

CHUCK CLOSE | LIFE

CHRISTOPHER FINCH

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Prestel

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Front cover: Chuck Close in front of *Self-Portrait I*, 2009.
Oil on canvas, 72 x 60 in. (182.9 x 152.4 cm). Photo by Michael Marfione
Frontispiece: Chuck Close working on *Keith* in his studio at 27 Greene Street, 1970.
Photo by Wayne Hollingworth

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Contents

Preface	vii
Prologue	I
PART I	5
Chapter One: Born on the Fifth of July	7
Chapter Two: Learning to be Unafraid	19
Chapter Three: Life Lessons	31
Chapter Four: Everett	39
Chapter Five: Breaking Away	57
Chapter Six: Bicoastal Adventures	71
Chapter Seven: New Haven	87
Chapter Eight: Transitions	99
PART II	111
Chapter Nine: Rags and Rats	113
Chapter Ten: Grand Unions	127
Chapter Eleven: Heads	137
Chapter Twelve: Recognition	159
Chapter Thirteen: Downtown Domesticity	183
Chapter Fourteen: The Grid Emerges	194

Chapter Fifteen: Widening Horizons	201
Chapter Sixteen: Family Matters	220
Chapter Seventeen: Leaving SoHo	229
Chapter Eighteen: Prismatic Grids	234
PART III	245
Chapter Nineteen: The Event	247
Chapter Twenty: Alex II	269
Chapter Twenty-one: Regeneration	273
Chapter Twenty-two: Head-On	280
Chapter Twenty-three: Process and Pragmatism	291
Chapter Twenty-four: From the Oval Office to the Kremlin	305
Chapter Twenty-five: Inspiration Is for Amateurs	316
Chapter Twenty-six: Portraits of the Artist	323
Chapter Twenty-seven: You Start Off with a Blank Canvas	334
Notes	343
Acknowledgments	345
Photo Credits	347
Index	348

Preface

One day in late October 2004, I called Chuck Close from the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where I had just attended the press view of an exhibition surveying the career of one of his predecessors, the early American portraitist Gilbert Stuart. The purpose of my call was to arrange for a studio visit, but in the course of the conversation Chuck proposed the idea of my writing a book about his career. When I pointed out that there were already several volumes dedicated to his work, he countered that they were either catalogues of single exhibitions or were limited to a specific area of his art, such as printmaking. What was yet to be done, he said, was a comprehensive book that covered his complete oeuvre in every medium.

One reason he thought of me as a logical candidate for this project was that I had been a witness to his career from its beginning. I had met Chuck and his wife Leslie in 1968 when I was an associate curator at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and had been instrumental in the Walker purchasing his first major painting to enter a public collection—the now iconic *Big Self-Portrait*. When I settled in New York the following year, I became a frequent visitor to his SoHo loft, hung out in the same bars and restaurants, and on Saturdays we often toured the galleries together, logging innumerable hours of conversation and debate about art and everything else from politics to movies.

This was a dramatic period, full of cultural and social turmoil, during which SoHo was transformed from an urban wilderness colonized by painters, dancers, and musicians—who at first were little more than squatters—into one of the centers of the international art world. Chuck was at the nexus of that ferment, and I was a privileged eyewitness. I had ongoing access to his seminal photorealist paintings (a term he dislikes) as they were being committed to canvas and saw how he took a leadership role in the art world protests that followed the tragic

shootings at Kent State. He was a witness at my wedding and a couple of years later painted a major portrait of my wife, Linda, which is now the pride of the Akron Museum of Art. I have been a close observer of his career ever since.

A day or two after that initial phone conversation, we discussed the idea of a book over lunch, and a few months later I had a detailed proposal for a monograph ready to submit to publishers. The most interesting response came from Christopher Lyon of Prestel Publishing, suggesting not one but two books, the first the comprehensive study of his art that Chuck had envisioned, to be followed by a full-scale biography. Unlike almost any other major living artist, the dramatic arc of Chuck's life justified such a concept, not only because his work has been interwoven with his life in an unusually rich way, but because at the center of both is a traumatic event that would have destroyed most careers and which Close overcame with a determination and flourish that can only be described as inspirational. This momentous episode would, of course, have to be addressed in both books, but only in an exhaustive biography could it and other key aspects of his story be treated as fully as they deserved to be. A degree of overlap between the books would be inevitable, since to some extent the biography draws upon research and quotes used in the first book, *Chuck Close: Work* (published in 2007). *Chuck Close: Life*, however, stands by itself as a book that is complementary to the earlier volume but far more complete with regard to biographical material.

