

Far from white-hot L.A., David Hockney embraces the cool vistas of his youth

A new exhibition documents the longtime L.A. artist's return to his native England.

By Fred Schruers, Special to The Times
Bridlington, England

David Hockney stands in the filtered gray daylight of the train station platform, a stork-like figure whose cane and upthrust chin set him apart as he's scanning the arriving passengers. He's wearing a stylish fedora, dark greatcoat and a suit that will prove to be cashmere, a sensible outfit for a December drive in the English countryside with the window halfway down. Hockney, who at 67 has let his once-peroxidized hair go comfortably pewter, smiles at the visitor and extends his hand with an intriguing mixture of warmth and reserve.

"Not many people go to Bridlington," he almost immediately says with a conspiratorial savor. "If you tell someone in London you've been to Bridlington, they won't know where it is."

York is only a two-hour train journey from London, and Bridlington is an hour's drive beyond that, but it's a drive into a seemingly unchanged world. Bridlington is still in part a fishing village, in part the seaside resort Hockney's family visited in the '40s and '50s, where he bought and furnished a comfortable home overlooking the North Sea for his mother (who died in 1999 at age 99) and his sister, Margaret Hockney, who lives there still. "It was built by a Bridlington trawler owner for his ugly daughter," says Hockney, who made a point of not removing the number plates that once guided patrons during the house's latter days as a bed and breakfast.

Hockney, strolling toward his car in a way that shows the cane to be more accessory than necessity, wants to know how the journey from London was. As a seasoned trencherman, he seems pleased that his visitor enjoyed a full English breakfast en route. Our mission today is to drive via back roads through East Yorkshire — not to be confused with the Yorkshire Dales, the more famously picturesque terrain to the west where Turner painted landscapes — and look at some of the locales that inspired the 55 watercolors in Hockney's upcoming (Feb. 26 through April 2) show at LA Louver gallery in Venice, Calif. It's titled "Hand Eye Heart," after the Chinese formulation describing what painting draws upon. The show's mostly roadside vistas share a rough-hewn beauty that's rich in mossy greens, lavender-gray skies and stark, winter-stripped trees and hedgerows. One grouping is of 36 smaller paintings, hung four scenes high by nine scenes long, composing a pastorate in lush green and rich yellow hues.



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photography by Richard Schmidt

WANDERING EYE: A newfound passion for watercolor, which inspired the longtime L.A. artist to roam, frames the show opening at LA Louver Gallery in Venice. The exhibition documents Hockney's return to England, as captured in "East Yorkshire. Spring Landscape," 2004.

For all its pleasures, it's a show that could induce in Los Angeles art lovers a feeling of suspense and even poignancy, for these works were inspired by and executed in Hockney's native country and mark the culmination of three years largely spent away from his L.A. home and studio off Mulholland Drive. Although he won't state outright that he's away from America indefinitely — he'll casually say things such as, "I'm a

claustrophobe, that's why I live in L.A." — he also gives no timetable for his return.

Blame a great deal of his urge to roam on his newly discovered medium of watercolors. What began as a few portraits in the late '90s flowered into a group of works done in Spain, then bravura Norwegian and Icelandic landscapes. Hockney learned the craft quickly and came to love loading up his brush for the kind of strokes that require real commitment.

"A painting is an artist's account of looking at the world," he says on this day, a credo he's stated before. The world he's seen recently is revealed (though sometimes barely, as with one fog-shrouded row of trees in the new show's untitled signature work), largely under northern light. His studio in the Bridlington home's converted attic lets in the same faint glow, and the L.A. show's "Bridlington. Garden and Rooftops III" invites you to make what you will of the sedate view north from it.

Hockney's friend, writer and cultural critic Lawrence Weschler, has written an essay for LA Louver's catalog, and he finds "a return to origins" in Hockney's autumn- and winterscapes: "the sense of returning in winter, perhaps, to one's own springtime."

CONTINUITY, NOT CHANGE

Hockney leads the way to his tan Lexus, which he chose as the quietest ride this side of a Bentley. He immediately rolls down his window and lights a smoke, which he does at a rate of slightly more than a pack a day when he's talking a lot. (He points out that Eisenhower has been unjustly criticized for smoking 80 cigarettes on D-day — "I should think he would have smoked 200.") Between conscientious tour guide business — glances at the remains of York's ancient wall and the landmark tower the York Minster — he continues to kvetch eloquently about the antismoking forces in England and America. It's a theme he returns to often, but his summation relies on a countryman's words and is aimed straight at his sometime home: "Tom Stoppard says people in L.A. think the choice is between smoking and immortality."

As we motor through small villages and down verdant ravines that, as Hockney points out, were carved by glaciers rather than rivers, we pass occasional flocks of sheep and Highland cattle, and fields that the government has decreed will be forever reserved for cultivating oats, wheat and barley.

