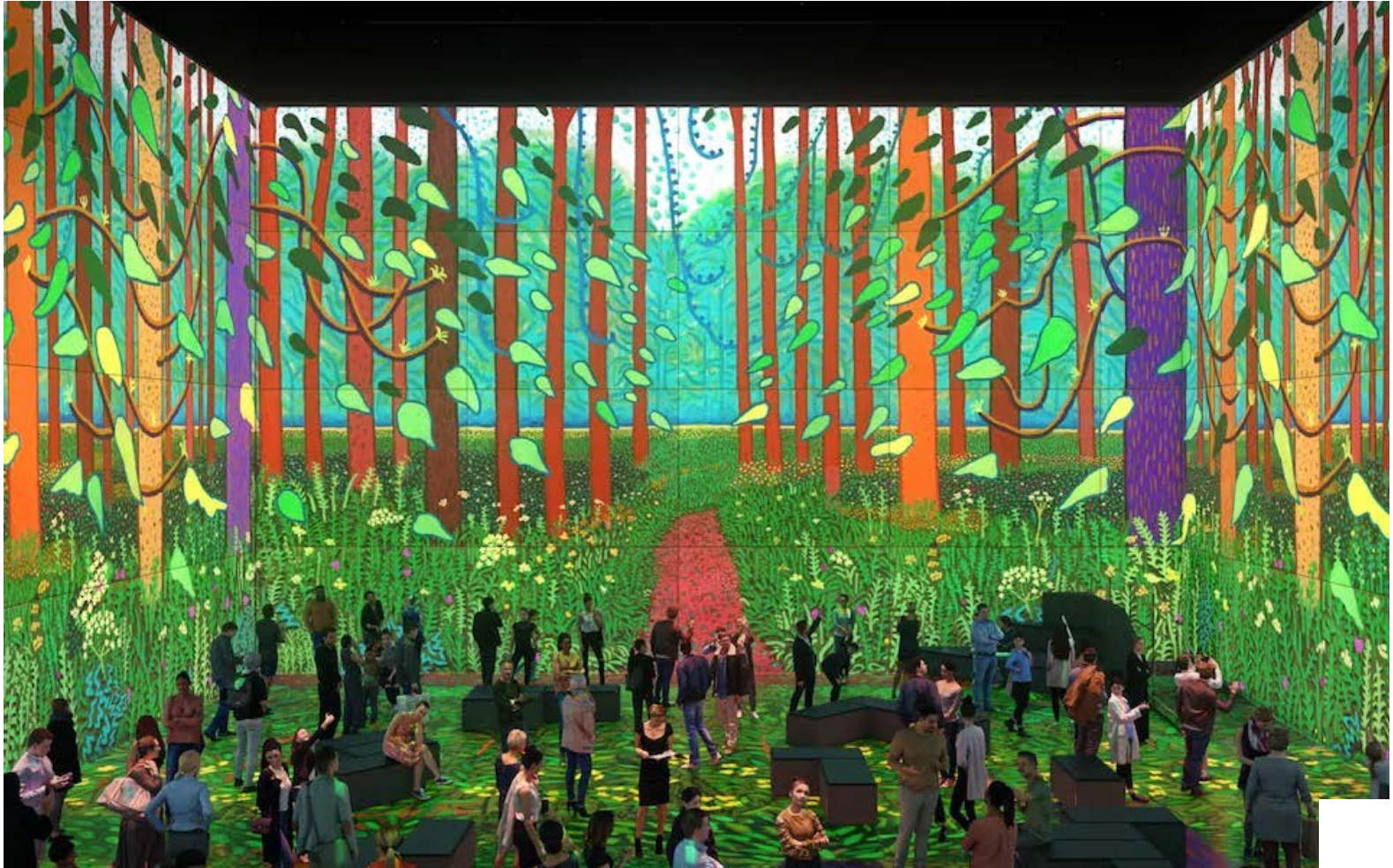


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“ REVIEW

Visual art that’s more like drive-in cinema? A fresh triumph for David Hockney

★★★★☆ 4/5

The artist has fashioned his own son-et-lumière mausoleum in this eagerly-awaited exhibition – and the effects are undeniably impressive

By Alastair Sooke

21 February 2023 • 6:10pm



Titanic: The Exhibition

Walk through a recreation of the ship's interior, from f

Fever

Deep beneath a terrazzo-clad new-build in King's Cross, there's a cavernous chamber that could accommodate a city block. Ramesses II couldn't have conceived of a grander resting place, though he might have objected to being interred so close to the shopping complex of Coal Drops Yard.

