in the representation of faces.

It is evident that the barriers between art and craft, which were first thrown down in the sixties, have not been re-erected. But defining the relationship between contemporary art and contemporary craft is not easy. We've seen how Deidre Scherer's work demands to be judged by criteria that have little to do with either function or decoration. Her work has brought the idea of art and craft close enough together for confusion. The apparent disadvantage of fitting nowhere and everywhere at the same time can be converted and used as a tool for finding ones own distinctive voice and communicating in a language that does not have to conform to any preconceived notions of what constitutes art or craft.

The fundamental difference between makers of art and makers of craft is the maker's view of him/her self, and their decision to accept or reject the label 'artist'. In accepting the label artist and rejecting labels such as 'Fibre Artist' or 'Artisan', Deidre Scherer is confronting her own responsibility as an artist. She writes, "By visualising my place in life, I take myself and my art seriously, which in turn requires that other will." [P. 31 – Scherer 1998]. It is his is the level of emotional and intellectual commitment required to overcome discrimination in our institutions and education that Linda Nochlin addresses in her essay "Why have there been no great women Artists?" [P.151 Nochlin 1998]

It is clear that the role of embroidery in the construction of femininity has constricted its development as an art form. For the last forty years textiles as art have grown and flourished in terms of the diversity of expression. For me, embroidery defies definition. There are no boundaries and no limitations. Lying dormant is an abundance of potential, a whole new language just waiting to be reinterpreted and explored. Everything is possible.

Appendix 1 – Guideline questionnaire for telephone Interview with Deidre Scherer 12/2/1999.

- When you went to college in Rhode Island in the mid 60's what were the popular influences or attitudes of the day? What kinds of questions seemed especially urgent to you and your peers?

- What was it like for you when you started working through the medium of textiles when attitudes towards this medium as an art form were particularly negative. Do you feel that working through this medium has inhibited access to & acknowledgement of your work?

- Do you think that taking on textiles as a medium means that you are burdened with both the textile and painting traditions? In what ways do you think you are linked historically to these traditions?

- Has the surface design movement helped to make your work more acceptable as an art form? If so how?

- Do you ever exhibit with painters or sculptors?

- Do you have a problem with the terminology associated with "art" textiles?.

- Do you frame your works or put them behind glass?

- How did your work become known?.

- What is the price range of your work?

- Have you ever considered using the computer as either a tool or medium in your work?.

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