

# The New York Times

## David Hockney Goes High-Tech

The British artist has always embraced new ways of working. With an immersive digital extravaganza, he is taking that to the next level.



By **Alex Marshall**

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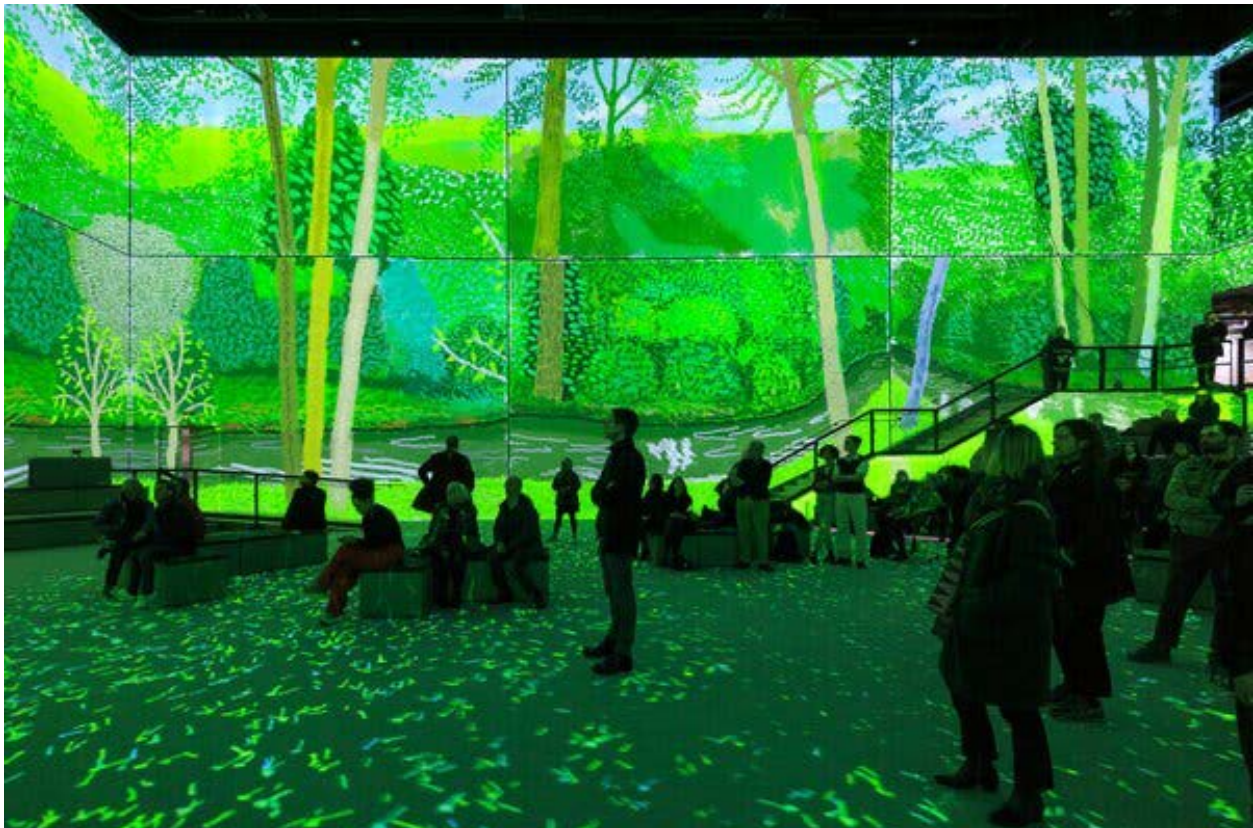
David Hockney said the interactive art extravaganza “Bigger & Closer (Not Smaller & Further Away)” was a natural development in his career: “My work was leading up to this, really.” Credit...Justin Sutcliffe

The British painter David Hockney grabbed the art world's attention in the 1960s and '70s with fun and glamorous depictions of Californian life. They included striking images of [nude sunbathers lying alongside glistening swimming pools](#) and [socialites in their sleek, modernist homes](#).

Then, Hockney discovered technology. In 1982, he began [exhibiting works made with Polaroid cameras](#). Those pieces featured dozens of photos of friends and family, or landscapes, arranged into disjointed collages. Soon, Hockney was making art with [fax machines](#) and [photocopiers](#). In the last 10 years, he has exhibited works he made with smartphone apps [and his iPad](#).

Now, Hockney, 85, has embraced digital technology on a much larger scale to create "[Bigger & Closer \(Not Smaller & Further Away\)](#)" – an immersive spectacular that opens on Wednesday at Lightroom, a new London arts venue, and runs through June 4.

In the show, dozens of Hockney's paintings are beamed onto Lightroom's walls at huge scale, so they surround and engulf the viewer. They include some of his most famous works, such as "[A Bigger Splash](#)," his 1967 swimming pool painting; and "[A Bigger Grand Canyon](#)," which depicts one of America's greatest landscapes in psychedelic hues.



