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# Art review: "David Hockney: A Bigger Exhibition"

**Bee Art Correspondent**

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"Drawing is an ancient thing – 30,000 years old. Why give it up?" said the artist at the press preview for "David Hockney: A Bigger Exhibition" at San Francisco's de Young Museum.

Drawing is at the heart of the show, which runs through Jan. 20. A group of recent charcoal drawings from the series "The Arrival of Spring in 2013 (Twenty Thirteen)" is a high point of the exhibition, which ranges from massive oil paintings to plein air watercolors to intimate portraits to drawings done with iPods, iPads and computers blown up to large-scale, ink-jet works on paper. There are also what Hockney describes as "Cubist Movies," filmed with multiple cameras.

The term "a bigger exhibition" is an understatement. Covering the years 2002 to the present, the more than 300 works in the show are installed in 18,000 square feet on two levels of the museum. It is the largest show in the de Young's history. It goes on for what seems more like acres than square feet. It's a testament to the productivity of Hockney, 76, one of Britain's best known and most prolific artists.

The show, which is arranged in mainly chronological order, starts modestly with watercolor paintings of still lifes, landscapes, portraits and self-portraits, among them "Self-Portrait With Red Braces," which shows the penetrating gaze with which Hockney observes his subjects.

Watercolor was an ideal medium for these works because it is portable and dries quickly, allowing him to work in a different setting at various times. It was particularly suitable for painting outdoors, with the small works developed into larger landscapes, like "Godafoss, Iceland, 2002" a watercolor on eight joined sheets of paper that has the feeling of a van Gogh.

In 2005, Hockney returned to oils, with portraits such as "The Photographer and His Daughter," a poignant interior with figures that has the raw color he is known for. He also began making monumental landscapes formed from multiple canvases. Back in England, after many years of living in Southern California, where he first made witty paintings of swimming pools, Hockney was entranced by the changing of the seasons and began working on site in East Yorkshire to paint particular views at different times of the year.

A series of paintings of tunnels made of overarching trees records the passing of time from the bare trees of winter to the fully leafed-out trees of summer. A series of paintings of Woldgate Woods, done on multiple canvases, also chronicles the seasons in lush landscapes with unexpected color.

Trees have a special place in Hockney's work, sometimes seeming almost overpowering as in

"Bigger Trees Near Warter," shown in both summer and winter versions. The trees in these canvases dwarf the viewer, taking on an almost fierce quality. Equally powerful is "May Blossom on the Roman Road," an eight-canvas oil of a gigantic, riotously blooming hedge.

These landscapes culminate in "The Arrival of Spring in Woldgate, East Yorkshire in 2011," an installation of 12 printed iPad drawings made outdoors and a monumental 32-canvas oil painting executed in the studio of the scintillatingly colorful spring that was built up to in the iPad drawings.

Beginning in 2009, Hockney started experimenting with an iPhone, using the Brushes application to render flowers, sunrises and sunsets, landscapes, portraits and more, images he emailed to friends around the world. In June 2010, he began to draw on the iPad, depicting East Yorkshire's landscape and in 2011 Yosemite National Park. The latter iPad drawings were blown up to monumental size and printed on large sheets of paper to form the series "Bigger Yosemite." At 12 feet high, they evoke the grandeur of the park's sites albeit in images that seem somehow soft in comparison to Hockney's oil paintings.

A noble failure is a series of paintings done after Claude Lorrain's "The Sermon on the Mount," which is housed in the Frick Museum in New York. Because the varnish on the painting has darkened over time, Hockney downloaded a photo of the work onto his computer and began to digitally "clean" it. Fascinated by the subject, he then produced a number of his own versions, including a cubistic one, that culminate in a monumental work, which Hockney calls his "sermon on thirty canvases." It's titled "A Bigger Message," but the work's undigested color and awkward figures fail to live up to Claude's original.

In October 2012 in East Yorkshire, Hockney began to draw with charcoal on paper, working intensively for several months. Using his north-facing bedroom in Bridlington as a studio he began doing portraits of close friends, family and colleagues. These tender depictions, such as a drawing of his mother, were done from life and completed in one or two days.

They are, for me, some of the strongest works in the show, as are his drawings from the series "The Arrival of the Spring in Woldgate, East Yorkshire, 2013," in which he records five locations in five different stages that show the progression from a bleak winter to a lush summer.

They are followed by a series of images made from photographs of 25 of the drawings, ink-jet printed at four times the original size. They seem an unnecessary addition to the show, notable mostly for their bigger size.

In June Hockney returned to Southern California and in July took up his brushes in his Hollywood Hills studio and began making portraits of his friends and colleagues. This new series of acrylic on canvas portraits, finished in early October, are some of the strongest portraits in the show. Among the people Hockney painted are handsome painting assistant Jean-Pierre Goncalves de Lima, invaluable technical assistant Jonathan Wilkinson and the unprepossessing art dealer Larry Gagosian.

A section of the show is set aside for screenings of "Cubist" movies, including a delightfully comic one of jugglers set to a Sousa march.

The last room of the show is devoted to portraits done using the optical device known as a camera lucida with which Hockney experimented during the time he was writing his book "Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters." Hockney believes the old masters achieved photographic likenesses by using earlier versions of such devices. His camera lucida drawings are creditable renderings of interesting faces, but seem to lack a sense of space or atmosphere.

The show closes with an installation of "The Great Wall," an arrangement of high-quality color prints of hundreds of paintings from the years 1200 to 1900. Hockney asserts that a photographic quality appeared around 1420 in the works of artists like Jan van Eyck and

others who may have used cameralike devices. It's a fascinating look at his exhaustive study of Western art history.

This is an imposing show, one that is a "must-see" exhibit, though, for me, it raises questions about whether bigger is always better. Some of his monumental canvases are grand, but the Yosemite images and the blowups of his charcoal drawings fail to stand up to their size. I liked better a series of iPhone drawings done as sketchbook entries that flash on screens, revealing that for Hockney, drawing is like breathing.

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## David Hockney: A Bigger Exhibition

**Where:** de Young Museum, Golden Gate Park, 50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive, San Francisco

**When:** Through Jan. 20. 9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday; open until 8:45 p.m. on Fridays through Nov. 29

**Cost:** Free for members and children 5 and under; nonmember tickets start at \$25 for adults; discounts for seniors, students and youths. Premium tickets available.

### Tickets and

**information:** [www.deyoungmuseum.org](http://www.deyoungmuseum.org); (415) 750-3600

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