Hockney Has Landed
Larging It With David Hockney
Hockney On Top Of The Wold

Charles Saumarez Smith on why next year's exhibition of large-scale David Hockney landscapes at the RA is bound to make a splash

In making all the preparations for the David Hockney exhibition at the Royal Academy, which opens on January 21, I have realised how much I belong to a generation whose visual consciousness has been informed by his work, by his attitude to colour and to drawing, by a particular sensibility as it relates to his views of swimming pools in California. I think, most particularly, of his early work after he left the Royal College of Art, including *We Two Boys Together Clinging*, which was painted in 1961 with a title from Walt Whitman; *A Bigger Splash*, painted in the summer of 1967 and now in the collection of the Tate; his picture of *Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy*, acquired by the Tate in 1971, the year that it was painted; and his portrait of his parents, also in the Tate's collection, which has a postcard of Piero della Francesca's *Baptism of Christ* visible in the mirror between them.

Hockney was the golden boy of the Sixties, producing images that represented the hedonism of that period. I also remember how important it was when, during the Seventies, he and his friend Ron Kitaj emphasised the importance of drawing from the life at a time when it was going (or had gone) nearly completely out of fashion. And I especially remember a moment very soon after I went to work at the V&A in 1982 when he came to lecture about an exhibition that was held at the Hayward Gallery, consisting of work derived from photocopies. Roy Strong described in his introduction to the lecture how he and his wife, Julia Trevelyan Oman, drove through the Herefordshire landscape, imagining it as if it had been depicted by Hockney – Herefordshire transmogrified into California. Hockney himself held a large (and possibly slightly sceptical) audience listening to every word of his discussion of this body of work with a curious and very impressive combination of openness and thoughtfulness, 300 people sitting on hard seats attentive to his every word.

Since then, my closest encounter with Hockney's work was the opening of Salts Mill in Yorkshire where Jonathan Silver, one of his friends from Bradford (they were both at Bradford Grammar School, although not at the same time), opened a gallery especially devoted to his work. It was the diagnosis of Silver with cancer that led Hockney to spend more time staying with his mother in Bridlington and, in driving from Bridlington to Bradford, he rediscovered a love of the Yorkshire Wolds, where he had worked as a farm labourer when he was a teenager. He began to depict the countryside, fields and hedgerows, particularly the low, rolling hills of the Wolds, in a slightly neo-romantic way, going back to the English landscape tradition of Samuel Palmer and Graham Sutherland, but in hot, Californian colours.

So I was, not surprisingly, extremely sympathetic when it was suggested that the Royal Academy might hold an exhibition in its main galleries based on Hockney's recent landscape work, but including his older landscape work as well. The suggestion came from Edith Devaney, who has for many years been involved in making all the arrangements for the Royal Academy's annual Summer Exhibition. In the Summer Exhibition of 2007, Hockney showed a huge picture, *Bigger Trees Near Warter*, which had been an experiment, involving the conjunction of multiple canvases, and which he had painted over a period of two months in spring 2007 and donated to the Tate the following year. It was known to Edith that this work derived from his renewed passion for the landscape. She felt, quite rightly, that it would be good – since David Hockney is himself an RA and since the great exhibition galleries, designed by Sydney Smirke, are so wonderfully suited to large paintings – if the Royal Academy were to hold an exhibition of Hockney's landscape paintings and Edith, together with Marco Livingstone, a leading expert on Hockney, are acting as joint curators (they both say that, actually, Hockney himself is the third curator, since artists are almost invariably passionately interested in how their recent work is exhibited).

The idea of the exhibition has been serendipitous. Hockney had already discovered how much he enjoyed just going out into the Yorkshire countryside, parking his easel by the side of the road, in some ways like a very traditional amateur painter (he has never been afraid of working in an unfashionable way), in order to observe the changing character of the landscape and to record it *en plein air*. The realisation that this body of work could be made into a big exhibition gave him a renewed impetus, as is evident in the wonderful film that Bruno Wollheim made at this time, which gives a very good indication of Hockney's working method. He bought a big warehouse on an industrial estate on the outskirts of Bridlington where he could undertake large work.

Hockney likes trees and clearings and hawthorn blossom and the view of roads stretching out into the distance. He's obsessed by the nature of looking and close observation, describing in the press conference to launch the exhibition how he had asked a friend to describe the colour of the road. The friend said, "I see what you mean." In Martin Gayford's recent book, *A Bigger Message: Conversations with David Hockney*, this story is told slightly differently and the friend is reported as saying after 10 minutes, "I'd never thought what colour the road is." The point is the same: most people are not normally attentive to close observation of ordinary colour and don't, like Hockney, spend their life observing minor variations in the colour of ordinary things, the infinite calibration of changing light on the surface of objects and the landscape, including trees, grasses and plants.

There is often a slightly fairy-tale quality to his pictures, as if he is rediscovering the forces of nature in his old age, together with the occasional cruelty of man cutting down trees, the effect of logging, with images of the sawn trunk of a tree, which he depicts with a quality of magical realism, with the trees reduced to abstract totem poles. I like the fact that he doesn't mind the exploration of fantasy and is always restlessly experimental in his work.

In the end, I find Hockney's work impressive for two, oddly contradictory, reasons. The first is that there is a sense in which it cannot help but be deeply informed by his exceptional knowledge of, and interest in the

techniques of, Old Master painting. He cites the influence of the work of Dürer, and the exhibition will include his adaptation of Claude's *Sermon on the Mount* in the Frick Collection in New York. There is an occasional sense that he is in competition with John Constable and that the Yorkshire Wolds provide a similar sense of sustained satisfaction to that Constable experienced in the fields and meadows round Dedham and East Bergholt. He records in the book of his conversations with Martin Gayford how much he respects the life of Monet at Giverny:

> "The best form of living I've ever seen is Monet's – a modest house at Giverny, but a very good kitchen, two cooks, gardeners, a marvellous studio. What a life! All he did was look at his lily pond and garden."

He draws wild flowers in a linear and calligraphic way like a Chinese painter.

The second reason I find Hockney's work impressive is exactly the opposite. He's obsessed by new technology, by photography, by photocopy machines, by film, and now by what can be achieved by working on an iPad, which, in his hands, is an extraordinarily impressive instrument of drawing. So there is always a tension in his work between the traditional task of viewing and observation and then, on the other hand, the ways that attitudes towards landscape and looking have been adapted by changing technologies, as if it is impossible to look at the landscape in a pure way without the intervening mediation of the ways people now view landscape according to the conventions of photography and film.

Hockney doesn't belong to any school or movement, if he ever did. He is his own person, always exploring the challenge of depiction with a wilfully deceptive attitude of wide-eyed innocence, deliberately winding up critics with his boyish enthusiasms. It is quite likely that the critics will disparage his recent work, as they have tended to ever since his early work in the Sixties. But I am equally confident that the public will recognise that he belongs to a long tradition of English landscape painters, recording with a fresh eye the wonders of the Yorkshire Wolds.

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