IN LIVING COLOR

Octogenarian DAVID HOCKNEY splashed onto the 1960s art scene as a flashy student and launched a six-decade-long career known for kaleidoscopic swimming pool scenes and Picasso-like perspectives now valued in the millions of dollars.

by Jason Edward Kaufman

Interior with Blue Terrace and Garden, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 96 inches, one of the artist’s dazzling renderings of his home in the Hollywood Hills.
At the November opening of his 60-year retrospective at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, British-born artist David Hockney sported a navy blazer over a light green cardigan, accented by a red tie, checked pocket square, and matching cap. He looked every bit the English gentleman, belying the fact that for most of the last half-century he has lived and worked in Los Angeles.

When the retrospective showed at the Tate Britain last year, the exhibition attracted 478,000 visitors, making it the most popular show of a living artist in the museum’s history, surpassing Damien Hirst (2012) and approaching Henri Matisse: The Cut-Outs (2014), which drew more than half a million. His colorful paintings have sold for seven-figure sums—including in 2016 when his landscape Woldgate Woods went for a record-breaking $11.7 million at auction.

At 80, Hockney remains energetic, acutely alert, and boundlessly productive. Though grayed and hearing-impaired since his 40s (he wears aids in both ears), he still smokes—and, indeed, he is an ardent pro-smoking advocate—and his sense of style is fully intact.

Widely regarded as England’s most celebrated living artist, he entered the limelight in London’s swinging sixties and became a cynosure of gay liberation. One reason for his success is that he prefers to paint recognizable subjects in pleasant, even joyful colors. This has made his work easily accessible, even as he experimented with modes of representation and various media. His expression has ranged from drawing, painting, and printmaking to making photographs, collages, videos, and digital technology pieces, lately pioneering the use of the iPad as a sketchpad. His adherence to figuration has led some critics to say he panders to commercial taste, but throughout his prolific career, Hockney has produced innovative compositions that assure him a place in the canon of modern masters.

From left: David Hockney photographed in 1993 at the National Museum of Photography, Film & Television (renamed the National Media Museum in 2007). Large double portraits of members of the artist’s circle in Los Angeles on display at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art: Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy, 1964; and American Collectors (Fred and Marcia Weisman), 1968.
When Hockney visited Los Angeles, he was enthralled with the sunshine, open spaces, and the lifestyle. Within a week he had a driver’s license, a car, an apartment in Santa Monica, and a studio in Venice.

His signature works of the period depict the people he met, crystalline swimming pools, modern homes, and tropical vegetation in scenes suffused with clear California light. He switched from oil paint to more brightly hued synthetic acrylics available in American art supply stores, and adopted a palette of pleasing pastel pinks, blues, and greens.

One of his most famous pictures, A Bigger Splash, 1967, is a diving-board view of a turquoise pool with a splatter of white paint where the diver has just plunged in, and a pair of palm trees standing against the clear blue sky above a salmon-colored modernist pavilion. A Lawn Being Sprinkled, 1968, is even more reductive, mainly an expanse of wavy green punctuated by white triangles of irrigating spray.

The most ambitious works of the period are 7-foot-by-10-foot, nearly life-sized double portraits. American Collectors (Fred and Marcia Weisman), 1968, shows the couple on their sun-drenched patio accompanied by sculptures in their collection and posed as if they were but two more statues on display. His treatment of the British novelist Christopher Isherwood admiring his younger partner Don Bachardy in a Los Angeles living room is a more intimate tribute to his friends. Henry Geldzahler and Christopher Scott, 1969, centers on Geldzahler (then the Metropolitan Museum curator of 20th-century art), enthroned on a plush lavender sofa while his younger boyfriend stands to the right wearing a raincoat and looking away as if their relationship will soon end.

Another 10-footer captures Hockney’s longtime friends, the fabric designer Celia Birtwell and her husband dress designer Ossie Clark, in the bedroom of their Notting Hill residence. “Berti,” as she was known, stands in a navy gown with a hand on her hip and Clark, wearing a blue sweater and bell-bottom jeans, leans back in a Breuer chair with his toes in the shag carpet and their white cat on his lap. The posh couple address the viewer as light pours in through open balcony shutters that provide a glimpse of a hazy garden. It took Hockney a year to complete Mr. and Mrs. Clark and Percy (1970-71), and within months it was exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery and purchased by the Tate.

MADE IN CALIFORNIA

Hockney grew up in relative poverty in Bradford, an industrial-era town in West Yorkshire in the north of England. His father, a conscientious objector during WWII, eked out a living repairing prams and bicycles and his mother tended to their five children, David the second youngest. His natural talent for drawing propelled him to Bradford College of Art, on to a dazzling stint at the Royal College of Art in London, and by his mid-20s the fashionable phenom was touted as the next big thing in British art.

As a student he attracted attention as a rising member of the School of London, alongside painters Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Leon Kossoff, and R. B. Kitaj. He was painting in a pastiche of abstract expressionism and pop art, combining gestural brushwork, flat patterns, illusionism, and distorted space. His immediate influences were Bacon, French painter and sculptor Jean Dubuffet, and his idol Pablo Picasso.

