



CHUCK CLOSE

# CHUCK CLOSE

*Colin Westerbeck*

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

*in collaboration with*

THE FRIENDS OF PHOTOGRAPHY

This catalogue accompanies the exhibition "Chuck Close,"  
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## CREDITS

All works illustrated are by Chuck Close and were included in the exhibition,  
unless otherwise noted.

Front cover: *Sunflower Triptych (Alive)*, 1988 (fig. 14), detail.

Back cover: *Sunflower Triptych (Dead)*, 1988 (fig. 15), detail.

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Chuck Close at work on a composite Polaroid self-portrait, 1980.





1. *Self-Portrait/Composite/Nine Parts*, 1979. Polaroid photographs; 210.8 x 175.3 cm. (83 x 69 in.).  
Lent by Barbara and Eugene Schwartz.

# CHUCK CLOSE

by Colin Westerbeck

**I**n *Breaking the Sound Barrier*, a wonderful British movie from the early 1950s, nobody can figure out why the planes keep crashing until one of the pilots realizes that as you reach Mach 1, all the controls are reversed. This is utter nonsense, of course, but as drama it is rather effective. It appeals to a modern sense we have that beyond a certain point, all the laws of nature change. When speeds, sizes, or distances become superhuman, familiar principles of physics no longer seem to apply. The recent photography of Chuck Close, which has been done on a room-size camera that makes an 80 x 40-inch Polaroid image, has a similar effect on us. In these pictures, common objects and sights like flowers or the human body seem to have expanded to a critical mass at which new laws of nature, or at least of perception, take hold. The controls are reversed.

Consider the mammoth nudes that Close has been doing. In them, the naked flesh of lithe, beautifully muscled young men and women loses almost completely the erotic quality we would expect. The sheer scale of the photographs neutralizes the subject matter. The nipples of the reclining figure in *Bertrand II* (fig. 3) appear to have been formed on such different axes that they look like two galaxies swirling in deep space, light years apart. The great expanses of skin that our eyes must traverse to get from one of the model's features to the next leaves these body parts dissociated in our minds.

This tendency of different aspects of a single subject to exist independently in the picture is enhanced by the way Close has placed with great care the divisions between the sheets of film that go to make up his panoramic images. That the nipples in *Bertrand II* are in different panels is not incidental to the impression of separateness with which they strike us. Nor is the line down the middle of the penis in *Mark Diptych II* (fig. 13) only a bisection of the image. It is also a form of *dissection*, as if the isolation and enlargement of the subject had been done as an aid to anatomical study. Likewise, in *Laura Triptych* (fig. 24), the slight displacement of the point of view from panel to panel flattens the body; we feel we are looking at some peculiar isometric distortion that permits us to see the sides and front simultaneously. The vastness of these outsized bodies compels us to look at nudity in a way we never have before. These young men and women become wonders of the world rather than mere objects of desire.

While the scale and framing of Close's work desexes the nudes, it has rather the opposite effect on the presumably more innocent subject of flowers. These are flowers as seen by a bee. Their centers are deep, inviting, overwhelming. They are irresistibly lush and sensuous, and more than a little threatening as we hover near them. They have about them a muzzy, disheveled luxuriance, a thrill of sex, that the nudes avoid. This makes them not only unlike Close's nudes, but also unlike Edward Weston's famous erotic imagery of vegetable nature. In Weston's celebrated *Pepper #30* (fig. 2), the forms that we



2. EDWARD WESTON, *Pepper #30*, 1930.

Silver gelatin print; 23.9 x 19.1 cm.

The Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Max McGraw, 1959.665. (Not in exhibition.)

see locked in a naked embrace are so sinuous and elegant that they are almost classical figures. The love-making is exultant, the human sexuality of a very highly idealized sort. In Close's flower pictures, the erotic energy is myopic and groping. The imagery seems to have emerged from the sense of touch more than from vision or voyeurism.

