

Los Angeles Times
11 February, 2007

ARTISTS ON ARTISTS

Landscape perspectives

David Hockney rediscovers the landscape of his youth and his celebrated countryman, John Constable.

By Suzanne Muchnic, Times Staff Writer

DAVID HOCKNEY, known for incisive portraits and quirky urbanity, lived in Los Angeles for decades before rediscovering the English landscape of his youth. John Constable, his celebrated countryman, is so closely identified with early 19th century landscape painting that his favorite location, the Stour Valley in Suffolk, is known as Constable Country.

It isn't an obvious pairing, but Hockney is at the Huntington Library in San Marino, looking at "Constable's Great Landscapes: The Six-Foot Paintings." The exhibition is the first to round up all six of Constable's monumental masterpieces and the first to put his full-scale sketches on public view, along with about 50 related items.

"I was thrilled by the show when I saw it last summer in London," says Hockney, who has come to the Huntington for a second look. "It was a big turn-on that I didn't quite expect. These are marvelous paintings, obviously great to look at and worth spending some time with."

This may be surprising praise from an artist whose concurrent show, at L.A. Louver gallery in Venice through March 17, focuses on much bigger pictures of a particular grove of trees in East Yorkshire. Painted outdoors during the past year, they were born of a laborious process that required dividing each scene into six 3-foot-by-4-foot panels that were transported in a van and set up on easels tied to the ground. But the results are so airy and loose that Hockney might have inhaled the atmosphere and exhaled it on canvas.

Both artists offer viewers pathways into deep space. But Constable's "six-footers" are packed with near-scientific details of nature and working life along the Stour River.

Hockney loves these works, but he says the sketches are livelier. Although Constable painted them in his studio, Hockney senses his excitement.

"I can see that he was thrilled with what I found," he says of his plein-air experience, "meaning to work on a bigger scale, more directly. In the big sketches, he uses big brushes and he is very, very bold. It's more like Chinese painting."

It's also less like photography, Hockney says. And that brings him to his favorite subject — artists' use of mirrors and lenses to project images for their work before photography existed. A new paperback edition of his book "Secret Knowledge" expands upon his argument that perspective and chiaroscuro came from studying projections of nature.

He says that Constable, like many other artists, used optical devices to compose pictures. The exhibition, on view through April 29, includes a glass-and-string apparatus that Constable used to put nature in perspective.

"Artists thought the optical projection of nature was verisimilitude, which is what they were aiming for," Hockney says. "But in the 21st century, I know that is not verisimilitude. Once you know that, when you go out to paint, you've got something else to do. I do not think the world looks like photographs. I think it looks a lot more glorious than that."