This is the setting for *Bigger & Closer* (not smaller & further away), the latest, astonishing venture by that Croc-wearing, chain-smoking, hedonistic populist, David Hockney, who, at 85, seems as frisky as ever. And, like a vast tomb in the Valley of the Kings, his 50-min light show, which, divided into six "chapters", looks back over his 60-year career, is fundamentally commemorative. Using massive projections and high-end audio equipment, so that his disembodied voice thunders throughout the space as if he were Jehovah rumbling commandments from on high (if, that is, Our Father had been brought up in Bradford), Hockney has fashioned his own son-et-lumière mausoleum.



David Hockney at his Bigger & Closer exhibition | CREDIT: Justin Sutcliffe

Let's get something straight from the off: there's been much speculation about the nature of *Bigger & Closer* (should it, for instance, be considered a self-portrait?), but it isn't a work of art – or, rather, it's as much one as, say, a deluxe coffee-table book or high-end documentary exploring Hockney's oeuvre. This is not to denigrate the project, which, considered on its own terms, is a coup of entertainment: accessible, affecting, and, technically, executed with panache.

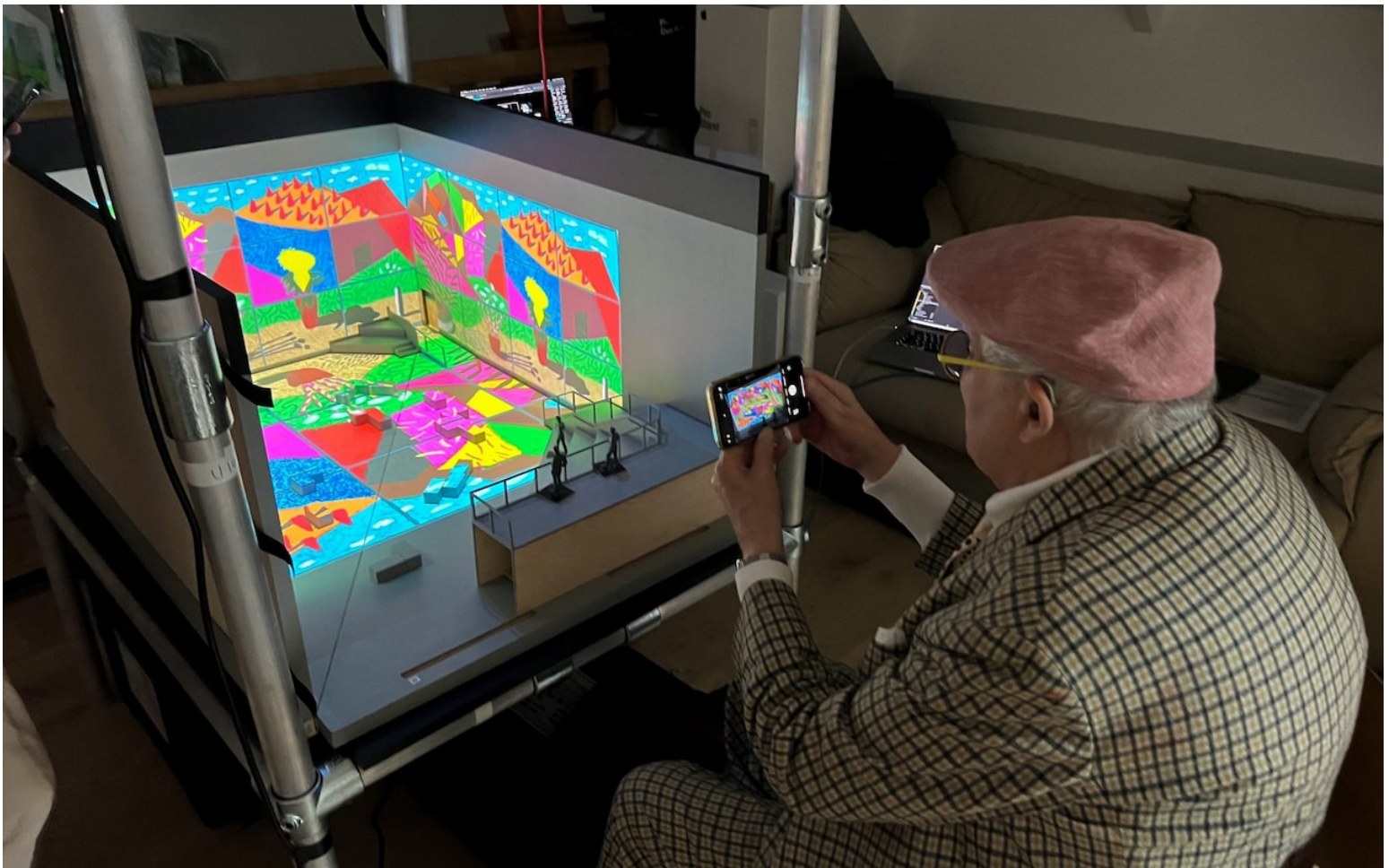
Hockney has always been obsessed with “tech”, experimenting over the years – whether in London, Los Angeles, the Yorkshire Wolds, or Normandy (where he lives today) – with photocopiers, fax machines, instant cameras, iPads. And now, he claims, he has invented a new type of cinematic experience, in which images, projected onto enormous screens, engulf the viewer on every side, and even underfoot. Lights, camera, action! Hollywood, take note.



