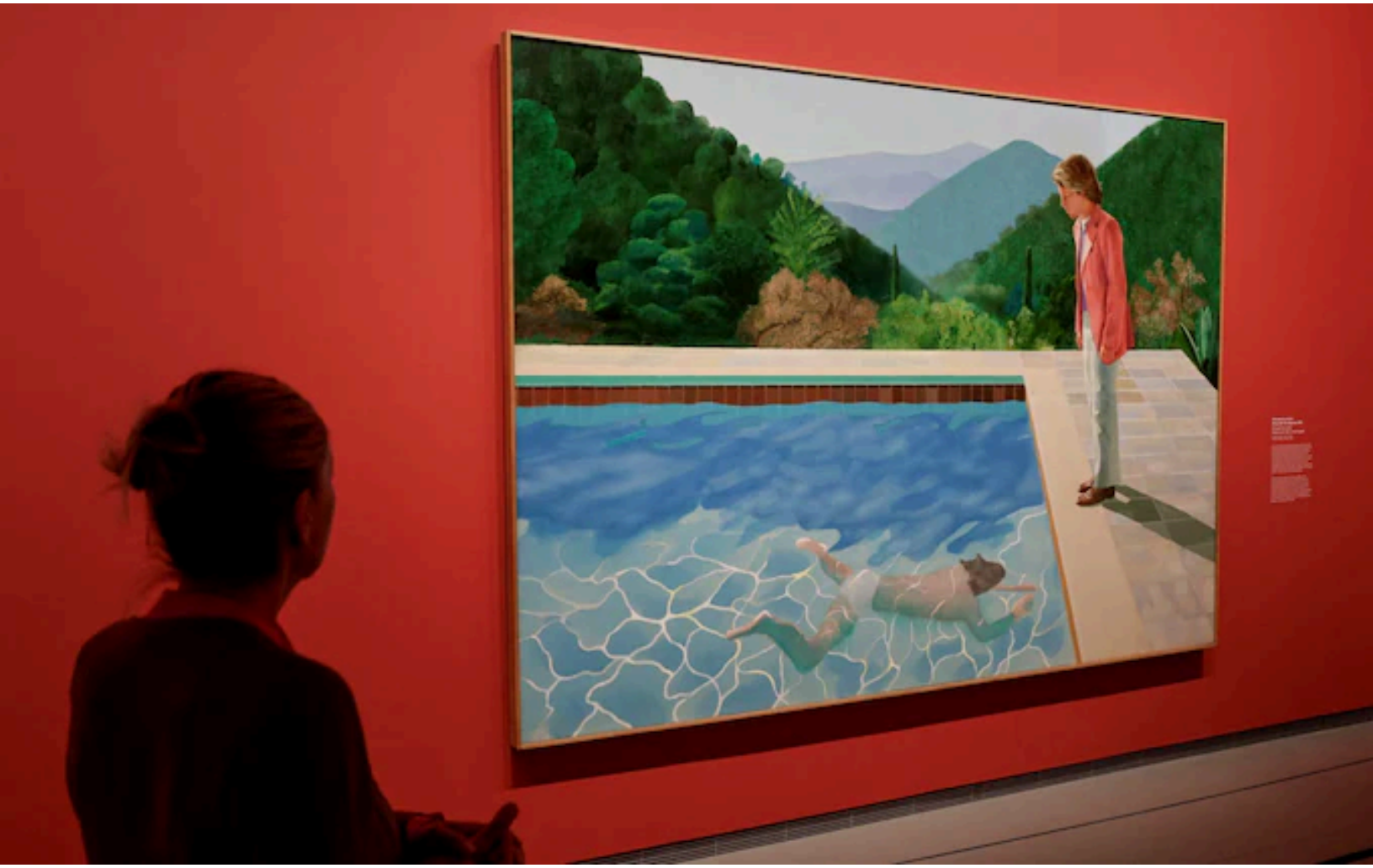
David Hockney 25, Fondation Louis Vuitton: Will transform how we think about this brilliant artist

