Long Queues & Gallery News

From Hockney Fever To Expansive Plans

A New Energy

A New Dawn

Could You Expand?

Charles Saumarez Smith sums up his artistic spring – from Hockney to Kiefer – and charts and looks forward to new gallery developments

Over the first few months of the year, the Royal Academy experienced an extraordinary phenomenon. I can only call it Hockney fever. It began before the first day of the exhibition when my telephone began to be jammed with well-known people asking if it might be possible to come to the private view or, slightly implausibly, suggesting that their invitation had been lost in the post. By the time the private view opened, there was a queue all the way down to Piccadilly. One person said that he would sue if he caught pneumonia as a result of being kept waiting.

At that point, nobody outside the Royal Academy had actually seen the exhibition, so there could have been no word-of-mouth about the experience of it. It was based on Hockney's reputation and the absolutely immense amount of advance press.

There is something about Hockney's personality – the Yorkshire accent, the occasional flat cap, the image of the cheeky-chappy older man with strong views on everything, including painting and smoking – that particularly appeals to the more anarchic aspects of the English temperament. We may have laws about smoking, but we don't really approve of them. It's a stereotype, but a very well-established one, which includes Andy Capp and Alan Bennett as well.

Added to this, Hockney is the prodigal son. In his 20s, he succumbed to the lure of California, all those swimming pools and sunshine. But he kept in touch with his mum back in Yorkshire and has now finally realised that English weather is better – the cold and the mists and the bleak drizzle of east Yorkshire, as well as the moment of spring, which he calls "action time". He has decided that the seaside at Bridlington and being able to park your car along a farm track somewhere on the Wolds is infinitely preferable to living in Hollywood. What could be more flattering to the English sensibility ?

So the exhibition has appealed far beyond the conventional art world. I found it fascinating watching people experience it. The first big room was devoted to the landscape works Hockney did before he returned to Yorkshire. It has never previously been a central part of his oeuvre, apart from an early

Euston Road picture of the fields at Eccleshill, which he painted when he was 19 and shows his early mastery of grasses, hedgerows and farm tracks.

The key group of paintings was in the second room of the exhibition, described as his "First Yorkshire Landscapes". There was a picture of the road through Sledmere, a small village in the middle of the Yorkshire Wolds, painted in 1997. In the same year, he painted a view of the Wolds from memory, which shows a grand checkerboard of fields and hedgerows, stretching out into the distance. The following year, he painted the steep descent off the Wolds onto the Vale of York, a picture which is now owned by the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The most impressive of this group of paintings was a big, brightly coloured view of ploughed fields. This is an extraordinarily romantic view of the English landscape: not exactly nostalgic, but suffused with a deep memory of the English pastoral, including, as many critics have pointed out, the work of Samuel Palmer, as seen in Californian colours.

In talking to people about their experience of the exhibition, what everyone emphasised was its vitality. In sheer physical terms, it was an extraordinary achievement for an artist in his early 70s to have created such a huge body of work. There was something more – a sense of energy and exuberance and devil-may-care about it. You felt that he didn't mind what the critics were going to say (they said it), that his reputation is sufficiently secure that he can stick two fingers up at the art historians and indulge himself in a genre that has been taboo for the past half century. It succeeded in exactly the way that it was planned to.

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One of the pleasures of the spring was going to visit the new White Cube Gallery in Bermondsey Street. Long ago, my wife worked in an old warehouse in an alleyway off Bermondsey Street and I remember her coming back from work one day with a tale as to how the young apprentices would be covered in glue and leather shavings and wheeled down the street. Now it is full of cappuccino bars.

I find it fascinating how the commercial art galleries are now able to provide public space that is at least the equal of public museums. If one wants to see the best of contemporary art, then it can be seen adventurously displayed and interpreted, with full scholarly apparatus, in Gagosian Gallery in Britannia Street (designed by Caruso St John), or Victoria Miro's cool spaces off City Road (designed by Claudio Silvestrin), and now the new White Cube, which has been designed by Casper Mueller Kneer Architects in the most cerebral Swiss style, nearly monastic in its austerity.

It is not just the setting that is of museum quality, but also the recent display of the work of Anselm Kiefer, as grand and monumental a showing of his work as I have seen. I first saw his great lead books in the Watermans Art Centre in Brentford in the mid-Eighties. He has kept up his output of titanic, historically resonant work, bathed in mud, as if the world has ended, leaving only the sediment of ancient civilisations. His recent exhibition was based on the alchemical text of Fulcanelli, who

published Le Mystere des Cathedrales in 1926. It included a work, Sprache der Vögel, made in 1989, consisting of metal books piled on a stone plinth and with great eagle's wings made of lead. There could be a risk that this work is too bombastic, too self-consciously referential. I never find it so, only endlessly inventive, involving a complex language of commemoration, evoking a world of memory and cataclysm.

The last room in the sequence was devoted to a set of paintings inspired by Templehof Airport, which was built outside Berlin by Albert Speer on a site that had originally been occupied by the Knights Templar. One senses in the paintings a deep layering of history, including a sometimes uncomfortable reference to the Nazis.

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At the Royal Academy, we have a new president, Christopher Le Brun, who is himself an heir to the tradition of German historicism, having spent 1987-8 in Berlin on a DAAD scholarship. Neo-expressionism in painting is currently very unfashionable, but these things come in cycles, and, like Kiefer, Le Brun has stuck resolutely to paintings, watercolours and sculptures, which are infused with a semi-mystical belief in the power of symbolism. He is the first president under the age of 60 to have been elected since Lord Leighton and, like Lord Leighton, he has a deep belief in the Royal Academy as the representative institution of artists. This is going to make for an interesting period in the Academy's history as we seek to renovate the old historic building of Burlington House – including new facilities for our Friends and Patrons – and expand next door into the old Museum of Mankind building.

We are using Sir David Chipperfield as architect, who has himself demonstrated an understanding of the power of a stripped-back classicism in his Museum of Modern Literature in Marbach in Germany and of the resonance of history in his grand renovation of the Neues Museum in Berlin. He is going to install a lecture theatre based on the Temple of Epidaurus in Greece. As Christopher Le Brun has said, we must all wear togas.

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