

RICHARD GRAY GALLERY

# Los Angeles Times

## Artist David Hockney builds on his portraits for the 21st century



Artist David Hockney sits in front of two new pieces at his studio in the Hollywood Hills. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

By **BARBARA ISENBERG**  
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There have been few better times to visit David Hockney's studio in the Hollywood Hills. He says he's having his most productive period of the last 20 years, and it certainly appears that way. The walls of his big, bright studio are full of new photographs and new portraits, one painted just that morning, and he has major gallery exhibitions coming soon in Los Angeles and London.

Hockney, 77, is sitting comfortably in the studio, smoking his customary Camel cigarette and admiring his new work. He does not get up; rather, he tells a guest to sit down next to him in a matching bluish-green worn velvet chair. It's the best view in the place, he suggests, so just look straight ahead. Look at that wall of brand-new photographs he refers to as "3-D without the glasses."

In truth, a visitor doesn't know where to look first. Besides the large-scale photographs straight ahead, there are several 3-foot-by-4-foot portraits tacked to the wall on the right, and on the left is a neat line of more than 50 smaller inkjet prints of his full portrait output — so far. And though Hockney looks a bit frail, swathed in layers of sweaters, he is animated and clearly enjoying himself.

He is doing exactly what he wants, and he traces this productive time to stimulation from a museum-packed New York visit last fall. "I saw twelve-hundred paintings by Matisse and Picasso on that trip," he says. "There were the Matisse cutouts at the Museum of Modern Art, the Cubist show at the Metropolitan Museum, and Picasso shows at Gagosian and Pace [galleries]. I came back absolutely thrilled with what I saw.

"We came back on a Sunday, and on Monday morning I was painting away," he says. "I realized Picasso worked every day. That's what you must do."

As his hearing declines, the studio is also a comfortable place to be. "I hardly go out now because I'm too deaf," says Hockney, who has worn hearing aids for more than 20 years. "Most of the time, if you go out, it's to listen to something, and I'm not good at listening now. I can't hear music anymore. I can't hear the high notes, and I can't hear the low notes. It's gone for me now, music."

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Hockney, an Englishman who loves opera and long designed opera sets, is reading more and gadding about less. "I never go to openings," he confides. "I can't hear anybody. It's as if you're there and not there. I'd rather be not there. So I don't go out much. I go to bed at 9:30."

### **An L.A. return**

After eight years of living and working mainly in Bridlington, Yorkshire, 60 miles from where he was born, Hockney moved back to Los Angeles in summer 2013.

A 23-year-old studio assistant, Dominic Elliott, died in March of that year after ingesting drugs and other substances, the most serious of a series of blows. A few months earlier, vandals had painted graffiti on a large nearby tree, a favorite subject of his paintings, then sawed it down. The incident sent him to bed for two days. He also had what he describes as "a tiny" stroke. For six months, he drew with only charcoal.



Images of David Hockney and his work at his studio in the Hollywood Hills.

Soon after, he headed back to his longtime, colorful Los Angeles home, a few steps down from the studio and under the clear blue skies that first lured him here in the '60s. Back in the California sunshine he popularized in paint, he has created his own parallel universe, bringing the outside in by inviting painting, photography and film subjects to perform for his camera or sit for portraits.

He'd begun widening his studio guest list before he left Bridlington, where visitors included jugglers whom he immortalized in a short multi-camera video later shown at LACMA and elsewhere. Last summer, invitations went to dancers who gave him a sense of dance and movement as he created a circle painting in homage to Henri Matisse's "The Dance" (La Danse).

The most ambitious of his studio work these days is his ongoing portrait project. Begun last year, it has already involved individual visits by dozens of people, who come to the studio to be painted. Most are members of an eclectic group of friends and staff, a de facto acting company that has appeared in many of his earlier portraits and photos.

An early participant was Stephanie Barron, senior curator of modern art at LACMA. "What's really fascinating are the differences that emerge among the paintings when the setting is the same for everyone," observes Barron. "Each of us sat on the same white armchair, in front of the same blue curtain, and on an elevated platform. What was different was the pose each individual chose."

Barron thinks Hockney profited from the social aspect. "For someone whose hearing is so compromised, being out in groups is difficult. Each person had nearly three days with him, with opportunities for breaks, coffee, lunch and conversation. It's great for the sitter and also good for Hockney."

There was a similar social aspect to Hockney's large-scale photographs of card players, his homage to Paul Cézanne's "The Card Players." Former Hockney assistant Charlie Scheips, today an author and cultural historian, sat for both a portrait and for the card players. "They were playing Hearts, which I didn't play, but the other players taught me. We spent five or six days playing Hearts. Nonstop."

Hockney says he got the card player photographs going in two days, then refined them for two weeks. Friends were invited into the studio to sit at a table and play cards or sometimes Scrabble, and, he explains, "I made the paintings first and then realized I could do photos of them. I knew how to make them, because I had already done the paintings."

To begin, he photographed the floor of the studio, then the wall, then the card table. Next he photographed each of the card players, getting in close to shoot a hand or a shoe. He then photographed such things as a bottle, an older painting, a jacket, even his landmark Polaroid collage, the 700-photograph "Pearblossom Hwy., 11-18th April, 1986." Then he put the pieces together, as he might a picture puzzle.

Each artwork, he says, is "conceptually constructed" of 200 or 300 photographs. Other photographs freeze one particular moment. "That's why they're all flat. I put in the figures, each one at a different time, and everything is close-up. That's why you feel close to them. An ordinary photograph wouldn't read across the room, but these do."

Hockney likes to experiment. The artist's 50-year career sweeps in artworks made not only with paint on canvas but using such things as fax machines, still videos, color laser copiers and, more recently, iPhones and iPads. His multi-image photographic collages of the Brooklyn Bridge, Grand Canyon and Pearblossom Highway emerged in the '80s, and just a few years ago, Hockney was making multi-camera films, shown as one artwork made of several digital videos presented together on adjacent screens.

"He's an image maker," says his longtime dealer, Peter Goulds, at Venice's LA Louver Gallery. "The new photographs are made by utilizing Photoshop and other current digital technology, and I see these digital assemblages as a natural evolution. He's always gravitated to cameras, and bringing time and attitudes toward time into a pictorial space."

There are many ways to examine perspective, adds LACMA curator Barron, who has been involved with Hockney's exhibitions since the '80s. "With David Hockney's work, one thing always evolves into another," she says. "The portraits are a genre in themselves but seem definitely connected to the card players and other studio work with multiple figures. They lead to the photos we're seeing now."

The card players and some of the portraits will be included in LA Louver's summer exhibition, "David Hockney: Paintings and Photography," one of two coming exhibitions of the new work. Scheduled to open at London's Annely Juda Fine Art in May, and at LA Louver in July, the two shows will each include the same 28 artworks.

Hockney says he is also looking toward a major show in 2016 of all his new portraits at London's Royal Academy of Arts; his last exhibition there in 2012 was that institution's most popular show of the last 16 years. While a Royal Academy spokeswoman said it was still too early to announce or confirm that show, Hockney contemplates 70 paintings and 25 drawings will be shown there.

That said, Hockney looks around the room again. "It looks very good in here," he says with a smile. "I'm soaking it all in, and I'm very pleased with it. They are portraits for the 21st century."