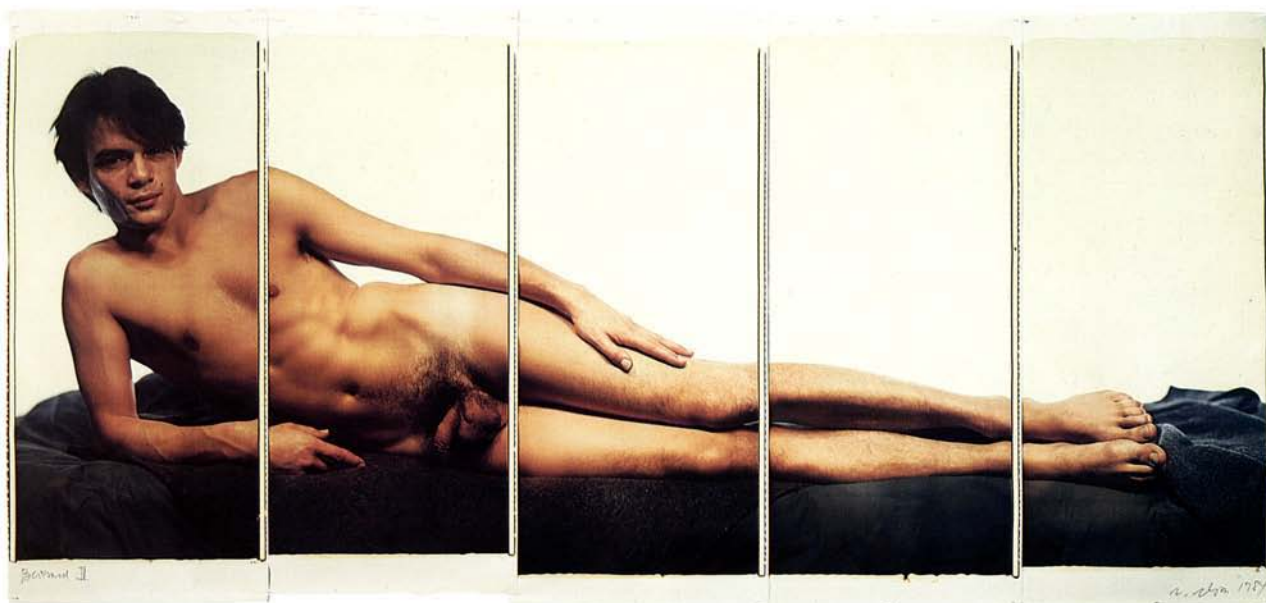
Since Weston's pictures still seem to be, a half century after their making, this medium's definitive statement on eros and nature, it's hard at first for a photo historian to know how to take Close's work. It doesn't fit with what the modernist tradition in photography leads us to expect. Where Close's recent Polaroids do make sense, however, is in the context of his own career. The flower pictures and nudes are an apotheosis of his art, a culmination of it not just in photography, but in all media. In order to appreciate this work, you have to begin by looking at how it fulfills his own artistic development.

**O**RIGINALLY CLOSE WANTED to be an abstract expressionist. Having first seen paintings by Jackson Pollock in 1953, he was still laboring under the inspiration of that artist, and of de Kooning, in the late 1960s after finishing his graduate studies in painting at Yale University. "In those days," he has said, "it was always exciting to go to my studio, but I didn't like the results very much, and I didn't produce much work either. Now the actual process of painting is pretty tedious a lot of the time, but the results are good."<sup>1</sup> The trouble was that the gestural, intuitive behavior of the action painter didn't come naturally to Close. He felt as if he were trying to emulate somebody else's notion of what a painter should do and how a painting should look. While finding more suitable ways to work has left him, he admits, "with fewer of the highs I used to have in the studio, . . . I also don't have the tremendous lows that would come when the whole painting would fall apart in front of my eyes."<sup>2</sup>

His intuitions told him to do something very different from what his early heroes had done as painters. Paradoxically, he felt constricted — indeed, paralyzed at times — by the limitless choices that abstract painting gave him. He thought that it would be liberating to deal with imagery that was just a given, so he began doing constructions employing photographs that he got from magazines, family albums, and record covers. This wasn't quite the solution either; but some experiments working with an airbrush on canvas felt more like the right track. Then, one day when he was photographing a painting done this way, having a frame or two left over in the camera after he'd gotten all the documentation he needed, he took a picture of his own face, and that opened up a whole new world of possibilities for him. Working from photographs and using only himself or his friends as subjects, he began doing a series of large-scale, tightly cropped portraits of heads (see figs. 6, 7). The advantage of such imagery lay in the "restrictions" it imposed on the painting: "no matter how interesting a shape was," Close has explained, "if it wasn't in the photograph, I couldn't use it."<sup>3</sup>

Since it was the mechanical reproduction that appealed to him in photography, Close began to apply that aspect of the medium to painting. He adapted to painting in acrylics with the airbrush the methods by which printing presses reproduce color photographs. From the transparency of one of his portraits, three color separations — cyan, magenta, and yellow — would be turned into five dye-transfer photographic





3. *Bertrand II*, 1984. Polaroid photographs; 259.1 x 528.4 cm. (102 x 208 in.).  
Pace/MacGill Gallery.



4. *Laura I*, 1984. Polaroid photographs; 259.1 x 528.4 cm. (102 x 208 in.).  
Pace/MacGill Gallery.



prints that he could use to layer colors onto the canvas one at a time. He even wore over his glasses filters corresponding to the color he was working on in order to screen out everything else as he added that particular hue dot by airbrush dot. Thus did Close transform himself from an abstract expressionist into a figurative minimalist. Using photographs as a way to limit his approach to painting, he removed his work about as far as was humanly possible from the open-ended, improvisational techniques of action painters.

Although he didn't know it at the time, one reason he was having trouble making himself into an abstract expressionist, and found it much more satisfying to fill in a grid with dots, is that he is dyslexic. He had instinctively devised a technique that permitted him to work toward the completion of each picture without having to reconceptualize it, which he found impossible, every time he added another stroke of paint. He only discovered the source of his difficulties a few years ago when, after attending a lecture on learning disabilities in which he recognized some of his own symptoms, he decided to have himself tested. When he was a teenager, he had been told to consider going to trade school because he was "too dumb" for anything else. What he did instead, many years later, was to make dumbness into an aesthetic. He created a kind of painting that turns on the world a blank stare, thereby revealing to us a strangeness and mystery that we, without his help, would be incapable of seeing. He has based his art on the perpetuation of a soothing kind of monotony for which he alone has a special gift.