Britain's most popular living artist has launched his biggest show yet in Paris – and it's an eye-opening, dopamine-unleashing triumph

★★★★★5/5

Alastair Sooke
Chief Art Critic
08 April 2025 1:00pm BST



Hockney's Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures) Credit: STEPHANE DE SAKUTIN

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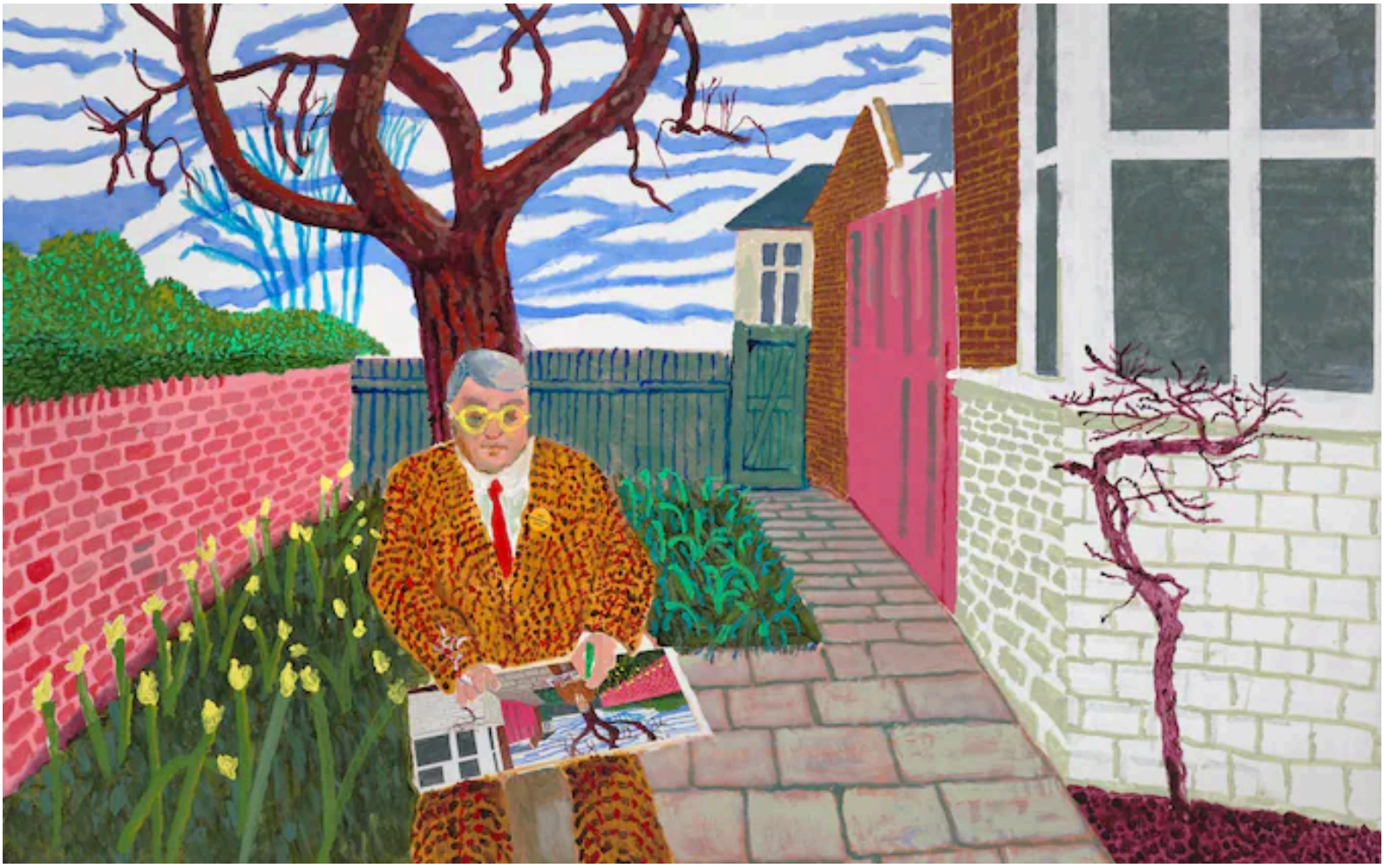
Dressed in a flat cap and tweed suit (but, uncharacteristically, without a cigarette), David Hockney, 87, is whizzing on a mobility scooter around his colossal new retrospective in Paris. With more than 400 artworks produced, astonishingly, over seven decades, the exhibition is – fittingly, for an artist who relishes titles that