When embarking on the biography, I was encouraged by the knowledge that Chuck Close is a pack rat, one of those people who holds on to the ephemera of his past—childhood snapshots, elementary school report cards, high school yearbooks, even his grandmother's old magnifying glass—all preserved as meticulously as the catalogues and reviews that form a record of his adult career: a biographer's dream. Before I started work on either book, he handed me a typewritten family history compiled by his Great Aunt Bina, forty-five single-spaced pages packed with invaluable information about everything from his family's migration from Nebraska to the Pacific Northwest to the circumstances surrounding Chuck's birth. I included a few tidbits in *Chuck Close: Work* and then put her typescript aside to draw upon at length for this biography.

As I embarked on *Chuck Close: Life*, its subject produced other treasures, such as his baby album—scrupulously and tellingly annotated by his mother—as well as access to some of his oldest friends whose generously shared reminiscences facilitated my reconstruction of Chuck's life in Everett, Washington, in the 1950s. In addition to all these resources, Chuck made himself available for innumerable

hours of questioning, patiently going over the details of traumatic events in his past as well as the complexities of his relationship with his mother, a difficult woman who was in crucial ways responsible for much of who he is today. All this enabled me to reconstruct his early years in great detail, so that whereas his life prior to settling in New York occupied a single chapter of *Work*, it takes up eight chapters of *Life*, tracking the evolution of Chuck Close the artist as he advanced, sometimes painfully, from the Everett Public School System, through Everett Junior College and the University of Washington, and finally on to Yale, where his colleagues in the MFA program constituted a golden generation that included such future luminaries as Richard Serra and Brice Marden.

While writing *Chuck Close: Work*, I soon realized that I had been flattering myself in thinking that my knowledge of his art was reasonably comprehensive. I had previously written about several of its aspects, notably his paintings and dot drawings, but now I was hit by just how many facets there are to his work. Close might have one primary subject, the human face, but he brings to it an infinite variety of approaches. (I can imagine a story by Jorge Luis Borges in which an artist named Chuck Close fills a studio with endless portraits of the same sitter, each of them entirely different.)

Something similar happened when I began working on *Chuck Close: Life*. Here was someone who had been a friend for forty years, and whom I thought I knew pretty well, but the gaps in my knowledge of his past were enormous. These lacunae were filled during the course of the aforementioned long sessions of informal dialogue. We would sit in the artist's studio or in some NoHo bistro for hours at a stretch, talking about anything and everything—old friends and current art world gossip, Yankee games and auction prices—pausing for an espresso or a drink then almost at random turning to matters directly related to the book. It was during these rambling conversations that—to paraphrase Chuck—the process really began to percolate, as we reached back to the roots of our friendship and became so relaxed that, when we did turn to matters connected with the narrative, rich nuggets would emerge. It was during conversations like this that he would suddenly recall the art epiphany he experienced at a Billy Graham rally in Tacoma, or an incident involving Robert Rauschenberg and a chicken in a New Haven lecture hall. This kind of enjoyably discursive dialogue, especially when exploring his early years, enabled me to piece his life together as if reassembling an ancient artifact from shards—or accumulating a narrative by means that have something in common with the incremental process used to produce a Chuck

Close portrait. This process continued for three years, with some of the most critical material emerging during the final weeks before my deadline.

At the outset of his career, Chuck described his paintings as “mug shots,” preferring to think of them as “heads” rather than portraits in the traditional sense. Over the past four decades, he has moved away from that concept—at least in its most literal form—demonstrating that there are many valid ways to make a portrait if pursued with rigor and integrity. One rule he has adhered to from the beginning, however, is that he never sets out to flatter. In a recent interview, he talked about his regard for his sitters when considered in this light.

“It’s an act of tremendous generosity and bravery to submit to my photographs. . . . Anyone I’ve painted has [given me] an extraordinary gift by lending me their image, with no control over what I’m going to do with it.”

