



‘landscape’ a Panoramic Look at Hockney’s Use of Space

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SEP. 22, 1998 | 12 AM



TIMES ART CRITIC

David Hockney’s paintings always evoke for me the image of a child playing alone. There’s so much joy in the work, it’s easy to forget it’s serious business. Both qualities are particularly evident in an important and revealing exhibition of Hockney’s most recent work at L.A. Louver, “looking at landscape: being in landscape.”

The centerpiece is “A Bigger Grand Canyon,” a 7-by-24-foot panorama painted on a grid of 60 smaller canvases accompanied by a couple of related studies and photo-collages. Another half-dozen paintings are devoted to views around the artist’s birthplace in Yorkshire, England. Differing locales notwithstanding, all grew from Hockney’s fascination with the grandiose sweep of the American West.

Hockney’s interest in landscape ranges at least from his 1980 “Mulholland Drive: The Road to the Studio” to the largely abstract “Snail’s Space” of 1995. The new batch is distinguished

and united in the way it comes to grips with every painter's omnipresent but ever-invisible subject: space.

We can't see space except as defined by things in it. The most basic of those things is the earth we stand on. That's what makes landscape the most flexible means of dealing with space pictorially.

At a glance, Hockney seems to approach the problem like a very young but extremely precocious Post-Impressionist. He uses their bright, symbolic color so roads can be lavender, wheat fields lemon yellow. He contradicts traditional practice by not dulling hues as they fade into distance, so backgrounds tend to pop to the surface, flattening the canvas. How can you do that and create an illusion of space? Hockney's never after the illusion. He's after the sensation. That's why we get such a kick out of his lawn sprinklers emitting little dashes and swimming pool reflections that are wiggled noodles. They feel more like the real thing than mere representation. The source of Hockney's wit is his winsome admission that you can't actually depict anything.

The source of his genius is discovering ways around the problem. Here he uses a bird's-eye topographic view and a multiplicity of vanishing points to evoke driving through serene landscapes in a fast car. In "North Yorkshire" we enter the painting from the bottom, which becomes the top of a hill. We race around a meandering circular purple road back to the start. At any point the illusion can break down. The road becomes the outline of a Picasso-like head, then a road again.

“Double East Yorkshire” makes cultivated fields into quips about striped fabric. It evokes the painter as this manic kid reinventing landscape according to a logic being made up as he goes along. At a point on the viewer’s left the perceptual program breaks down. The landscape becomes a bolt of yardage and the prodigy dissolves in laughter.

He regains solemnity in “Salts Mill, Saltaire Yorks.” Endearingly depicting a massive factory from the artist’s childhood, it and the surrounding worker’s village feel like the memory of a real place conflated with a toy town.

“A Bigger Grand Canyon” is pretty awesome. We could be in a helicopter above a promontory looking down on yellow cliffs jutting in from side and center. The view across to red hills and a deep gorge is topped by the narrowest strip of sky. Size and wide-screen format add to the sensation of space but, oddly enough, so does the grid format. It imparts the feeling of looking at something dimensional through something flat like a window. Spatiality is most convincing at a distance. Up close, the painting reminds us it is what it is.

The fully illustrated catalog marks the exhibition as something of an event. The main text interview with Hockney was conducted by the ever-perceptive author and New Yorker magazine writer Lawrence Weschler. Along with numerous insights it provides the back story for the paintings. Hockney undertook the Yorkshire series while there visiting Jonathan Silver, an old friend who died of cancer during the artist’s stay. The pictures acted for both maker and friend as a paean to the beauty and paradox of life.

The exhibition came together here after parts were shown at the National Gallery and Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts. This will be its only West Coast appearance before it moves on to join a survey of Hockney’s landscapes at Paris’ Pompidou Center and a later retrospective in Bonn, Germany.

* L.A. Louver Gallery, 45 N. Venice Blvd.; to Oct. 31, closed Sunday and Monday, (310) 822-4955.