



**Visual Arts**

## David Hockney at Tate Britain: an even bigger splash

Survey of the UK's most popular artist shows work that is moving as well as visually enchanting



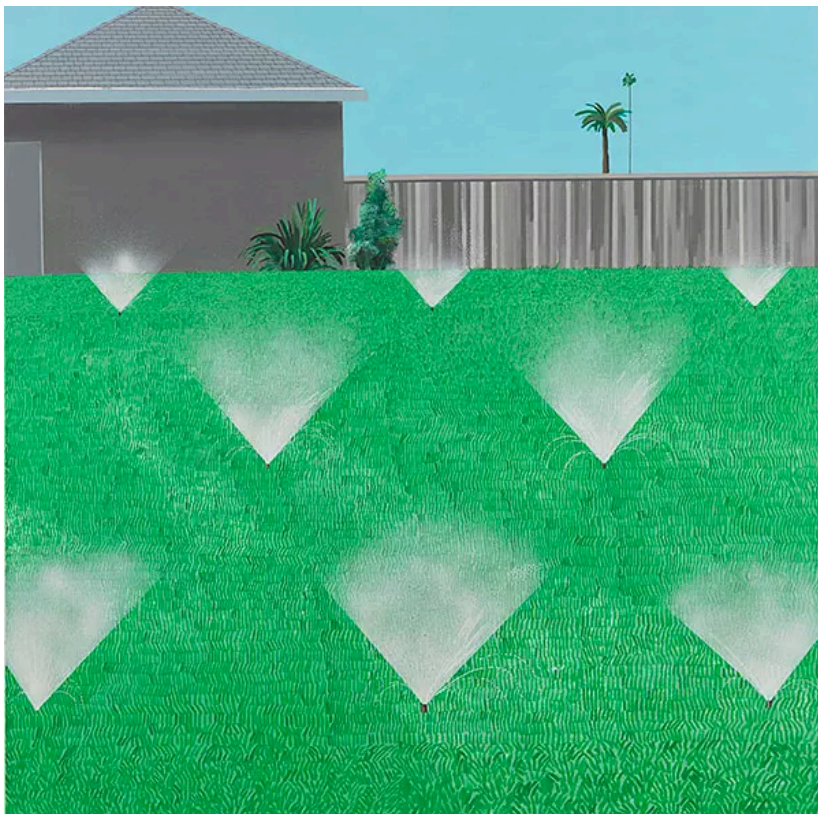
David Hockney's 'Red Pots in the Garden' (2000) © David Hockney; Richard Schmidt

FEBRUARY 10, 2017 by: Jackie Wullschlager

“People want meaning in life. That’s a desperate need, and images can help. Unfortunately there is within modern art a contempt for people . . . I do want to make a picture that has meaning for a

lot of people. I think the idea of making pictures for 25 people in the art world is crazy and ridiculous.”

This was David Hockney speaking in 1977. He was by then a celebrity, popular as no British artist before or since, the people and places in his life accessible and familiar in crystalline, stylised yet acutely observed, instantly recognisable pictures: “Peter Getting Out of Nick’s Pool”, “Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy”, “Domestic Scene, Los Angeles”, “A Lawn Being Sprinkled”. Forty years on, these remain memorable, beloved images. We see now that they also constitute an iconography mapping postwar revolutions of sex and class, taste and money.



‘A Lawn Being Sprinkled’ (1967) © David Hockney; Richard Schmidt

Saluting Hockney as a formal master of light and movement in scores of such cool, laconic distillations of everyday rapture — “Sunbather”, with its calligraphic pool; “The Room Tarzana”, where light from an open window streaks across a bedroom interior, based on a Macy’s department store advertisement, illuminating Hockney’s boyfriend Peter Schlesinger in T-shirt and socks — Tate Britain’s retrospective for Hockney’s 80th birthday this year was always going to be a blockbuster; it has already exceeded Tate’s record for advance ticket sales. Anchored by Hockney’s graphic brilliance, lifted by his wit and optimism, the show is pleasurable from start to finish.