contain the word “bigger” – his biggest yet. What’s it like for Britain’s most popular living artist to see his career laid out in such glorious fashion? “It’s fantastic,” he tells me with a smile, eyes twinkling behind canary-yellow, round-framed specs. “I’m still here!”

“Fantastic” is the “mot juste”. Timed to coincide with his favourite season, as blossom erupts outside in the Bois de Boulogne, David Hockney 25 is a rousing, dopamine-unleashing celebration and summation of a brilliant, beloved artist’s work.

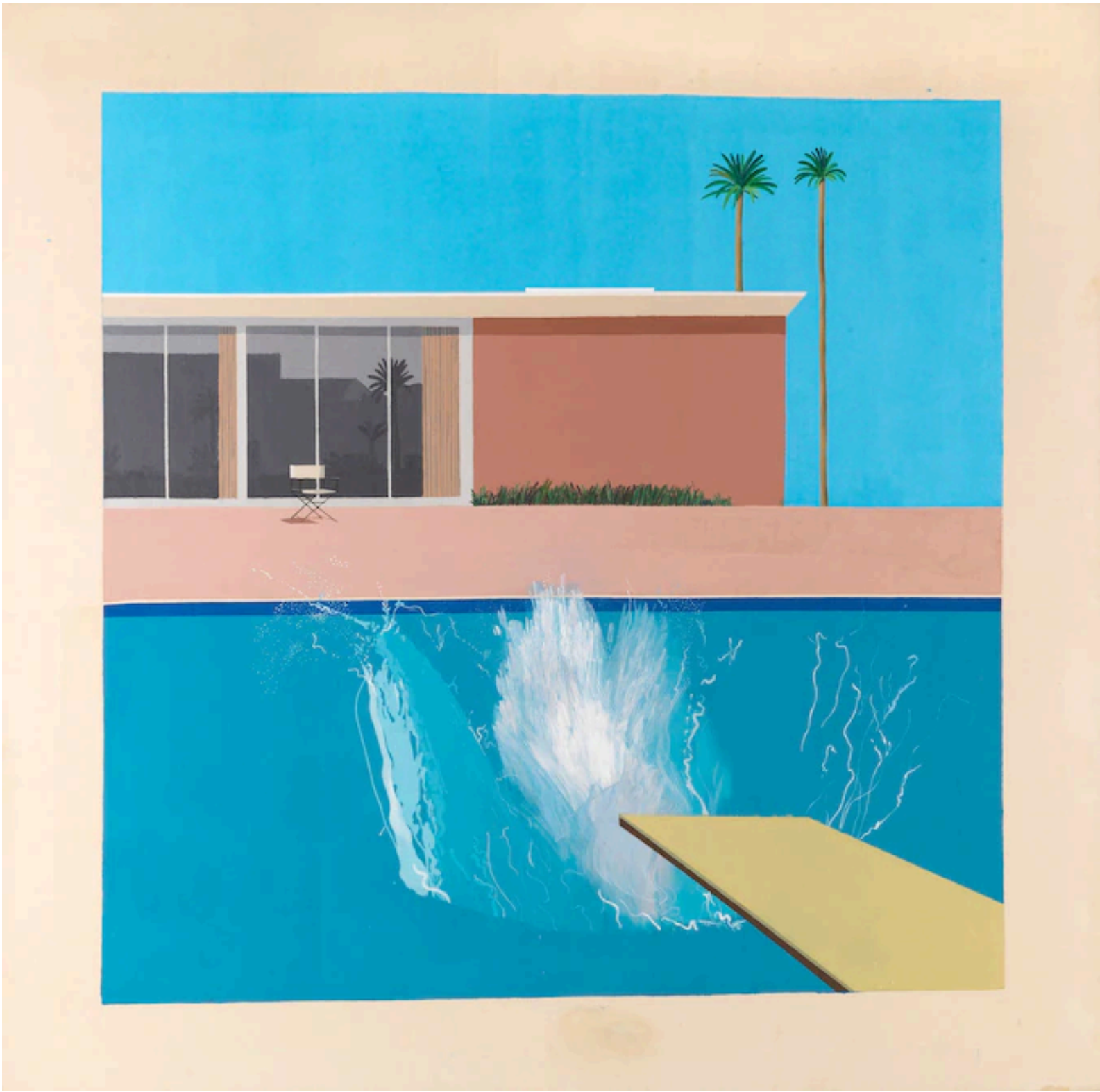
On the billowing silver exterior of the Louis Vuitton Foundation designed by his friend Frank Gehry (whose blue-eyed, crinkly-lipped portrait, with hands like red gloves, appears halfway through the show), Hockney’s quasi-handwritten words are picked out in pink neon: “Do remember they can’t cancel the spring”. As (potential) swansongs go, it’s remarkably uplifting.