**A**T THE TIME when he came to New York City —1967— and in the company he began keeping upon his arrival, the impulse to make dumb art was not all that unusual. Minimalist sculptor Richard Serra, for whom Close and other young artists would serve as assistants whenever a new sculpture had to be assembled, often spoke of his pieces in those terms. "Richard wanted to make the dumbest sculpture he could," Close recalls, "something that didn't depend on a sophisticated or artful manipulation of the materials. We all wanted to de-artify our work, to make something that didn't look like art."<sup>4</sup> Their friend Philip Glass was trying to make a comparable kind of music, one whose notes were as relentlessly, insistently repetitious as the surfaces of Close's photo-based paintings.

When Close speaks of the apprehensiveness he felt as an abstract expressionist, he always phrases it the same way. His remark from 1987 (quoted above, p. 6), about watching a painting "fall apart" in front of his eyes, echoes statements made as long ago as 1972, when he said that he could not stand to see his pictures "go to pieces" even as he painted them.<sup>5</sup> He has turned his hells into benefits, as Emerson said we must, by making the disintegration of the image into a fundamental part of his art. Beginning with the photograph, Close has translated his portraits into a whole array of other media — acrylic on gessoed canvas, watercolor, ink, mezzotint, graphite on paper, et cetera. He has even used an ink pad and his own fingerprint or big, tinted spitballs of pulp pressed together to make a handmade paper. The point was to see how vestigial and merely suggestive an image could be and still evoke the subject.

These ultra-reductionist versions of the portraits of the 1960s and '70s were a tour de force that attracted much notice. The photographs on which they were based were taken to be only a kind of neutral ground, like the white gesso under the paint, over which imagery in other media could be layered. Yet if



5. Cockscomb Diptych, 1987. Polaroid photographs; 259.1 x 217.2 cm. (102 x 85-1/2 in.).  
Pace/MacGill Gallery.



6. Photo maquette for *Gwynne* (1982), 1980.

Black and white Polaroid photograph; 50.8 x 40.6 cm. (20 x 16 in.).

Pace/MacGill Gallery. (Chicago only.)



7. *Gwynne*, 1982. Watercolor on paper mounted on canvas;

188.6 x 148 cm. (74 1/4 x 58 1/4 in.).

Lent by Mr. and Mrs. David Pincus. (Chicago only.)

the dots of color or impressions of Close's finger filling a grid were a way to break down reality, then the grain structure of the photograph is, conversely, a way to build it up. Part of the attraction the Polaroid material has for him is that since the negative is always the same size as the print, the grain remains all but imperceptible. Having at first tried to reduce a whole human face to some smudges on a tiny piece of paper, he now enlarges a few petals on a flower to almost seven feet.

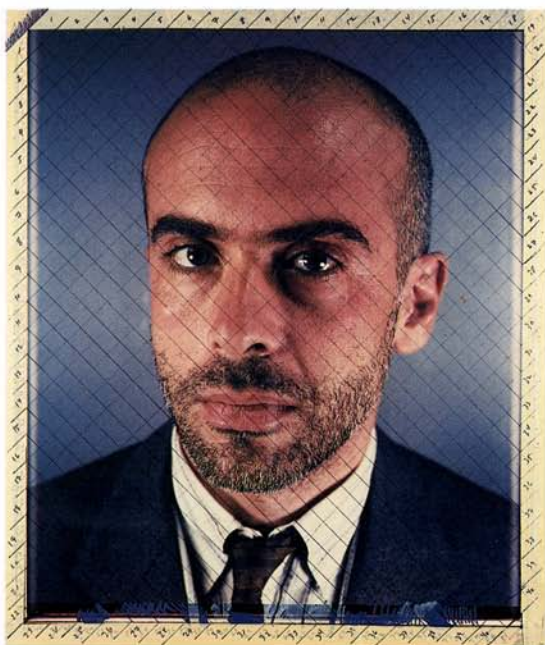
THE FINGERPRINT DRAWINGS of a decade ago and the large-format Polaroids Close has been doing lately are at opposite ends of a visual spectrum along which his work has had a continuous development. The composite self-portraits made up of 24-inch prints (see fig. 1) are just an extension of the grid on which he has constructed imagery in other media, and the panoramic nudes or flowers done in 80-inch prints carry the same line of investigation further still. The course of his career in recent years seems an effort to compensate for the earlier lack of acknowledgment of photography's importance to his work, for he has been devoting more and more time to these big Polaroids that are intended as ends in themselves rather than as maquettes for paintings. Having begun by using photographs as a basis for renderings of other kinds, he has ended up back at photography again. His career has come full circle.

That Close has mastered so many different media indicates his ambition to achieve a certain comprehensiveness with his work. How crucial photography is to this closure or completion to which he would bring his vision can be seen from the way in which his present activity as a photographer revives aspects

