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Detail of a study for Chuck Close's *Big Nude*, 1964. This work and more of Close's photography will be at the UMCA in September.

## Freedom of Expression

*Chuck Close, genre-pushing artist, returns to UMass.*

AN EXHIBITION at the University Museum of Contemporary Art (UMCA) to open this September marks a return to UMass for world-renowned painter and photographer **Chuck Close '95H**, who cut his creative teeth as a young faculty member in the art department in the 1960s... and tasted controversy.

The UMCA exhibition highlights Close's photography, a little-known aspect of his career. Although Close began working from photographs

as an art student in Vienna in 1959, it wasn't until he employed the large-format Polaroid camera in 1977 that he began to value his photographic maquettes as works of art in their own right, rather than just a basis for his painting.

"As a photographer, he's one of the forerunners of experimenting with the medium," says UMCA Director Loretta Yarlow. "This show is a way for people to see behind the scenes at his thinking process." In addition to Polaroids, Close now works extensively with black-and-white film, and even daguerreotypes.

One feature of the upcoming show is the study for Close's monumental 10-foot-by-21-foot *Big Nude* (1967). Close began the piece in Amherst, enlisting a secretary in the art department as a model. After painting one of the figure's feet, he consigned the project to dormancy until after he had left the university for his SoHo studio in

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New York City. **Ron Michaud '72, '75G**, former professor and chair of Art, Architecture, and Art History, was a student during Close's time at UMass. He recounts: "*Big Nude* was an important painting in Close's career, a major transitional piece indicating the direction he was going to go in—it was a break with his path and a compendium of his technique to come. He was establishing his own personal idiom."

Wearing tiny glasses, bell bottoms, Hawaiian shirts, and cowboy boots, Close was a distinctive figure when he arrived on campus as a bright new faculty member in the mid-1960s, straight out of Yale. "For many of us in quiet Amherst, he came across as cutting edge. We were mesmerized by him," recalls Michaud. Says John Townsend, professor emeritus and Close's former colleague: "He was the first hippie. And he was very different in his approach to teaching. He made an impression on faculty as well as students."

Close joined an art department that was in its infancy but rapidly expanding in a time of cultural ferment, with a new generation of artists pushing the boundaries of their art forms. By the mid-1960s, the department, not yet a decade old, boasted 10 art historians, 20 2-D artists, and 10 3-D artists—high numbers by contemporary measures. Faculty were being housed wherever space could be found on campus, the nascent MFA program attracted students from all over the country, and an "art bus" ran students on monthly day trips to Manhattan. "Things were changing very rapidly and we were bowled over by them, trying to absorb everything that was going on, and Chuck was at the center of a lot of that," explains Michaud.

It was in this context in 1967 that Close held his first solo exhibition, which led to a landmark free speech court case.

The show, on view in the front hallway of the Student Union, featured paintings, painted reliefs, and drawings based on photographs of album covers and magazine illustrations, including a depiction of Bob Dylan in the nude, in a more abstract style than Close's later work.

Private complaints about the frontal male nudity in the exhibition, as well as a patch of yellow paint that someone interpreted as urine, reached the attention of the administration, which had the show pulled down by campus police overnight after it had hung for only one day.

