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Visual Art: David Hockney's Belfast show is modest in scale but ambitious in scope

MAC exhibition, a first for Ireland, is a fine collection with a focus on drawing

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David Hockney's primary instinct seems always to be to produce work: 'Self portrait' 1954, collage on newsprint; 'Margaret Hockney' 2008, inkjet printed computer drawing on paper

David Hockney: I draw, I do ★★★★★

The MAC, Edward Street, Belfast

Until October 16th, themaclive.com

It seems like something of an oversight that the MAC's I draw, I do is the first major solo show of David Hockney's work in Ireland. After all, Hockney is industriously prolific and warmly regarded, and his work is immensely popular and accessible. And, all those years in California notwithstanding, he is English and has never weakened his links with his homeland. Looking

back over the decades, one wonders if organising a show in Ireland, South or North, was just too expensive or logistically difficult, or perhaps curators thought he was just too obvious a choice. Which he is not, because his sheer creative energy and the range of his achievement are breathtaking. So full marks to the MAC for making good on a glaring omission in the Irish exhibition record.

That said, I draw, I do is perhaps not as big or extensive a show as the pre-publicity made it sound: it occupies just one of the venue's two-and-a-half exhibition spaces and is inexplicably denied the spacious Upper Gallery. The good news is that it's an excellent show, modest in scale but ambitious in scope. Careful selection, and some surprises, make up for a lack of depth in terms of each body of work represented. It's a collection of edited highlights, by no means amounting to a greatest hits compendium, but it is still great.

Putting the focus on drawing makes particular sense because while Hockney is endlessly versatile and flexible as regards media and technique, virtually everything he does, including painting, printmaking and even photography, comes back to drawing. If it is not pure drawing – and it often is – it's underpinned by drawing. He has always used etching, for example, as essentially a drawing medium. It's interesting to note that you would be hard put to make sense of the other two shows at the MAC without reading the substantial explanatory texts that introduce and situate them within particular areas of cultural theory. That's par for the course for a great deal of contemporary art, so that it almost goes without saying, but it is emphatically not the case for Hockney.

Certainly you can frame his work in any number of theoretical or historical ways, but that's more incidental, more a question of background. Contextual explanations and interpretations can be informative and even illuminating but essentially there is an easy, conversational quality to what he does, the work reaches out to engage us without the necessity for any intervening theoretical apparatus. We don't really need to be told what it's about because we can see what it's about, which is pretty much everything in terms of our experience of being alive in the world.

Often there is a witty literalness to what we are seeing, nowhere more than in the wonderful print series from the 1960s, several of them represented at the MAC, including *The Rake's Progress* (based on Hogarth but depicting Hockney's first visit to New York), *The Boy Who Left Home to Learn Fear* from the Grimm Fairy Tales and etchings inspired by the poetry of C P Cavafy. In fact the literalness was in a sense tactical. Hockney has written about realising that he wasn't going to be an Abstract Expressionist painter, which seemed to be the cool way to go when he went to the Royal College of Art from 1957. Printing words onto the canvas was his

initially indirect way of introducing the figure, or more generally representation, into his paintings, and he was mocked for doing so. Going on from there he would picture, with deadpan humour, exactly what the words of a title were saying.

He was born in Bradford and attended the Bradford Regional College of Art in the 1950s. Rejecting suggestions that he pursue a career in either commercial art or teaching, he set his sights firmly on being a painter. Jill Iredale of Bradford Museums and Galleries co-curated and brings several early paintings of Bradford dating from that time. They are in tune with the prevalent mode of Kitchen Sink realism, but with a distinct lyrical tinge. Drawing is central to them.

The MAC's survey encompasses some of the artist's more recent departures, including the Yorkshire landscapes that were shown in an incredibly popular, blockbuster exhibition, *A Bigger Picture* at London's Royal Academy in 2012. Hockney became adept at using an iPhone, and then an iPad, to produce coloured drawings, including portrait drawings. Another marathon project, *82 Portraits and 1 Still-Life* is currently on view at the Royal Academy (until October 2). Then, to mark his 80th birthday, the most ambitious retrospective of his work ever attempted will open at Tate Britain next February.

Hockney offered his views on what the organisers proposed to include in that show, and they have taken on board his ideas but, as co-curator Chris Stephens perceptively remarked of him: "David, more than most other artists, is particularly engaged with what he's going to do next rather than what he did in the past."

As with Picasso, by the time his public is catching up with what he's been doing, he's already deeply immersed in something new, he's moved on. He is an omnivorous observer whose primary instinct seems always to be to produce work. That's undoubtedly a means of self-preservation. It also entails a certain toughness, even ruthlessness, and that's apparent looking back over Hockney's life. As Graham Greene famously put it, there's always a "splinter of ice in the heart of a writer". For writer read artist.