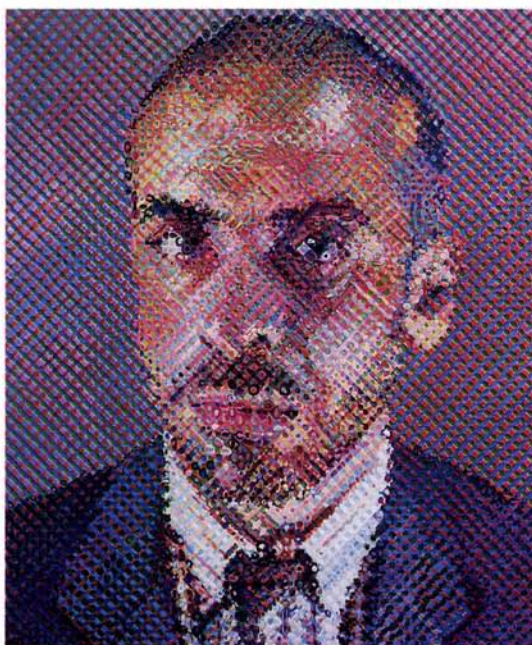


of his earlier work that he had originally used photography to escape. Making photographs on the big Polaroid camera is a drama all its own. The camera is housed at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston because its original purpose, and still its primary use, is to make studies of details of works of art. The chamber itself is a room, like an enormous Renaissance *camera obscura*, that is 12 x 12 x 16 feet. Whenever possible Close actually stands inside to watch the inverted image appear on the huge sheet of Polaroid film that has been vacuum-sucked to the wall opposite the lens. Outside, the subject has been carefully positioned on a fork-lift truck, since the lens is fixed, so that the framing and focus will fall just where Close wants.

Working this way with nude models or with flowers, which tend to wilt from the intense heat of the modeling lights even as Close is putting them in place, can be nerve-wracking. "It puts me in a terrific state of tension and anxiety," he confesses. "You have to remember to close down the lens, cock the shutter, purge the strobes, or whatever — all kinds of stuff that I never need to think about when I'm alone in my studio painting. I'm a nervous wreck by the end of a day spent working with the crew up there. And you have to be fast on your feet too, because you only have so much time in which to get it done; a lot of



8. Photo maquette for *Francesco II* (1988), 1988. Polaroid photograph;  
61.0 x 50.8 cm. (24 x 20 in.).  
Lent by Richard Gallerani. (Chicago only.)



9. *Francesco II*, 1988. Oil on canvas;  
182.9 x 152.4 cm. (72 x 60 in.).  
The Pace Gallery.



what goes on is like a kind of crisis management. You have to make decisions constantly. It makes me absolutely frantic.”<sup>6</sup> This is the way he sounds when he’s talking about how it felt, years ago, to be an abstract painter. Because this kind of photography forces him to conceptualize an entire image, right on the spot, it is something of a throw-back to his early trials and tribulations as an expressionist. The truth is that he never rejected that experience; it was only the results that disappointed him. He has always looked for artistic chances to go back and reclaim some of what had to be left behind. He has implicitly preserved many of the principles of abstraction in his work, and he has found ways to retrieve behaviors and emotions that he gave up only reluctantly. The photography he is doing now is important to him not least of all because it permits him to reincorporate into his work aesthetic activities without which, he recognizes, no art can be truly complete. Making those heroic Polaroids lets him feel once more what he calls “the thrill of being in trouble.”<sup>7</sup>

That Close is now painting in oils again (see fig. 9) is a sure sign that he feels confident returning to options he had closed off earlier. In the recent portraits of himself and other artists, the matrix of color dots has become looser, less machined, more impressionistic. In the brushwork on these canvases, we can see the amount of English that Close has put on every stroke as he applied it. His wrist imparts to each a slightly different inflection from the one before it. And yet, despite the degree of interpretation that these individual daubs of color suggest when examined closely, the overall effect is still of the kind of impassive, even-handed image that the photo maquettes for the paintings contain. Close obviously likes the increase in paradox that this disparity between detail and whole creates in his work. It represents one more



10. *Big Nude*, 1967-68. Acrylic on canvas; 304.8 x 670.6 cm. (120 x 264 in.). Collection of the artist. (Not in exhibition.)



11. *Chrysanthemum Triptych*, 1987. Polaroid photographs; 259.1 x 327.7 cm. (102 x 129 in.).  
Pace/MacGill Gallery.



12. *Celosia (Cockscomb)*, 1987. Polaroid photograph; 246.4 x 109.2 cm. (97 x 43 in.).  
Pace/MacGill Gallery.

step toward an all-inclusive reconciliation between expressionism and minimalism, abstract and pop, painting and photography.

In yet another way, the panoramic Polaroid nude entitled *Laura I* (fig. 4) has the same significance. It goes right back to that moment when Close was giving up abstraction, for his break-out image was a 22-foot long painting of a nude lounging in almost exactly the same position (*Big Nude*, fig. 10). He rejected that experiment because it had certain "hot spots,"<sup>8</sup> aesthetic erogenous zones that received more attention than other areas, whereas he wanted his figurative work to have the sort of impartial, equally distributed emphasis that a Pollock painting has. Photo imagery like *Laura I* at last achieves for the nude the desired effect that had eluded him in the 1967-68 painting.

**B**OTH CLOSE'S CAREER in general and his use of photography in particular have always been hard to classify. When William C. Seitz wrote about the new photo-realist painters for *Art in America* in 1972, the only place he could find to stick Close, who might have been considered an essential figure for a discussion like this, was an aside quoting some rather negative remarks critic Hilton Kramer had made about Close's painting.<sup>9</sup> The difficulties inherent in categorizing him have left Close seeming like a bit of a loner and an oddball at times, but it has also allowed his work to appear fresh and new again and again in different contexts as the movements, fashions, and ideas that make up the art world have changed.

