

The view from the woods

David Hockney's East Yorkshire landscapes make Cézanne look Pop

By David Pagel, Special to The Times

Cézanne never struck me as being a Pop artist. Seurat, maybe, with his cool images of tawdry entertainment. And even Matisse, whose urbane idylls set the standard for intelligent hedonism. But Cézanne's paintings of the French countryside seemed too serious, too rooted in the basics of nature to embrace the accessible ordinariness of Pop at its best.

David Hockney's new paintings at L.A. Louver Gallery change all that. They make Cézanne look Pop, turning the granddad of Cubism into a painter of light-drenched landscapes made of whiplash shortcuts and shorthand gestures that seem subdued and distant but loaded with emotion.

Hockney's quietly ravishing pictures also astonish because they depict the East Yorkshire landscapes of his native England as if they were interiors — intimate spaces in which viewers are invited to kick back and relax, taking in the subtle splendors of daylight as it dances across leaves, cuts around branches and suffuses the space between trunks with tasty sensuality. The walls of the downstairs gallery have been painted "Eating Room Red," a deliciously deep burgundy that suggests the hearty comforts of rustic hunting cottages endowed with all the amenities 19th century aristocrats would expect.



Elderflower Blossom, Kilham, July

Each of its picture-window-size paintings depicts a perfectly ordinary bit of woods. The bright greens, saturated lavenders, hazy grays and high-keyed oranges pop against the deep burgundy backdrop.

Hockney painted the five works from the same spot in the Woldgate Woods, standing in the middle of a little dirt road just before it branches into three paths, disappears over a slight rise and then reappears in the distance, in a clearing where the light does funny things with perspective and depth perception. He made each six-panel oil on canvas in two- or three-day sessions last year, from March to November, after schlepping everything he needed to that spot in the woods, setting up a lawn chair, looking carefully and then painting furiously. The results are stunning.

Each picture is unlike any other. The one from July is a symphony of verdant greens, more luscious than Henri Rousseau's fantasy landscapes. A November painting is an explosion of vibrant oranges, its ground blanketed by a bed of fallen leaves that makes it seem as if terra firma has gone spongy. A second November painting is all gauzy light, the crisp vividness of the woods softened to the point of dissolving in the purple-gray fog.

Upstairs, the paintings are smaller and the colors brighter — a rainbow of aqua, lime-green and golden yellow. The skylights bathe everything in a warm glow.

These nine landscapes recall Hockney's plein-air watercolors from two years ago, but they add more sumptuousness and muscle. In each, he marries intimacy and expansiveness, using his eye for portraiture to create wonderfully detailed close-ups of trees, bushes and vines, all set among patchwork fields and beneath skies that seem to reach into infinity.

He says that Constable, like many other artists, used optical devices to compose pictures. The exhibition, on view through April 29, includes a glass-and-string apparatus that Constable used to put nature in perspective.

"Artists thought the optical projection of nature was verisimilitude, which is what they were aiming for," Hockney says. "But in the 21st century, I know that is not verisimilitude. Once you know that, when you go out to paint, you've got something else to do. I do not think the world looks like photographs. I think it looks a lot more glorious than that."