

FOCUS

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Janet by Chuck Close

At first glance, it may seem contradictory that celebrated artist Chuck Close is best known for his large-scale portraits. Close has prosopagnosia, which means that he has trouble recognizing faces—even those of people he has known for years. But flattening out a face through the process of painting or printmaking helps Close remember it, as he explained in an interview with PBS NewsHour in July 2010:

I have virtual photographic memory for anything that is flat, so it's not an accident that I only do images of people who matter to me—family, friends, other artists....These are images that really matter, and I want to commit them to memory, and the only way I can really do that is to flatten them out, scan them, make these drawings and paintings and prints. And then they enter my memory bank in a different sort of way.

This 2007 Close portrait, *Janet*—which portrays painter Janet Fish, a friend of Close's—is currently receiving conservation treatment at the Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts (CCAHA). To create the huge paper print, Close and his collaborators applied different shades of paper pulp using a complex system of stencils.

Unfortunately, this edition had developed an 18-inch horizontal crack running from the left center area along the figure's eye level, causing the top layer of pulp to delaminate from the layer underneath and exposing lighter-colored, broken fibers. The print also had a slight bend along the horizontal center. Poor handling, prior to housing, most likely contributed to both the crack and the bend.

CCAHA Senior Paper Conservator Soyeon Choi determined that the bend would most likely worsen with time due to the print's insecure housing; it had been mounted to a mat board with silicone-based adhesive placed in thick splotches in the upper half, and this secondary support was in turn mounted to a larger mat board using the same adhesive. With help from CCAHA staff Jim Hinz, Samantha Sheesley, and Gwenanne Edwards, Choi removed both mat boards using a sharpened metal spatula and reduced the adhesive using a scalpel. She then mended the crack by applying wheat starch paste with a very fine syringe and a brush. Parts of the crack seamed completely, but hairline gaps remained in other areas, so Choi used finely-grated, soft pastel to inpaint along them.



Images, counter-clockwise from top: Senior Paper Conservator Soyeon Choi applying wheat starch paste with a fine syringe to mend an 18-inch crack / Janet, before conservation treatment / Close-up of Choi applying wheat starch paste / Close-up image of the crack, which left lighter-colored paper fibers exposed