Fifteen to twenty years ago when Close was appropriating imagery from magazines and beginning to experiment with intentionally dumb pictures of his own making, he might have been thought of as a conceptualist. Today he might be considered a premature postmodernist, an image recycler of the sort whose work now has great currency. What I earlier called the disintegration of the image in his work is also a form of deconstruction, an analysis of the way that the medium in which a subject is seen affects our perception of it. The grid of dots through which each face appears in his paintings represents it as it would look on television or in a reproduction in a magazine. At the same time that Close's photographs are part of his commentary on the issues raised by his painting, the painting itself is a comment on issues that have been raised for photography by postmodernism. Close's ambition to attain a kind of completeness with his art is reflected in the number of contemporary topics like these that his work addresses.

Though Close may seem at the moment to be someone who doesn't fit into the history of photography as we know it, he may make a place for himself there in the future. After all, in the 1920s and '30s, a lot of the artists who adopted photography, such as Man Ray or László Moholy-Nagy, didn't seem to belong to the medium's history either. Yet their influence is as central now as that of anybody who ever picked up a camera. Whether Close comes to occupy such a position or not, what will always matter to him more is the importance that photography has had in relation to other media in his own career. If Edward Weston's pepper (fig. 2) is the apotheosis of his vision as a photographer, Close's flowers come near to having the same significance among his works, not just in this medium, but in all the media that he has adopted.



In the flowers, the content of the image and the photographic style that Close has carefully developed over the years mesh completely. The funky sexuality of his blooms — the way in which they are often fading, wilting, drooping, dying, turning brown around the edges — is the perfect counterpart for the shallow, differential focus that he prefers and the rough, usually misaligned edges of the multipanel prints. The unfocused centers, tendrils, and leaves combine with the occasional uneven frame or the unfinished bleed lines along the bottom to give these images the spontaneous, gestural feel of expressionist painting. At the same time, these effects along the border or in the background provide a context for a precise, mechanical realism unique to camera imagery.

A similar description might serve to characterize Close's career as a whole, which has also been a development where one kind of artistic vision became the context for another that is its dialectical opposite. Like the petals on a sunflower or spider mum in the photographs themselves, Close's career has radiated out into the contemporary art world in many directions, and at the center of his blossoming in many different media is his work in photography.

## NOTES

1. Chuck Close, conversation with the author, May 1982.
2. Lisa Lyon and Robert Storr, *Chuck Close*, (New York, 1987), p. 31.
3. Linda Chase, Nancy Foote, and Ted McBurnett, "The Photo-Realists: 12 Interviews," *Art in America* 60, 6 (Nov./Dec. 1972), p. 76.
4. Chuck Close, conversation with the author, August 1988.
5. Chase, et al. (note 3), p. 77.
6. Close (note 4).
7. Close (note 4).
8. Chase, et al. (note 3), p. 76.
9. William C. Seitz, "The Real and the Artificial: Painting of the New Environment," *Art in America* 60, 6 (Nov./Dec. 1972), p. 61.



13. *Mark Diptych II*, 1984. Polaroid photographs; 259.1 x 215.9 cm. (102 x 85 in.).  
Pace/MacGill Gallery.



14. *Sunflower Triptych (Alive)*, 1987. Polaroid photographs; 259.1 x 327.7 cm. (102 x 129 in.).  
Pace/MacGill Gallery.



