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‘A Play within a Play’: Why Hockney Still Matters at 80. A Review of the *David Hockney* Exhibition at the Tate Britain

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‘A Play within a Play’: Why Hockney Still Matters at 80. A Review of the *David Hockney* exhibition at the Tate Britain

Emilia Halton-Hernandez

Tate Britain 9 Feb-29 May 2017: Hockney [exhibition], 9 February 2017 - 29 May 2017, Tate Britain, London.

Upon leaving the exhibition, a collection of sixty years of Hockney’s work marking the artist’s eightieth birthday, you might be forgiven for thinking that you have just encountered twelve rooms by twelve different artists; such is the diversity, range and reach of the artist’s most recent retrospective.

The first room of the exhibition, ‘A Play within a Play’, showcases some of Hockney’s earliest paintings and introduces us to the meta-theme unifying the works: ‘pictures that are about making and looking at pictures’.¹ The rooms of the exhibition are mostly in chronological order, allowing the viewer to wander through the different phases and places of Hockney’s creative life. Room two presents us with later work from his art school years in England in the 60s, and rooms three, four, and five show us the sun-bleached paintings and portraits of 70s Los Angeles and California. Rooms six and seven are organised around experimentation with different mediums including drawing and photography, but in room eight we swiftly return to painting once again with works from the 80s and 90s focusing on depictions of space and Hockney’s new home in the Hollywood Hills. The final three rooms take us back to scenes of the artist’s native Yorkshire and the Wolds, depicted in painting as well as film and digital iPad art.

This exhibition follows on from the artist’s last major retrospective at the Tate Gallery in 1988, and combines pieces from the 2007 exhibition at the Royal Academy which featured Hockney’s Yorkshire paintings and iPad drawings. Hockney began creating art on his iPhone in 2008, swiftly switching to the newer technology of the iPad two years later. The larger scale of the iPad enabled him to paint with his fingers as well as his thumb. The Royal Academy’s 2012 exhibition *David Hockney: A Bigger Picture* showcased a number of these vivid digital paintings, many depicting the lush landscapes around the coastal town of Bridlington.² Like the 1988 retrospective, the 2017 exhibition takes us through Hockney’s

¹ Tate Britain, *Tate Britain 9 Feb-29 May 2017: Hockney* (leaflet) (viewed 2 May 2017).

² *David Hockney: A Bigger Picture* [exhibition], (Royal Academy: London, 21 January - 9 April 2012).

work sequentially. However, the 1988 exhibition ended with a collection of paintings influenced by and in homage to Picasso, whose painterly shadow looms heavily over Hockney's experiments with both abstract and figurative forms. By contrast, this most recent retrospective seems to solidify the artist's own painterly vision and voice. Whilst Hockney remains, by his own admission, indebted to Picasso, his oeuvre as presented here provides us with the portrait of an artist whose most serious tool was his wry humour and playfulness. Hockney's power comes not through painting emotionally arresting works like Picasso's depiction of war-torn Spain in *Guernica* (1937), but through exactly the opposite: an unabashedly playful focus on pleasure, both sexual and aesthetic.³

In room two we are presented with the cheekily subversive celebration of two boys' passion for one another in *We Two Boys Together Clinging* (1961), painted before homosexuality was decriminalised in Britain. In some of his later Los Angeles paintings that depict beautiful bodies in beautiful places, his humour as well as his attention to the light and fanciful, paradoxically elicits a seriousness and depth. In an interview in 2012, Hockney describes the important experience of seeing a 'pretty' painting in a Matisse show:

There was a still life painted in 1942. I noticed the date. I suppose in 1942 in Europe everybody was blasting themselves to bits and things, and he was sitting somewhere painting these little pots of flowers. It was actually a very pretty painting. It was pretty, unashamedly so. I must admit, well, I'm glad somebody just looks at something small like this and sees how beautiful it is. Somehow, we need more of that, to me.⁴

It is this recognition of the importance of attending to the beauty of the small and the mundane, on staying on the side of life and vitality that runs throughout the exhibition. It is worth noting that in his youth, Hockney, in league with his father, was a committed conscientious objector. Like Hannah Arendt's concern with thinking and judgement as political faculties, Hockney's work stresses the need for looking and seeing as potentially influential.⁵ In the 2012 film *David Hockney: Pleasures of the Eye*, Gero von Bohm comments on how 'opening our eyes to beauty, the beauty of small, seemingly unimportant things, that is [Hockney's] aim. And he draws or paints his portraits to allow us to see what is behind the face'.⁶

³ Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937, oil on canvas, 349.3 × 776.6 cm, Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid.

⁴ *David Hockney: Pleasures of the Eye*, dir. by Gero von Boehm and Beatrice Monti della Corte (Arthaus Musik, 2012).

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind. Vol. 1: Thinking*. (Florida: Harcourt Inc., 1978), p. 5.

⁶ *David Hockney: Pleasures of the Eye*, 2012.

