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WSJ. MAGAZINE | FEATURE

The World According to David Hockney

The 82-year-old artist's monumental new work, a meditation on the view from his Normandy home, demonstrates his singular way of seeing things.



Artist David Hockney with new work he's showing at Pace Gallery's Manhattan flagship this fall.

PHOTO: JAMIE HAWKESWORTH FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

By *Lesley M.M. Blume*

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The drive up to David Hockney's Los Angeles home in the Hollywood Hills is a narrow, winding route, full of hairpin turns. At the top of a hill, his compound is fortified away behind an expanse of fence, hidden within a

barely tamed jungle of palm trees and bird of paradise plants. Nearly every surface—the walls, the walkways connecting the buildings, the handrails and the roofs—has been painted brilliant colors: bubblegum pink, cerulean, canary yellow, sea green.

The color story continues inside Hockney's studio, a cavernous space with soaring ceilings. Light filters in from a line of windows at the top of the room; paint splatters and cigarette burn marks form a scattershot pattern on the floor. Hockney sits in the center of the studio, wearing a gray suit and a spring-green cardigan, aqua-colored socks and bright yellow glasses with his signature round frames. Beneath his chair is an oversize carpet, littered with stubbed-out cigarettes. On the table in front of him sits a hefty tome about Rembrandt, the remains of several morning coffees and a pack of Davidoff cigarettes. He drops the butt of his just-finished cigarette onto the floor and lights another.

"I've smoked for more than 60 years," he says with a shrug. "But I think I'm quite healthy. I'm 82. How much longer do I have? I'm going to die of either a smoking-related illness or a non-smoking-related illness."

Americans have become too censorious about smoking, he says—even in the country's more libertine cities, like New York and Los Angeles. To that end, he is leaving in two days for less-puritanical France, where he has a house in Normandy. Last year, he bought the place essentially on a whim, after seeing it for only 25 minutes. He was visiting France after the unveiling of a stained-glass window he had created, on his iPad, for Westminster Abbey, in his native England. Hockney had been to Normandy before and thought it was a "lovely place," but he became so freshly enchanted during his holiday that he decided to buy a house there. It was the only one he had looked at. "I fell in love with it," he says.



Hockney at his home and studio in Los Angeles. PHOTO: JAMIE HAWKESWORTH FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

The house, whose main structure dates back to 1650, is named La Grande Cour, or "the big yard." Its grounds, filled with cherry, pear and apple trees,

hawthorn thickets and elderflower patches, immediately inspired Hockney to create a monumental work. This month, as part of the inaugural exhibition of its eight-story, 75,000-square-foot new Manhattan flagship, Pace Gallery—which has long represented Hockney—will showcase the immersive 24-panel panorama and four additional drawings depicting the arrival of spring in Normandy, as seen from his new home. It took Hockney 21 days to complete the panoramic work, which depicts the property in great detail.

“The dots took a long time to do,” he says. “It was getting a little tedious at the end, but I was engrossed and I loved it.” Among his influences as he conceived and drew the work: the medieval Bayeux Tapestry, housed near his Normandy home, and Chinese scroll painting, which, with its absence of vanishing points, has long fascinated him and informed his work. “With Chinese landscape, they’d take a walk and then paint a memory of the walk,” he says. “They wouldn’t put shadows in, because when there are shadows in a landscape, you can tell the time.” In his multipanel Normandy drawing, Hockney largely omitted shadows, pulling the landscape out of time and space.

The layman viewer might not detect the ancient Chinese approach in Hockney’s Normandy landscape. After all, despite the relative lack of shadows, it’s clearly a modern scene, with several cars and a swing set. But Hockney has always incorporated such historical references—some comparably subtle, others obvious, such as in his Henri Matisse-style *The Dancers* series.

“His respect for art history is enormous,” says Stephanie Barron, senior curator of modern art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, who organized the museum’s 2018 exhibition *David Hockney: 82 Portraits and 1 Still-life*. “This is an artist who reads and looks with deep intensity and intellectualism and curiosity. He studies the work of the masters: Manet, Monet, Rembrandt [and] Picasso, who he’s been in dialogue with for life. He has engaged art historians in serious discussions about perspective and technique. That’s a strong driver, and that grounds his looking, thinking and making. It’s easy to say that his work is beautiful and approachable, but it’s got real gravitas.”