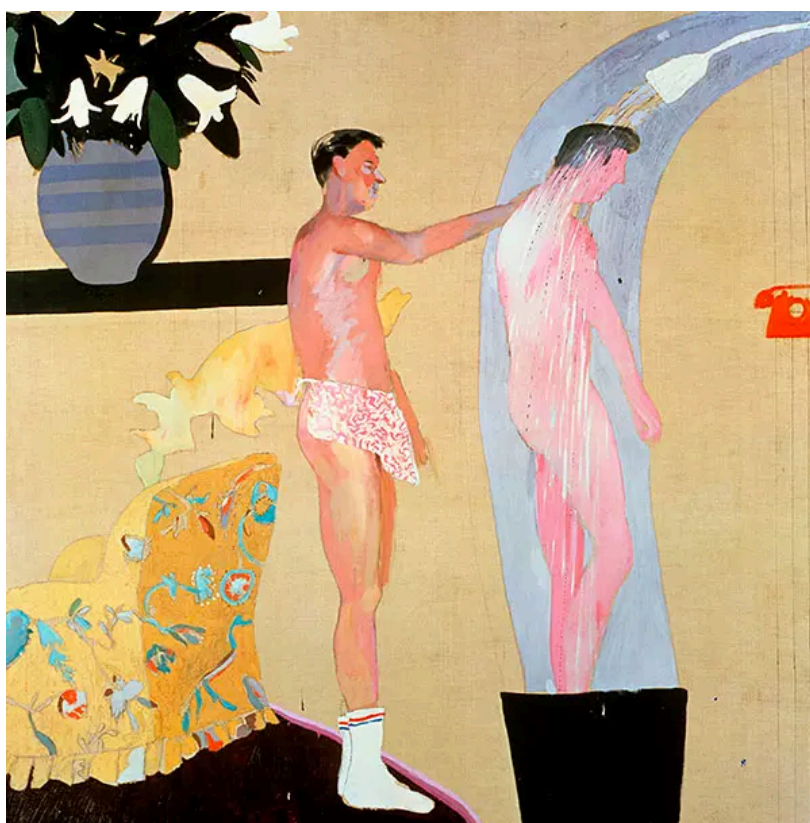
Tate’s challenge was to make it more than that: to draw out Hockney’s conceptual experiments, iron out his unevenness, emphasise the coherence underpinning swerves in style and media. The result feels right and inevitable: the exhibition charts the powerful, straightforward story of an artist whose natural gift as draughtsman was second in the 20th century only to Picasso’s, and whose life-long exploration into possibilities of representation, filtered through autobiography, takes off from Picasso.



With Hockney's virtuosity, that is enough to sustain an enthralling career. Intimate works on paper here are a rewarding show of their own. In "Gregory Sitting on Base of Column", Hockney's lover is as nonchalantly beautiful as a Botticelli youth. The table still life of bottle and book "Vichy Water and 'Howard's End', Carennac", evokes in brief limpid strokes drowsy southern afternoon heat. Widowed Laura Hockney is formidable, resilient though distracted by grief, in the broken-lined "Mother, Bradford".

As in any extensive oeuvre, there are dips and dead ends — the photocollages and iPad drawings are tedious, and no one wants to see the videos again — but Hockney's dramas of pictorial space are consistently spectacular and emotionally resonant. In 1965, a playful depiction of his suited father in an interior of cylinders and cones riffs on materiality versus flatness in "Portrait Surrounded by Artistic Devices"; its argument is really that a loved human presence outweighs theory. In 2013, 25 charcoal drawings, precise, tender and melancholy, chronicle moment by moment "The Arrival of Spring" on a receding tree-lined road from Bridlington to Kilham. Completed after Hockney recovered from illness in 2013, this is English pastoral as redemptive vision.