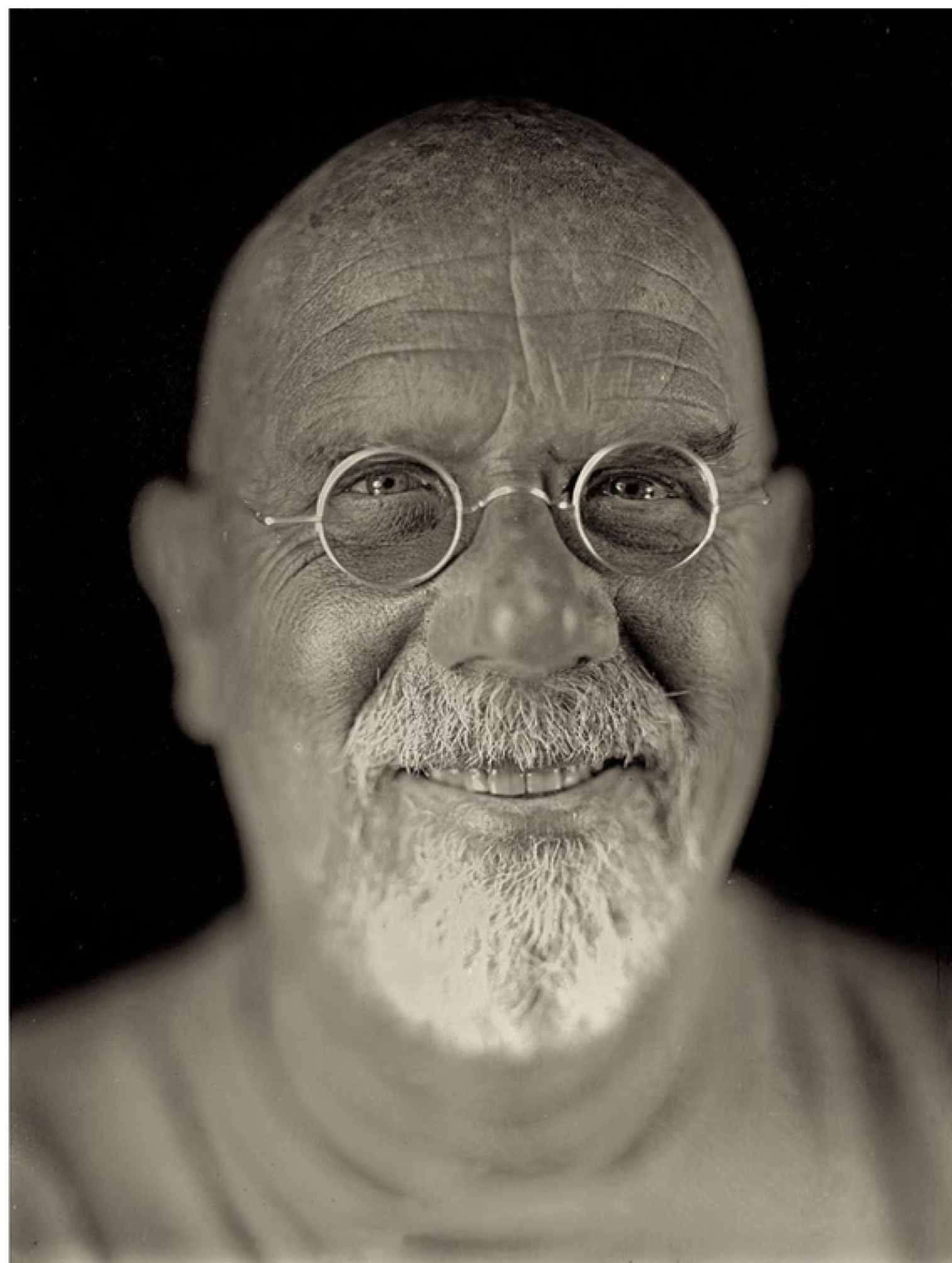
Faculty protested the censorship. With the support of the ACLU, Close brought a lawsuit against the administration, to the Massachusetts Supreme Court. "He was furious, but I think he loved the notoriety of it," reflects Professor

Emeritus Jack Coughlin, another departmental contemporary. Close won the case. And even though the suit was later reversed on appeal, it set a groundbreaking precedent, much cited in later free-speech cases.

Close has now held more than 200 solo exhibitions in more than 20 countries, including major exhibitions at New York's Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia.

"He worked very hard, became famous, and now is a superstar," says Coughlin. "He's sought after all the time." As difficult as the period of controversy may have been for a young artist to weather, Coughlin suggests that it may ultimately have been a gateway to Close's illustrious career. "Suppose his show had been accepted? The important thing is that he left academia, he did go down to New York, and became a great artist without being hindered."

—Laura Marjorie Miller



Close uses a variety of photographic media for his work, as with this daguerreotype *Self-Portrait* (2004).

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