"18th-27th June 2021, La Dorette Winding Its Way," a work by Hockney projected onto the walls and floor for the "Bigger & Closer" show at Lightroom, an arts venue in London. Credit...Justin Sutcliffe

Sometimes, the vivid paintings flow off the walls and stretch out across the venue's floor. At other moments, Hockney's animated brushwork appears on the walls one stroke at a time, until a painting becomes gloriously whole.

Throughout the show, Hockney's voice can be heard, in excerpts from old TV and radio interviews. "You can't be bored of nature, can you?" Hockney says in his thick Yorkshire accent, as dozens of his landscape paintings appear on the walls.

"You've endless subjects in nature," Hockney adds, "if you really look."

In a recent interview at Lightroom, Hockney said that "Bigger & Closer" was a natural development in his career. "My work was leading up to this, really," he said.

Hockney, who smoked throughout the conversation, said that art critics used to complain that his work "was all over the place" because he worked in so many media. "I knew it wasn't," he said. "I've always been consistent."

Although Hockney is now a critics' darling, his latest working medium is less favored. Over the past few years, immersive art extravaganzas have mushroomed around the globe, including in places such as [Bordeaux, France](#); Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates; and [New York](#). Most of those shows follow a strict formula: digitized masterpieces by long-dead artists such as Dalí, Matisse or Van Gogh are projected at scale onto warehouse walls, then animated to an orchestral soundtrack. Discussing two recent immersive Van Gogh spectacles in New York, the Times critic Jason Farago noted that, in those shows, "sensuous selfie backdrops come well before intellectual engagement."

Hockney said that he hadn't seen any of those spectacles based on other artists' work but that he knew his was different. "They're dead," Hockney said. "I'm a living artist, so I've come in and actually done things."



Hockney's "Yorkshire April 04," at Lightroom. Credit...Justin Sutcliffe

“Bigger & Closer” has been more than three years in the making. In 2019, 59 Productions, a British design company that works in theater and opera, noticed the boom in immersive experiences and began looking for ways to make similar projects with living artists. Mark Grimmer, a director of 59 Productions who led the work on “Bigger & Closer,” said in an interview that he wanted to make events that were “more about storytelling than simple spectacle.”

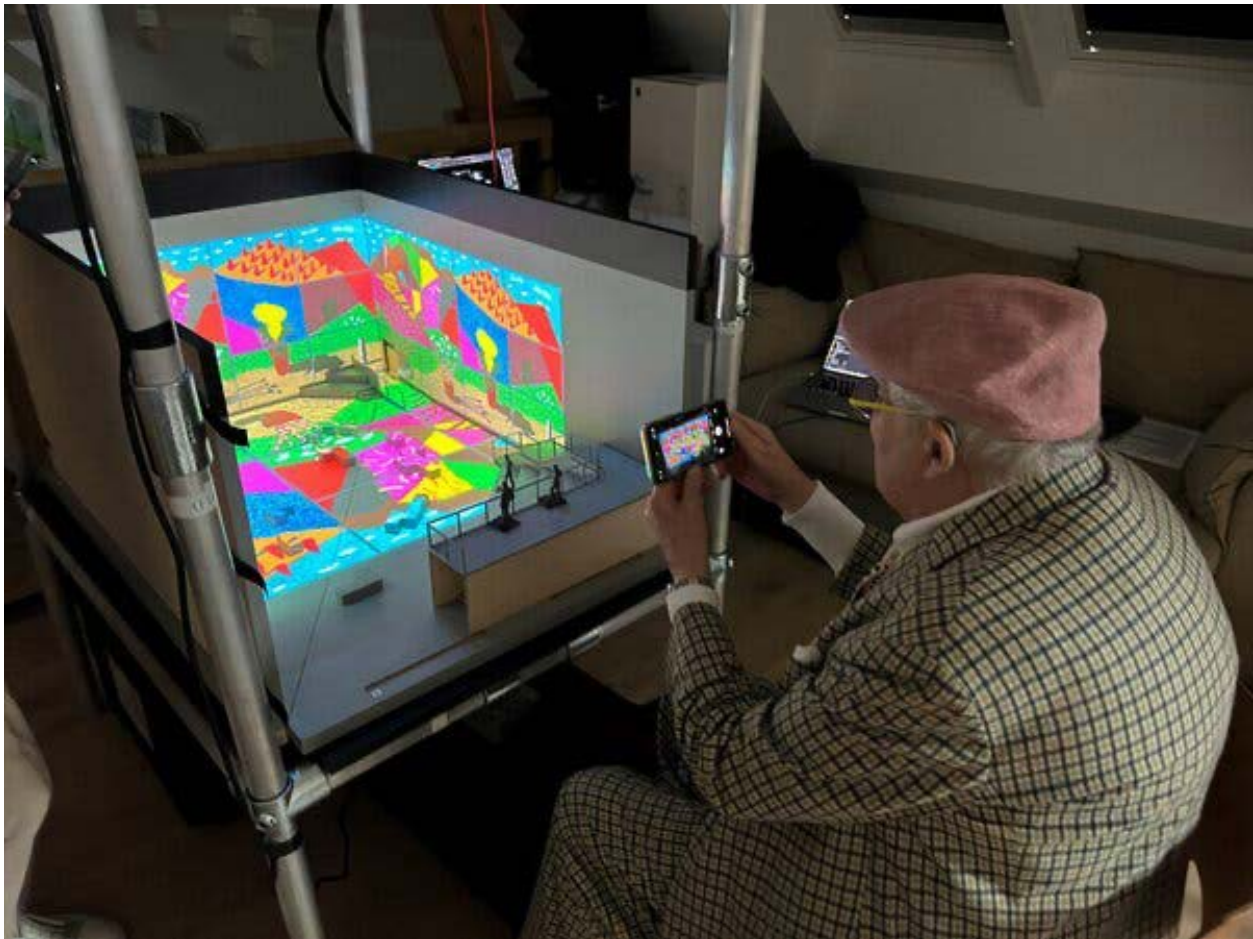
Hockney — a technical innovator with crowd-pulling appeal — was an obvious choice for the first project, Grimmer noted.

