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David Hockney, 82, talks marijuana, drawing and cheating death with Kirsty Lang

# “In Normandy, there is apple, cherry and pear blossom... It's really turned me on” David Hockney

*The artist on new passions and defying doctors at 82*

**THE  
MAGAZINE  
INTERVIEW**  
**KIRSTY  
LANG**



A strange sense of familiarity drifts over me as I step into David Hockney's Los Angeles home for the first time. It's the colours: the cobalt blue, flamingo pink, lemon yellow and jungle green that cover the walls and woodwork of this higgledy-piggledy house built on a steep incline in the Hollywood Hills. Standing on the blue wooden balcony outside his living room, looking down at the kidney-shaped pool, the pink wall, the lush green ferns and palm trees, it strikes me that I've seen versions of this view dozens of times in his paintings and iPad drawings. Now I'm finally stepping into the 3D version.

His assistant Jonathan Wilkinson shows me into the studio. I've arrived early, and David is having a nap because he was up at dawn drawing. It's a huge airy room built on a level above the main house. In the centre are several old comfy armchairs, splattered in paint and arranged around a small coffee table covered in cigarette packets and overflowing ashtrays. One wall is given over to a long desk with several Apple computer screens. Wilkinson is working on one of them. He has been assisting David with the technical aspects of his work since 2008. They met at Salts Mill arts centre in Bradford when Hockney was back living in Yorkshire.

The first thing that catches my eye are dozens of pictures of a half-timbered Normandy farmhouse with blue shutters drawn from a variety of different angles. And trees. Not the tall sycamores and beeches of the East Riding, but small fruit trees, all in blossom. Normandy is the orchard of France, a huge apple-growing region and the home of calvados. This is Hockney's latest obsession, his new home in France purchased on the spur of the moment 18 months ago. Minutes later, the 82-year-old artist shuffles in like someone who has just woken up, blinking in the light. Pointing at the pictures on the wall he explains that his new project is to “capture the arrival of spring in

Normandy and paint it like the *Bayeux Tapestry*. The idea is that you will walk past it and think it's moving, but you are doing the moving.”

Will it be as long as the *Bayeux Tapestry*? He hesitates. I think he's tempted to say yes, he's just not sure whether it's possible.

Hockey is fascinated by scale. *Bigger Trees Near Warter*, his landscape painting of a coppice in East Yorkshire, measures 40ft, the length of a seagoing container. That painting, which he donated to the Tate in 2008 (currently on loan to the Hong Kong Museum of Art), was painted on 50 individual canvases over five weeks one winter, in situ. He has always preferred drawing and painting from life.

Although the artist will for ever be associated with painting swimming pools in the bright Californian sunshine, in Los Angeles he misses the seasons. “It's too tropical. In northern Europe, the nature is full of variety and constantly changing.” In Yorkshire, he painted landscapes in the winter, spring, summer and autumn, and he plans to do the same in France.

In the autumn of 2018 after his stained-glass window was unveiled in Westminster Abbey, his chief assistant, Jean-Pierre Gonçalves de Lima (known as JP), suggested a break in Normandy. “We went to see the *Bayeux Tapestry*, which I hadn't seen since the Sixties,” says Hockney. “It's now housed in a new building, which is much better. It's in the dark, and you can walk along all 70 metres of it.” Later, on the drive to Paris to see another tapestry, “I just happened to say to JP, wouldn't it be good to do the arrival of spring here, because there's a lot more blossom than in East Yorkshire? There is apple blossom, the cherry blossom, the pear blossom. I said maybe we should find a house or something.”

JP duly called a couple of estate agents, and by November they had purchased La Grande Cour. The half-timbered farmhouse is at the top of a gravel drive, surrounded by fields and orchards. Builders were ➤➤➤

**PHOTOGRAPH**  
**AUSTIN HARGRAVE**

# Galerie Lelong & Co.

Paris – New York



AUSTIN HARBRAYE FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE

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**BRANCHING OUT**  
Hockney with recent pictures of his half-timbered Normandy farmhouse and its orchards. Previous page: the artist at home in the Hollywood Hills. Below: the stained-glass window in Westminster Abbey he designed in 2018

hired to create a new high-tech studio for Hockney in the old cider press adjacent to the farmhouse. By March he had started work. "I did a lot of drawing first: I did those drawings," he says, pointing to the ones on the wall that I had been admiring earlier. I'm struck by the excitement in his voice: "I started work immediately and I've been going ever since and it's really turned me on."

