David Hockney in Normandy.

CULTURE

David Hockney Just Keeps Painting

As he prepares for the most comprehensive exhibition of his career, the 87-year-old legendary artist opens up about aging, iPhone art, and the unstoppable urge to create.

by **Arthur Lubow**
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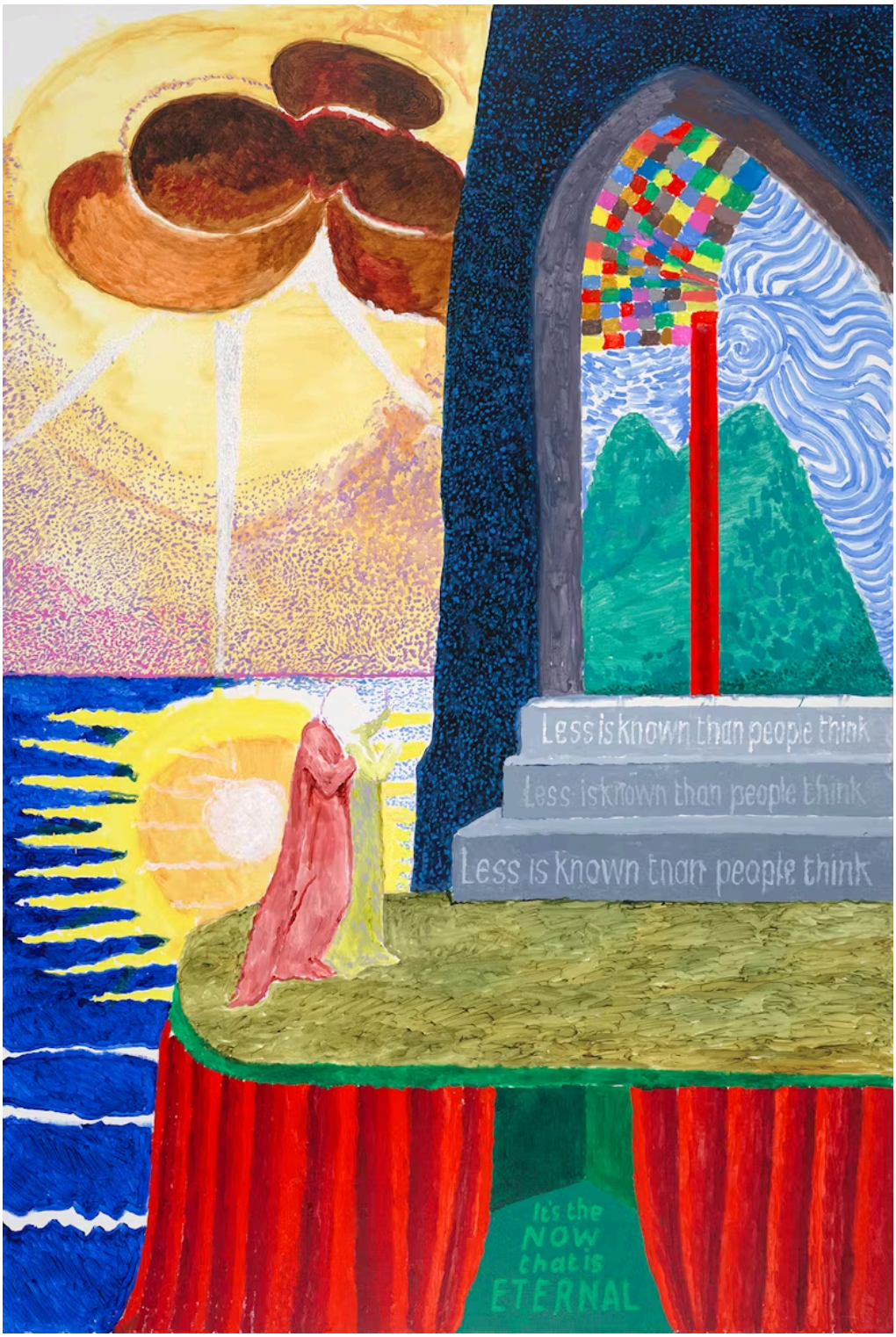
An unrepentant lifetime smoker, David Hockney, 87, wheezes from respiratory difficulties. He sleeps during some of the day and is watched over by round-the-clock nurses. His deafness, the first signs of which he noticed in 1979, has worsened considerably, so that even with hearing aids he relies on lipreading to facilitate conversation. In July 2023, he moved to London from his house in rural Normandy, France, partly because he needed to be in close range of a hospital in case of an emergency.

