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DAVID HOCKNEY REDISCOVERS PAINTING

From his home in Normandy, the eighty-four-year-old artist shows off a new series of portrait paintings and discusses all of the work he still has left to do.

By Françoise Mouly

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From a seventeenth-century cottage in France's Normandy region, Hockney has spent the pandemic restlessly pursuing new avenues for his work.

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For the past three years, David Hockney and his longtime partner, Jean-Pierre (JP) Gonçalves de Lima, have lived in a remote seventeenth-century cottage in France's Normandy region. They first saw the home in 2018, during an impromptu visit to the area, and they were so enamored that they made an offer to buy it on the spot. A traditional, low-ceilinged house surrounded by outbuildings, it sits beside a river amid gently rolling hills. Gonçalves de Lima took the lead in restoring the property, converting a cider-press building into a skylit art studio. On the mezzanine, Hockney's longtime assistant Jonathan Wilkinson set up a large-format, twelve-color printer. Hockney has spent the pandemic almost entirely at the house, but he has remained remarkably connected to the outside world, organizing museum shows, taking calls from friends, and restlessly pursuing new avenues for his work. A few days after Christmas, I drove with my husband, the cartoonist Art Spiegelman, and our daughter, the writer Nadja Spiegelman, along the narrow, tree-lined roads leading to the home. I had visited the previous year as well, and, in the time since, a gate and an intercom had been installed at the entrance, to keep out the Hockney fans who trek to the property almost daily in hopes of meeting him.

After thirty-five years in sunny California, Hockney found fresh inspiration in the Norman landscape's dramatic seasonal changes. In 2020, he began drawing on his iPad every day, documenting the grounds' poplar and fruit trees as their first blossoms appeared. A selection of lusciously enlarged prints was exhibited at London's Royal Academy of Arts last summer, in a show titled "The Arrival of Spring." A more recent exhibit of iPad paintings, at Paris's Musée de L'Orangerie, presented a yearlong chronicle of the seasons, from springtime to a rare snowy day. It was inspired by the Bayeux Tapestry, a medieval embroidery depicting the Normans' conquest of England, which is housed in a museum not far from Hockney's home. By the time we arrived, though, he was already in the beginning stages of a new project, a series of portraits on canvas.

Wearing a houndstooth suit and a bright-yellow tie, Hockney received us in his home's large living area, which is framed by two stone chimneys. Enlarged prints of iPad paintings of the interior—a hearth, a windowed door—were hanging near their real-life models. While we ate a lunch of sea bass with creamy *sauce Normande*, Hockney played us a recording of [a lecture on Picasso](#) he'd given, in 1984; it was now posted on the Web site of the Guggenheim Museum, and Hockney was thrilled to see his ideas freely available online. At eighty-four, Hockney is frailer than he once was, but his vigor waxes as he discusses his thoughts about art. His trusty iPad—whose cover is smeared with paint—accompanies him wherever he goes. Midway through our visit, as we sat in his studio, the device buzzed with an incoming call. Hockney opened the cover and set the screen to easel mode. His longtime friend Bing McGilvray appeared. Hockney hadn't been feeling well the previous day, and McGilvray was calling to check in. But Hockney shrugged off the concern. "What was it I just read from Alexander Pope? For some people, health is no better than the most tedious disease," he said. Our conversation has been condensed and edited.

What brought you to Normandy in 2018?

We'd come for that [stained-glass] window in Westminster Abbey, the one I made for the Queen, with all the hawthorn blossoms in it. And I said to JP, "Why don't we just go to Normandy? It's easy to get to. We won't stay in London because there were too many people

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coming around. We will just go.” And so we came to Honfleur. We got there in about six hours, including the Channel. And we watched a sunset there, with the sun behind, lighting up everything, and it was a fantastic experience to have. That was like Van Gogh—everything was clear, everything was marvellous.

What about the Bayeux Tapestry interested you?

