Chuck Close Rediscovers the Art in an Old Method

By LYLE REXER

FROM the moment in 1839 when Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre announced that he could capture an image of the seen world on a silver surface, the daguerreotype both threatened and enthralled visual artists with equal force. The first form of photography, it drove an industry of miniaturists virtually out of business. Yet its delicate precision fascinated such painters as Eugene Delacroix, who collected daguerreotypes and recommended them to his students as an aid for improving their rendering of the human body. Both Daguerre and the man who brought news of his process to the United States, the inventor of the telegraph, Samuel F. B. Morse, were painters, and they viewed the ‘‘silver canvas’’ not as a threat to art but as a new art form.

Nearly a century and a half after the daguerreotype’s demise as a popular process, it is being revived by Chuck Close, who sees in its special qualities untapped possibilities of expression. In a collaboration with the contemporary daguerreotypist Jerry Spagnoli, Mr. Close has produced an extensive series of daguerreotype self-portraits, as well as front and back views of nudes in close-up, for an exhibition at Pace/MacGill Gallery that opens Wednesday and runs through April 22.

Their effect is as unexpected as opening a beaded purse and finding a cell phone. In a photo session at Mr. Spagnoli’s studio in Chelsea recently, Mr. Close said, ”I am trying to banish the nostalgia from something old to make it about our time.”

Reinventing the past is nothing new for Mr. Close. In the 1960’s and 70’s, he revolutionized the idea of the painted portrait by creating images of himself and his friends in overwhelming dimension: the mug shot writ large. He also led a movement to erase the boundary between painting and photography by basing his work on large-format Polaroid photographs and eliminating any trace of a brush stroke from his canvases. His early airbrush techniques inspired the development of the ink jet printer. He saw his first daguerreotypes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art while he was still in graduate school in the 60’s, and he never forgot them. ”I have always attempted to create images that deliver the maximum amount of information about the subject,” he said. ”I was fascinated by the clarity and detail of the daguerreotype. Nothing gets lost.”

The daguerreotype’s ability to capture fine details was the source of its instant popularity. Within two years of its demonstration in 1839, the streets of Paris were crowded with tripod-toting...
picture takers. The cumbersome cameras sold like hot cakes as painters laid aside their brushes and chemists their retorts to become “daguerrean operators,” as they were called. The daguerreotype even inspired one commentator to cry, “Steel engravers, copper engravers and etchers, drink up your aquafortis and die! . . . All nature shall paint herself.”

Although the daguerreotype’s chemistry is complicated, the process of making one involves only a few steps. A silver-surfaced copper plate, usually 8-by-10 inches or smaller, is carefully polished, then coated with a solution of iodine and bromine to make it light sensitive. It is exposed in the camera and then developed by “fuming” with mercury vapor. The result is a one-of-a-kind image rather than a negative for reproducing photographs. Its visual effect is unlike any other photographic process. In conventional photographs, the silver particles are embedded in the paper and absorb light. In essence, they “stain” the paper. In a daguerreotype, the silver crystals sit on a reflective surface and don’t absorb light but scatter it. To see the image, the viewer has to tilt the plate until it is at the proper angle to reveal the pattern of scattering. This inconvenience is one reason the daguerreotype fell out of favor, and also why it is so hard to reproduce in print. In Mr. Spagnoli’s opinion, a daguerreotype is not a photograph at all but an “optical system” involving the plate, the viewer and light.

This paradox of precision and evanescence also attracted Mr. Close. “A daguerreotype has a dimensionality, a depth that makes it very close to a hologram,” he said. In the forthcoming Pace exhibition, his holograms and daguerreotypes are exhibited in the same room. The exhibition also includes large digital ink-jet photographic prints.

“My work is all about focus and scale,” he said. “The closer you get to a daguerreotype, the more you see. In some ways it’s the opposite of a painting, which breaks down into brush strokes.”

But admiring a daguerreotype and making one are very different things. The commercial replacement of silver plates by paper photographs, which could be easily reproduced, meant that by the 1990’s only a handful of people in the United States knew how to make daguerreotypes. Mr. Close would never have begun the project if Colin Westerbeck, an associate curator of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago, had not had an interest in the process. In 1995, he used a grant from the Lannan Foundation to bring Mr. Close together with Grant Romer, director of conservation at the George Eastman House. Mr. Romer is one of that handful of daguerrean operators. “The daguerreotype is a direct positive image like the Polaroids on which Chuck’s paintings are based,” said Mr. Westerbeck. “I knew its detail would grab his interest. Besides, he loves any medium that entails knotty technical problems.”

The results, however, were maddeningly inconsistent. One reason was the nature of the process. The silver surface has to be unblemished, the mix of chemicals and timing just right. As Mr. Spagnoli lamented: “You can be going along blithely convinced that everything is wonderful and in the end have a complete failure because of some subtle error. There’s no way to monitor your progress.” No wonder daguerreotype studios guarded their techniques and innovations. In addition, the long exposure required for a daguerreotype increases the likelihood of movement blurring the image. As Mr. Close said, “Bodies breathe.”

Enter Mr. Spagnoli, an artist and photographer turned daguerreotypist. Mr. Westerbeck saw Mr. Spagnoli’s work and suggested another attempt. Mr. Spagnoli did not say so, but he was not sure he could achieve success in the quantity Mr. Close wanted – more than 40 full-plate images. But just before their sessions began last summer, Mr. Spagnoli improved his technique of polishing and sensitizing the plates and managed to eliminate much of the inconsistency.