As his dealer, John Kasmin, secured him sales and exhibitions, his eye-catching wardrobes, bleached-blonde hair, and thick-rimmed round glasses made him a media star—a transatlantic counterpart to Andy Warhol. The signature yellow tresses came about on a trip to New York where the brunette saw a Clairol hair-dye ad on TV that promised “Blondes have more fun.”
His Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures), 1972, represents his former partner as a clothed figure pensively looking into a pool at a submerged swimmer who approaches with arms extended, the California countryside extending into the distance. Equally tender is a 1977 portrait of the painter’s parents, Laura and Kenneth Hockney. Wearing a cobalt dress, she sits with her hands folded, gazing affectionately outward. Her husband, in a gray suit, pores over an art book balanced on his knee. Their figures are echoed by a vase of tulips and a makeup mirror that rests on the green studio table between them.

In 1982, Hockney bought a house in the Hollywood Hills and built a studio on what had been a hillside paddle tennis court. Set in a lush garden, the interior and exterior walls of the compound are the pastel colors of his pictures, as if Henri Matisse had gone to Los Angeles rather than to the South of France. Hockney could have continued to produce the radiant double portraits there, were it not for the landmark Picasso retrospective he saw in 1980 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Awed by Picasso’s protean energy, he began to recognize the limitations of straight realism. He describes the Spanish master as “crucial … because he brings very much to the fore the question of verisimilitude versus the remaking of appearance. And what led me into the questioning of the verisimilitude of naturalism was that it was not real enough.”

Hockney always venerated Picasso, telling Jonathan Jones, art critic for the Guardian, that “Picasso was, without doubt, the greatest portraitist of the 20th century, if not any other century.” In ink drawings, Hockney emulated Picasso’s meticulously controlled line, seeking to convey volume, depth, and character with the sparest of means. His powers as a draftsman are evident in his 1967 portrait of his dealer Kasmin, propped on a pillow reading in a grand bed, and in a magisterial likeness of the poet W.H. Auden from the following year.

Seeing Picasso’s career laid out in sequence alerted Hockney to the ways that painting could be transformed in pursuit of a more compelling representation of visual experience. Western art is typically based on linear perspective, where images are conveyed like a window that the viewer peers into from a fixed point outside the scene. But humans observe the world by taking in multiple glimpses and assembling them in their heads to form reality. Hockney realized that this experience is precisely what Picasso recorded with cubism, which showed individual objects and space from multiple vantage points organized into a pictorial image.

His inquiry led him to study Chinese scrolls that depict the world without perspective and require the viewer to journey through scenes as the picture unrolls. He also experimented with reverse perspective, in which the orthogonal lines converge in the viewer’s eye rather than at the horizon. He felt these systems were no less valid than linear perspective, which he associated with the invention of the camera in the West. This research informed the many projects he has done for the stage, including costume and set design for Stravinsky’s The Rite of Spring, Mozart’s The Magic Flute, Puccini’s Turandot, and other operas at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, La Scala in Milan, and the Royal Opera House in London.
Multi-panel depiction of the Yorkshire countryside, *A Closer Winter Tunnel, February-March, 2006*, oil on 6 canvases (36 x 48 inches each) 72 x 144 inches overall.
Hockney long used cameras to make studies for paintings but never thought of photography as a medium suitable for personal expression. The single perspective and flatness of a photograph to him are unsuited to the roving eye, which constructs space from multiple perspectives observed over time. In the 1970s he developed a way to get around perspective and flatness of a photograph for personal expression. The single studies for paintings but never thought Hockney had long used cameras to make

early paintings in the David Hockney retrospective recently at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York: (from left) Rocky Mountains and Tired Indians, 1965; Arizona, 1964; and Portrait Surrounded by Artistic Devices, 1965. A NEW LENS HOME AGAIN

When he switched to 35 mm film fax machine to send pictures, once

with technology when he enlisted a

before a vast, open space.

the immersive feeling one gets standing

overlapping photographs with slightly

operations, his staff includes a full-

of furniture splayed across a cubistically

Hockney also manipulates multiple

paintings. Further using the computer to experiment with color changes, Hockney also manipulates multiple

and assembling them side by side. The result was a Bigger Grand Canyon, 1998, a 24-foot-wide piece comprising 60 canvases. Hockney took the approach a step further by outfitting a Jeep with nine HD video cameras mounted on a grid, then drove slowly along English lanes documenting the moving scenery in multiple adjacent perspectives. Reconstructed on a multi-screen display, these works create a mosaic that viewers scan as they would walking through the forest itself. In 2015 he sold the property and returned to Los Angeles, where he continues to live and work.

About five years ago he returned to portraiture with a series depicting more than 80 friends, each in a yellow-upholstered wooden chair set on a platform against a background of various blues. Among the sitters for three-day sessions in the Los Angeles studio are the art dealer Larry Gagosian, architect Frank Gehry, California conceptual artist John Baldessari, and Hockney’s sister, his dentist, and his housekeeper. The portrait series will be on display at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, organized by the Royal Academy of Arts, London April 15 – July 29, 2018.

Today Hockney oversees his staff and studio with help from Jean-Pierre Gonçalves de Lima, a French accountant and his companion for 15 years. The recently established David Hockney Foundation owns much of his art and conserves archives at offices on Santa Monica Boulevard. As the popular painter enters his ninth decade, Hockney’s reputation shines brighter than ever. •
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