And yet, for three hours or so each day, Hockney marshals his energies to sit down and paint. Earlier this year, he was still making pictures to include in his largest exhibition to date, "David Hockney, 25," a retrospective scheduled to open on April 9 at the Fondation Louis Vuitton, in Paris. Working with his companion, Jean-Pierre Gonçalves de Lima, who is known as JP, Hockney has been instrumental in shaping the contours of the show.

As the title indicates, "David Hockney, 25" will spotlight his 21st--century output, pictures he has made in the past 25 years. "He's done a huge amount of work in that period," says Sir Norman Rosenthal, former head of the Royal Academy of Arts, who is the Fondation's guest curator. "He's a kind of Picasso figure, in terms of the breadth and variety of concentration and the sheer production." The exhibition will also include some earlier iconic works, among them *A Bigger Splash* (1967), *Mr. and Mrs. Clark and Percy* (1970–71), and *Portrait of an -Artist (Pool With Two Figures)* (1972)—the last of which sold in 2018 for $90.3 million, a price that remains the record at auction for a painting by a living artist.



Hockney's painting *After Blake: Less Is Known Than People Think*, 2024.
Jonathan Wilkinson, © David Hockney.

Like his hero, Picasso, Hockney has managed to create a prodigious quantity of acclaimed art while maintaining a public persona that enjoys brand-name recognition. A celebrity since his mid-20s, he dyed his dark hair blond and wore oversize round eyeglasses, guilelessly crafting a look that distinguished him from the crowd. Shunning plain clothes, he opted for checks, tattersalls, plaids, and, especially, stripes. His socks were brightly colored and mismatched. A cigarette was never far from his lips.

Also like Picasso, he immortalized a succession of lovers in a multitude of portraits—only in Hockney's case, the lovers are male. While a student at the Royal College of Art, in London, at a time when homosexuality was still illegal in Britain, he depicted gay sexuality and domesticity with courageous

insouciance. Back then, influenced by Jean Dubuffet, he was making blocky "art brut" figures—but Hockney's boxy men were hugging and kissing (*We Two Boys Together Clinging*, 1961) or engaged in reciprocal fellatio (*Adhesiveness*, 1960). His life-study painting, a requirement for graduation, was inspired by a muscleman posing on the cover of a homoerotic physique magazine. Was he penalized? To the contrary, his paintings were praised in the press after being chosen in two consecutive years for the "Young Contemporaries" show in a London gallery. Upon graduation, he was awarded a gold medal of distinction with his diploma. He wore a gold lamé jacket to the ceremony.

In 1974, Sir John Rothenstein, the longtime director of the Tate, wrote that Hockney "enjoyed an immediate, international success that began when he was still a student—something achieved by no serious painter within my earlier personal experience." Through his beguiling personality as well as his talent, he entered elite social circles, making dear friends of Christopher Isherwood and Billy Wilder, and fraternizing with the likes of Andy Warhol, Paloma Picasso, Amanda Lear, Karl Lagerfeld, Tony Richardson, Dennis Hopper, Stephen Spender…the list goes on and on.

Clockwise from top left: A portrait by Cecil Beaton, 1965; Hockney, with artists Raymond Foye (left) and Jerry Sohn, in front of a wall-size work, 1980; with the painting that won him the first prize at the John Moores National Museums Liverpool exhibition, 1967; Hockney, circa 1985; in Los Angeles, circa 1978; Hockney's painting *The Most Beautiful Boy in the World* being hung at the Royal College of Art's "Young Contemporaries" exhibition in London, 1961; the film poster for *A Bigger Splash*, 1973; at work in his studio, 1984; Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, with sets designed by Hockney, 1987; with Peter Schlesinger on the set of *A Bigger Splash*; *Portrait of an Artist (Pool With Two Figures)*, 1972.

