

# STYLE

Section C/Page 1  
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## Hockney shows sensuous 'drawings' in Polaroid

*Multiple-frame photos have Cubist allusions*

By Christopher Knight  
Herald Examiner art critic

David Hockney describes the process employed in his extraordinary new Polaroid photographs as "drawing with a camera." Each of the 28 works, made within the past four months and on view at L.A. Louver Gallery, 55 N. Venice Blvd., through July 3, is composed of a number of individual Polaroid photographs which separately isolate bits of visual information and which collectively form a single, complete image.

"Gregory Holding Some Roses," for instance, consists of 90 separate Polaroids assembled in a grid pattern to form the image of a figure holding a bouquet and seated in a cluttered interior. If these masterful Polaroids were music, they might best be described as polyphonic spectacles.

The "shattered" images built from numerous interlocking planes of visual information bear superficial resemblance to the fragmentation of Cubist paintings. Hockney openly acknowledges this resemblance in several of the works: The tabletop assemblage of plastic fruit, a newspaper and guitar in "Yellow Guitar Still Life" recalls numerous Picasso still lifes; "Henry (Geldzahler) Cleaning His Glasses" looks remarkably like Picasso's 1910 "Portrait of Ambroise Vollard" somehow transformed into the synthetic colors of Polaroid film; and the debt is most clearly

stated, with a simultaneous nod to the ubiquity of mechanical reproduction, in "Bing Looking at Picasso," in which the artist's studio assistant is seen scrutinizing a reproduction of a Picasso painting. And these drawings composed from scraps of photographic paper even recall Picasso's invention of collage.

But these are not simply camera-trick gimmicks made in homage to the master. Nor is his method new; other artists have used techniques of combining multiple photographs to form a composite image similar to what Hockney employs here. Rather, the technique and the Cubist allusions seem to spring less from a desire to find ways to make an image than they do from a desire to find ways to see an image; to allow the reality-based objects that photography captures to reveal themselves in concert with the artist's eye. That, coupled with the instantaneous, notational qualities of Polaroids, is what makes these works not so much photographs as drawings.

There is a remarkable luxuriousness to these drawings, a sensuousness that seems to be at the heart of this (and, for that matter, every Hockney) enterprise. Partially a function of the dense, highly saturated, artificially manufactured colors of Polaroid film, it is also a function of the process by which the composite image has been

Hockney/C-6, Col. 4

## Hockney

Continued from page C-1

made.

Each of the single Polaroids records its image frontally and in focus. If one blocks out the rest of the pictures in the grid and looks at just one square — Gregory's hand, let's say, or the television set at the rear — it becomes clear that each has been taken at relatively close range. The clarity and scale of the TV within its photographic frame is closer to that of Gregory's hand in its photographic frame than to what our eye would perceive if we were standing at a fixed position in the room.

When assembled together in the grid to form the composite image, everything in the picture — whether foreground, middleground, or background — is seen close up on a shallow plane defined by the camera's focal length. Like the hard, bright Polaroid colors, the composite images themselves are dense, highly saturated and artificially manufactured.

These individual snapshots assembled into a grid become a kind of visual "list" of things in the room: fingers, a rumpled sleeve, lips, a zipper, a fern frond, a matchbook, pictures tacked on a wall, oak floor boards, a doorway, etc. Each Polaroid is an artifact, and each artifact is given equal weight by the non-hierarchical composition of the grid. In this equalizing process, everything becomes an aesthetic object to be enjoyed for the visual pleasure it yields, and each of these separate voices in the polyphonic chorus is equivalent to the whole of "Gregory holding some roses."

The visual pleasure here is a sensuousness born of surfaces. The camera's focal length, which keeps everything in the picture in focus in a manner much richer than the eye sees, is the distance between the camera and the surface of the object photographed. One imagines the artist moving around the room, approaching the object of desire, embracing it at a distance as the shutter clicks and the electronic motor purrs, then retreating and moving on to the next.

The distanced embrace (which the presence of the camera requires) keeps the artist in a position of detached passion. The composite image is reconstructed from the composite of sensory experiences of surfaces seen and collected. As a result, the final drawing assumes the properties of spectacle.

(While much of Hockney's earlier work partakes of similar sensory delight in the eye-catching embrace of the spectacle, it may be that his concentrated involvement with opera set design in recent years has further heightened this interest.)

What charms in these "spectacular drawings" is their expansiveness, their non-exclusionary qualities. The isolating eye of the camera segments the views, but the reassembled grid juxtaposes things of a sharply different nature; the hard geometry of the television set yields a sensual pleasure different in kind but equal in intensity to the fragile petals of the daisies adjacent. Everywhere the drab and insignificant becomes the singular and radiant.

Hockney's Polaroid drawings display a kind of voraciousness that is at once exhilarating and seductive. The seemingly impersonal eye of the mechanical camera here becomes the vehicle for personal involvement in the accumulation of sensual experience. This luxurious detachment is perhaps the ultimate in contemporary dandyism, which Susan Sontag has succinctly characterized as being "both impassive and fantastic, inane and profound, unconscious and supremely sensuous."

None of these pictures are, at the moment, for sale. As drawings, they are quite logically being used by Hockney as studies for future paintings. Based on the studies, one eagerly anticipates the dandy's next adventure in spectacle.



David Hockney's "Gregory Holding Some Roses."