Hockney’s success, which came early in his career, has been stratospheric. Exhibitions of his work draw huge crowds at museums and galleries around the world. Almost 1.5 million visitors viewed his retrospective at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, London’s Tate Britain and Paris’s Centre Pompidou. The recent Hockney exhibit at LACMA “struck gold” for that museum, says Barron, who noted that visitors lingered longer in front of Hockney’s paintings than she expected them to, looking carefully at each work. When his 1972 *Portrait of an Artist (Pool With Two Figures)* sold at auction in late 2018 for \$90.3 million, it became the most expensive work of art by a living artist sold at auction. (The painting was reportedly sold by Bahamas-based billionaire Joe Lewis, who is said to have acquired it in 1995

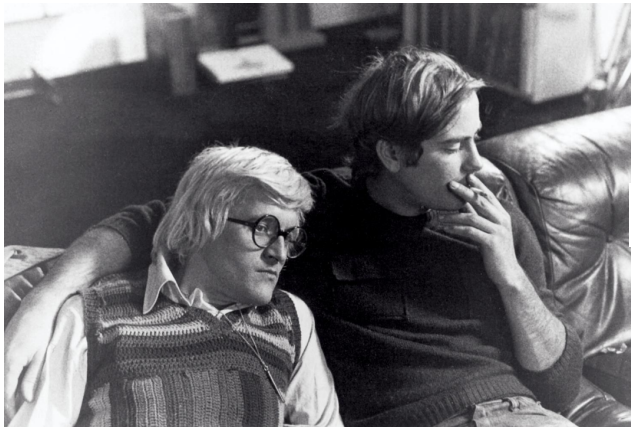
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Hollywood Hills vegetation. PHOTO: JAMIE HAWKESWORTH FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

The World According to David Hockney

The 82-year-old artist's monumental new work, a meditation on the view from his Normandy home, demonstrates his singular way of seeing things.



Hockney with Peter Schlesinger in 1973 FROM A BIGGER SPLASH, BR 1974. PHOTO BY MARY EVANS/RONALD GRANT/EVERETT COLLECTION

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entertainment mogul and art collector David Geffen. Its original sale price, in 1972, was \$18,000.)

“The atmosphere was pretty electric,” says Katharine Arnold, international director, co-head of postwar and contemporary art, Europe, at Christie’s, which auctioned the painting. Christie’s will not disclose the buyer’s identity, but Arnold says it was a private individual. “It’s one of the most iconic images that Hockney painted,” she adds. “It’s tremendous for a living artist to see that kind of success during their own lifetime.” (A 1986 Jeff

Koons piece, *Rabbit*, subsequently broke the Hockney record when it sold for \$91.1 million this past spring.)

Hockney has created a substantial body of work, beginning in the 1950s and consisting of many different chapters. “He challenges himself every decade, if not more frequently,” says Arnold, “and he’s still constantly innovating, despite his age.” Arnold is loath to categorize Hockney in terms of genre. Rather, he is, she says, one of “the greatest living international figurative painters.” Some credit him with helping revive figuration when most of his peers, from the 1960s onward, were working in the realms of abstraction, minimalism and conceptualism.



The paint-splotted floor in Hockney's studio. PHOTO: JAMIE HAWKESWORTH FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

“He’s a radical artist,” says Arne Glimcher, founder of Pace Gallery. “Imagine him in the ’60s, when everyone is making pop art, and he’s making these extraordinary portraits that don’t fit into time and space at all. They were decades ahead of themselves.”

Hockney, on the other hand, sees his early work as almost fundamental. As a figurative artist in an abstract moment—one who had set up shop in Los Angeles, when New York City was then the center of the art world—he saw himself as a peripheral artist, but he still had confidence in what he was doing.

“I had no influence, I thought,” he said. “The art schools were giving up

drawing. I said that was a big mistake. Drawing—you can't get rid of it. It's like dancing and singing. There will always be dancing and singing, and there will always be drawing. They're all ancient."

Despite the diversity of Hockney's works, Hockney observers see discernible through lines within the oeuvre. His brilliant colors place him in the same category as unbridled colorists such as Matisse or Pierre Bonnard. There are the continued experiments with perspective. "Whatever medium he embraces, his curiosity is always headed in the same direction," says Barron. Whether Hockney is working with paint, pen, video camera or iPad, his aesthetic is distinctive. He has found artistic utility in successive technological advances, even ones that turn out to be the most mundane and corporate of objects: He once created a print series, titled *The Hollywood Sea Picture Supply Co.*, on fax machines, delighting in the distorted images that resulted from the experiment.

With his panoramic Normandy drawing, he returned to traditional media, using Sennelier ink on paper. Hockney stayed in close touch with Pace's Glimcher by email as he developed the concept for it. "It was really quite thrilling," Glimcher says. "No other artist does that." When Glimcher saw the finished panels, he immediately asked to present them as a Pace Gallery inaugural exhibition. "They seem to exist fully formed," he says. "It's like he bleeds them onto the page. They're a new kind of notation, the marks he makes, that gives you just the amount of information necessary to build a larger picture in your brain."

"I have the vanity of an artist. I want my work to be seen. But I don't have to be seen."

