

David Hockney's Restless Decade

New exhibit at San Francisco's de Young Museum examines 76-year-old artist's burst of productivity

At 76, the artist has had a burst of productivity, creating paintings, prints, drawings, watercolors and digital works for the iPhone and iPad.

By Ellen Gamerman



David Hockney looks pale next to the new batch of vibrant paintings stacked along the walls of his Hollywood Hills studio. It's been a brutal year for the 76-year-old British native whose taffy-colored pictures of sun-kissed L.A. swimming pools, semi-naked men and hearty English landscapes have always seemed to defy sadness. He suffered a small stroke and lost a beloved tree featured in his work to chainsaw-wielding vandals. He mourned the death of a studio assistant in his seaside mansion in England and watched as an inquiry into that fatal night exposed drug use in his home.

The artist, who is battling deafness and wears hearing aids in both ears and a hearing device around his neck, doesn't talk while he works and plays no music. He stands at his easel for about five hours most days, tearing through his work, lately a series of acrylic portraits of close friends and associates. He has done 18 paintings in three months.

“There might come a time when I can’t work, but I can,” he says during a recent interview at his studio, his Camel cigarette burning between paint-smeared knuckles. “And I’m happy doing it, as much as I get happy, perhaps.”

Mr. Hockney hasn’t shied away from work with age—in fact, he’s done the opposite. The last decade, one of the most productive of his career, is the subject of “David Hockney: A Bigger Exhibition” opening Oct. 26 at the de Young museum in San Francisco. It’s the biggest exhibit in the museum’s history, featuring so many paintings, prints, drawings, watercolors and digital works that officials can’t tally exactly how many pieces are in the show.

“Basically, there won’t be any empty wall space when we’re finished,” says museum deputy director Richard Benefield, adding that Mr. Hockney weighed in on everything from the color of the walls to the placement of the works. “We hold something on the wall and he goes, ‘Yeah, that looks about right.’”

An art-world boy wonder in his youth, Mr. Hockney cut a glam profile as he ushered in the pop art era alongside celebrity friends like Andy Warhol. His lifestyle is more subdued now, his old bottle-blond bowl cut faded to gray. But the artist, whose paintings sell for between \$850,000 and \$8 million, is still restless. The de Young will feature a hastily assembled gallery of the new portraits he completed after the exhibit catalogue went to print.

Mr. Hockney says he’s fully recovered from a medical scare last October, when his longtime friend and curator, Gregory Evans, noticed the artist was having trouble ending sentences. Tests revealed he’d suffered a minor stroke. His first subject when he returned to work was what he has dubbed his “totem tree”—a tall tree trunk that starred in some of his kaleidoscopic landscapes and became a landmark for Hockney fans.

In attacks in the woods of East Yorkshire last fall, vandals scrawled an obscenity on the trunk with pink spray paint and later, as Mr. Hockney was in the hospital recovering from his stroke, reduced it to a heap with a chainsaw. Mr. Hockney took to his bed for two days after the tree was cut down. “I would think that cutting it down brought out all kinds of feelings about his own situation and his own close call with death,” says Lawrence Weschler, a friend who has written extensively about the artist. The act was taken as a national insult: The Guardian put a Hockney drawing of the mangled stump on its front page.

His art changed in that period. “It got more intense,” Mr. Hockney says of the highly detailed charcoal drawings he pursued in the wake of his illness. “It’s the touch in charcoal, how you put pressure on it and all the subtle things you can do about smoothing it and rubbing it. I’ve not done anything like this before and I probably won’t do it again.”

Spring was just returning to the countryside last March and Mr. Hockney was busy at work on a new charcoal series when a flame-haired, 23-year-old studio assistant named Dominic Elliott died at the artist's home after ingesting drugs, alcohol and household drain cleaner.

Later, at an inquest into Mr. Elliott's death at the Hull coroner's court in East Yorkshire, witnesses said the young man had been partying with Mr. Hockney's former longtime boyfriend, John Fitzherbert, one of several men living with the openly gay artist in his red-brick home in the coastal town of Bridlington. A statement read at the inquest on Mr. Hockney's behalf said he was asleep in a separate bedroom and learned about the incident from an assistant when he woke the next morning. A coroner ruled it an unintentional death without a crime. Representatives for Mr. Hockney said the artist does not want to comment on the subject.