That year, Grimmer said, he nervously emailed Hockney a pitch. The artist replied almost instantly. “I would certainly like to talk to you,” Hockney wrote, adding, “I have made things recently that I’m sure you will be very interested in.”

In February 2020, Grimmer invited Hockney to see for himself how the projection technology worked. Grimmer’s team beamed several Hockney paintings, including [“Mulholland Drive: The Road to the Studio,”](#) a 1980 panorama of the Santa Monica Mountains, onto the walls of a former printing-press building in eye-popping color. Some of the projections were 20 feet high and 100 feet long.

Then a technician gave Hockney an electronic stylus connected to the projection system so that he could sketch onto the walls with light. Hockney doodled away, drawing trees and houses and filling the bleak concrete space with swaths of color. It was “quite exciting,” Hockney said. At that moment, he added, he knew that he wanted to work on the project.

Soon, Hockney and the 59 Productions team were emailing ideas for the show back and forth. Grimmer’s team made a scale model of the Lightroom venue for Hockney that included several projectors so that he could watch drafts of the experience at home. After each viewing, Hockney filmed a reaction on his iPhone, with instructions about what should be changed.



The team behind “Bigger & Closer,” 59 Productions, made a scale model of the Lightroom venue for Hockney so that he could watch at home and give feedback as the show came together. Credit...Mark Grimmer

Hockney was still suggesting tweaks until a few weeks before the premiere, Grimmer said.

The final show, which plays on a loop, has six main sections, all set to music by the American composer Nico Muhly. One of the longest of those focuses on Hockney’s stage designs for operas that were regularly staged at venues including the Metropolitan Opera of New York and at the Glyndebourne Festival in southern England from the 1970s to the ’90s.

Hockney — an opera buff who says he still goes to performances even though he has hearing difficulties — said he enjoyed making that long section the most. First, staff members at his archive, in Los Angeles, dug up original drawings for around 10 opera productions. Then, Hockney brought those to life with the help of seven animators at 59 Productions. At one point in the show, moths and bats — taken from Hockney’s [1981 staging of Ravel’s “L’Enfant et les Sortilèges” at the Met](#) — appear to fly around Lightroom. Later, viewers find themselves standing in the middle of an animated ship, from his 1987 [“Tristan und Isolde”](#) for the Los Angeles Opera.

The projection methods of 59 Productions have huge theatrical potential, Hockney said, adding that he hoped young artists would come to “Bigger & Smaller” and “just one or two of them might see in this technology the possibilities for new dramas.”

Richard Slaney, Lightroom's chief executive, said that "Bigger & Smaller" was a "huge risk" for Hockney, given the sniffy reception other interactive spectacles had received.

On Wednesday, as early reviews of the show appeared in the British news media, some critics were scathing. Jonathan Jones, [writing in The Guardian](#), said "Hockney, in his innocence, has lent his fame here to a dumb contemporary fad that doesn't — and cannot — capture the beauty of his art."

But in the interview, Hockney appeared unbothered by what the art world's gatekeepers, or anyone else, thought of "Bigger & Smaller."

"I don't care what critics say about me," Hockney said. "I think it's really good," he added, "and if I think it is, that's all that counts."

***A correction was made on  
Feb. 22, 2023:***

*Earlier versions of two picture captions with this article, using information from a publicist, misstated the names of works by David Hockney. They are "18th-27th June 2021, La Dorette Winding Its Way," not "La Dorette Winding Its Way, 17th June-2nd July 2021," and "Yorkshire April 04," not "Pages From a Yorkshire Sketchbook, 2004."*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/22/arts/design/david-hockney-immersive-lightshow-london.html>