



**ENGLISH EYES IN L.A.**—British artists Howard Hodgkin, David Hockney, Peter Blake, with Hodgkin's "Monsoon Over Bombay" and Hockney's "Divine," show their painting in Venice gallery.

Times photo by Martha Hartnett

## L.A.—COLOR IT LOVERLY

# British Artists Painting the Town

BY SUZANNE MUCHNIC

Times Staff Writer

Feeling a little down on Los Angeles? Chin up. The British still love us. Princess Margaret apparently loves us for our money, or what's left of it. David Hockney, Peter Blake and Howard Hodgkin, three English painters in town for a show of their work at Venice's L.A. Louver Gallery, love us for more likable reasons.

Hockney, one of the Western world's most gifted and popular painters and a colorful character of contemporary legend, is so enamored with our city that he lives a major part of each year here, in a house high above Hollywood. "I'm excited every day," he said. "There's not one ugly part of Los Angeles for me. London has lots of dreary parts but I never find anything dreary in Los Angeles."

### An Attentive Eye

Our eclectic architecture is exactly to his taste, while cities such as London and Tokyo are "too repetitious" and boring. Constant turnover of real estate, instant changes of decor and tolerance for varied architecture—all part of our indulgence of fantasy—are sources of fascination for Hockney. He noted that if you're not attentive, "a whole block might have gone and been replaced by something different" before you know what happened.

Hockney has painted Southern California's turquoise swimming pools, tan citizens, stucco houses and laid-back culture. He is now working on a 20-foot painting of Santa Monica Blvd. While laboring over a small study of the boulevard, on location, a passer-by informed him, "No, no—you've got it all wrong. They're doing it

in cubes now." It's the sort of California story he tells with great pleasure.

Blake, best known as a pioneering Pop artist and creator of the Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" album cover, painted the Hollywood Sign, the Big Donut, Grauman's Chinese Theater and Jungland's 80-year-old lady lion trainer when here on a grant in 1963. "I still find it amazing," he said. "People are roller-skating, juggling and listening to transistor radios, all at the same time. They put a lot of effort into relating to you. In London nobody relates to you. Everyone looks the other way." For Blake, who often paints "fringe entertainers," Los Angeles overflows with subject matter. "The city is full of that phenomenon," he said. He hopes to return and record more of our bizarre attractions—a pet cemetery, for example.

### It's So Beautiful

Hodgkin, in Los Angeles for the first time, smiled agreement with Hockney and Blake. "I find it all so beautiful," he said, "I laugh with warmth. When someone asks if I want to go here or there, I just say 'Yes.' I have gone to India for years but when I got off the plane and saw this place, I said to Peter, 'Forget India.'" Hodgkin, who has moved from painting representational figure groups to more abstract versions of people in interiors, also wants to come back here and do some work. He said he'd probably deal with the same subject, "but in a completely different atmosphere" or perhaps switch to painting people out-of-doors.

Hockney, Blake and Hodgkin are participants in a

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two-part exhibition called "This Knot of Life" at L.A. Louver Gallery, 55 N. Venice Blvd., Venice. Gallery owner Peter Goulds, also an Englishman, is showing work by Hockney, Hodgkin, William Coldstream, Lucian Freud and Euan Uglow through Nov. 17. Drawings and paintings by Blake, Frank Auerbach, Francis Bacon, R. B. Kitaj and Leon Kossoff will be at the gallery Nov. 27 to Dec. 22.

The British/Los Angeles love affair is not one-way. When the three artists came to town at the same time, we happily arranged to gather at the gallery, snap a few pictures and catch up on the state of British art. After years of jet travel and easy communication, we still find each other at least a trifle exotic.

The artists arrived in a sports car, after a "glorious drive" on a perfect day from the hills to the beach. (We hadn't the heart to tell them the weather isn't always gorgeous. Besides, such matters are relative). Hockney, decked out in tennis shoes (one red, one green), a bright yellow shirt that matched his hair, a magenta pullover and red cap, looked like one of his new paintings. "I'm into color," he announced. His more conservatively dressed friends, who would take off for Disneyland and Watts Towers after the interview, shared his articulate wit if not his flamboyance. Despite obvious differences in approach to art and life, the three men's opinions seemed of a piece. Some of their remarks could have come from American counterparts.

