

Birthday Of An Old(ish) Master

At the age of 60, David Hockney is still putting the colour back in a gloomy world.

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In a corner of David Hockney's Los Angeles studio, opposite a new portrait of his wrinkled mother, stands a picture that, when finished, will swiftly make its way to several thousand homes throughout the world. The Tate Gallery wanted a poster to celebrate its centenary, a poster for underground stations and bus shelters and the Tate Shop, and who better to paint it than the most popular British artist alive?

The Tate is 100 this year, Hockney's mother will be 97, and Hockney will be 60. He says he will try to ignore this milestone, but fears his friends will make such a fuss. 'I don't mind getting older', he says, 'I don't hold inquests. I'm not nearly as careerist as some people.'

For him there is a more significant event this year – his first large-scale show in a commercial London gallery for over a decade. It contains tremendous paintings, his most assured work for many years, the experimental theorising of recent pictures now replaced by bold expressions of colour, space and delight. The show opens on election day, a fact that vaguely bemuses him. 'You're talking to a non-voter,' he says, 'but I must admit I hate Jack Straw. Thirty years ago he said 'We don't know all the facts about marijuana – we can't legalise it.' He says the same thing now. But what experience does he have of it? Well I've got some. I know it's perfectly harmless, but they're still putting people in prison for it.'

Hockney says he keeps in touch with England through the newspapers and friends: 5,000 miles away, Tony Blair strikes him as 'an eager school prefect, mad for power.' He drinks his afternoon tea. He adds: 'You probably need him though, need a change.'

We need him; he doesn't. He's been in the Hollywood Hills since the early seventies, lured by the northern light and his claustrophobia, and the promise of working virtually unhindered by his celebrity and constant demands on his time. And he has worked relentlessly, supplanting the signature images that once threatened to engulf him – the iconographic LA pools, the blond boys, the still palms – with new forms of expression and perspective in all the mediums he can find.

His cavernous studio, which he converted from a tennis court at the side of his house, provides glimpses of his many endeavours – his oils, his fax machine, models for his opera set – and on the sunny late-afternoon I visited it was busy with assistants bringing Fed-Ex packages and serving biscuits and cataloguing his colossal output, some 7,000 images to date. His two well-fed dachshunds, unhindered by their own fame, snooze on bean bags.

Alongside the pictures, Hockney has put up a sign saying 'Silence', a gentle nod to the fact that every year he edges a little closer to deafness. 'It's getting

worse and worse,' he says, showing me the box controlling his new hearing aids. 'It's not silence you get – I like silence – but it's a din, a cacophony. I realise people will never be sympathetic, they always think you can hear. My father was the same; for the last 10 years of his life he probably didn't hear a single word my mother said.'

Hockney has been to many ear specialists, and each told him there was little he could do but get more gadgets, like the amplifying contraption on his phone. He hopes there may be an upside: 'I think it makes me see clearer.' He says he now leads an anti-social life, forced upon him by being unable to hear in crowds. He is dreading the opening of his London show. 'Because I won't be able to hear anyone I'll just smile and nod. You get fed up doing that really. Luckily I don't have a job where I have to listen to people'.

His new work consists of small, dense portraits of family and friends (and two self-portraits that make him look sad, thin and wistful), and larger, ecstatic still-lives of cut flowers. These are ordinary subjects and already they have provoked some suspicion. The actor Dennis Hopper, a friend of Hockney's since they met in Andy Warhol's studio in the sixties, came round to see them a while ago. When he left he told the artist, 'At first, when you said flowers I thought, 'what's he doing fucking flowers for – after those *dogs!*' Fortunately, Hopper thought the work was terrific.

The paintings were partially inspired by Hockney's visit to the Vermeer exhibition in The Hague last year. He was less impressed with Vermeer's content than with the glow of the paint, the vivid colour of the physical objects. Hockney has always been a militant colourist, and a few years ago found himself the only artist defending the colouring of black and white films. 'Woody Allen went to Washington to protest!' he gleams. 'But I think you should colour anything. With films, all you're doing is colouring a reproduction. After all, Duchamp didn't stick a moustache on the real Mona Lisa, he stuck it on the copy.'

A little later, as he shows me his renovated 'aquarium' – a large living-room window behind which he has hung ultra-bright aluminium cut-out fish over a display of lush Californian shrubs. He says, 'We've lived through 150 years of people draining the colour from our lives. People think that colour is lighthearted, not serious. But what's the opposite? Gloom, doom – why would anyone want that?'

Several of his flower paintings contain yellow, in sunflowers and backgrounds. Van Gogh signalled yellow as the colour of hope, and Hockney found himself drawn to it. 'If you know people who are ill,' he says, 'they all want some kind of hope.'

Recently, Hockney printed up some yellow flower pictures and sent them to friends with the instruction to pin them on a wall. He says that they all noticed how the pictures had lifted them and brought some joy. Hockney thought, 'Well, my paintings are useful. That's very good. That's always been enough for me as far as I'm concerned.'

