

# Calendar

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT



MERIE W. WALLACE

## 'November' Breeze on a Summer Day

As an antidote to these hot summer days, perhaps the title "Sweet November" will prove more appealing to audiences than when the film initially was released in February. The love story, with Keanu Reeves and Charlize Theron, arrives on video today.



"Henry Cleaning His Glasses" (1982) represents an early work by Hockney using a Polaroid camera. Photos courtesy of MOCA

## Peering Beyond the Edge

Hockney's photos give visibility to the unseen.

### Art Review

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT  
TIMES ART CRITIC

Artists often find motivation for their work within an acute awareness of their own invisibility. They look at the world around them, don't find themselves included anywhere in the sphere of human society, and so make art to invent a habitable realm. What's not represented in the world can be as important to an artist as what is.

British-born painter David Hockney was among the first postwar artists to make homosexual desire an explicit feature of his work. Heterosexual desire had been an artistic staple for centuries—not least for Picasso, the Modern artist Hockney most admired. But images of gay desire were suppressed.

After his first visit to Los Angeles in 1963—he moved here full time the following year—Hockney reinvented a traditional subject of European art. Classic 19th century paintings by Ingres and Cézanne showed bathers indoors or in the landscape. They replaced the biblical Garden of Eden with the lost Golden Age of classical antiquity. Hockney gave this secular paradise a homoerotic spin: His signature paintings of men in tiled

Please see Hockney, F10



"Sitting in the Zen Garden at Ryoanji Temple."



# Hockney: Similar Subjects Recur in Photos

Continued from F1

showers and sun-dappled swimming pools were bathers for the 20th century.

Not surprisingly, these and similar subjects turn up in Hockney's photographs, too. In the retrospective exhibition of his photo works that opened Sunday at the Museum of Contemporary Art, experiences not represented in museum art before are made as important as what is commonly seen.

That same recognition, however, assumes an additional role. It's a function specific to photography. Hockney's art understands photography first as a medium with an implicit connection to invisibility—to what's not in the picture.

Hockney's innovative photo works date from the 1980s, when he composed by assembling dozens of Polaroid or 35-millimeter prints into one large picture. They invoke a subtle sense of quiet estrangement. Look at the image of a Left Bank street in Paris, a man sitting in a chair or the yawning abyss of the Grand Canyon, and you see a scene that initially seems filled to overflowing with compelling visual incident.

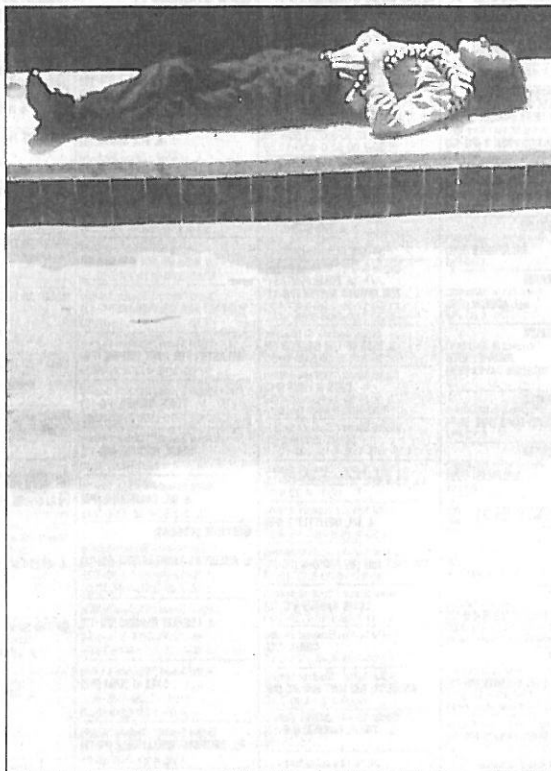
Yet, as the individual snapshots trail off the page, or as they overlap one another to pull together a visually comprehensible section of the composite, you also see something else. Inevitably, your eye is drawn to the photographs' edges.

Each edge makes you subconsciously mindful of what's not in the picture, of what was left out by the artist when he looked through the camera's viewfinder and chose to snap the shutter. The strategy builds on one developed by such street photographers as Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand, whose seemingly haphazard scenes, shot at odd angles, also emphasized the photograph's edges.

Multiply that awareness by four for the number of edges in each snapshot, and then by 60 or 160 for the number of snapshots in each Hockney composite. The result is a pictorial universe filled to overflowing with edges. Everywhere you look you're reminded of what's not in the picture, as well as seeing what is.

The richness of Hockney's best photo works is a function of this paradoxical preoccupation with edges. It makes your experience of looking at his art extremely self-conscious. Looking at pictures—an ordinary activity that is sensual, fun, mysterious and socially—comes to the foreground as a principal subject.