I always knew about the Bayeux Tapestry and first went to see it in 1967. We were told about it at school [in England] when I was about five or six years old. That was 1942 or '43; there was a threat of a German conquest. France had been conquered three years before—and Holland, lots of other European countries. England hadn't yet, and now I realize that's why they told us about this story: because it was the last time anybody conquered England.

When I saw the tapestry again [recently], I thought, I have to do something based on it.



The Bayeux Tapestry, a medieval embroidery, depicts William the Conqueror leading the Normans into battle against England. It is housed in the town of Bayeux, in Normandy, not far from Hockney's home.

Courtesy Bayeux Museum

Can you tell me about the Tapestry's connection with your iPad series?

At first, JP and I thought we would just do the same show that was at the Royal Academy—"The Arrival of Spring." But I kept going to see the space, and JP told me, and he told the curators, "I don't think this show is done yet." This was back in October of last year, and I'd already made two hundred and twenty iPad paintings for 2020. But I knew what he meant. He meant making something more like the Bayeux Tapestry.

You mean in the way the viewer walks past the tapestry and makes the story unfold?

Yes, but the trees in the Bayeux Tapestry are all the same, aren't they? It's not about the seasons, really. It's about making the ships and going off to England, and things like that. But mine is even more real—it's about the seasons. And mine is longer, nearly three hundred feet. [*Laughs.*] I had to do it from the two hundred and twenty paintings and add to them to get a whole year. It was a bit difficult to join them all together, and we couldn't see all of it in this studio. We could only make a half-size version and had to do it in bits. So the first time I saw it, really, was when we put it up in the museum, and I did think it was very good.

You get a whole year in Normandy. We began with winter trees. You have to begin with them to see the first buds that come out. I had made all these pictures, and I saw they got better and better as I went along, because I got more and more skillful with the iPad. But I wanted it to end on a final snow scene, and there was only one day of snow here, in January. A weather forecast said snow was coming Sunday. I got up early. Light only comes at about quarter to nine anyway, and there was no snow. But it was all gray. I was just thinking of going back to bed when it started coming down, at about 9:15 A.M. So I got out my iPad and I went to that door here and drew. The snow didn't really cover the green—that field in front of the house was still green. It only snowed for about forty-five minutes, and then it stopped. And then, by 12:15, when the sun came out, it had all gone completely. And I realized, if I'd stayed in bed until twelve-o'clock, I'd have totally missed it.



Hockney's series of iPad paintings of the Norman landscape captures a rare snowy day.

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What do you see in the Norman landscape compared to California's or Britain's?

The landscape of Normandy is quite close to the English landscape, really. It's only a short way south of Sussex. It's very, very, very green. That's the predominant color we see out of the window, everywhere, in every direction—but the real estate here is a lot cheaper. [*Laughs.*]

How did the pandemic affect the project?

The spring of 2020 was marvellous in northern Europe. It was a beautiful spring, and a lot of people noticed it, probably for the first time, because they were in one place. I mean, my friend Celia Birtwell—she's the one in the "Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy" painting—told me she never noticed the spring from beginning to end ever in her life before. She's eighty years old.

With all the things that are happening in painting these days, there are very few people who want to make things that are beautiful. It's not the goal of a lot of artists now because, Ack, beauty was so a century or two ago. But you're making beautiful things.

I think the world is beautiful to look at, but most people don't see it. The world is beautiful, and it's also mad. People are mad. And I don't think that's going to change that much. I can't see it changing.



While painting the seasons on his iPad, Hockney became intimately familiar with the trees on his four-acre property.

So most of what everybody has lived through during the pandemic, for you, was actually Normandy, the discovery of this landscape. You didn't feel isolated?

Well, I like the isolation because I can get on with work. Having no visitors was a boon to me, really. People lived in cities because of culture, because of music and art and galleries and museums. And that's why I lived in them, but I'm not sure about now. I don't really need the cities now. I mean, you can now look at any big painting on your iPad. You can look at them in incredible detail, can't you?