"It's the food bin of England," Peter Goulds, LA Louver founder and director, says of Hockney's native Yorkshire, noting that the artist spent most of his childhood in the sooty city of Bradford in West Yorkshire. Goulds, who first sold works by Hockney in the late 1970s, sees more continuity than change in this hanging: "It's all part of what you could call David's journey to light." Goulds helped Hockney mount a September 1998 show at the gallery titled "looking at landscape/being in landscape" in which massive studies of American sites (including "A Bigger Grand Canyon," which sold to the National Gallery of Australia for \$3 million) were hung near a series of Yorkshire scenes. The latter, though done in oils, Hockney's most familiar medium, covered territory similar to the recent watercolors. Goulds sees the watercolor spate as almost inevitable for the "intellectually curious and technically proficient" painter. "It was a medium he'd largely avoided; finally he had to take it on."

The 1998 show derived much of its inspiration from drives Hockney made between Bridlington and the town of Wetherby, where his great friend Jonathan Silver lay dying of pancreatic cancer. (The same disease had claimed his confrere, curator Henry Geldzahler, in 1994.) "You might as well live," was Hockney's way of summing up his determination not to despair despite those deaths and a series of others — from AIDS, age and other causes — among his oldest friends. Legendarily devoted to his dachshunds, he was further dismayed by the death of his frequent portrait subject Stanley (Hockney is a great fan of Laurel and Hardy). That latter loss did create a kind of liberation — he was no longer constrained by dog quarantine regulations that had kept Stanley from joining him on visits to England. As the departure of friends joined with his severe hearing loss to leave him increasingly isolated in his canyon, the logic of spending time in England grew.

L.A. INSPIRATIONS

Most of Hockney's London days, in the three years since he's been once again based there, are spent in his apartment and studio at the edge of Holland Park, where he walks most mornings while fetching the newspapers. ("I'm not really a reader of the Guardian," he'll sniff, showing little interest in their putting a loaned sketch of his on the front page this very Saturday as part of a neighborhood campaign to save what turns out to be his old post office.)

He has a brother living near Margaret in Bridlington and two more in business in Australia, but he dotes on the chirpingly delightful Margaret, a former nurse who has such an array of computers supporting her digital photography (much of it linked to her second career as a herbalist) that the BBC recently visited to film her at work. As a young nurse, she went to Zambia for a year but stayed three because the need was so great: "My sister has an innocence about her," he says lovingly. "She's seen life much more harsh than you or I. She's never earned any money in her life." He pauses for a wry look: "You have to be a big crook to get money."



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The artist is able to be of and apart from the London arts community; a 2002 arrangement to trade portraits, each of the other, with Lucian Freud resulted in many walks across Holland Park (where, significantly, "I saw my first Northern European springtime in 22 years"). Hockney willingly sat for 129 hours; the older artist gave him but three to capture the forbidding Freud visage. Both men are "academicians," as the elite members of the Royal Academy of Arts are called, and are said to be privately unhappy that an architect was selected to head that group rather than Hockney's longtime painter colleague (they were at the Royal College of Art with director Ridley Scott in the early '60s), Allan Jones.

AN L.A. PERSPECTIVE: Hockney in his studio in 1990 with an unfinished canvas of the Santa Monica Mountains.

Hockney was the toast of swinging London before he characteristically removed himself from it. His arrival in Los Angeles in the mid-1960s (after a brief spell testing the water in New York) was vivifying: "I was so taken with the space, the beauty of it. It was ... January 1964. You could drive anywhere; it hardly seemed to have a rush hour — you'd drive from Santa Monica to Pasadena at 6 o'clock, and it'd take you half an hour ... move around the city with the greatest of ease in your private space."

He had arrived bearing the proceeds from his first large show in England: "I traveled with a letter of credit, took with me about three or four

thousand dollars. I felt I was rich, very rich."

Hockney spent \$900 on the Ford Falcon that would take him through 50,000 miles of exploration. "One day a week I used to drive around L.A., go anywhere, find out where I was from the Thomas Guide and then drive back. It was amazing, actually. I'd never felt freer, sexually free, everything."

If his paintings were not the first proclamation that L.A.'s swimming pools and palm trees were iconic, they were among the more powerful. And though he doesn't dwell on the impact of globally familiar images such as the almost audibly evocative snapshot-in-acrylics called "A Bigger Splash" ("I painted that in Berkeley actually — probably from a photograph — while I was teaching there for a semester."), he was and is pleased to claim his territory: "One of the great things about L.A. for me when I first went there was nobody had painted it. Paris had been painted by great artists, Italy, London — but in L.A., you didn't even know what famous building was there."

Still, he refused to put down immobilizing roots, despite the happiness he found there from 1964 through 1977. He was 28 and a growingly famous La Cienega boulevardier (his usual uniform was "a T-shirt") when he met 18-year-old art student Peter Schlesinger.