This book is the result of a huge act of generosity on the part of Chuck Close. He gave of himself magnanimously, as did many other people who unstintingly shared their recollections and reflections with me, enabling me to create this portrait of the artist. I hope I have done them justice.

Prologue

At five o'clock in the afternoon of December 7, 1988—the forty-seventh anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor—Chuck Close finds himself in Yorkville, the old German neighborhood on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. At the age of 48, Close has established himself as one of the most accomplished painters of his generation, already the subject of a major museum retrospective and a full-scale monograph. His most recent exhibition, at the Pace Gallery, was rapturously received by both critics and his peers.

Well over six feet tall, slim but broad-shouldered, with a full beard and thick glasses, Close is a familiar presence in art world haunts from the bistros of SoHo and Tribeca to the galleries of Fifty-seventh Street and Madison Avenue. Yorkville, however, is off the beaten path for him. He is here, and more conservatively dressed than usual, because he's on his way to Gracie Mansion—the official residence of the mayor of New York—for the annual awards ceremony of the Alliance for the Arts, at which he is to be a presenter.

Close is feeling under the weather. For a couple of weeks now he's been suffering from a miserable respiratory infection, accompanied by a hacking cough. On top of that he woke up this morning with severe chest pains, but was not especially worried by this because he has a history of angina-like episodes, none of which has ever progressed to anything worse, or led to a credible diagnosis of a heart condition. He puts them down to stress but likes to add, "Denial runs in my family."

He's a little early so he stops into a neighborhood tavern and orders a scotch, hoping the drink will make him feel better. Instead he feels worse. He's nauseous and, by the time he leaves the bar to walk the last few blocks to Gracie Mansion, the chest pains have returned. It's dark by now, and the day has turned cold. He walks past storefronts trimmed with Mylar icicles and blinking Christmas

lights, past Chanukah candles glowing in apartment windows, arriving at Gracie Mansion a little before six. There he's shown into a reception area where hors d'oeuvres are being served. He sees people he knows but, although normally gregarious, is in no mood for casual socialization. The chest pains have become worse and he is beginning to take them more seriously. On the program he's been handed, he's listed as the third presenter. Even assuming everything goes smoothly, that's almost an hour away. Close approaches the woman in charge of the event, explains the situation, and requests that he be moved to the head of the list. She tells him that's impossible.

As waiters circulate with canapés, Agnes Gund—a prominent collector and a trustee of the Museum of Modern Art—approaches Close and tells him she is pleased to have run into him because she has been meaning for some time to ask him if he would accept a commission to paint her portrait. As a matter of principle, Close never accepts commissions. He paints friends and family, and then only when and whom he chooses to—one of the ways in which he distances himself from the traditional role of the portrait painter with its feudal baggage of artist and patron. Under normal circumstances, Close would point this out politely and with a palliative dose of charm, but in pain and with claustrophobia pressing in on him, his reaction to Gund's request verges on rudeness. Surely she knows his policy on accepting commissions? It's no secret, after all. His curtness, so out of character, takes the collector by surprise, and she backs off.

At 6:10, as scheduled, the mayor—Ed Koch—appears to introduce the awards ceremony. By now, the chest pains have become almost unbearable. As Koch begins his introductory speech, Close leaves his seat and once again confronts the woman in charge of scheduling. He makes it clear that the moment for protocol is past. He needs to get medical attention as soon as possible. If he is to present the award, he must be moved to the head of the list; otherwise he will leave immediately. This is a demand rather than a request and is finally agreed to. An offer is made to call an ambulance, which he refuses, but a police officer is alerted to accompany him to Doctors Hospital, which, fortuitously, is just across the street from Gracie Mansion. Even so, Close must wait through the mayor's speech, and Koch famously relishes every minute in the spotlight, playing this evening to an audience of fewer than a hundred people with a born performer's hunger for applause, his timing as measured as Jack Benny's. At last he's finished, and Close is introduced. He makes his way to the dais and reads the citation.

“Louis Spanier, visual arts coordinator, community school district thirty-two, is being honored for bringing an appreciation of the visual arts to students in the Bushwick area of Brooklyn . . .”