David Hockney's Play within a Play within a Play and Me with a Cigarette (2024-2025) Credit: Jonathan Wilkinson

Yet, more than this, as signalled by the subtitle ("Less is Known than People Think") of two strange, spiritually intense new paintings at the end, fresh from Hockney's Marylebone studio (he moved to London from his half-timbered farmhouse in Normandy in 2023), the show may transform how we think about a figure occasionally rebuked for his escapism. On this evidence, Hockney is a complex, even (at times) melancholic artist, seemingly compelled – to my surprise – by a burning otherworldly yearning.

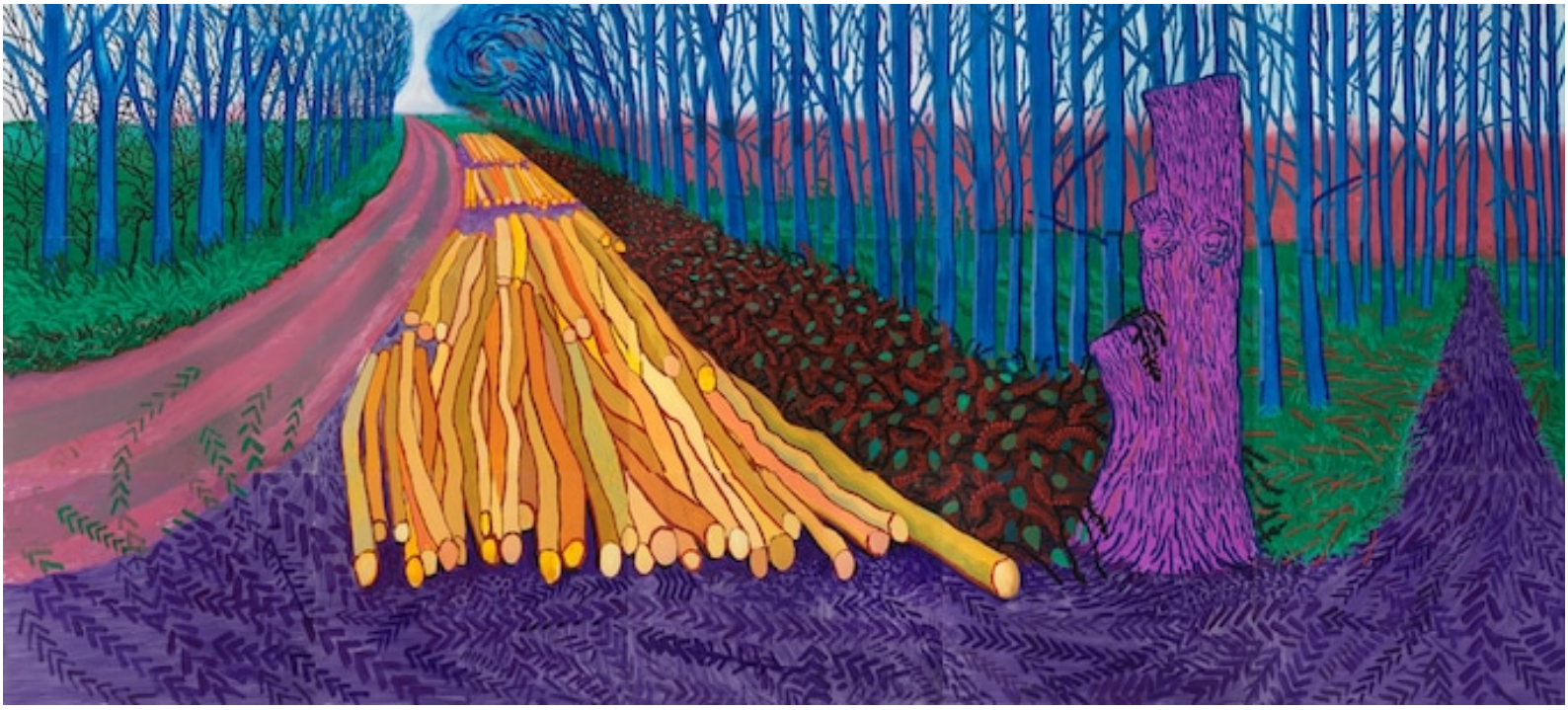
There are 11 rooms, beginning with a pleasingly chunky, two-gallery synopsis of his career to the turn of the millennium, filled with many of his greatest hits (including 1967's A Bigger Splash, lent by the Tate), as well as a sombre 1955 portrait of his dark-suited father, like something by Édouard Vuillard (and the first painting he ever sold).