Wilkinson explains that the set-up in France is much easier for him than it was in Yorkshire. There, he would have to get into a car and drive out to the countryside from the house in Bridlington, which he originally bought for his mother and sister to live in. In France, he barely has to leave the garden, the trees are all around.

**W**e are meeting to discuss Hockney's new London exhibition, *Drawing from Life*, opening at the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) later this month. The show focuses on five figures whom he has painted consistently over 60 years: himself; his mother; his friend Celia Birtwell; Gregory Evans, his former lover, studio manager and now curator; and Maurice Payne, a master printer and friend since the 1960s. It is a curiously intimate show, a portrait of his inner circle. All five figures are depicted growing older, and the drawings chart the changing nature of their relationships.

Sarah Howgate, who has curated the exhibition, says it also demonstrates the fact that, for six decades, Hockney has never stood still, never stayed with one approach or medium, "from his pen-and-ink drawings and the coloured-pencil portraits of the 1960s and 1970s to his more recent, and freer, experiments with watercolour and digital technology". He is always exploring new techniques, most notably embracing the iPad when it first came out.

The intimacy of the show is particularly evident in the drawings of Evans. In the early years there are numerous pictures of him naked, emerging from the swimming pool or in bed asleep. That's when they were lovers. I ask him why there are so many of Evans asleep. "If you are drawing somebody asleep, you know them

really well, otherwise how would you draw them?" Later portraits show him sitting in an armchair, sometimes with a book and reading glasses. We see the beautiful young lover age slowly before our eyes, morphing into an old friend and sage adviser.

"I've always felt there was something quite sexual when David was drawing me," says Payne, who has worked closely with Hockney, printing a number of his etchings. When I put this to the artist, he says Maurice isn't the only one to make that observation, and that it's probably something to do with the intensity of his gaze when he's drawing.

"I think this show will be interesting because it's five people that I drew for 50 years at least, so it's quite unusual," he says. "Not many artists would have done this. There are one or two others you could probably name — Lucian Freud, possibly." Freud also painted his mother over and over again. But Howgate says the key difference between these two titans of 20th-century British art is that Freud settled on a particular approach to portraits and spent decades finessing it. "David never settled, he is always experimenting." Towards the end of Freud's life, the two artists sat for each other. Afterwards Hockney remarked that Freud took far more time over his drawing and liked to talk to his sitter, whereas Hockney works fast and in silence.

One of the early self-portraits in the show was painted in 1954 while he was studying at the Bradford School of Art. It's a collage on newsprint. There is a copy hanging in his LA studio. He is wearing a yellow tie, a red scarf and blue jacket over a check shirt, which must have made him stand out in 1950s Bradford. His hair was very dark back then and cut in a pudding bowl, but the look in his eyes is surprisingly confident. It is also instantly recognisable as Hockney, who has an eternally boyish face framed by round, Harry Potter-like glasses. On the day we meet, his outfit is a similar clash of bright colours: a pale green cardigan, a red tie and yellow-framed glasses.

He started doing sketches of his family when he was 15. Paper was expensive in the postwar period, so he'd steal bits from school or draw on anything he could find,

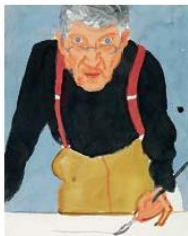


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## LIGHT FANTASTIC

Far right: *A Bigger Splash*, 1967. Below: a self-portrait from 1954, while Hockney was a student at Bradford School of Art, and *Self-Portrait with Red Braces*, 2003



even bus tickets. “I left Bradford Grammar School at 16 and went straight to art school. I was the only one in the family who stayed on in education past 16,” he says with pride. His parents were surprisingly encouraging. His father, Kenneth, who worked as a clerk, always told him not to worry what the neighbours thought, which the artist points out was unusual for someone of his class and background then. “He said that to me, not my three brothers, probably because I was a conscientious objector like him.” Hockney worked in a hospital instead of doing military service in the late 1950s.