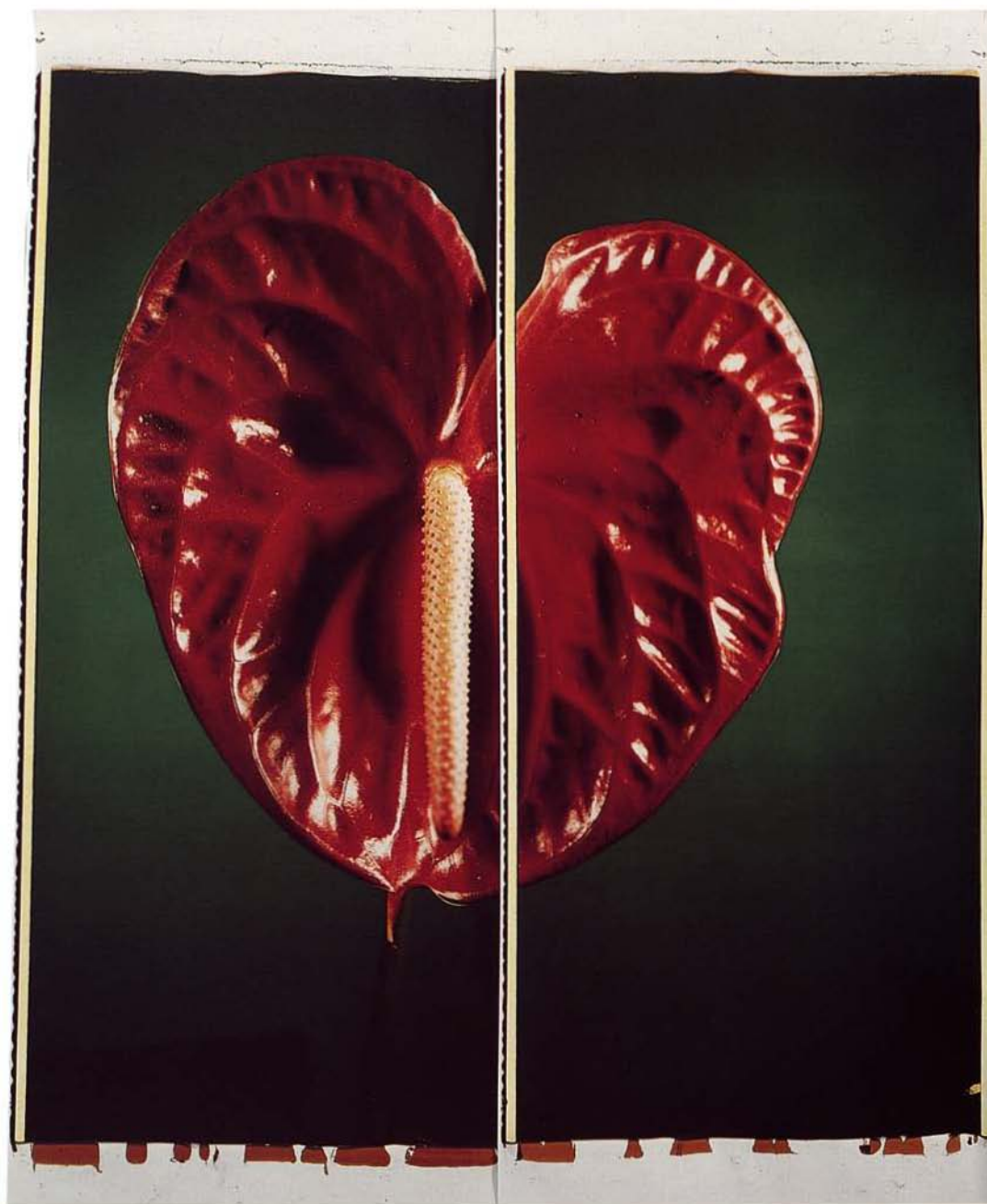


15. *Sunflower Triptych (Dead)*, 1987. Polaroid photographs; 259.1 x 307.3 cm. (102 x 121 in.).  
The Regis Collection, Minneapolis.



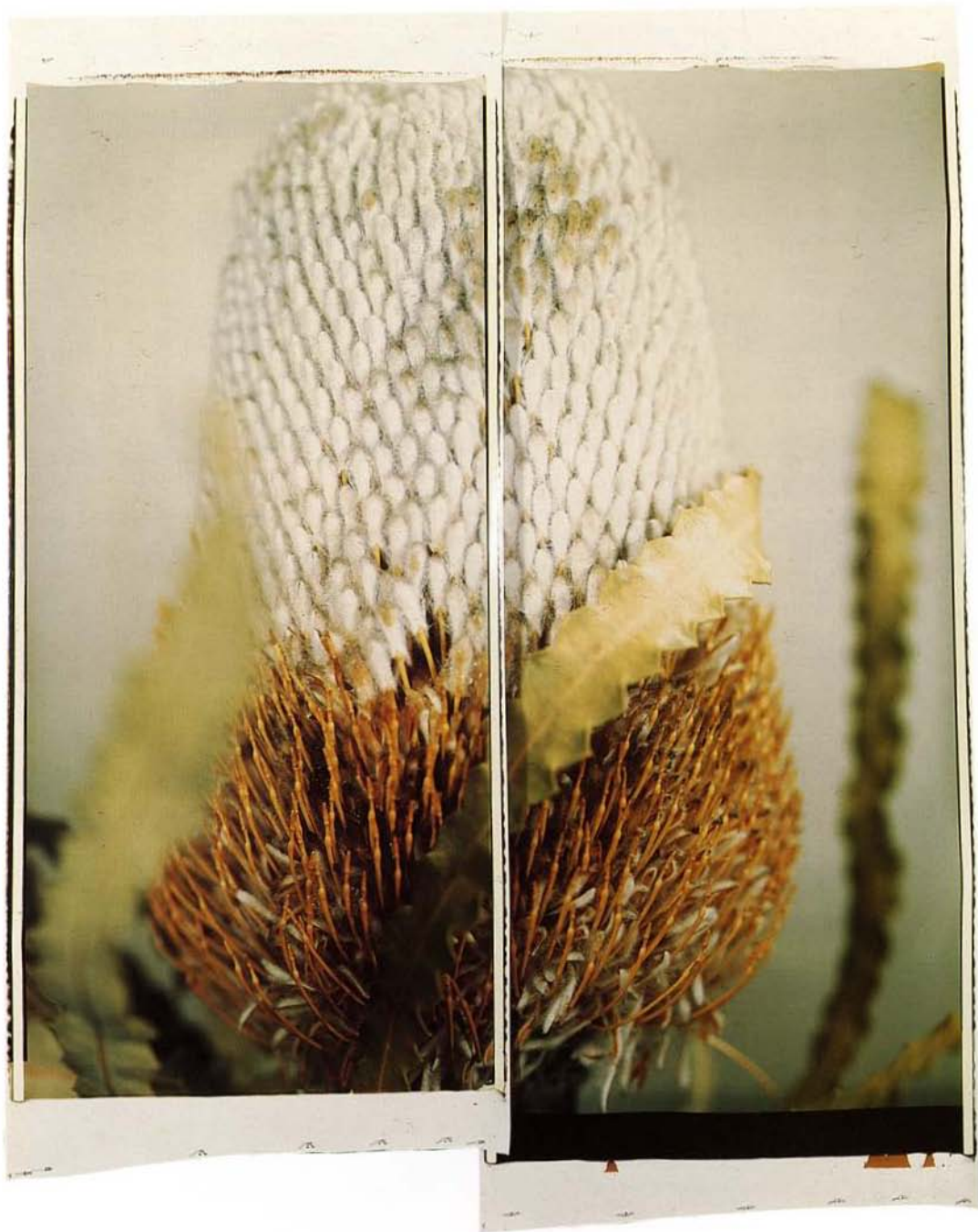


16. *Fuji Mum*, 1987. Polaroid photographs; 262.9 x 215.9 cm. (103-1/2 x 85 in.).  
Lent by Barbara and Daniel Fendrick.