I don't feel isolated here, really. I've got this studio, I've got connections with everybody all over the world. So long as JP is here, I'm O.K. I know human relationships are the most important thing—they are. I mean, I'm an eighty-four-year-old smoker. How much longer do I have? Well, Picasso lived to be ninety-one. I know what keeps me going: it's work. That's what keeps most people going, isn't it?

Maybe it's curiosity that keeps you going.

Yes. You can smoke, drink, and do what you want if you've got curiosity. A lot of people don't, do they?

You have new work on the walls. Were these also done on the iPad?

Well, no. I'm finished with the iPad for a bit. I learned a lot doing it, about marks made on an iPad, but then I wanted to go back and make marks on paintings. The first one I did with JP, and since then I've wanted to do portraits of anybody who came here, practically. The district nurse who used to come. Vincent, who is the gardener here.

When did you start painting again?

In November, not that long ago, and I already made more than twenty. Look at this page here from *Le Monde*. It's just a photo of a guy sitting on a chair. I'm suggesting magazines should use more drawings and paintings; they are a lot better than photographs to give you a sense of the person.

What is the first thing you draw when somebody sits for you?

The nurse here, she sits down, and first I draw the eyes and then the head. I say, "Well, are you comfortable?" She'll sit there for two or three hours, and I just paint her. I work fast on them because I got used to working fast on an iPad. I paint the faces quickly because then you can get more subtle things. A portrait should be done quickly. To do a portrait slowly is a bit of a contradiction, really.



One portrait in Hockney's new series depicts his longtime companion, Jean-Pierre (JP) Gonçalves de Lima. Gonçalves de Lima's intent look in the picture represented "renewing our vows, our invisible vows," he said.

Do you usually tell your subjects where to look and how to sit?

No, I let them find their position. Often they just look at me, and that's how I paint them. But I might do a brother and sister next weekend, and I'd like the sister looking at the brother and the brother looking at me. And so I set up a triangle, because I'll be looking at the sister and the brother, of course, but then the brother is just looking at me.

How do these paintings compare to the "82 Portraits and 1 Still-life" series that you did in L.A. a number of years ago?

I haven't looked at those much. These are different; I know these are different. The earlier series was always the same chair—at least here there's a different chair, sometimes. And in the "82" series I did each one in two or three days. And I began those with charcoal drawings. I don't now. I just start painting.

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Do you find painting more physical than working on the iPad?

Yes, yes. Painting is holding brushes again. It's different from the iPad. That's why I wanted to go back to it as well. I mean, I am a painter, after all.

Do you paint standing up?

I can't stand that long. I have to sit now, right here [on a chair with wheels, set in front of an easel].

You're pointing to where all the cigarette butts are on the floor.

Yes, we've worked it out. With three-foot-by-four-foot canvases, I manage to get to every corner of a picture, even while seated.

You're so many painters, but you're always a painter. And you have thought a lot about photography and its effect on art and image-making. Why does photography matter so much to a painter?

Most people thought the photograph was the ultimate depiction of reality, didn't they? People thought, This is it, this is the end of it. Which it's not. And I'm very certain it's not, but not many people think the way I do.

I mean, it's all about depiction. We've always made depictions, always. If you go back twenty, thirty thousand years, art is always a depiction of something. I'm sure the first man doing that—there was probably somebody else watching him. And that man might have grunted or somehow said, "I'm seeing an animal," or something.

Besides, color photography never was that good, because you can't photograph what exists in color. You'll notice, if you have a field of rapeseed, rapeseed is a fluorescent yellow. But, if you photograph it, it's not. It's just a plain yellow.

But here is a work that you did with photographs, about photographs, although you call it a "photographic drawing."

Yes, because everything in it is photographed, but it's also drawn—I placed every figure in there carefully.

Is the space created digitally, or does it exist somewhere?