All his early portraits were of his parents. There are sketches of scenes he drew in the family kitchen in Bradford. “My mother was a more willing sitter than my father. My father couldn’t really sit still. He was a fidget. But the first oil painting I ever sold was of my father, painted in our home in Hutton Terrace. I sent it to an exhibition of Yorkshire artists in Leeds. I never put a price on it, because I thought nobody would buy it. But they did, for £10, which was a lot of money in those days.”

He continued to draw his mother up until her death in 1999. “I’d always draw when I went to stay, and always on the last day.” For the last 10 years of her life, he’d go four times a year to Bridlington and draw her each time “because I’d think, ‘This might be the last time.’” He drew her twice on the day of his father’s funeral, which to an outsider seems strange. But Hockney says it had become his way of communicating with her.

It was at Bradford School of Art that he learnt to draw. “It was open at nine in the morning until nine at night, so from the age of 16 to 20 I drew 12 hours a day.” His dad fixed up an old pram so the teenage David could push his paints and materials around as he painted the streets of Bradford. As I listen to him saying this, the Californian sunshine is beaming in from the skylights in his studio. It must have been such a shock to his senses arriving in Los Angeles after growing up in the monochrome world of 1950s England. He nods. “This was colour, so much colour and light. And with the bright sun you get the deepest shadows.”

Also included in the NPG exhibition is a series of 16 etchings he did after his first trip to America in the summer of 1961. Inspired by William Hogarth, he did his own version of *A Rake’s Progress*, transforming the tale of an aristocrat in London who squanders his wealth into a story about a young gay man in New York. It was there that he bleached his hair for the first time after watching a Clairol TV ad that claimed blondes have more fun. He recalls walking through the Bowery in Lower Manhattan, which in the early 1960s was pretty grim, New York’s Skid Row. “There were people lying about on the pavement drinking. And I thought, this is like Hogarth’s London in the 18th century.”

Apart from his mum, the other woman he has painted consistently for more than 50 years is Celia Birtwell, a textile designer. They met in the mid-1960s and immediately bonded, because they’re both from the north and have a shared sense of humour. Hockney

was the best man at her wedding to the fashion designer Ossie Clark. His present to the newlyweds was his famous double portrait *Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy*, which shows Celia standing at the window of their Notting Hill flat while Ossie reclines on a chair with Percy the cat on his lap. For years the portrait has been one of the bestselling postcards in the Tate collection and in 2005 was voted one of Britain’s 10 favourite paintings.

The last time he painted Birtwell was at his house in France. She visited twice, in August and November, and sat for him each time. She was anxious that he would make her look like an old lady. His response was: “Well, you’re going to be painted by a very old man.” He speaks of her with great affection. “She’s a good sitter. She has a marvellous face, it is still marvellous even now she’s 78 or 79. She hasn’t many lines, and she still smokes in the evening.”

For Hockney, smoking remains an act of defiance in a world that is increasingly intolerant of the habit. He is also a big supporter of California’s decision to legalise cannabis. “I always assumed they kept marijuana illegal because of the power of the alcohol lobby. That’s their competition. But the alcohol lobby has become less powerful, and of course there are lots of people now in their seventies or eighties who’ve smoked marijuana for



40 or 50 years. And they know it’s harmless.” He says he smokes it himself — not when he works, but in the evening to relax.

He chain-smokes cigarettes continually throughout the interview. When our photographer asks him if he has ever given up smoking, he says once, back in the late 1960s, when his boyfriend Peter Schlesinger (the beautiful young man in the swimming pool paintings) asked him to. But he took it up again when Peter left him. “I’ve had three doctors in the past 40 or so years. They all told me to give up smoking and now they’re all dead,” he says chuckling. He did, however, have a minor stroke in 2012 and a heart attack 30 years ago. “The doctors said it was due to smoking, but I think it was stress. I had an angioplasty, carried on and I was fine.”

He proceeds to recite a short WH Auden poem about doctors, by heart — one he is fond of repeating, having recited it during another interview for *The Sunday Times Magazine* some years ago. ➔➔➔

“Lots of people have smoked marijuana for 50 years. They know it’s harmless”

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**MODEL FRIEND**  
From left: Celia Birtwell, 1971; Birtwell last year; Hockney in 1982, with fellow artists David Stoltz and Ian Falconer



“Give me a doctor partridge-plump,  
Short in the leg and broad in the rump,  
An endomorph with gentle hands  
Who’ll never make absurd demands  
That I abandon all my vices  
Nor pull a long face in a crisis,  
But with a twinkle in his eye  
Will tell me that I have to die.”