The pain and the constriction in Close’s chest are such that he has difficulty getting the words out. He makes the presentation, and then instead of returning to his seat, hurriedly and unsteadily leaves the room. Accompanied by the assigned police officer, he makes his way on foot the short distance to the Doctors Hospital emergency room, where—a miracle for New York City—not a single patient is waiting. Close is attended to immediately. He is given massive doses of painkillers, and intravenous Valium for sedation.

Fully conscious, Close requests that his wife, Leslie, be alerted. She hears the phone as she awaits the elevator outside the couple’s Central Park West apartment, on her way to the Pace Gallery Christmas party. She jumps into a cab and heads for the hospital, not as alarmed as she might be because she too has been through this before. Like her husband, she initially puts this latest episode down to the effects of stress and fatigue, but the scene that greets her at the emergency room quickly dissolves any vestige of complacency. The urgency communicated by the staff immediately brings home the seriousness of the situation, and to make things worse no one can tell her exactly what the problem is. They are testing for cardiac arrest but cannot confirm that that is the explanation. Only one thing is clear—the situation is critical.

There is a feeling of helplessness that comes in a moment of crisis like this—a sense of being in the way yet needing to be there, of wanting answers to questions that may be unanswerable.

Suddenly Close goes into convulsions. Long and frenzied, it seems they will never end, but then just as suddenly his body is still, unnaturally so, just lying there, dead weight, flesh without animation.

Still fully conscious, Chuck Close is paralyzed from his shoulders down.

Part I



Four generations: the infant Chuck Close in the arms of his maternal great-grandfather, Benjamin Albro, with Chuck's mother, Mildred Close, left, and Blanche Albro Wagner, his maternal grandmother, 1940.

Born on the Fifth of July

It is unusual, to say the least, for a living artist's face to be featured on billboards, but not long ago commuters from Long Island, and travelers en route into Manhattan from Kennedy and La Guardia airports, were greeted at the entrance to the Midtown Tunnel by a towering black-and-white likeness of Chuck Close dressed in a black leather jacket and a white tee-shirt adorned with a facsimile of one of his many portraits of the composer Philip Glass. Had it not been for his unsmiling expression, it might have seemed that he had been appointed the city's official greeter, an adjunct to the Empire State and Chrysler buildings. Nor did it stop there—a companion billboard was the first thing you saw as you emerged from the IRT subway station at Sheridan Square and, 2,500 miles away in LA, another overlooked the Walk of Fame on Hollywood Boulevard, while a Godzilla-scaled photomural climbed the side of an office building on the Sunset Strip. Sponsored by the Gap to promote the Whitney Museum Biennial Exhibition, the image used at all these sites was also featured on the back cover of *The New Yorker* and prominently in other periodicals; but then it's not unusual to find Chuck Close's likeness on the pages of publications ranging from *New York Magazine* to *Interview* to *W*, and he has produced enough self-portraits—around one hundred so far, including paintings, prints, drawings, and photographs—to have merited a full-scale traveling retrospective that consisted of nothing else. To those who follow the American art scene, Chuck Close's face is as familiar as any since Andy Warhol's.

Faces are the artist's business, and a biographer must contend with the fact that this subject has already accumulated and presented an extensive visual autobiography which commenced in 1967 when he conceived the iconic *Big Self-Portrait* now hanging in the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis—a painting nine feet tall, severely black-and-white like those recent billboards, a vision of the

young artist as outsider, cigarette smoldering between lips parted into the hint of a sneer, the cumulative effect proto-punk and confrontational. That at least was the impact the painting had until, with the passage of time, reverence crept into the artist-viewer relationship, as it inevitably does, altering the experience as it alters that of reading a Kerouac novel half a century on or watching a *nouvelle vague* movie at some revival house. The experience is still powerful, but has undergone a sea change.

The image most associated with Close's likeness today is that of the New York sophisticate, the insiders' insider. He seems to know everyone and to be at every major opening, every A-list party, feted and showered with awards and honorary degrees. He was the first artist to be appointed a trustee of the Whitney Museum (and is one of very few to have had retrospective exhibitions at the Whitney, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Metropolitan Museum). He is active in the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a member of the New York City Cultural Affairs Advisory Commission, and sits on the boards of a number of organizations concerned with the well-being of education and the arts. He is, in fact, the consummate New York cultural establishment figure, to the extent that it has become difficult to understand just how shocking—transgressive even—paintings like *Big Self-Portrait* seemed when they were first shown. (*The New York Times* critic Hilton Kramer characterized Close's debut exhibition as, "The kind of garbage washed up on shore after the tide of Pop Art went out.")