At the entrance to the show, a wall-size mural is made from a grid of laser-printed color photographs. It shows the artist to one side, an easel with a landscape photograph at the other side and in between a woman with her back to the camera. She's looking at a



A detail of "Yves Marie Asleep, May, 1974," in the exhibition at MOCA.

mural-size photographic enlargement of the landscape picture on the easel. That picture shows three people, also seen from behind, standing at a fence and looking out over verdant landscape.

The mural mimics what you are doing. You're looking at pictures of people looking at pictures of people looking at—what? Nature? Or a picture?

A field of grass, flowers, trees and sunshine becomes a landscape when entered by the eye and mind, rather than the body. A landscape, in other words, is nature made pictorial.

It's probably no coincidence that landscape painting became prominent in Western art in the 19th century, after having languished as a minor subject for hundreds of years. Photography, which was invented at the same time, had the power to make anything and everything pictorial. That power helped democratize the world. The camera gave all kinds of pictorial representations a sense of equality. The established hierarchy of major subjects and minor subjects collapsed.

The MOCA show, which was organized by the Ludwig Museum in Cologne, Germany, is installed according to subject. First come two galleries of portraits. Next are swimming pools, followed by travels (Paris, Rangoon, Shanghai, London, sites around LA, etc.) and the artist's studio. Last are land-

scapes. The installation plan doesn't shed much light, because subject matter doesn't seem to drive these photographs.

Pictorial problems are instead at the core of Hockney's enterprise as an artist. The full Hockney retrospective in 1988 at the L.A. County Museum of Art showed that his mature work has three loosely overlapping phases—painting beginning in the 1960s, stage design in the 1970s and photography in the 1980s—and that each one was explored as a complex set of pictorial problems.

This exploration is one reason Hockney's work is so consistently popular with the public. His art almost always expresses a deep fascination with the experience of looking at pictures, which is never as simple or straightforward as it might seem. And who doesn't like to look at pictures?

Indeed, lots of Hockney's photo works show people engaged in layered acts of looking. An art dealer looks at a self-portrait of Picasso reproduced in a book. A curator cleans his eyeglasses, which he needs to see. A standing man looks down at his seated lover, who looks out at us. A couple looks at snapshot portraits of the artist, spread out on the floor.

Frequently Hockney includes himself as a playfully explicit element in the picture. Sometimes his reflection in a mirror or his looming shadow appears. Elsewhere he begins his fragmented photographic survey of a place with pictures of his feet, which turn up at the bottom of "The Brooklyn Bridge" and his view of the contemplative Zen garden at Ryoanji Temple in Kyoto, Japan.

The references underscore his concentration on the act of looking in the process of making art.

The insertion can also be very sly. The couple who is shown looking at snapshots of Hockney is mirroring the unseen activity of Hockney looking at snapshots of the couple, as he assembles the composite portrait of them.

Like most people, Hockney always made photographs—the earliest ones in the show date from the 1960s—and often he's used them as an aid to painting, somewhat in the manner of drawings. A 1968 double-portrait of the late L.A. art collectors Fred and Marcia Weisman standing poolside on their patio, for example, is the source for a well-known, though significantly altered painting.

There are even early images composed from multiple snapshots. A vertical picture made by pasting together a head-to-toe sequence of five snapshots of a young man standing in a London park, for example, shows the same figure who turns up standing by a swimming pool gazing at an underwater swimmer in the 1971 painting "Portrait of an Artist (Pool With Two Figures)."

Around 1982, however, Hockney began using a Polaroid instant camera. The photo work quickly assumed a sharper, more inquisitive focus. In the early '80s a host of artists, mostly in the United States and Europe, initiated a wholesale revision in the way photography began to be regarded. This shift generally came as a second generation of Conceptual art. Probably because Hockney was an established painter, his photographic interests were considerably different.

Space is the No. 1 pictorial problem for a painter. A picture has only two physical dimensions—height and width—but the world has three. Plus, there's the dimension of time. Hockney, in his composite photos, attempted to reconcile space and time with the two dimensions of a picture.

In the show, the reconciliation fails in the recent large murals, made by enlarging photographs with a laser printer. These photo blowups of the Grand Canyon, taken as snapshots in 1982 and enlarged last year, come uncomfortably close to wallpaper, recalling photo-mural landscapes once common as commercial décor. Photo-wallpaper looks cool in the lobby of the Standard Hotel, but not so cool in MOCA's galleries.

The problem is one of scale. Hockney's best composite photos resonate against the human body, which makes their pictorial qualities vivid. But the Grand Canyon photo-murals are unhinged from that physical relationship. When a handrail shown at the edge of the canyon's awesome abyss is large enough to be grasped but can't be, all you see is the unforgiving photographic illusion. Before it you become, well, invisible.

The rest of the show demonstrates quite the opposite. Giving visibility to what had previously been marginal—outside the frame—is central to Hockney's artistic achievement.