**A**s the photographer packs up in the studio, Hockney rather sweetly invites us to lunch. The photographer declines, but I accept with some alacrity having caught scent of some enticing cooking smells coming from the kitchen. It’s a scrummy fish pie packed with carbs, butter and peas, cooked by his housekeeper. Clearly, all these years in California haven’t changed his eating habits, either. Most wealthy LA residents of his age limit themselves to nibbling on a bit of protein and raw vegetables. We eat in a big open-plan kitchen and living room with french windows onto the terrace. Around the table are his two assistants, Wilkinson and JP, and a neighbour who has just popped in: Benedikt Taschen, the German publisher and art collector, who recently produced a massive art book of Hockney reproductions covering 60 years. Taschen explains to me that he calls it “a Sumo book”, because it’s big like a Japanese wrestler.

Over lunch, Hockney tells a funny story about taking his mum to Tate Britain and her being perplexed by an artwork that was a piece of rope. “She wanted to know if the artist had made it,” he says, shaking his head and grinning at the memory of it. “Do you know why laughter is important?” he asks, turning towards me. I shake my head. “It’s the only time as human beings that our fight-or-flight response is turned off. It’s good for you.” It’s one of the reasons he is friends with Birtwell: she makes him laugh. “And she uses words like ‘cigarooogie’ or ‘a cigarama’, something like that. It’s a delight, all the words she uses.”

JP mentions the American comedian Larry David. He introduced Hockney to his sitcom *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and they’re all fans. I imagine the artist and his two assistants sitting around the TV watching it together. The awkwardness of the humour and the

curmudgeonly comedian’s lack of political correctness appeals to Hockney. He’s also a fan of Ricky Gervais.

He says he stopped going out many years ago because of his deafness. Like his father, he started going deaf in his forties and has been using hearing aids for decades. He also stopped going to the opera because he found his lack of hearing depressing. “I’d given up going to restaurants here in LA even before they banned smoking because I couldn’t really hear anybody. I could hear background noise, but not the person next to me. Now I’m 82, I don’t want to go out anyway.”

Was it isolating losing your hearing at such a young age? “Yes, it was, but I’ve arranged my life so I always have people come to visit. We can have six or eight people around the table, no more, and it’s fine.”

I’m struck during lunch how he has created a little family around him of assistants and close friends. Or perhaps a small family business is a better way of describing the Hockney household, because everything revolves around the art. If the artist isn’t sleeping, eating or smoking, he is drawing or making art.

This close-knit studio family was shattered in the spring of 2013 with the sudden death of his young assistant Dominic Elliott at the house in Bridlington. In the catalogue for his NPG show, Howgate writes how this tragedy brought to an end the painter’s eight-year stint in Yorkshire. He returned to Los Angeles and, for a while, found it difficult to work. The breakthrough came when he started on a portrait of JP sitting in a chair with his head in his hands. Inspired by Van Gogh’s visceral portrait *Sorrowing Old Man (At Eternity’s Gate)* JP’s obscured face speaks volumes. “It is the embodiment of grief, the self-portrait Hockney could not bear to paint,” Howgate writes.

I ask him whether he has many regrets. “No. I can honestly say that, for the last 60 years, every day I’ve done what I want to do. Not many people can say that. I’ve been a professional artist. I didn’t even teach much, just painted and drew every single day.”

He points to Taschen’s Sumo book. “That book made me see what I have achieved in my life. I set out to draw the world about me — to draw it, not photograph it — because I think the world doesn’t really look like photographs and you have to draw it. Human beings have been drawing for 30,000 years.” Cameras, he explains, can’t capture nature; they have difficulty with trees or rain. “When they shot *Singin’ in the Rain*, they had to put milk in the water for the camera to see it,” he says. “I’m with Edward Munch, who said photography can’t compete with painting, because it can’t deal with heaven or hell.” ■

*David Hockney: Drawing from Life, National Portrait Gallery, London WC2, February 27-June 28; npg.org.uk*

“I’ve had three doctors.  
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