A Bigger Splash (1967) by David Hockney Credit: David Hockney

Much of the rest of the exhibition dwells on his output over the past quarter century, with galleries devoted to landscapes executed in Yorkshire during the 2000s, as well as, from 2019, rural Normandy.

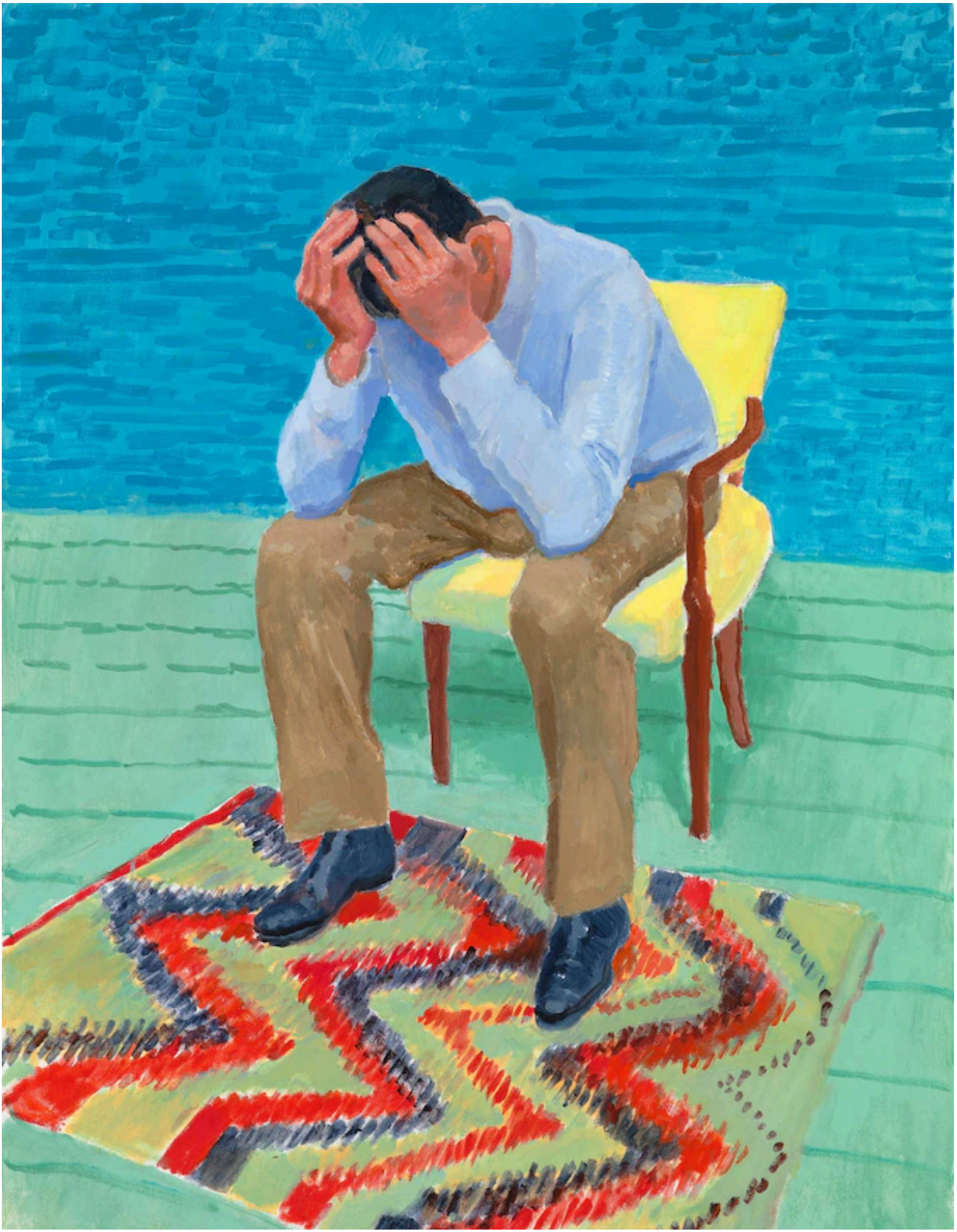
I was snippy about some of Hockney's Yorkshire pictures when they appeared at the Royal Academy of Arts in 2012; the smaller works remain parochial and minor. But the grand paintings in which, say, hawthorns like gigantic squidgy chess pieces appear to undulate and dance while exuding creamy blossoms like squashed eclairs? They're radiantly weird.



David Hockney's Winter Timber (2009) Credit: Jonathan Wilkinson

With its anthropomorphic purple tree stump, like a grumpy forest god surrounded by pupal orange streaks, Winter Timber (2009) is impregnated with supernatural, cosmic significance: beside a track, felled orange logs laid out like the yellow brick road lead the eye to a vortex of swirling blue branches, like a portal to another dimension. Few galleries could so suavely accommodate Hockney's Bigger Trees near Warter (2007), an oil painting on 50 canvases depicting a wintry coppice irradiated by uncanny, seemingly fluorescent reddish-pink.