Clockwise from top left: Cecil Beaton, Condé Nast via Getty Images; Susan Wood/Getty Images; WATFORD/Mirrorpix/Mirrorpix via Getty Images; Michael Childers/Corbis via Getty Images; Evening Standard/Hulton Archive/Getty Images; LMPC via Getty Images; Ron Bull/Toronto Star via Getty Images; Ron Scherl/Redferns; Moviestore/Shutterstock; Jenni Carter, © David Hockney; Corbis/VCG via Getty Images.

He owes his popularity with a wider audience to his skill in constructing a fully inhabited and furnished universe. That was especially true of Los Angeles, which he, more than any other artist, has visually defined in the public's imagination. He moved there in 1964, having idealized it—and painted it—beforehand, with an erotic aura he absorbed from reading *Physique Pictorial* and gay fiction. As he looked down from the airplane and saw the profusion of blue swimming pools, he knew he had found his home.

Over the next decades, Hockney would depict L.A. as a collection of shimmering pools, towering palms, and low-slung modernist houses, all aglow in a flat bright light. And the city, in turn, would leave

its mark on him. Before he arrived, he was painting people as heads atop rectangles. Beginning in 1966 with a painting of a friend, the gallerist Nick Wilder, he began doing portraits of specific people.

In his personal life, he was teaching an art course at UCLA, and at the start of the term he fell for an 18-year-old student, Peter Schlesinger. Their five-year relationship was the first love of Hockney's life. Its dissolution in 1971, chronicled with unusual intimacy in Jack Hazan's semi-fictionalized documentary *A Bigger Splash*, left him bereft. He expressed his forlorn feelings in his work, most famously in *Portrait of an Artist*, with the artist being Schlesinger, who is standing at the edge of a pool and looking down at a man swimming.

Clockwise from top left: Hockney's *Portrait of My Father*, 1955; with his then partner, Peter Schlesinger, 1969; at home in Los Angeles, 1987; with his dog, circa 1999; poolside in Los Angeles with David Stoltz (left) and Ian Falconer, circa 1978; a painting of his current companion, Jean-Pierre Gonçalves de Lima, 2013; with Celia Birtwell beside *Mr. and Mrs. Clark and Percy*, 1970–71; in the Hollywood Hills, circa 1978; his memoir *David Hockney by David Hockney: My Early Years*, 1988; with Paloma Picasso, 1984; Hockney's painting *Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy*, 1968; Cecil Beaton and Hockney, photographed by Schlesinger, 1970; with Keith Haring at Mr Chow restaurant, 1985.

Clockwise from top left: Richard Schmidt, The David Hockney Foundation, © David Hockney; Chris Morphet/Redferns/Getty Images; Anthony Barboza/Getty Images; Mikel Roberts/Sygma via Getty Images; Michael Childers/Corbis via Getty Images; © David Hockney; Nick Harvey/WireImage; Michael Childers/Corbis via Getty Images; Abe Books; Alan Davidson/Shutterstock; Fabrice Gibert, © David Hockney; Peter Schlesinger; © Ben Buchanan, American Art Archives.

For the most part, however, his portrayals of pools, especially in Los Angeles, were sunnier. In 1988, in the catalog for a Hockney retrospective at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, its director Earl A. Powell III wrote, "It is through Hockney's work that many people derive their impressions of life in Southern California, a landscape redolent with sunshine, swimming pools, and palm trees." That was 37 years ago. The smoke of the catastrophic L.A. wildfires was still fresh when I asked Hockney for his reaction to the devastation. He has two homes there, one in the Hollywood Hills and one in Malibu, on the beach. The golden dream of Southern California was now grievously smudged. "I lived in L.A. for 30 years, and I probably won't go back now," he told me, speaking through an associate who read him my questions. "Somebody said my little house on the beach survived because it was on rocks and you went up the steps to the wooden garages. And maybe it has. I don't know. I am sure it must be a sadder place, L.A. right now."

But looking back feels unnatural to Hockney. He prefers to make new work that can be included in the upcoming show. In his latest self-portrait, he adopted a characteristic pose, seated in his garden, drawing a tree with one hand and holding a cigarette in the other. He has also made recent studies of his nurses, Lewis and Sonja. These paintings are tinged with the wistful tenderness that can come in

old age to those fortunate enough to accept it gracefully. "I recently did Lewis and Sonja because I have got to know their faces, you see, because they are looking at me and I am looking at them," he said. "Otherwise, you are not sure what people really look like. I know we are all different—everybody's different. And like the leaves on the trees, they fall off at different times; they don't all fall off at once."

