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Friday, October 3, 2008

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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT | OCTOBER 3, 2008

The Paper Chase

Collectors Take a New Interest in Handmade Paper Works

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By **ROSS KENNETH URKEN**

(See *Corrections and Amplifications* item [below](#).)

Artist Chuck Close's fingerprints crawl across the surface of "Phil/Manipulated," a 1982 paper pulp portrait of composer Philip Glass. Though this work comes as an edition of 20 prints, impressions of the artist's fingertips -- pressed into the nonchalant expression on the composer's mouth and his wild hair -- personalize each print in the series. "The piles of pulp were just sticking up and aching to be shoved around," Mr. Close recalls. "It has a new expressive power, because you have altered it."



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Sotheby's

A Chuck Close handmade paper work similar to "Phil/Manipulated," which sold for \$46,800 in 2003.

With turmoil in the financial markets, many collectors are looking for distinctive art at lower prices. Handmade paper works like "Phil/Manipulated" form a niche hybrid that allows buyers to get unique works by blue-chip artists like Mr. Close in the less-expensive print category.

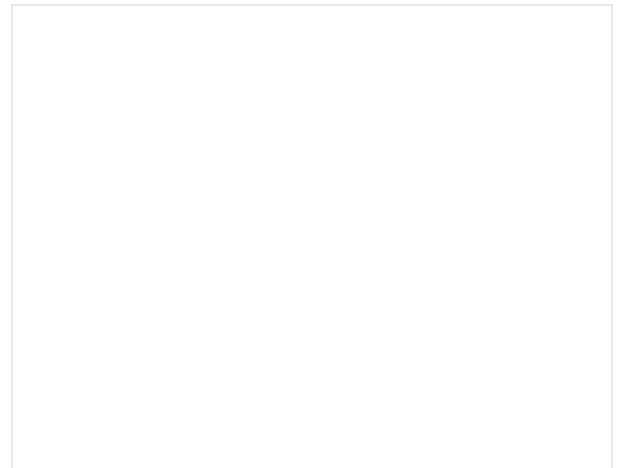
A painting by Mr. Close on canvas, like 1972's "John," of a bearded, bespectacled man, sold for close to \$5 million in 2005 at Sotheby's New York, whereas the handmade paper work "Phil /Manipulated" sold for \$46,800 there in 2003.

Wynn Kramarsky, who sold Van Gogh's "Portrait of Dr. Gachet" for what was a world record price of \$82.5 million in 1990 at Christie's New York, has bought handmade paper pieces by Mr. Close and Jane Hammond for less than \$10,000 in the past decade.

"Younger buyers who are priced out of big art now have a desirable way of entering the stream with unique pieces or almost unique pieces of work," says Mr. Kramarsky, a Manhattan-based art collector.

Whereas regular print-making may feature rote reproduction with identical outputs in a series, papermaking requires intimate artist manipulation that individualizes each print. With a 2,000-year history brought to the artistic forefront by Robert Rauschenberg, David Hockney and Mr. Close in the late '70s and early '80s, papermaking is an intricate multistep process. A window-frame structure of wire mesh is dipped in refined pulp that is stored in frothy vats of water. Once strained, the pulp forms a fibrous sheet that is painted, stenciled or otherwise artistically manipulated and dried in a hydraulic press and system of fans.

For Grimanesa Amoros, a Peruvian-born multimedia artist, papermaking is complex and



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visceral. "It's a very intimate, delicious process," she says.

Art experts say these pieces can prove to be good investments. For example, Arturo Herrera's 2005 untitled work, an abstraction of the Disney images of Snow White and the seven dwarfs, was released by Manhattan's Dieu Donn  Papermill at \$2,500 and valued at \$5,000 once the edition of 15 sold out just under a year later.

But the medium has faced some criticism from outsiders. "The worst word in arts, the most derisive term is the 'c word': 'craft,' " says Mr. Close. "Anything that has to be made, whether ceramics, or blowing glass, falls into an arena that is extremely suspect."

Ruth Lingen, a papermaker who collaborates with Mr. Close on pulp projects at Pace Prints, has doubts about the medium's artistic viability, in part because many critics don't take it seriously. "I'm not convinced it will be considered a major art form -- ever," she says.

Over the last eight or nine years, Sotheby's has seen a rise in the sales for pieces on handmade paper by Frank Stella, Ellsworth Kelly and Mr. Close. This recent boom can be seen as a result of collectors' increasing interest in unique works that are more affordable and the natural migration of big-name works to auctions after two or three decades in private collections, says Christopher Gaillard, head of contemporary prints at Sotheby's.

Dick Solomon of Pace Prints, a major figure in the world of lithographs, is opening a 2,850-square-foot paper mill in Brooklyn this fall to tap into the artist community he says is booming there.

On Oct. 14, Dieu Donn  will host its annual auction, which promises to be bigger than ever, attracting many luminaries in the art world. Brooke Garber Neidich, co-chairwoman of the Whitney Museum of Art's board of trustees, and David Kiehl, curator of prints at the Whitney and board director at Dieu Donn , are scheduled to attend. The auction will include works by Louise Bourgeois, Kiki Smith and Richard Tuttle.

Despite the recent interest, the medium has a challenge to overcome: Paper takes a back seat to works on canvas, considered by many collectors to be more authentic and substantial. For example, Mr. Close's "Georgia," a 1984 paper pulp portrait of his daughter, sold at \$34,500 in 1999 at Sotheby's New York, whereas another version of the piece glued to canvas went for \$431,500 there in 1997.

To ensure the medium's viability, Mr. Close says more artists must work on the pulp paper projects.

"Somebody's got to be interested in banging their head against the wall," he said. "It takes a special person and special engagement and a willingness to hang in there."

Write to Ross Kenneth Urken at ross.urken@wsj.com

Corrections and Amplifications:

In 1990, Wynn Kramarsky managed negotiations with Christie's New York for the sale of Van Gogh's "Portrait of Dr. Gachet." This article incorrectly said Mr. Kramarsky sold the painting.

Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page W6

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