17. *Anthurium*, 1987. Polaroid photographs; 259.1 x 212.7 cm. (102 x 83-3/4 in.).  
Pace/MacGill Gallery.



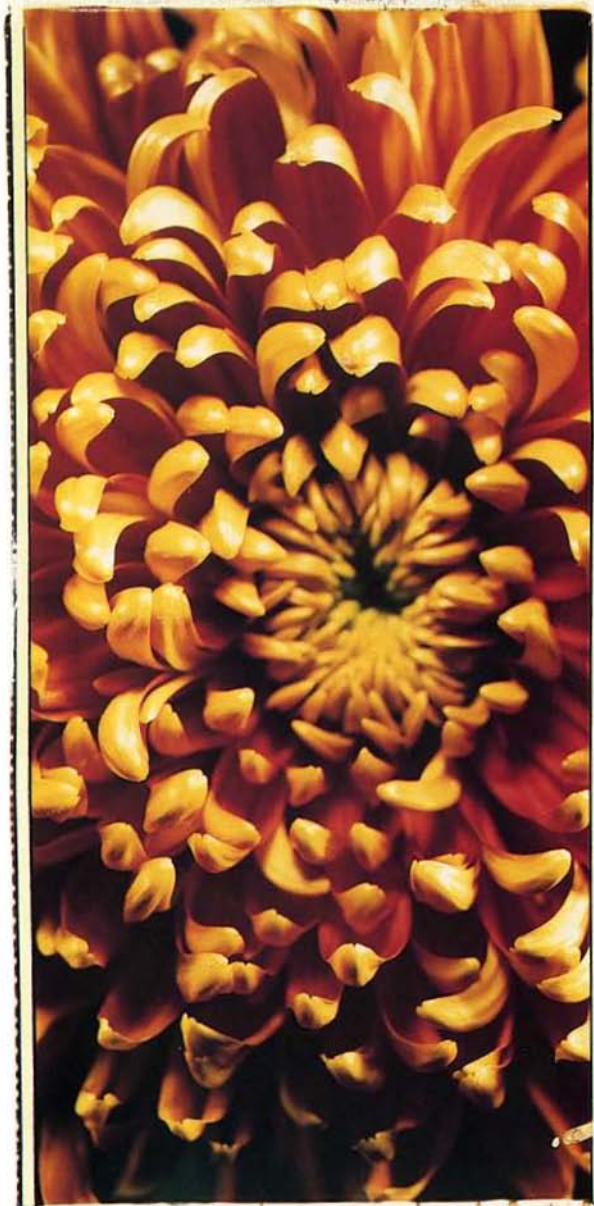


18. *Protius*, 1988. Polaroid photographs; 269.2 x 217.2 cm. (106 x 85-1/2 in.).  
Pace/MacGill Gallery.





19. *Carter Triptych*, 1984. Polaroid photographs; 259.1 x 325.1 cm. (102 x 128 in.).  
Pace/MacGill Gallery.



20. *Chrysanthemum* (Light), 1988. Polaroid photograph; 259.1 x 109.2 cm. (102 x 43 in.).  
Mr. and Mrs. Harry Goldberg. (Not in exhibition.)