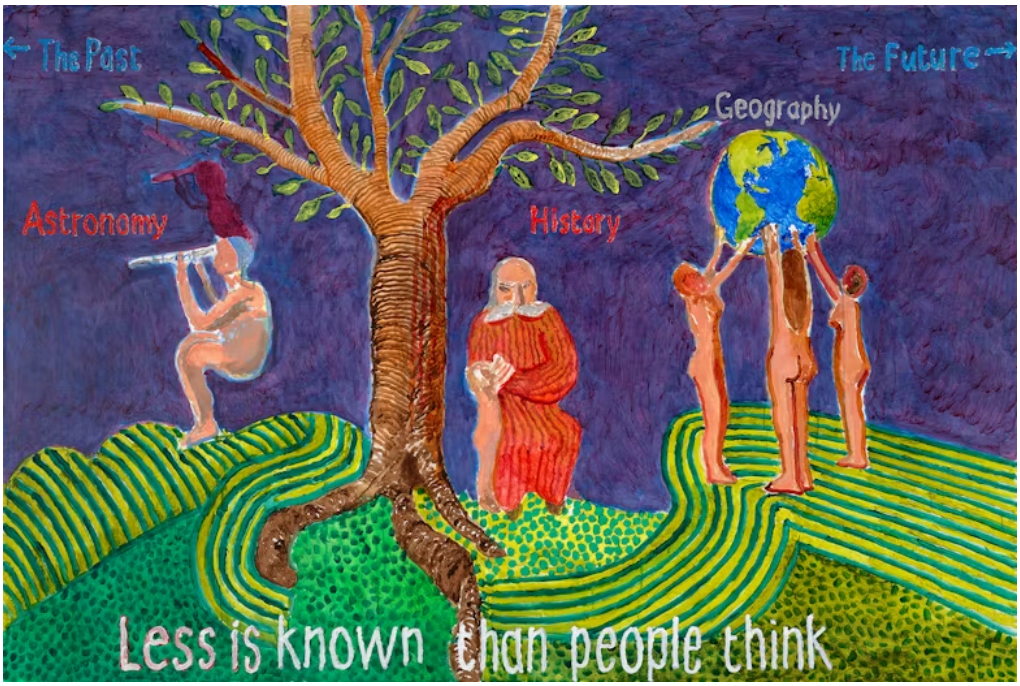
Hockney with his dog, Tess.
Jean-Pierre Gonçalves de Lima, © David Hockney.

Hockney's budding years took place in a working-class household in Bradford, a city in northern England. His father, a pacifist, was an accountant's clerk; his mother, a devout Methodist and a vegetarian, tended the home. They recognized Hockney's artistic talent and drive at an early age and, with some hesitation, bowed to his insistence that he forgo getting a job and instead attend the Bradford School of Art, a well-regarded institution. He received a first-class diploma with honors and was admitted for postgraduate work at both the Slade School of Fine Art and the Royal College of Art, two of the most prestigious art schools in Britain. When he received his diploma from the Royal College of Art, in 1962, he already had been represented for a year by a dealer, John Kasmin, and was known in the London art world. Counter to the usual story of an artist clawing his way to recognition, he had to resist the temptation to rest on his laurels. By the time he was 40, he was a global celebrity.

That is how old he was when I first spoke with him, in 1978, in his studio in the Notting Hill district of London. I was a young magazine journalist, interviewing him about the sets he was creating for a

Glyndebourne Festival production of Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*. Looking back at my interview notes, I see that Hockney was already coping with the weight of his achievements. "It gets harder to paint as you go on, partly because you've got your own work of the past to think about," he said then. "So, it's both a burden and an advantage. And, of course, you always want to paint better pictures. Otherwise, you wouldn't go on; you'd give up."

With that in mind, he had been revisiting some of his early paintings. At one point, he said, he had dismissed them as "awfully poor and inconsistent"—in short, "dreadful." But then he saw them again at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1970 and revised his opinion. "You could see how I'd taken up some ideas and moved along with them and abandoned some and moved into other areas," he said. "Obviously, great artists give you standards that you want to try and attempt to reach, but I'm not stupid. I can't paint like Velázquez or Goya or Picasso. I would be mad to try. I just don't have that kind of skill at all."