Well, this floor is real. This is my studio. But time has been added to these pictures. And the people are real, but it's a creation—so this is all made by David Hockney. The walls are all mirrors, and these are all the same figures, you see. You cannot see them all at once like you do in an old photograph. You have to look at every figure and object because each one has its own perspective. In space, everything is moving. So the third dimension is time, which cannot exist without space.

I'm still having a hard time understanding how you made this.

This work was made up of nine pictures, and I put nine chairs there, there, there, and there. Then I

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got people to come and sit, but they weren't all sat together. And each person is photographed in 3-D. Then you put it on the computer, and it slowly makes it up. You can only see it in 2-D, but you can change them any way you want. So I placed each of the figures, and we got this. It's 3-D without the glasses—because 3-D glasses don't work, do they?

A moving picture isn't three-dimensional, even if it's got two dimensions and linear time. They say they want to make pictures in four dimensions, which would be like the real world. Well, if you ever found yourself in a 4-D picture, I think the first question you would want to know is “Where is the exit?” [*Laughs.*]

I find it fascinating that you search for flatness and pure color in your paintings—and at the same time create elaborate virtual images like this one, where you play with all aspects of perspective.

Well, yes. This is much more an illusion of space than a single photograph can be. I've come to see what the invention of perspective was, really. Twenty years ago, I still thought perspective was a mathematical invention. But now I know it's not an invention but the discovery of a law of optics.

Art history tells us that Brunelleschi invented perspective in Florence, in 1420. We went to Florence in 2000, and we stood about seven metres inside the Duomo, with a panel the size of Brunelleschi's. And, with a five-inch-diameter concave mirror, we projected the Baptistery [of St. John] onto the panel, as he had. It was upside down, but it was reading the right way around. That's what the first perspective picture was, drawn from a single mathematical point in the middle of the mirror or the lens.

So the lens has been a dominant thing for six hundred years now, and I think depictions need to get away from that, really. If you do, marvellous things can happen. But I'm just still finding this out. I am eighty-four—I can't have that much longer, but somebody else might take it up. If I can get out more of my ideas about photography, maybe somebody else will read it and perhaps begin to understand what's going on today.

When you were in art school, what was the summit of what was considered art? What were you taught to reach as a pinnacle?

I went to art school in Bradford [England] when I was sixteen years old. And for four years we really just did life drawing, and that teaches you to look. That's all drawing is. It's teaching you to look and question things. A person would sit down next to my drawing, and then he'd draw a shoulder or something, and I could see he had seen more than I had. So when I got back to mine, I looked harder.

Which years were those?

1953 to 1957. And then, from 1959 to 1962, I was at the Royal College of Art—three years, and that's when I really discovered my painting. I hadn't done that much painting in Bradford—I'd done models and things like that, but we didn't know much about color then. Bradford was a very, very dark city, with black buildings from all the coal and things. I left it in 1959 and never really went back.

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In school, they were teaching you abstraction, right?

Well, yes. Throughout the fifties and sixties and seventies, abstraction reigned, but I was never really attracted to it. Abstraction at first looked as though it was going to lead to everything, but it doesn't, does it?

I wrote a letter [recently, to *The Art Newspaper*] because I read a book review titled “Beyond Abstraction,” and I wondered what on earth that could be. Giacometti said abstract art was the “art of the handkerchief”—which I like. [*Laughs.*] But I think now abstraction has had its say. You must now depict, but it must be done in a new way. How? That's the real problem today.

When you think of it, abstraction occurred at the height of photography. Those illustrated photography magazines started in the thirties—*Life*, *Picture Post* in England, *Illustrated*. And they ended when television came. Television took over all these pictures. I mean, *Picture Post* came out every week—it was all very fast printing, fast photography. But, when Clement Greenberg was saying abstraction is the thing, that's the time when no one questioned photography, really, did they?

At the Museum of Modern Art, the last time I was there, I think, there was a room full of abstract paintings by [Gerhard] Richter, by a few people—and it was O.K. Then you go into Philip Guston. Well, I mean, it was just a fantastic jump, and I thought, Well, this is much, much better.