His friends: several of his close ones have died from Aids, while the fortunes of others have improved greatly due to new drugs. I wondered whether Hockney felt that there but for the grace of God... 'Oh, yeah. I spent a lot of time in New York in the late seventies and early eighties, working for the Metropolitan Opera. You could have sex with all kinds of people. If you had to organise that at home you'd have to have somebody professional to plan it. I

used to say, "I don't know if it's heaven or hell," and maybe if you don't know, it's hell.

'I was tested a long time ago, because you couldn't tell. It was so anonymous, and I'm not that keen on that. Although once I was in an orgy room, and somebody whispered in my ear that they'd loved (the Satie/Massine ballet) Parade – I'd just done it at the Met. I thought, "well, so much for anonymity". After some laughter, he says, 'But I was sexy then.'

There is grey at the roots of his bleached hair, and his skin is sallow than most who have lived in California for as long as he has, but Hockney still doesn't look his age. He sure doesn't act it. He has retained most of his Yorkshire accent and all of his garrulousness, and he maintains the air of the larky agitator. He still likes to preach and pick mild arguments, and occasionally I got the impression he found it impossible to withhold statements that he knew he would regret later.

He seems to look after his weight (when I last met him a few years ago he reproached his former dealer Kasmin for eating ice cream: 'It's solid fat!'). But he smokes plenty and coughs frequently, and has not taken well to his country's anti-tobacco nannying. A few weeks ago he wrote a letter to the New York Times, alarmed by the suggestion of a public health official who said that Deng Xiaoping, who had died recently, was a bad example to the young Chinese because he always had a Panda cigarette in his mouth. 'But the guy lived to be 92! I wrote a note saying that Mr Deng was probably grateful to Panda cigarettes for keeping him calm.'

He sighs; they didn't print it. 'But if someone had said in the New York Times in 1965 that Churchill was a very bad example, smoking all those cigars, you would have thought the writer was a bit of a weed, wouldn't you?'

A few days after we met, Hockney honoured a long-standing arrangement to light his designs for a production of Turandot in San Diego, but he spoke of the project with little enthusiasm. Increasingly over the last few years he has grown disillusioned by his work for the stage, lamenting his worsening hearing ('though I still hear in my mind'), and claiming that 'opera people are so un-visual'. He also bemoans the great inequality of time between the many months he spends designing stage sets and the few hours the world's great opera houses set aside for rehearsal. 'When we did Die Frau ohne Schatten at Covent Garden, I must have spent seven months preparing it, and we gave them a three-and-a-half hour videotape of a model we had done with all the lighting changes and all the music cues. I sent it to them, saying "This is what it should be like," but then they didn't give us the time to light it, they took time away. In the end I just felt, "Oh, I can't be bothered to do this anymore".'

Photography, a passion that once occupied his entire studio as he assembled vast collages, has also been cast aside; certainly it is no longer seen as a gateway to perception. Photography doesn't scrutinise faces, he remarks, noting that the wall of small portraits behind him required 130-140 hours of intense concentration. Hockney is now deeply suspicious of the veracity of any photograph, convinced that documentary photography died when images were first altered by computers.

He picks up a fat book of 20th century photographs on the table in front of him. He laughs at the cover, a classic image by Henri Cartier-Bresson depicting a French street scene in which a boy is carrying a bottle of wine

under each arm. 'A great photograph,' he says, 'but if that was taken in California today it would be held up as a picture of child abuse, and the photographer would be arrested, and the person who sold the wine would be prosecuted.'

Hockney loves Cartier-Bresson, not least because he never saw the need to crop his pictures. But he notes that Cartier-Bresson abandoned photography in the seventies in favour of drawing, and he remembers meeting him in Paris at about this time. 'I wanted to talk photography with him, but of course all he wanted to talk about was drawing. It's usually like that.'

The critic Robert Hughes has remarked that Hockney is popular because his work offers a window through which one's eye moves without strain or fuss into a wholly consistent world. Undeniably reassuring, his new flower paintings may turn out to be some of the most popular works he has ever produced. Although most pictures were completed in a great flourish last summer, he has been planning the London exhibition for several years, and he has taken enormous care over its hanging, going so far as to construct lighted models in which he would move miniature copies of his work.

I had brought him over some proof pages from the flowers catalogue, and he perused them in silence for a while, obviously approving, eventually remarking that even with all the care lavished on reproduction, and all the technological advances in printing, the photographs still can't possibly do justice to his work.

Despite this observation, Hockney has been a great populariser, keen that his work should be widely disseminated, unquestionably pleased that it brightens so many hallways. 'Every picture becomes decorative after a while,' he says. 'Which is probably why even crucifixions don't work on us emotionally any more.'

He walks over to the corner of his studio, to the Tate picture. He is waiting for a model of a red double-decker bus to arrive, so that he can paint it driving past the gallery (the poster was commissioned by London Transport).

'Museums have just become big shops,' he says to an assistant. He smiles broadly. 'We're not professional enough... we never get paid royalties.'

He says that he's always taken a bit of trouble with posters because he knows that this is how his work gets seen and remembered; without printing we wouldn't know much about painting. He reasons that most art disappears, 'and what remains survives through love – somebody loves it and therefore looks after it. Hopefully a few of my posters will survive.'