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David Hockney swaps oils for pixels



Cristina Ruiz

THE era of the digital paint-brush has caught up with David Hockney. One of Britain's most influential artists, he believes the latest generation of software is so "fantastic" that he can not only reproduce the look of traditional painting but can also get more subtle effects than with old techniques.

Hockney has composed his latest series of portraits and landscapes on screen before printing them out. They have the brushstrokes and subtle shadings that he was previously able to create only using traditional techniques.

While software has long been used by artists, the work produced on them usually had an unmistakably computer-generated look. The software was too unwieldy and slow to be used for "paintings".

"It's probably only in the past year that the computer's got quick enough to keep up with the draughtsman," said Hockney. "It's a very new medium and it's turned out to be a fantastic medium."

He added: "[The works] are very strong when we print them big. You can see they're hand done . . . and it's a very, very direct feeling you get. [There's] nothing between you and the mark being made."

He added: "You can actually mix the colours on the [screen] . . . you can get incredibly subtle effects."

Hockney, 71, is printing out his pictures in limited editions of between seven and 25, costing between £7,000 and £20,000 each. This compares with the seven-figure sums sometimes fetched by his more traditional paintings.

If he decided later to release the computer file, this would open up the possibility of art lovers being able to download and print out paintings at home identical to those hanging on gallery walls. He has not yet decided whether to destroy the original computer files.

Hockney's medium is Adobe Photoshop software, the latest version of which was released last September. He draws with a stylus onto an electronic tablet plugged into his computer.

While he is not abandoning paints or drawing, Hockney is enthusiastic about the advantages of using a computer for both speed and precision. "The loss would be a physical texture. The gain is speed with colour that's quite unusual," he said. "With a brush it would be slower — swapping brushes in the hand takes time."

His first works have included landscapes of the Yorkshire countryside near his home in Bridlington, with prints such as Winter Road near Kilham and Autumn Trees near Thixendale. These are being exhibited in Los Angeles and will be shown at his gallery, Annely Juda Fine Art in London, from May, along with portraits of his brother Paul and sister Margaret, who once said of him: "Computers are not really his thing." "I drew [them] playing with iPhones and they sat there for about three hours absolutely engrossed while I drew them on Photoshop," said Hockney.

He added: "A few years ago it wasn't possible. I'd often tried it but found that the computer couldn't keep up. You'd finish a drawing and on the screen the line was still moving."

Hans Ulrich Obrist, the co-director of exhibitions and programmes at the Serpentine Gallery in London, recently visited Hockney in Yorkshire where he saw one of the Photoshop paintings on the wall of the artist's studio.

"I've never seen anything like it," said Obrist. "At first I thought it was a painting. The more I examined it, the more I wasn't sure."

Some critics are likely to point out that the software could allow painters to "cheat" by constantly correcting themselves and to be far more precise than if they were using only their eyes and hands. Hockney believes these features are an advantage. He can magnify a small area of the painting temporarily so that he can work on it in detail.

Although Hockney is predominantly a painter, he has always been willing to experiment. His work has included Polaroid photograph compositions, faxes, collages of photographs and early Xerox prints in the 1980s.

Prominent artists who use computers include Julian Opie, who designed the cover of Blur's "Best of" album. Banksy, the street artist, offers 13 high-resolution designs on his website available for download with the message: "This shop is for personal amusement only. Please don't use it to start a business."

Some artists are happy to use the internet for short-term offers. Two years ago Gilbert and George made a work called Planed available free online for 48 hours only. Nine panels had to be downloaded separately.

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