To see behind the face is to not take the world at face-value, but to engage with the deeper subjectivity of the person or thing that is painted. For Hockney then, painting and drawing enable us to look in such a way that brings us a kind of truth: ‘drawing makes you see things clearer, and clearer and clearer still, until our eyes ache’.⁷ There is likewise a concern for truthful looking in Hockney’s recurring interest in perspective that runs throughout the length of the exhibition, particularly in the works of rooms seven and eight.

In *Large Interior, Los Angeles* (1988), the artist plays with the conventional tunnel perspective of most images, expanding our vision of the room to a wide-angle, fish-eye panorama. An armchair on the left-hand side of the painting exemplifies this play with looking; it displays both sides in a way that can only be captured by a looking in motion, scanning from one side of the chair to the other. In room seven, Hockney’s preoccupation with multiple perspective finds expression through his experimentation with photography in the 80s. Describing conventional photography as like ‘looking at the world from the point of view of a paralyzed cyclops — for a split second’, Hockney’s photographic experiments subvert the myopic and dominating cyclopean view by endowing it with movement and extended time.⁸ We are presented with a number of cubist inspired photo-montages that capture their subjects from multiple viewpoints, challenging the way looking is represented.

In a different vein, in the fifth room of the exhibition titled ‘Towards Naturalism’, Hockney’s earlier portraiture work from the late 1960s gives the viewer an insight into the more personal issues at stake for Hockney in regards to perspective and looking. Curiously, all of the seven paintings portray couples with one partner either looking at the other partner, at the artist/viewer, or at something else in the frame; they never look at one another. For example, in *Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy* (1968), a triangulation of relations is presented: the artist or viewer locks eyes with Bachardy, the American portrait artist, while his partner Isherwood, the British writer, looks at Bachardy. The humor found in the strategically placed banana and corn cob on the table invokes a sexual energy directed towards

⁷ Devanshi Shah, ‘The Artist and his Muse: David Hockney’s Singular Journey Through Portraits and Pools’, *Architectural Digest*, 28 April 2017, <architecturaldigest.in/content/artist-and-his-muse-david-hockney-intense-ocean-palette/#s-cust0> [accessed 12 September 2017].

⁸ *Tate Britain 9 Feb-29 May 2017: Hockney* (leaflet), 2017.

Bachardy. But again this humour reveals a deeper melancholy around loneliness and exclusion – Hockney has referred before to his longing for something like the couple’s 30-year companionship. In locking eyes with Bachardy, the artist and the viewer seem to partake in the relations between the two men, providing a gaze that intervenes in the coupledness.

The last four rooms of the exhibition present us with Hockney’s work from 2006 onwards. In a kind of homecoming, Hockney takes us back to the landscapes of his childhood in Yorkshire and the Wolds. Approaching his eightieth birthday and with his hearing continuing to deteriorate, one might expect to find these final scenes preoccupied with ageing and mortality. Certainly, in his retreat to depictions of the natural world we no longer find the young bodies and sexy exuberance of the 70s LA paintings. Nonetheless, the artist’s most recent experimentation with iPad drawings have a vitality and vibrancy that exhibit a creative mind still in full gear. The iPad paintings perhaps pique Hockney’s interest not because of the digital aesthetic that is brought to the image itself, but rather for the technological innovation: the ability to record and play back each mark made, serving as a useful and curious living diary of the painting process. Watching the digital drawings develop on the screens in the final room produces an almost uncanny effect: they show an artwork seemingly coming to life on its own. A playful nod to the fact that the artist will not be around forever, the iPad drawings here seem to provide a kind of record of the painter in movement and in time for posterity’s sake.

As the gallery booklet suggests, the most important theme that runs throughout the retrospective is what picture-making and looking at pictures means. I would add to this that it is through an attention to the aesthetics of lightness – play, humour, joy, prettiness – that Hockney remains such a relevant artist. Hockney’s most important contribution is in opening the eyes of his viewers, and he does so through these particular affective and aesthetic means. Whilst wandering through the exhibition’s rooms I was reminded of what Cézanne reportedly said about looking at an artwork:

This is what a picture should give us, a warm harmony, an abyss in which the eye is lost, a secret germination, a coloured state of grace [...]. To love a painting, one must first have drunk deeply of it in long draughts. Lose consciousness. Descend with the painter

into the dim tangled roots of things, and rise again from them in colours, be steeped in the light of them.⁹

Upon leaving the gallery and walking onto the spring streets of Pimlico, I found myself seeing with a new intensity and attention: the mauvish colour of the Mimosa trees lining the roads popped and came into relief, and I became aware of the flitting of my eyes between street lights. Like Matisse's impact on Hockney, and the artwork's impact on Cézanne, this latest retrospective left me with a vague sense of coloured grace. Hockney trains the eye to see the world in such a way that is as important and subversive now as it has ever been.

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⁹ Paul Cézanne quoted in Joachim Gasquet, *Cézanne: A Memoir with Conversations*, trans. by C.E. Pemberton (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 1990), p. 180.