

ART & DESIGN

Chuck Close Is Accused of Harassment. Should His Artwork Carry an Asterisk?

By ROBIN POGREBIN and JENNIFER SCHUESSLER JAN. 28, 2018

When the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery was preparing the wall text in 2014 to accompany an image of the boxer Floyd Mayweather Jr., the museum decided to note that Mr. Mayweather had been "charged with domestic violence on several occasions," receiving "punishments ranging from community service to jail time."

Such context is common for controversial subjects in art. But far less so for artists themselves — centuries of men like Picasso or Schiele who were known for mistreating women, but whose works hang in prominent museums without any asterisks.

Now, museums around the world are wrestling with the implications of a decision, by the National Gallery of Art in Washington, to indefinitely postpone a Chuck Close exhibition because of allegations of sexual harassment involving potential portrait models that have engulfed the prominent artist in controversy. Mr. Close has called the allegations "lies" and said he is "being crucified."

The postponement news on Thursday has raised difficult questions about what to do with the paintings and photographs of Mr. Close — held by museums like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Tate in London and the Pompidou in

Paris, as well as by high-spending private collectors — and whether the work of other artists accused of questionable conduct needs to be revisited or recontextualized.

It is a provocative moment for the art world, as the public debate about separating creative output from personal conduct moves from popular culture into the realm of major visual artists from different eras and the institutions that have long collected and exhibited their pieces.

“We’re very used to having to defend people in the collection, but it’s always been for the sitter” rather than the artist, said Kim Sajet, director of the Portrait Gallery, which has a large body of Mr. Close’s work. “Now we have to think to ourselves, ‘Do we need to do that about Chuck Close?’”

“You can’t talk about portraiture in America without talking about Chuck Close,” she added. “There are lots of amazing artists who have been less than admirable people.”

For the most part, curators and museum directors say that making artistic decisions based on personal behavior is a dangerous road to go down. All of the museum officials interviewed said they plan to continue to retain and show their Close holdings, in part because he has not been charged with any crime and the accusations have not been proven in a court of law.

“How much are we going to do a litmus test on every artist in terms of how they behave?” said Jock Reynolds, the director of the Yale University Art Gallery, which collects Mr. Close’s work. “Pablo Picasso was one of the worst offenders of the 20th century in terms of his history with women. Are we going to take his work out of the galleries? At some point you have to ask yourself, is the art going to stand alone as something that needs to be seen?”

To be sure, art history is riddled with important figures of ill repute.

The Baroque painter Caravaggio was accused of murder, as was the 19th-century photographer Eadweard Muybridge. The early 20th-century painter Egon Schiele spent 24 days in jail on charges of statutory rape involving a 13-year-old girl. (He was acquitted of rape, but found guilty of exposing children who posed for erotic drawings in his studio.)

The 16th-century Italian sculptor Benvenuto Cellini was put on trial after a female model accused him of rape.

Picasso, who famously abused some of his lovers, once described women as “machines for suffering.” But for most of art history, scholars say, male artists have rarely been held accountable for the treatment of women who posed for them.

“Women who were available to serve as artist models were almost always considered sexually ‘compromised,’” said Rebecca Zorach, a professor of art history at Northwestern University. “They didn’t have even the modicum of leverage some women might have against sexual assault.”

There have been recent attempts to call attention to artists’ alleged misdeeds toward women. Last spring, for example, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles’s exhibition of work by the minimalist sculptor Carl Andre, protesters (including a former curator at the museum) handed out postcards asking in Spanish, “Where is Ana Mendieta?” It was a reference to charges that Mr. Andre had contributed to the death of Ms. Mendieta, his wife and a fellow artist, in a fall from a window of their apartment in 1985. (Mr. Andre, now 82, was acquitted of charges of second-degree murder in 1988.)

Generally, however, museum officials argue that the quality of the art should be kept separate from the conduct of the artist.

“By taking action in the form of canceling an exhibition or removing art from the walls, a museum is creating an understanding of an artist’s work only through the prism of reprehensible behavior,” said Sheena Wagstaff, the Met’s chairman for Modern and contemporary art. “If we only see abuse when looking at a work of art, then we have created a reductive situation in which art is stripped of its intrinsic worth — and which in turn provokes the fundamental question of what the museum’s role in the world should be.”

Moreover, art experts say, Mr. Close’s work deserves to remain in the canon, given its important influence in redefining portraiture. His immense photographic paintings — the best known of which depict leading cultural figures like the composer Philip Glass and President Bill Clinton (who in 2000 presented Mr. Close

with the National Medal of Arts) — have been acclaimed as both technically realistic and emotionally expressive.

“He innovated how the portrait could be seen,” Mr. Reynolds said. “That is a creative force that’s got to be reckoned with and will endure.”

The National Gallery had planned to feature about two dozen paintings, photographs and works on paper by Mr. Close as part of a rotating series of installations called “In the Tower.”

The museum’s decision to cancel the show — its Close painting “Fanny/Fingerpainting” will remain on view — may have been influenced by the fact that the National Gallery gets 72 percent of its \$164 million budget from the federal government, which tends to avoid courting controversy. Anabeth Guthrie, a spokeswoman for the gallery, said the decision to postpone the Close show was made solely because of the harassment accusations and not because of political pressure.

Art experts say the National Gallery’s cancellation has a significant impact, akin to rescinding an Oscar from an actor.

“It has enormous symbolic authority and power as an institution,” said Tom Eccles, executive director of the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College. “This is a time when sending messages is very, very important, particularly for national institutions. Their message is: If you’re accused of these acts, you will not get an exhibition at the National Gallery.”

Rather than focus on which artists to censure, Mr. Eccles added, institutions should consider which artists will expand the definition of what belongs in a museum, namely female artists and people of color.

“We can’t not show artists because we don’t agree with them morally; we’d have fairly bare walls,” he said. “It’s about addition — bringing new voices in and new artworks in.”

Some museums increasingly provide personal information to contextualize their art. In describing the Clinton portrait by Mr. Close that is currently — and will remain — on view, for example, the Portrait Gallery’s wall text says: “Clinton’s denial

of his sexual relationship with a White House intern, while under oath, led to his impeachment, but he was not convicted in the Senate trial.” The museum’s online entry for the rap artist Tupac Shakur says that he was “repeatedly condemned for his explicit, violent, and at times misogynistic lyrics.”

Whatever museums ultimately decide to do about Mr. Close, some say they can no longer afford to simply present art without addressing the issues that surround the artist — that institutions must play a more active role in educating the public about the human beings behind the work.

“The typical ‘we don’t judge, we don’t endorse, we just put it up for people to experience and decide’ falls very flat in this political and cultural moment,” said James Rondeau, the president and director of the Art Institute of Chicago, which has Close works in its collection. “We must be keenly aware of the responsibility and consequences of our decisions within this context.”

“The question is,” he added, “what are the decisions that place us on the right side of history?”

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