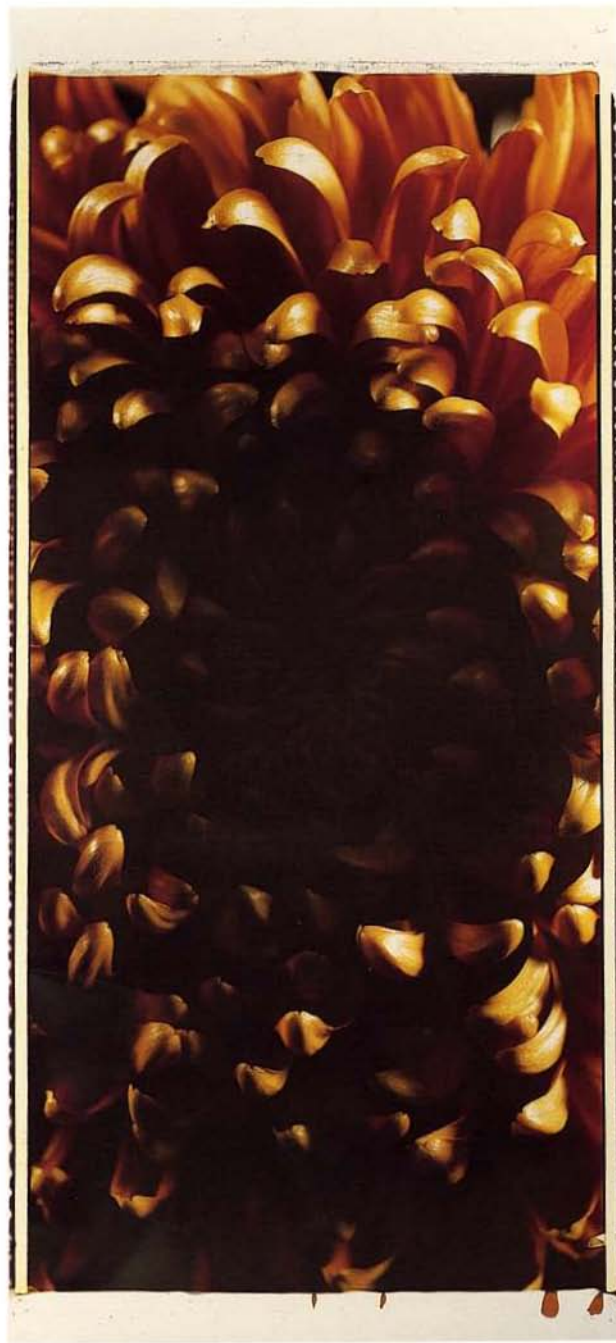


21. *Liatris*, 1987. Polaroid photograph; 259.1 x 109.2 cm. (102 x 43 in.).  
Pace/MacGill Gallery.



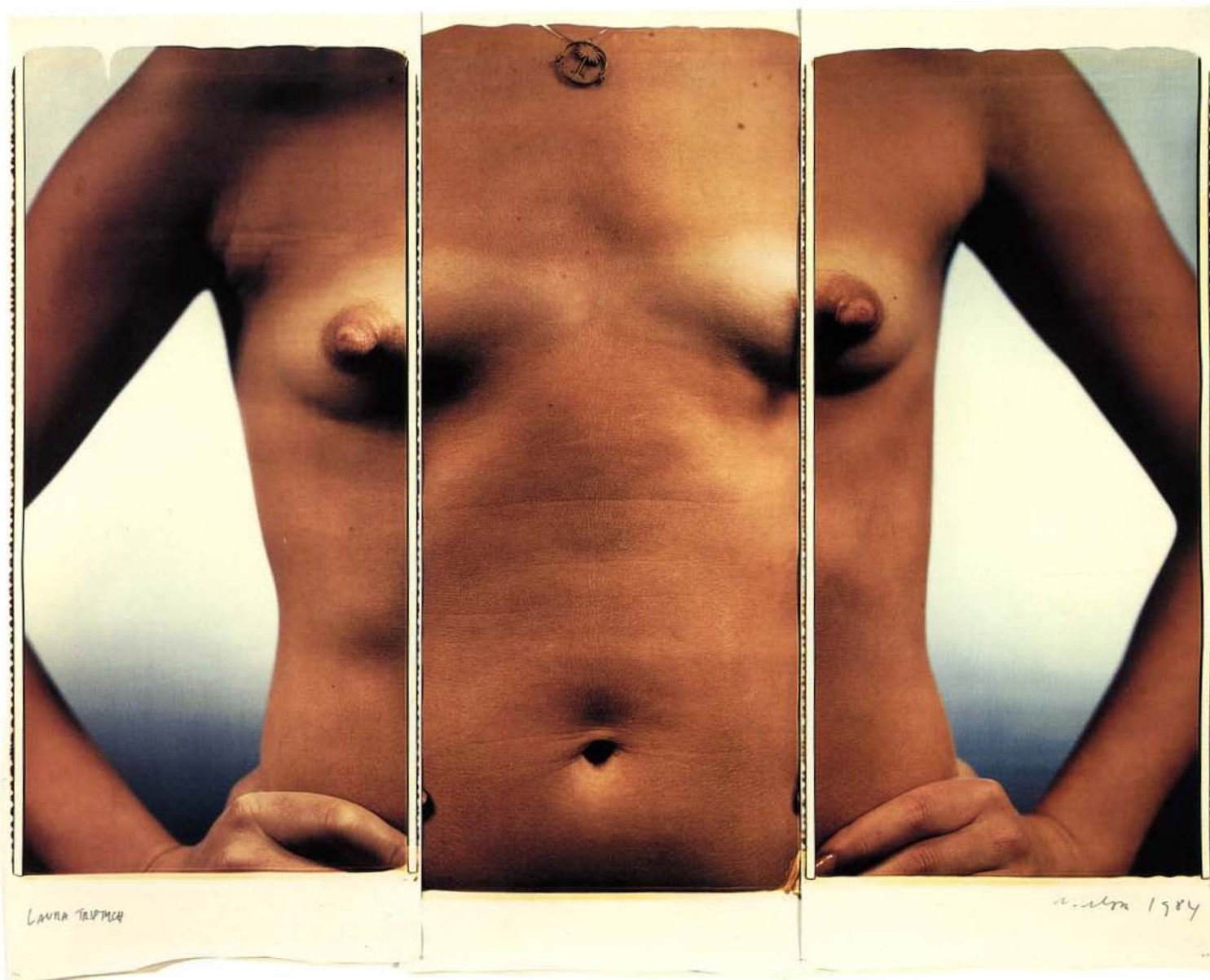


22. *Gladiolus*, 1987. Polaroid photograph;  
246.4 x 109.2 cm. (97 x 43 in.).  
Pace/MacGill Gallery.



23. *Chrysanthemum (Dark)*, 1988. Polaroid photograph;  
259.1 x 109.2 cm. (102 x 43 in.).  
Pace/MacGill Gallery.





24. *Laura Triptych*, 1984. Polaroid photographs; 259.1 x 325.1 cm. (102 x 128 in.).  
Pace/MacGill Gallery.

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