Yes, I think abstraction will become just a period piece. Do you know that book “The Power of Images”?

No. What's its thesis?

It's by David Freedberg. It's really good. It was published around 1990. I first read it then, and I read it again around 2005. The first paragraph is stunning. It says that images have great power. We worship them. We go on journeys to see them. We want to destroy them. And you think this is all in the past, but then he says, no, it's today as well. He points out that, if art gets away from images, what is art? There's nothing much, because the power is with images.

What was your approach to making art when you were a kid?

I used to paint just around where I lived. Eventually, I got a pram and put the paints in it, and I'd wheel it out and it was a lot easier. [*Laughs.*] There are some of my paintings of those years that still exist, but a lot of them have gone quite dark. Because I probably used too much white in the paint—that's why paintings go dark.

Did you see the Monets when you went to the museum? Do you think they've gone darker?

I wondered, but I thought it was the lighting.

Well, I can remember seeing them in 1960, which was just about thirty years after they were put there. And I remember them as very blue. And now some of the blues have gone. And, in the Museum of Modern Art, those “Nymphéas” (“Water Lilies”) are not as dark.

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Somebody told me that maybe he had used a varnish on these. But I don't think so, because Monet knew how to paint, and all his paintings still have color and they've not gone dark. But some paintings do go dark, and I'm not sure why. I paint all my pictures to last, actually.

For a painter, you also pay a lot of attention to reproduction.

Yes, and I've witnessed printing change a lot. I can remember seeing the first books on Impressionism in art school, and you had to wash your hands before you were allowed to touch them and look. And they cost about ten pounds then—which was a lot of money for a book in 1953. When I had my first show, at [Paul] Kasmin's gallery, he just produced one little picture, black-and-white, and that's all there was. I don't think he ever produced a catalogue. And then the catalogues started getting bigger. I remember when—I think it was Robert Hughes—said sometimes they might be the size of a London telephone directory. *[Laughs.]*

I've always followed printing, I've always been interested in it, and I've always known that pictures get known by being reproduced. But they've also got to be memorable. You need memorable pictures. And I've painted quite a few memorable pictures, haven't I?

What do you think makes them memorable?

Nobody knows.

Not even you?

No, because if anyone knew, there'd be a lot more memorable pictures. *[Laughs.]* But you don't know even when you paint them. For instance, "A Bigger Splash"—I painted that in Berkeley, California, when I was teaching there. I had no idea it was going to be a very famous picture.



"A Bigger Splash," from 1967. "I realize that a splash could never be seen this way in real life—it happens too quickly," Hockney said. "And I was amused by this, so I painted it in a very, very slow way."

Art work by David Hockney / Photograph © Tate

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Are there contemporary painters you're interested in?

Well, yes, there are some. I'm not sure if there are any getting quite to my way of thinking yet, but they might.

I think the star system is going, isn't it? I mean, movie stars now, beyond Brad Pitt—what is there? The newspapers, the movies needed stars, and the media needed stars as well. They provide gossip and things. But where are the stars today? On the iPhone, your friends are the stars on the screen. Why do you need another star or another screen out there when you've got one in your hand? I mean, we don't know what all this is doing to us.

It's big, what's happening.

Yes, it's very, very big, these changes. It's probably bigger than the printing press. Remember, Luther printed his sermons, and that's why they spread so much in Germany at first and why the Church couldn't control it. The last altarpiece commissioned by the Church by a rather good artist was Delacroix's, in Saint-Sulpice [in Paris]. But, after that, images left the church and went into magazines, the media, films, television. Images have a very powerful effect on us, they do.

So it's all these problems that I find interesting. I'm still at work, doing things—and I'm still interested. It is curiosity that keeps you going, yes. [*Laughs.*]



"I've always known that pictures get known by being reproduced," Hockney said. "But they've also got to be memorable."
