

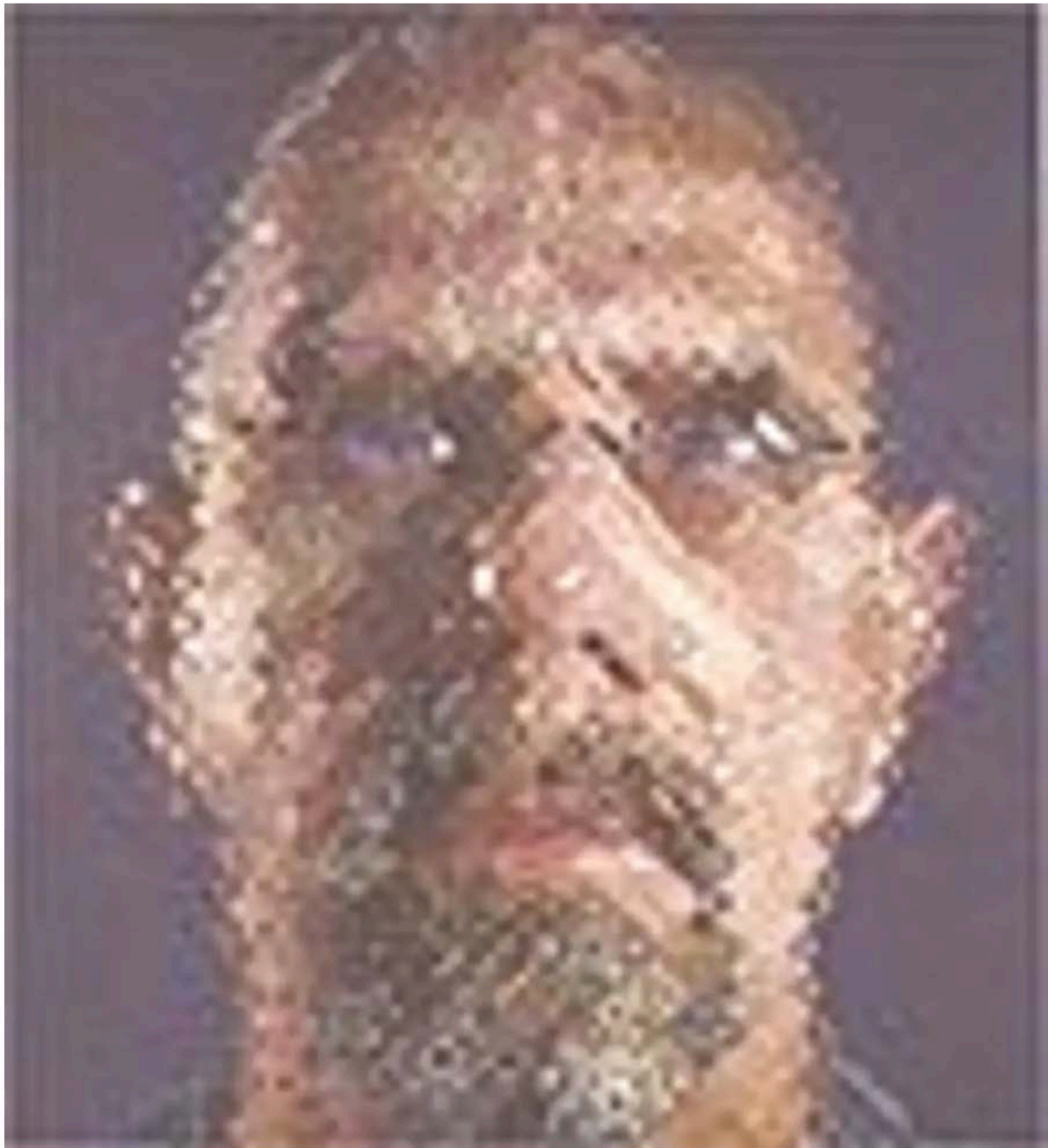
Reinventing the real

NICK HACKWORTH | **EVENING STANDARD** | Tuesday 4 February 2003 01:00 |



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Famous for the larger-than-life facial portraits that he has been producing since the late Sixties, American artist Chuck Close is the acknowledged master of photo-realist painting. In his first solo exhibition in London since a major retrospective of his work at the Hayward in 1998, he shows six large works, all painted in the past two years and executed in what has become Close's late style - a style that goes some way towards deconstructing the perfect realism that he has employed for so long.

Instead of being seamless and atomised, the surface of these works, as can be seen in Self-Portrait (pictured), is made up of a grid of diamond shapes, in each of which Close has loosely painted three or four concentric circles of colour. Close up, the painting seems entirely abstract but stand slightly back and you read the image as a whole and a crude face presents itself. From even further away the diamonds become pixels and all hint of abstraction is lost.

Though gimmicky and rather heavy-handed in its glib implication regarding the relativity of all information, the optical trick is entertaining and adds to the enjoyment of these well co-ordinated and very colourful paintings. It is also an effect realised only through exact measurement and hard labour.

The portraits, as usual, are of Close's family and friends, including his wife Lisa, his niece Emma, the artist Robert Rauschenberg and the otherwise anonymous "James". But Close's recent paintings are more images than psychologically acute portraits. His new style cannot convey the totality or subtlety of human facial expressions and thus the works remain happily superficial.

But for every negative there is a positive and, in his new playfulness, Close is moving away from the photo-realism which, in this digital age, is the most archaic form of painting around and in which painstaking labour is the sole - and pedestrian - source of value.

Chuck Close is exhibiting at White Cube until 15 March. Information: 020 7930 5373. ■