Hockney's painting *After Munch: Less Is Known Than People Think*, 2023.
Jonathan Wilkinson, © David Hockney.

Despite his modesty, Hockney possesses draftsmanship skills that surpass those of most of his contemporaries. Plus, he has the advantage of being an artist of his time. Early on, he was able to soak up what other artists were doing—such as the shaped canvases of Frank Stella and Jasper Johns, and the color field ring abstractions of Kenneth Noland, which can be readily detected in his Royal College of Art paintings. "At one time, I believed my work had to look like modern art or it wasn't any good," he said in that conversation decades ago. "Then I slowly began to realize that was a silly way of looking at it. Art can't go backwards. Even if everybody starts painting just what's in front of them, they can't paint the way it was done 50 years ago. It's just not possible. Then you begin to realize, if this is an impossibility, there's no use worrying about something you couldn't avoid anyway."

Later, when living in Los Angeles, Hockney became obsessed with the challenge of conveying a sense of movement and the passage of time in a two-dimensional painting. In the 1980s, he started taking Polaroids to make bigger and bigger collages. He was seeking to emulate Cubism in undermining single-point perspective, which places a viewer in a static posture, facing a scene that recedes to a vanishing point. Treating photos as his building blocks, he constructed compositions that culminated in 1986 in *Pearblossom Hwy.*, which comprises more than 700 -photographs to represent varying viewpoints that you would see from the front seat of a car while riding down a desert highway. In his paintings, too, he incorporated motion. *Mulholland Drive: The Road to the Studio*, from 1980, depicts a sinuous road that snakes through a scene of pointillist patchwork, in colors as bright as those of the Fauvists, juxtaposed with a section that has the bleached-out rectilinearity of a road map.

Much of the work on view in Paris will reveal Hockney's infatuation with the latest technologies. In late 2008, he began making drawings, initially of flowers, on his iPhone, a device that had been introduced

only a year before. By then he had moved his primary residence from Los Angeles to a town called Bridlington, on the coast of East Yorkshire, about 80 miles from Bradford. "The reason I was good on the iPhone was that I always had quite small sketchbooks in my pocket, so with it being small, it didn't matter to me that much," he said. "I drew on the phone with my thumb mostly, and then I got a stylus. But the first ones, 30 or 40, were drawn with just a thumb." He purchased an iPad in June 2010, as soon as it became available. Hockney had been stippling and crosshatching with ink on paper or acrylic paint on canvas, and the tablet allowed him a quicker, easier way to proceed. In Bridlington, he also returned to oil painting, inspired by the landscape, which he portrayed in acid greens and shocking mauves, similar to the colors on the prints made from his iPad drawings.

Hockney at his reading table.
Jean-Pierre Gonçalves de Lima, © David Hockney.

When he made his next move, to a half-timbered 17th-century house in Normandy in 2019, with JP, who is French, he was comfortable shifting back and forth between iPad sketches, ink drawings, and paintings. In Normandy, he made a series of acrylic portraits of friends and relatives who came to visit: his brother Richard; the three adult children of the fashion designers Ossie Clark and Celia Birtwell; record producer Clive Davis; and—surprisingly, because he dislikes painting portraits of people he hasn't known for a long time—Harry Styles. Loose and relaxed, they exemplify what Hockney is aiming for at this point in his life. "My approach to portraiture has changed," he told me. "Now I don't really draw a preparatory sketch on the canvas. I just start painting, which is a bit riskier because wherever

you put the head, the body has to fit. But I'm enjoying it, and I think most of the portraits are quite successful."

The Paris show is weighted toward his portraiture, and it pays primary attention to the paintings and drawings he produced in Bridlington and Normandy. But it will span the enormous arc of his career, beginning with the portrait he made of his father in Bradford in 1955, which was the first painting he sold. Some artists are daunted to see the scope of all they have created. It paralyzes them into uncertainty about where to make their next move. I asked Hockney, who has had so many retrospectives (including a gigantic one at Tate Britain and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, when he turned 80 in 2017), whether that possibility worried him. He said that Sir Alan Bowness, a former director of Tate, once told him that many artists couldn't work for months after such an exhibition. Hockney dismissed that fear with characteristic nonchalance. "Well, I just go on," he told me. "I never bother." Puckishly, he added, "Anyway, at my age now, I couldn't really freeze."