Amid this turmoil, Mr. Hockney abandoned "The Arrival of Spring in 2013," a series of East Yorkshire landscapes in charcoal. "We were very down then," he says. But he believed in the series charting the return of life to barren woods, a subject he believes other artists would have found boring or ignored. Eventually, he pushed himself to finish it. "Something told me 'No. Do it. Do it.' It was a tough time and I'm glad I did it."

Nature has been an obsession for him, particularly while in England. The artist, who has been more or less splitting time between homes in the U.K. and Los Angeles since the 1960s, showed his landscapes in a sprawling exhibit last year at London's Royal Academy of Arts. (About a third of the works in the de Young show appeared at the Royal Academy.)

Back at his Southern California home not far from the Hollywood sign, he is busy with portraiture, another constant in his career and a genre that friends say he turns to after periods of loss. He spends three hours on the sitter's face—he describes himself "groping, groping" to find it—and keeps his subject posing for about three days as he studies them and paints.

The countless brushes and tubes of paint filling his studio seem old school compared to the high-tech mediums Mr. Hockney has been famous for embracing in recent years.

Few artists get calls from Apple because of the work they do—Mr. Hockney is the exception. The de Young will use eight screens with rotating displays of hundreds of works he created on an iPhone and iPad, images he made with his right thumb using the Brushes app. (Friends say he distractedly wipes his hand on his clothes afterwards as if it's covered in real paint.)

The exhibit will also feature his iPad drawings of Yosemite National Park with towering 12-foot-tall prints.

Asked if he had any digital works currently sitting on his devices, Mr. Hockney pulled out his iPhone and opened a picture he'd taken from his bedroom window a few days before, an impossible multi-perspective shot of the sunrise for which he used an app, Juxtaposer, to stitch together four separate images. Back when photocopiers and fax machines were new, he made art using those machines.

More recently, he has been creating "cubist movies," digital films employing as many as 18 cameras tilted at different angles to subtly distort a scene as it plays across multiple screens.

His fascination with technology sparked an art brawl in 2001 with the release of his book, "Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters." In it he wrote that some early Renaissance artists such as Jan van Eyck used optical devices like concave mirrors to make pictures that were too perfect to be explained by talent alone. Critics said he was accusing the Old Masters of cheating.

In the de Young exhibit's catalogue, Mr. Hockney writes about "a fundamental change in picture making" now taking place as new technologies change the way artists see the world. He sounds happy about it, too: "It will mark the end of the old order," he writes, "which is no bad thing."

In a wide-ranging interview at his Hollywood Hills studio recently, he discussed the roots of his creativity, how encroaching deafness changes his vision and whether he's ever lost a masterpiece to a dead battery. Below, an edited transcript:

What explains your burst of productivity in the last 10 years?

All artists work. That's what keeps you going.

What about this new series of portraits you're working on now?

The recent burst of activity was just because, in a way, I went back to acrylic paint, which is a bit like a new medium for me. I've not worked in acrylic for 20 years and it has changed a bit. That gives you a boost. I'm just going to go on and do [these portraits] after San Francisco, probably until the spring. I might do 25, 30.

You work quickly compared to other artists. Do you consider speed part of your process?

I often think some of my best work is done at speed. Portraits, you have to work quite quickly—the expression is going to change. You do want the person there. When they're not there you stop painting. The shoes or anything—they have to be there.

Do you paint people because of your relationship to them or is there something you see in their faces?

It might be the face, it could be their character, it could be just be they're a friend. [He gestures to a portrait of a smiling man in tangerine pants.] He said it was the greatest day of his life. He has this look on his face and I realize it might have been, actually, because I have painted him.

Some see a sense of mortality in your recent charcoal drawings. Do you agree?

I mean, I'm aware of my own mortality. I smoke. [He lights a cigarette.]

When you go through a painful time, do you channel your grief into your art?