—David Hockney

Hockney estimates that he has kept a third to a half of his works for himself, and the Normandy drawings in the Pace show will remain in his personal collection. "Sometimes I decide to keep what I consider to be the best ones," he says. "I'm not sure what to do with [the collection] yet. I'll probably give it away to museums."

He thinks the prices paid for his works sometimes border on madness. "I want to ignore it, mostly," he says. "I've had sufficient money to do what I liked every day for the last 60 years. Even when I didn't have much money, I've always managed. All I'm interested in is working, really. I'm going to go on working. Artists don't retire."

Hockney contends that he doesn't necessarily care who acquires his works at these highly publicized auctions and sales—even though some of the pieces contain deeply autobiographical content. *Portrait of an Artist (Pool With Two Figures)* famously depicts his former lover, Peter Schlesinger; it was painted after the couple had broken up. (Schlesinger has denied that *Portrait* is a "break-up picture.") Those documented in *82 Portraits and 1*

Still-life hail from his family and inner circle of friends. The series itself was precipitated by a personal tragedy: In 2013, a young Hockney studio assistant died accidentally at the artist's home in England. Hockney retreated to his L.A. home and found himself mostly unable to work until he created a portrait of his equally grief-stricken studio manager and friend, Jean-Pierre Gonçalves de Lima. This first painting triggered the entire series. (Hockney declined to comment on these events.)

The artist says that he feels a sense of ownership over his pieces even once they've sold: "They're my paintings, regardless of who owns them." And there is, in his view, one upside to the astronomical amounts of money shelled out for his works. "They'll be looked after," he says. "And if they get looked after, they'll last."



A detail from his neighborhood surroundings. PHOTO: JAMIE HAWKESWORTH FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Artist **Andy Warhol** is credited with saying that in the future, everyone would be world-famous for 15 minutes. The world has changed considerably in the 50 years since he allegedly made this prediction. Hockney, who has outlived his contemporary by more than three decades, has surveyed today's cultural landscape and has arrived at a different conclusion.

"In the future, probably nobody is going to be famous," he asserts. The mass media has atomized, he says; information sources are becoming niche. Celebrity was, he says, a creation of the once-omnipotent mass media. Now global fame of the Warholian vision will elude most limelight seekers, he predicts: "People will become famous locally."

Does this bother him? After all, Hockney has been world-famous for decades—not to mention instantly recognizable. "He's a charismatic figure," says LACMA's Barron, who notes that this adds to the appeal of his work. Interest in the artist only continues to build: He inspired Catherine Cusset's fictionalized biography, *Life of David Hockney: A Novel*, which was published in the U.S. this past spring. This summer, *A Bigger Splash*, a

restored 1974 semifictional documentary-style film exploring Hockney's rise, was rereleased. Yet Hockney claims that he couldn't care less about fame. "I have the vanity of an artist," he says. "I want my work to be seen. But I don't have to be seen."

As for his still-distinctive look, "It's always just to please myself," he says. "I dress to please myself. I smoke to please myself. When people say, let's take a photograph [of you] for this exhibition, I refuse, or say, 'Why not print a picture, not of me, but of something I painted.' I think that's better."

He has worn some version of his signature round glasses since he was an 11-year-old in Bradford, West Yorkshire. He simply knew who he was, he says, and who he wanted to be, from an early age. He didn't know where the confidence came from, he's just always had it. By the time he was 8, for example, he knew he was going to be a painter. His father, an accounting clerk, and his mother, who raised him and his four siblings, supported his aspirations. "They didn't know artists couldn't earn a living," he says, laughing. "Middle-class people said, 'Anything to do with art, that's hopeless.' I never got that. I got encouragement all the time."

Far from courting fame, he just wants to cut himself off from people these days and get down to work, he says. Los Angeles, the city that first made him famous, has its merits; there is the big sky and the glorious light. But there are always visitors disturbing him. (Here, Hockney gives his interviewer a pointed look and lights another cigarette.) In Normandy, he is essentially left alone.

"[The drawings] seem to exist fully formed. It's like he bleeds them onto the page."

—Arne Glimcher

Though he took the keys to La Grande Cour only nine months ago, it now feels like home to him. He already has a pleasing Normandy routine, he says. He wakes up early to watch the sun rise and then works all morning. At midday, he and Gonçalves de Lima, who oversaw construction on Hockney's Normandy studio, break for a four-course, 13-euro lunch at a nearby cafe. It's Hockney's only meal of the day. Sometimes he takes a nap, and afterward he works into the evenings. "I can do twice as much work there, three times as much," he says.

There will be new experiments, new inspirations. The Normandy drawings being showcased at Pace are really about time, his preoccupation at the moment. "I've probably not much time left," he says, "and because I don't, I value it even more."

"I'd like to just work and paint," he says, lighting another cigarette. And to be able to smoke and eat in a restaurant at the same time, he adds. Thank God for Normandy, then: "The French know how to live. They know about pleasure."

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