Given his present eminence, and his current identification with New York, it may come as a surprise to some that Chuck Close was born a continent away from Manhattan. He did not, in fact, set foot in the Big Apple till a few weeks before his twenty-first birthday nor take up residence there till he was twenty-seven. That was when, in a downtown loft as bare of luxuries as any *Trilby* era Montmartre garret, he began *Big Self-Portrait*. From his student days, when he first encountered the work of Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock, making it in New York had been his goal, but—like Pollock, like Robert Rauschenberg, like Jasper Johns and so many other major American artists whose names have come to be associated with the Big Apple—Chuck was in fact a product of what would appear to be an unpromising provincial backwater, in his case the industrial fringes of Puget Sound.

Thus, there are almost three decades for a biographer to explore before the artist's visual autobiography was definitively launched. Chuck Close is a self-made New Yorker, and a master of the New York School of painting, but beyond

that he is an American artist, in the sense that Vermeer is Dutch, and Cézanne French—representative of an entire culture.

Chuck Close can point to forebears from Ireland, Denmark, Quebec, and elsewhere, but from the mid-nineteenth century on his family was the product of the rural Midwest, of farms, floods, droughts, and modest railroad towns where livestock was loaded for transport to stockyards in Omaha and Chicago. Like other families that had had enough of tornadoes, blizzards, and backbreaking dawn-to-dusk work harvesting sweet corn or sugar beets, the Closes, Wagners, and Albros who are Close's antecedents migrated westward, finding their way to the Pacific Northwest and the burgeoning cities and towns clustered around Seattle.

Chuck was cheated by a few hours of having the archetypal birth date for an American artist. On Independence Day, 1940, in Monroe, Washington, a small mill town on the Snohomish-Skykomish river system, Mildred Emma Close, age 27, was full-term with a child who—uncharacteristically in light of later developments—seemed in no great hurry to make an entrance onto the world's stage. The baby's arrival had been predicted for the middle of the previous month, but

The house in which Chuck Close was born,
134 South Madison Street, Monroe, Washington



the evening of the 4th arrived with no sign of an impending birth. As darkness fell, Mildred's husband, Leslie Durward Close, set off a barrage of fireworks and firecrackers. According to family legend, this was the trigger. Early on the fifth, Mildred went into labor. A local physician—Dr. Cooley—was summoned, and in the bedroom of his parents' tiny clapboard cottage at 134 South Madison Street—which had been scrubbed and sterilized daily for weeks in anticipation of his arrival—Charles Thomas was delivered, his weight at birth a healthy nine pounds.

His father immediately phoned Mildred's parents in Everett, fourteen miles downstream, and within a few hours her mother, Blanche Ethel Wagner—who had been frantic with worry because of the extended pregnancy and the thought of her daughter giving birth without her—arrived at the cottage in a black Ford sedan driven by her sister, Bina Almyra Albro. (Much of the information in this chapter derives from a detailed typewritten account of Chuck Close's antecedents prepared at his request, in the early 1980s, by his Great Aunt Bina Albro.) Many years later, Bina reported that she would never forget her first impression of Charles Thomas, "still red and such a big lump of a baby that no one would mistake for a girl . . ."

This last observation was prompted by the fact that, in anticipation of the imminent arrival, both Mildred and Blanche had spent a multitude of hours sewing and embroidering baby clothes. It seems, however, that they had been expecting—perhaps even hoping for—a girl since Bina would recall that many of these garments were hardly appropriate for a boy. She remembered in particular the spectacular, long christening gown, trimmed with yards of lace. Despite protests from his father that this garment (though in fact traditional) was highly inappropriate for a boy, the baby wore it for his October 6 christening, at Monroe First Methodist Church, through which he slept soundly. Afterward there was time for a single snapshot before his father insisted that the infant be changed into something deemed more appropriately masculine.