### A Passing Preference

Take patronage, for instance. They first stated private support of art simply doesn't exist. Then Hockney backed up and got a laugh when he said, "Well, a lot of people in England buy paintings but they prefer artists to be dead, even if they're still alive."

As for government assistance, "There are grants," said Blake. "Unfortunately, the attitude is 'We'll give you money but we don't want what you do.' It's charity and there's something wrong with that."

Hockney noted that some artists seem to get "backed for life," then puzzled, "I don't know how they do that." For most, an exhibition in an English museum is a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence, if it happens at all. "Since 1963, only one of my paintings has been bought by a museum in England," Hockney said. The artists agreed public institutions should purchase more contemporary art. They said collectors from other countries buy more art in England than do natives. According to the threesome, it is tougher to make it as an artist in England than in America. Most artists teach or work at other jobs to keep themselves in brushes.

The conversation was beginning to have the ring of a local gripe session, so we asked about Hodgkin's ongoing involvement with London art museums. He was a member of the board of trustees of the Tate Gallery, 1970-76, and currently serves on the board of the National Gallery. The policy of putting artists on museum boards apparently is common in England, though almost unheard of here. Asked if he thought the practice was a good one, Hodgkin said, "Probably not. Artists have their own work to do and they should stick to it."

### Deciding on Acquisitions

He insisted his official role is not as imposing or time-consuming as it sounds. "I go to meetings and make decisions on acquisitions, not exhibitions," he explained. Hodgkin said things got a little sticky at the Tate (an institution concentrating on modern and contemporary art), where "Friends wanted to influence me to buy certain things. At the National Gallery (a museum with historical collections), that problem doesn't exist." Hodgkin's museum work makes some sense in terms of his art. "I often paint people in museums," he said, "People looking at art."

As the talk shifted from Los Angeles to London and back, we stopped in New York, a city not loved by the British artists. "I won't show my work there, on principle," declared Blake. "New York is too chauvinistic and antagonistic toward outsiders"—an attitude he feels led to Paris' decline as a world art center.

Hodgkin and Blake characterized the Big Apple as the home of bandwagon movements, inflated reputations and shared rhetoric—a place where major talents such as Rauschenberg and Johns have "peaked, gone over the top" and resorted to churning out repetitive products. This process, they feel, is dictated by economics.

"It's sad to see them copying themselves," said Hodgkin.

### Ducking and Moving

Britain's celebrated sculptor Henry Moore suffers from the same "colossal pressures" as America's art heroes, according to the artists. "David (Hockney) handled it by ducking and moving," Blake said.

Blake, one of Pop's originators, believes Pop was a more authentic, tiny movement in England, where it began. "It got blown out of proportion in America," he said. "One of my claims to fame is I was the first to declare myself an ex-Pop artist. Lichtenstein is still hanging on to it."

"By his teeth," Hodgkin added.

At a time when it's easier to point to global than regional movements, we were curious about what English artists perceive to be their Englishness. "Idiosyncrasy," Hockney responded. "Look at William Blake, Turner and Hogarth. English literature, which is generally better than English painting, is idiosyncratic, too. England has a strong tradition of individualism and of artists working abroad. They used to go to Italy for the sun."

Now they come to Southern California.

A tradition of figure painting is also a constant in English art history—a tradition proudly noted by the three figure painters. The human body may have been ousted by abstraction elsewhere, but not in Britain.

After a decade of experimentation with video, performance and conceptual art when, according to Hodgkin, it was "eccentric" to be a painter, painting is enjoying a resurgence. "Students are talking about Bonnard and Vuillard," he said. "I'm stunned. Not long ago I was asked if I was interested in painting pictures to go in museums and I said, 'No. I'm interested in painting pictures to go over mantels in homes.'" Apparently, that was considered peculiar, if not downright reactionary.

"Even frames are coming back," said Blake, pointing to his gold-framed painting in the gallery office.

As lunchtime approached and Disneyland beckoned, we asked if the artists wanted to add anything to the interview. "Only that it's lovely to be here," said Hodgkin.

"Yes," smiled Blake, "it's wonderful being here."