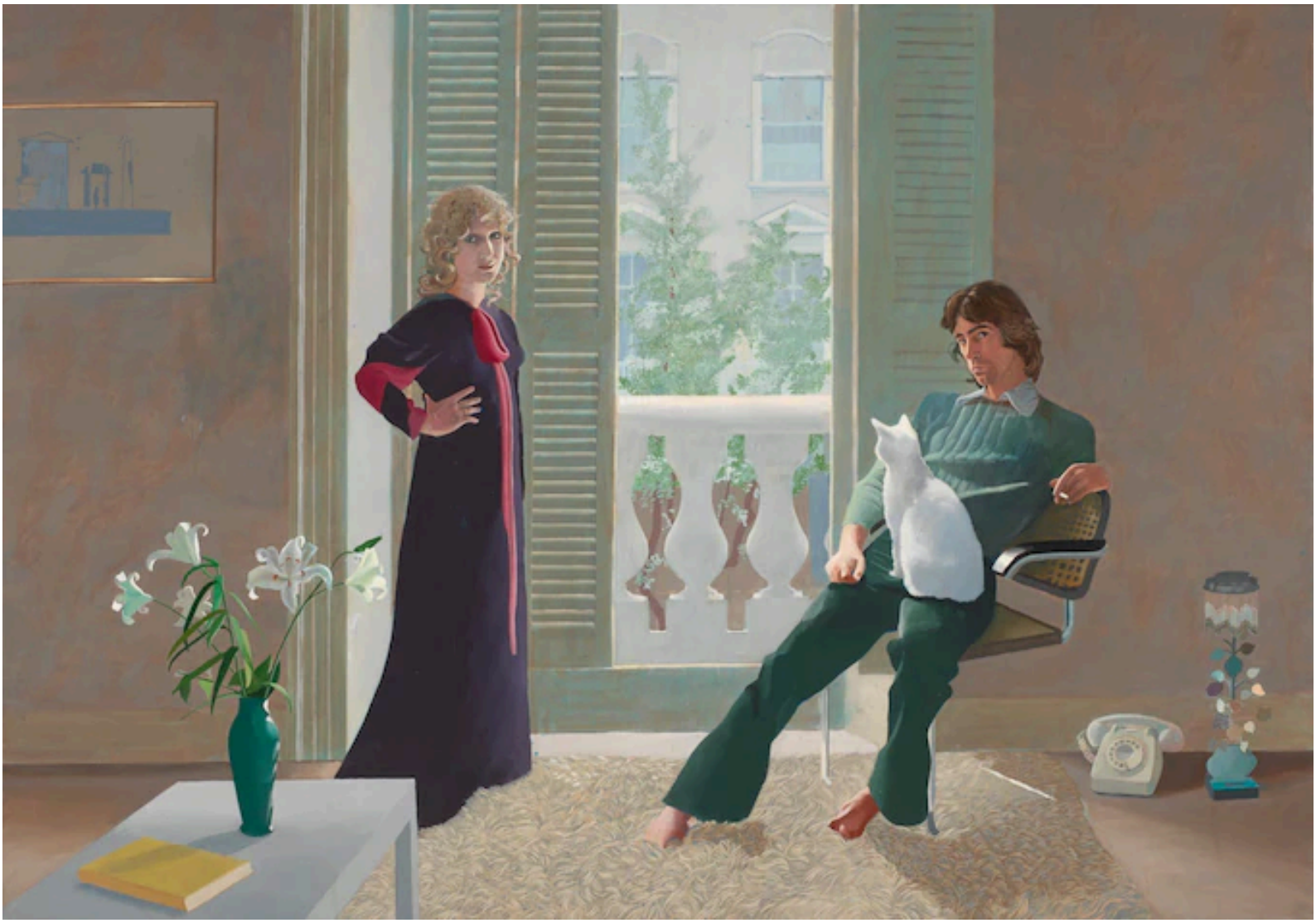
Throughout, artworks confound the notion that Hockney is nothing but a hedonist depicting sunshine and sex by the pool. A graffiti-like picture in the opening room, with two forms like bristly Weetabix depicting men urgently going at it, was painted in 1961, when homosexuality in Britain was still illegal; Berlin: A Souvenir (1962) seems to represent a nightclub frequented by wraiths.



J-P Gonçalves de Lima (2013) by David Hockney Credit: David Hockney

In a 2013 portrait, Hockney's partner, "JP" (Jean-Pierre Gonçalves de Lima), clutches his head as if bereft; nearby, in 15 grimacing self-portraits grouped together on a royal-blue wall, the artist appears, by turns, befuddled, plaintive, even vacant. In the final picture, he cups his ear, reminding us of his deafness, and, by extension, the inevitability of physical decline.

Several Normandy landscapes depict raindrops plopping into ponds or sliding down a window's panes. One vast composition, created using an iPad, turns the setting sun into a volcanic explosion; elsewhere, Hockney portrays clouds like luminous smoke rings. A gallery of nocturnes depicts the artist's garden tinged with silvery lunar reflections. Spectral and mysterious, they're the antithesis of the Hockney we thought we knew.



David Hockney's Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy (1970-71) Credit: David Hockney

Given his familiarity, I marvelled at the discovery of so much nuance. By the end, this genial Yorkshireman's achievement feels, yes, bigger than before, and almost overwhelming.

From April 9; information: fondationlouisvuitton.fr

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