The new love was enough to uproot Hockney, as he describes in his easy, if telegraphic style: "A very L.A. person, very good-looking and very bright, full of curiosity. He actually made me come back to Europe — he wanted to live in London. I moved back to London just because of Peter, and when we broke up I went to live in Paris. And after that I felt I'd rather be in L.A., that's the place, that's where I can work. I had to get a green card again, but I found L.A. a stimulant. I wasn't quite tempted to just lie on a beach; I might have painted a kind of hedonism, but the artists themselves can't be hedonists. Artists are workers."

BACK TO THE LAND

York proper and its suburbs are soon behind us as Hockney expertly pilots the sedan on the old Roman road, which soon resembles a country lane, rising 800 feet above sea level over the chalk hills ("wolds") between York and Bridlington. We're not far outside Stamford Bridge, where a noted prelude to the Battle of Hastings was fought, when he points out a pub that would look perfectly at home in a film adaptation of a Thomas Hardy book. As a 15-year-old schoolboy working an arduous summer job, "I'd go down there and have drinks." (This falls in line with his somewhat defensive boast, "I never had a cigarette before I was 9.") A half-mile on we pass a farmhouse surrounded by cornfields, where he'd stayed while he earned wages "stooking": "You picked up the sheaf of corn, tied it together with another and made it into a stook, then stuck them in the stubble. It was a hard day's work actually — the only consolation was it was rather beautiful looking out, on the shapes of the fields."

It's not the grandest manifesto an artist ever announced, but as he spent more time in England over the last couple of years, those fields called out to him. A number of the watercolors in the upcoming show, notably "Woldgate With Flowers and Blossom," recapture those days, showing landscapes that, he notes, "haven't changed a bit in 50 years." In addition to those and the almost riotous flora in the "36-Part Work," there are many wintry scenes, such as "Trees & Puddles, East Yorkshire," that use humble means to pull your eye into something actually as complex as one of Hockney's beloved Mahler symphonies.

Although the show's working title used the phrase "After the Secret Knowledge," these paintings clearly proceed beyond Hockney's recent studies of how the old masters used (and achieved) perspective. Though he's still involved in intellectual scraps with scientists from Stanford and Scientific American, the upshot of his research was a repudiation of photography's Cyclops eye, and a simple enough refutation of what the literal rendering of nature can do: "It led me back to the land. I realized you could [only] paint the landscape, because you can't photograph the landscape — you can't get space in it." So I thought, 'Well my God, I should go paint Yorkshire again.'"

Our destination is Bridlington, where we'll wander along the strand and eat a hearty lunch, dinner and breakfast with his aide, Gregory Evans, and the welcoming Margaret. (Hockney's companion of some years, John Fitzherbert, prepares a lunch, heavy on pork, before taking to his bed to fight a cold.)

But on the chatty, ambling ride to Bridlington, Hockney seems content to pull over in key spots for reconsideration. He sits alertly in the driver's seat, looking like he'd prefer the passenger seat, where he spent much time doing smaller paintings with a board across his knees to make an easel. Peering into the fields where the sun glowers but never quite breaks through, he seems again to be following the skein of memory that led him down these back roads. He's well aware that despite inveighing against establishments artistic and political, he's been under the covers with fame and wealth for more than three decades now. There's probably no more celebrated world-class artist, and the accessibility of his vibrant, involving canvases has somehow not hurt his standing among critics and curators. In disregarding fashion and trend, he's remained relentlessly fashionable.



photography by Richard Schmidt

AT HOME: The artist's view, "Bridlington. Gardens and Rooftops III," 2004.



photography by Richard Schmidt

ON THE ROAD: A vision in lavender, an untitled 2004 work manifests a Hockney credo: "A painting is an artist's account of looking at the world."

His friend, Norman Rosenthal, the Royal Academy of Arts curator, notes that the acclaim for Hockney's work would not have come if the artist weren't "an amazingly competent man" but sees his long-running success as more a function of being "constantly inventive" and also because of "a great moral authority that comes through in his art."

One of the more striking works in the LA Louver show is "The Road to Rudston," executed in March of last year. Its barren trees and hedgerows are rendered with almost manic brushstrokes, much resembling those in Van Gogh's Provence sketchbooks, under darkly swelling rain clouds. The painting is also to be found in a new hardcover collection called "Hockney's Pictures: The Definitive Retrospective," where it sits above one of his epigrammatic quotes. "I have always believed that art should be a deep pleasure," it reads, "the very fact that the art is made seems to contradict despair."

Rosenthal says Hockney "believes in life, and he believes in freedom, and all those things he's stood for all his life — and whether that was as a young man or now as an older man, he somehow hasn't changed. He doesn't dye his hair blond anymore but that's all the difference there is."

Hockney will admit that recent world events can induce moments of doubt, and that "one of my selfish thoughts was, 'Well, maybe you should be glad you're not too young.' " He gazes across the lane at the farmhouse where five decades ago he would sleep rough, one of six laborers to a room. "When you're young, the world excites you no matter what. It's when you're old you actually want the silk underwear."

He reflects a moment. "You know what the Chinese say about painting?" This he follows with a shrug that can only be described as philosophical: "It is an old man's art."