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Sitting (Not Always) Pretty for David Hockney

In an ambitious new portraiture series, the Los Angeles-based British artist painted people close to him. Like awkward school photos, the results aren't always flattering



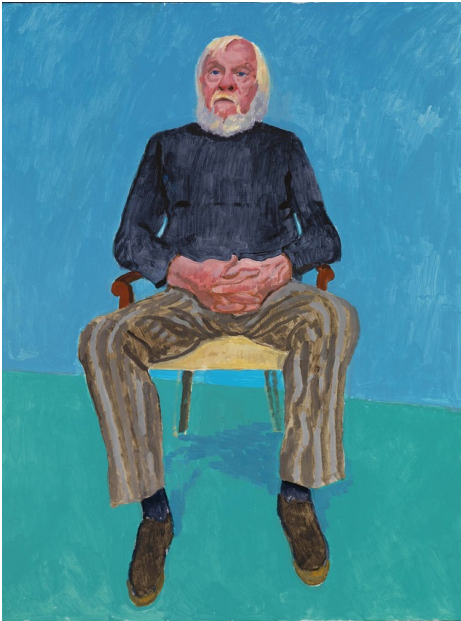
For his latest series, David Hockney painted people close to him. PHOTO: STEVE SCHOFIELD/CONTOUR/GETTY IMAGES

By [ANNA RUSSELL](#)

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For the past 2½ years, Los Angeles-based British artist David Hockney has spent three intense days each painting over 80 portraits of those in his social circle—from artist John Baldessari and megadealer Larry Gagosian to his sister, Margaret Hockney, dressed in glasses and polka-dots.

Like awkward school photos, the results aren't always flattering. "It was not my favorite, and I'll leave it like that," says British fashion designer Celia Birtwell, who has modeled for Mr. Hockney since 1969. "Vanity comes into the equation," she says. "I blame it on myself, not him."



David Hockney, 'John Baldessari, 13th, 16th December, 2013.'



David Hockney, 'Dagny Corcoran, 15th, 16th, 17th January, 2014.'



David Hockney, 'Rita Pynoos, 1st, 2nd March, 2014.'

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On July 2, Ms. Birtwell's portrait will join a slew of others on display at London's Royal Academy for "David Hockney RA: 82 Portraits and 1 Still-life." Long interested in portraits—a classic work starring Ms. Birtwell has been at the Tate since the early 1970s—Mr. Hockney conceived these new works as a series, to be executed under exacting circumstances.

"This is the most ambitious project involving portraiture he's ever done," says British art critic Martin Gayford, author of "A Bigger Message: Conversations with David Hockney," who sat for the artist in December 2013. "Just about everyone from David's world is included in this series."

Each work began with an invitation from the 78-year-old artist (he doesn't work on commission) to sit for him in his airy studio in the Hollywood Hills. Models are asked to pose for three days, for several hours a day, a period Mr. Hockney calls a "20-hour exposure." He doesn't work from photographs, and he doesn't sit down while working. He also doesn't make small talk.

"He was incredibly intense," says David Juda, Mr. Hockney's longtime London gallerist, who sat for a painted portrait on his own for the first time for the series.

Mr. Hockney has his subjects pose on a small stage in his studio in a yellow-upholstered chair. Models can wear whatever clothing they like and are free to choose their pose—as long they can

hold it for three days. Studio assistants mark the sitters' feet in charcoal on the floor, so they can quickly slip back into position after breaks.

Edith Devaney, the exhibition's curator, says she arranged the portraits chronologically to show their evolution over time. "There's a sense of his progression throughout; the first ones feel more tentative than the later ones," she says. "The faces become slightly more nuanced."



David Hockney, 'Rufus Hale, 23rd, 24th, 25th November, 2015.'



David Hockney, 'Edith Devaney, 11th, 12th, 13th February 2016'



David Hockney, 'Earl Simms, 29th February, 1st, 2nd March 2016'

PHOTOS: © DAVID HOCKNEY/PHOTO: RICHARD SCHMIDT(3)

Already deep into planning the show, Ms. Devaney was asked to model for a portrait. She opted for a casual look, leaning forward in a striped shirt, bluejeans and suede boots. She followed the movements of an electrical easel that Mr. Hockney uses to move the canvas up and down, trying to guess where the picture was in its execution. "But after a few hours you start worrying about drifting off," she says.

Other sitters say they worried about clothing. Mr. Gayford arrived at the studio one night for a dinner party and began sitting for the artist the next day. "He looked at my shirt and my trousers and said 'Hmm, you're wearing black' in a slightly unhappy tone of voice," he says. So Mr. Gayford threw on an orange pullover he thought had a "slightly Hockney color."

Ms. Birtwell arrived planning to wear a long powder-blue dress and sparkly shoes, but was told the outfit would take too long, she says. So she switched to a cream blouse and a polka-dot bow tie. "You try too hard sometimes," she says.

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