Arranged chronologically, the show unfolds as frankly as a diary. Before he left the Royal College in the early 1960s Hockney was subverting the prevailing language of abstraction into homoerotic narrative, with the childlike scrawled bodies, cryptic codes, phallic shapes and graffiti of "We Two Boys Together Clinging" — "Well, I hope they don't get any closer than that," was his tutor Roger de Grey's only response — and "The Most Beautiful Boy in the World", inspired by fellow student Peter Crutch, on whom Hockney had a crush. The highly textured gold/red surfaces, mirrored reflection, spatial ambiguity and fluid dancing figure — Crutch dressed as a girl performing for Hockney in the student bar — make



Domestic Scene Los Angeles' (1963) © David Hockney; Richard Schmidt

“The Cha Cha That Was Danced in the Early Hours of 24th March, 1961” a youthful masterpiece.

The exhilarating sense in these first rooms is of an emerging artist, ever more inventive, who knows he can get away with anything. In the comedy “Cleaning Teeth, Early Evening (10PM) W11” the clinging boys have become lascivious grinning blocks, one chained to the bed, engaged in mutual fellatio, with oozing toothpaste tubes substituted for genitals. “A Bigger

Splash” freezes the moment after a diver plunges into a pool in suburban California: an ejaculatory burst of white, laboriously painted with small brushes, contrasts with the broad slabs of smooth colour put on with a roller for the cloudless sky and still water. This figurative composition audaciously assimilates abstraction, then declares its own artificiality through a white, Polaroid-like border.



Model with Unfinished Self-Portrait' (1977) © David Hockney; Richard Schmidt

America offered Hockney sun, sex, an unpainted topography and psychological freedom. The great American double portraits of the 1960s-70s remain fresh and devastating. You could meet “American Collectors (Fred and Marcia Weisman)”, stiff, haughty, hideous as their Indian totems, at Frieze 2017. “Henry Geldzahler and

Christopher Scott” domesticates gay love as a secular annunciation: Scott an edgy, just-arrived angel in a raincoat, Geldzahler, domed forehead rhyming with round belly, haloed by a pool of light cast from the casement above his plush sofa. Marking Hockney’s break-up with Schlesinger, “Portrait of the Artist (Pool with Two Figures)”, one underwater, is as bittersweet an image of alienation as any in postwar art, set against transparent turquoise ripples, soft blue hills, patterns of cypresses and cacti.



Scale was America's other gift to Hockney. Through the 1980s, in photocollages such as "Pearlblossom Highway" he sought ways to depict the country's vast open spaces. Tate makes a case that these photographic "joiner assemblages" were foundational for the painterly panoramas of California in the late 1980s-90s and Yorkshire in the 2000s: "Pacific Coast Highway and Santa Monica", "Going Up Garrowby Hill". Here landscape is abstracted into interlocking arabesques of crimsons, purples, lush greens. Edges of viewpoints fold into and across each other, roads wind through luminous terrains where flatness collides with illusions of spatial depth.

Less formally innovative than Hockney's early works, these are deeply felt, exquisitely made homages to Modernist painting: Cubist games meeting rich fat Matissean colour. Outstanding are the "Breakfast at Malibu" still lifes of tea sets poised on what Hockney calls "the edge of the largest swimming pool in the world", the tilting delicate china threatened by the dark blue expanse of the Pacific: immersive, meditative, drawing out time and arresting it.

Hockney never fails to enchant the eye, but as this judiciously chosen, sensitively choreographed survey demonstrates, he also moves the spirit.

Tate Britain, to May 29, [tate.org.uk](http://tate.org.uk);  
Centre Pompidou, Paris, June 21-  
October 23; Metropolitan Museum,  
New York, November 20-February 28  
2018

Photographs: David Hockney;  
Richard Schmidt

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'Bill + Audrey Wilder Los Angeles April 1982' © David Hockney; Richard Schmidt