Installation of David Hockney's A Bigger Grand Canyon 1998 | CREDIT: David Hockney

At the same time, the piece presents a paradox. Hockney describes himself as a champion of painting, yet *Bigger & Closer* pays scant attention to the physical properties of pictures that are so integral to their effect. For the impresarios of the Lightroom, his paintings are infinitely malleable things, mere images to be expanded, manipulated, even animated, while a soundtrack plays.

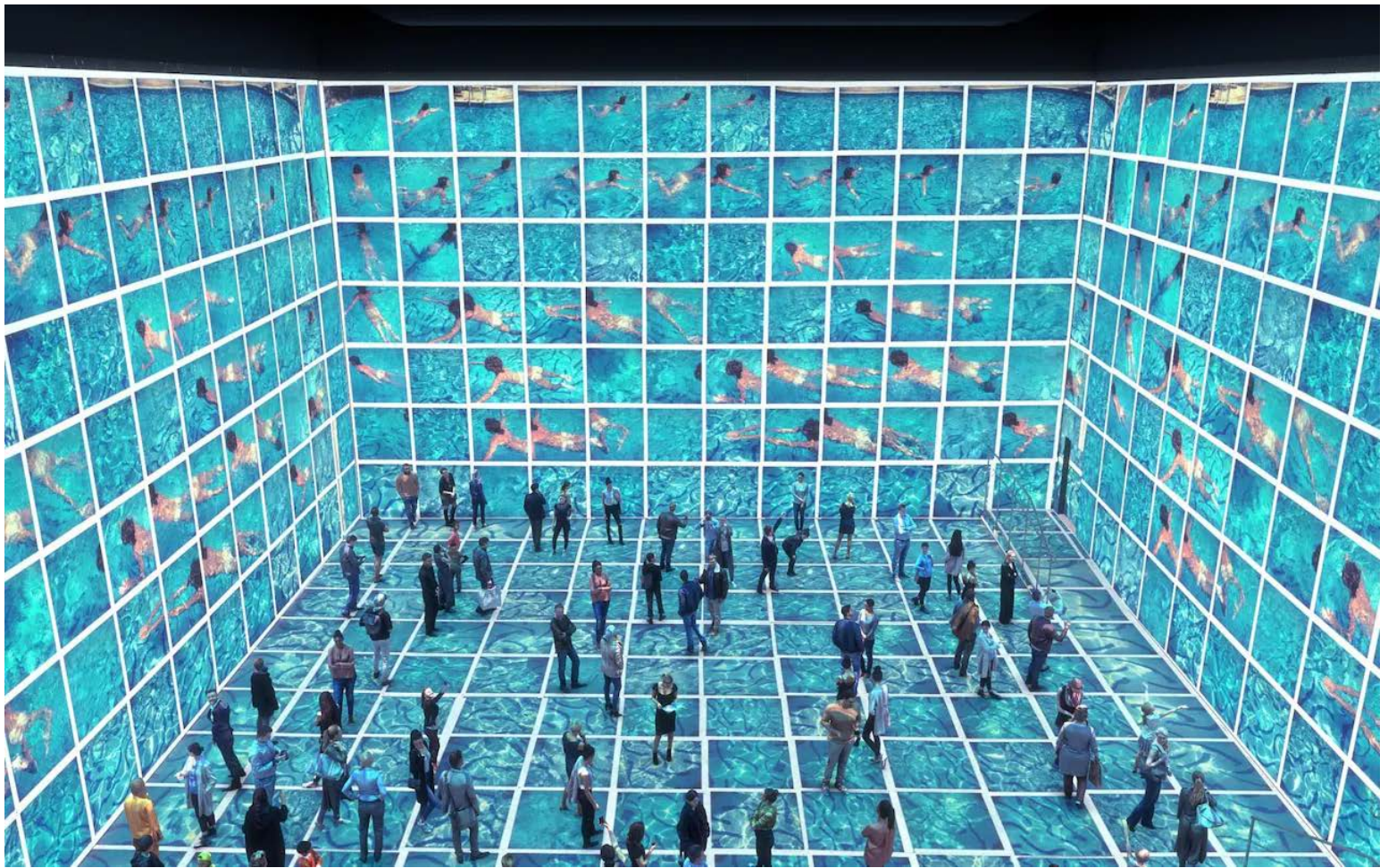
Perhaps spending so much time in supersize America has rubbed off on Hockney: this is visual art scaled-up and transformed into something akin to drive-in cinema; if it were a vehicle (and the show includes a rousing open-top ride through California's mountains, while Wagner blasts from a stereo), it would be one of those monster trucks with ginormous tyres. Who wants to look at boring paintings, *Bigger & Closer* seems to ask, when we can ogle gargantuan simulacra of them instead, each larger than a bus?



Obsessed with tech: David Hockney viewing the model box containing August 2021, Landscape with Shadows | CREDIT: Mark Grimmer

Yet, the overall effect is, undeniably, impressive. I arrived thinking it would prove impossible to enlarge a painting to the size of a billboard on Sunset Boulevard without pixelated glitches catching the eye, but I was wrong. *Bigger & Closer* really does look good. The format proves especially successful during a section about Hockney's pictures of swimming pools, as his versions of the "patterns water makes", as he puts it, flicker across the audience's heads and feet. For a few moments, you feel like one of his carefree skinny-dippers, arrowing through liquid blue.

Moreover, beyond mere technical accomplishment, *Bigger & Closer* strikes a movingly ruminative, gentle note, as we listen to Hockney's reflections (mostly, stitched together from old interviews) on past achievements – and hobby horses, such as the shortcomings of linear perspective. Lest things become melancholic (and the score is sometimes as lachrymose as that accompanying an awards-ceremony obituaries' montage), there are flashes of naughtiness: buttocks the size of Big Ben's clock faces; Hockney's description of spring, a cherished subject, as the moment when "nature has an erection".



Installation of David Hockney's Gregory Swimming Los Angeles March 31st 1982 | CREDIT: David Hockney

Yes, you could accuse Bigger & Closer of being vainglorious; at one point, the soundtrack even bursts into self-congratulatory applause. But, at root, Hockney's art has always been about communicating the joy that, lucky soul, he derives from living in, and looking at, this world. "You're always seeing more," he marvels at one point. Perhaps this sounds banal, but Bigger & Closer, I have no doubt, will excite a wide audience, and turn them on to art. Only a misanthropic misery-guts would fail to derive any pleasure from it.

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