Bina was asked to become the baby's godmother. Her contribution to the layette was a white reed basinet, hooded and lined with Shirred Japanese silk and furnished with a matching lace-edged coverlet. The Shirring had been done by women at the factory where Bina kept the books, a business devoted to the manufacture of funeral caskets.

Both of Chuck's parents were migrants to the Pacific Northwest from the American heartland. An only child, his mother, Mildred Emma Wagner, was born in

October 1913, to Blanche Wagner, at the Birdwood ranch a dozen miles northwest of North Platte, Nebraska.

Birdwood was the home of Blanche's parents, Benjamin and Emma Albro. Aunt Bina—born in a sod homestead in 1902—lived there at the time of Mildred's birth, as did Theodore—"Teddy"—Bina's younger brother, born in 1910 when his mother was forty-two years old. Emma had believed herself to be past menopause and did not realize she was pregnant until a week or two before giving premature birth to a baby weighing less than two pounds. Incubators were such a novelty in those days they were a popular feature of the midways at spectaculars such as the St. Louis Louisiana Purchase Exposition, and even entertained gawkers at



Close's maternal grandparents,
Charles and Blanche Wagner,
with Mildred Emma Wagner,
Chuck's mother, c. 1915

Coney Island's Luna Park. The Albro clan had no access to one so they made do with a washbowl full of olive oil placed on the hot water reservoir of the kitchen range to keep it warm. When Teddy turned blue he would be immersed in the oil, except for his face, and gently massaged until his color improved. Then he would be taken out and wrapped in flannel. Uncle Teddy not only survived but grew up to be a strapping adult, six foot two inches tall.

Millie's father, Charles Henry Wagner—whose own father had been born in Denmark—originally came to Birdwood to help on the ranch, Blanche having fallen in love with him while teaching in a one-room schoolhouse in northern Nebraska. As described by Bina, Birdwood sounds idyllic—a setting waiting to be painted by a Regionalist artist such as John Steuart Curry, the big house located

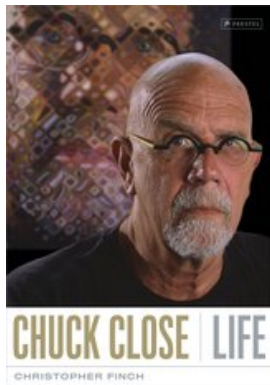
among a grove of trees near a lake created by the damming of a creek. In fact, though, life was far from arcadian. The children were expected to help with chores—from milking, to mucking out the horse stalls, to cooking for seasonal migrant workers housed in the haylofts—though Benjamin never forced them to do jobs unsuited to their age and physical limitations. The brutal Nebraska climate made for a life that was harsh and sometimes cruel, and however hard they worked, the Albro/Wagner clan did not enjoy much security because they were tenant farmers, owning little beyond their animals, farm equipment, and household belongings. Not long after Millie was born, Birdwood was sold from under them.



Mildred Close's graduation photo,
Auburn High School, c. 1930

There were subsequent attempts to scrape a living from the land, and Benjamin's prize mules continued to win ribbons at county fairs, but disaster was never far away. Bina would remember her father standing out on the porch of one farmhouse, watching as a hailstorm destroyed the entire corn crop.

When Millie was five, Charlie and Blanche Wagner found their way to Ravenna, a small city on the trunk line of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad. The Burlington provided Charlie with work as a brakeman. Millie, meanwhile, was able to start school in a setting rather more sophisticated than the one-room schoolhouses that older family members had had to make do with, and also began to take piano lessons, quickly displaying a gift for the instrument. In 1918, Bina Albro moved in with the Wagners, and the following year, Benja-



Christopher Finch

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Die Biografie zum großen amerikanischen Künstler

Nach der hoch gelobten Monografie über das Werk von Chuck Close, einem der wichtigsten zeitgenössischen Künstler der USA, legt Christopher Finch nun die erste autorisierte Biografie des Malers vor. Finch, seit Jahrzehnten ein enger Vertrauter von Close, erzählt dessen außergewöhnliches Leben, das ein beispielloses Exempel künstlerischen Wollens und Durchhaltevermögens angesichts großer Herausforderungen ist. Zahlreiche Fotografien aus dem privaten Archiv des Künstlers sowie hochwertige Farb reproduktionen seiner Werke ergänzen den Text.



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