Maybe. My life goes into it. So, I mean, it does actually, in a way. It does. I thought it was very worthwhile doing [the charcoal landscapes] because nobody else would do it. It's a very worthwhile theme and thing to do.

Were you deliberately trying to get back to a low-tech medium after your iPad drawings?

It's all drawing. It's a new medium for drawing, the iPad, it's like an endless sheet of paper. You can't overwork a drawing because you're not drawing on a surface, really, you're just drawing on a piece of glass.

Have you ever lost work to a dead battery or it didn't save?

No. I see the point. All the iPad and iPhone drawings were all printed out because they can be lost. I mean, loads of things are going to get lost on the computer, aren't they? Knowledge has been lost in the past and it will be today and it will be in the future.

Has Apple ever contacted you about these works?

Yes, but I just didn't react. I prefer to do it my way all the time. I just keep a little distance from it. I'm sure I must have sold some of their stuff for them.

What did they want?

I think they were just interested in what I'd done on it. People can do some things crudely but not many people can be very subtle with it. I see that now. It's a new medium.

Is there a medium you want to try that you haven't used yet?

I got interested a bit in videos, but different videos with 18 cameras I now see how you can open up things. [Mr. Hockney's movies feature the same subject filmed from many angles, so the viewer has the sensation of experiencing a single scene from different points of view.] With one camera everybody's seeing the same thing always, always, always—but we don't always see the same things in real life, even when we're looking at the same thing, because memories are different, aren't they? It's playing with time, that's what it's doing. I can see that it opens up new storytelling methods.

Why did you embrace the iPad and iPhone when younger artists didn't?

I've always been interested in the technology of picture making. I quickly discovered the drawing app and started sending pictures out to people who liked getting them, and I'd done 300 or 400 drawings on an iPhone. Then when the iPad came out, I got one straight away and I thought, "Well, drawing on this will be better because it's a bit bigger." We've printed some drawings nine-feet high from iPads.

Do you see yourself as young at heart?

My attitude is this—this is why I smoke—life is a killer, we all get a lifetime and there's only now. I believe that it's not so easy to live in the now. I mean, most people live in the past, don't they? Monet died at age 86. So it didn't matter if he smoked or drank or whatever, he had something to do and he's going to do it. Well, I have something to do and I'm going to do it.

Is it true that you have synesthesia, a condition where you see colors when you hear music?

Somebody came to see me once telling me I had it. They came to see me after seeing a Ravel opera [for which he designed the sets], with the red tree and the blue and the greens. But I don't know, and I wasn't that interested in it, either.

Do you think you see more acutely as a result of your hearing problems?

I do think that. I think as my hearing has gotten worse I see space clearer. I mean, a blind person uses sound to locate themselves in space. I once pointed out about Picasso that the one art he didn't care for was music, so I assume he was tone deaf. But he wasn't tone blind. And I thought, yes, he saw more tones than anybody else and probably heard fewer tones.

What other kinds of art are you interested in—do you love opera?

I don't go now much because of my hearing. I don't go to the theater much now. I don't watch television even. I don't go to the cinema now. Deafness is a big thing. It's why I'm very unsocial now. There's nothing I can do about it. It will get worse, I'm told. You've just got to accept it. But as long as I've got my eyes and my hand, I'm alright.

Do you ever think about how your work will be perceived 50 or 100 years from now?

Sometimes. Most art is going to get forgotten. I've painted one or two memorable pictures.

What misperceptions do you think people have about you?

I don't mind them having them, actually. I remember once I had lunch with [art critic] Mario Amaya and we met Man Ray in the street in Paris. [Mr. Amaya] said he'd written a book about Man Ray, and he'd like to send him a copy so then he could correct any mistakes. And Man Ray said, "Correct the mistakes? I'll add some more." And I thought, "Oh, that's very good." I mean, people think I'm a big partygoer. I don't mind. I don't care. But you know, I live very quietly actually, very quietly.

What are your plans for the exhibit's opening?

I won't stay that long. At the Royal Academy, I left the opening at 8:30. I went home alone. I'm not complaining. I'm perfectly happy going home and reading.

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