David Hockney and the art of seeing in an age of upheaval

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David Hockney's death at 88 closes one of the most remarkable careers in modern art. He was admired by critics, loved by the public, and endlessly curious about what painting could still do. Few twentieth?century artists combined such technical brilliance with such broad appeal. His exhibitions, numbering over 200, drew record audiences, his images entered everyday visual memory, and his restless experimentation made each new phase feel like renewal rather than repetition.

Unlike many celebrated contemporaries, Hockney never seemed remote. Friends recall him with fond astonishment: a man whose humility survived fame, whose quick, mischievous humour animated every room, and whose warmth made people feel instantly recognised. To them, he was not only a major artist but a joy to be around.

His paintings invited rather than excluded. The Californian pools, the elegant portraits of friends and lovers, the Yorkshire lanes and explosive spring blossom all possessed an immediacy that made looking itself a pleasure, at a time when much contemporary art required theoretical explanation before it could be enjoyed.

Born in Bradford in 1937 into a politically engaged working?class family, Hockney belonged to a generation transformed by the post?war reforms that expanded education and opened the arts to working?class youth. British capitalism, weakened by war and pressured by a confident working class, conceded the welfare state, the National Health Service and broader access to schooling. Hockney won a scholarship to Bradford Grammar School and then entered the Bradford School of Art.

Yet class remained an invisible barrier. At the Royal College of Art between 1959 and 1962, his accent marked him as an outsider. He responded by simply outdrawing everyone around him. He refused the fashionable insistence that abstraction had triumphed and figurative painting was obsolete.

There were also acts of public defiance. Homosexual acts between men were still criminal, yet Hockney refused to hide either his identity or his interests. When tutors objected to his refusal to paint the expected female nudes, he inserted the word "QUEER" into his work, turning an insult into a declaration of independence. There was genuine courage in this.

Throughout his life he resisted political labels. His father, a clerk and conscientious objector, was "very political," sympathetic to the oppressed and admiring of the Soviet resistance to fascism. Hockney said his father's support for the Soviet Union was animated by a commitment to equality. He was not a party member but was a "socialist internationalist" or alternatively a "socialist anarchist", if he had understood the term anarchism.

Hockney in part projects his own views here, calling himself "an anarchist, really", suspicious of authority, institutions and dogma. This striving for individual independence shaped both the strengths but also the very clear limits of his art. His rebellions were personal rather than political, directed against convention rather than the structures of society, and expressed in the small, stubborn freedoms he claimed for himself—including outliving the doctors who told him to stop smoking and his father, who was fiercely opposed to the practice.

Following Hockney's arrival in California in the mid?1960s, the America he embraced was not the turbulent nation of Vietnam, social revolt, assassinations and economic crisis but a sun?drenched, apolitical enclave of pools, studios and bohemian circles. He discovered a landscape utterly unlike post?war Britain: brilliant light, modern architecture, open space and a degree of sexual freedom unimaginable in England. The California dream offered not just a new setting but a new emotional climate in which he could live and paint openly.

The paintings that followed—*A Bigger Splash*, *A Lawn Being Sprinkled*, *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)*—secured his international reputation and announced a distinctive pictorial language. Water became an artistic problem rather than a motif. Hockney devised inventive ways to depict movement, transparency and reflection, turning swimming pools into laboratories for exploring colour, light and perception.

California also crystallised the philosophy that shaped his career. Again and again he insisted that art should be about pleasure. Love, friendship, beauty and attentive looking became his enduring themes; his remark during the pandemic that "they can't cancel spring" captured this outlook. Unlike Pop Artist Andy Warhol's embrace of mechanical reproduction, Hockney remained committed to drawing, observation and the handmade image.

If California gave Hockney his subject matter, it also sharpened the question that preoccupied him for the rest of his life: how do we actually see? More than any British artist since Turner, he treated painting as an enquiry into vision. The swimming pools, double portraits, photocollages, Yorkshire landscapes and iPad drawings were stages in a single investigation into the relationship between eye, memory and image.

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Drawing remained the foundation of his work. He possessed an extraordinary confidence of line: a handful of economical brushstrokes could describe not only a face but an entire personality. His portraits are remarkable less for psychological drama than for their attentiveness. Hockney believed that if one looked patiently enough, character revealed itself through posture, gesture and the spaces people create between one another.

This reached its fullest expression in the great double portraits of the late 1960s and early 1970s. *Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy* and *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)* are celebrated for their immaculate surfaces, yet their deeper achievement lies in their emotional ambiguity. The figures share a room while remaining psychologically distant, connected less by conversation than by silence. Light floods the spaces and colour vibrates with freshness, yet a sense of transience hangs over them. Hockney rarely painted tragedy directly, but he often painted the quiet possibility of loss.

His dissatisfaction with conventional photography grew from the same concern with how vision works. A camera, he argued, records a single instant from a fixed viewpoint, whereas human beings experience the world through movement. We glance, return, remember and compare, constructing our understanding of space over time. Seeing, like life, is dynamic rather than static.

This conviction produced one of the most original bodies of work of the 1980s: the "joiners." By assembling hundreds of individual prints into composite images, Hockney fractured conventional perspective and unfolded multiple viewpoints simultaneously, inviting viewers to reconstruct space actively rather than consume it passively.

These questions also led Hockney back through art history. His controversial book *Secret Knowledge* argued that the Old Masters relied more extensively than thought on optical devices to produce art. The uncanny precision of Van Eyck or Caravaggio is far easier, Hockney argued, to account for once lenses, mirrors, and projected images are acknowledged as part of the painter's toolkit. Whether or not his arguments convinced, the project captured his enduring fascination with the mechanics of vision.

That was encapsulated in the 2022 exhibition *Hockney's Eye*, where his drawings hung alongside works by Rembrandt, Constable and Ingres. It revealed how Hockney understood himself: as another participant in a centuries-long conversation of perception, extending it through photography, digital media and new technology.

Hockney's return to Yorkshire in his final decades reflected the same artistic continuity. The shift from Californian pools to English hedgerows looked dramatic, yet his concerns barely changed. Whether painting water or woodland, he remained absorbed by colour, light, rhythm and the experience of moving through space. Works such as *Garrowby Hill* and *Bigger Trees Near Warter* rank among the most ambitious post?war British landscapes: monumental yet intimate, rejecting picturesque nostalgia in favour of direct, lived experience. Roads twist unexpectedly, trees erupt in improbable colour, and the seasons register as emotional as well as visual events.

His embrace of digital technology followed naturally. While many contemporaries saw tablets as a threat to craftsmanship, Hockney treated the iPad as another sketchbook, a way to record fleeting changes in flowers, cloud and weather. Experimentation remained central. Unlike many artists who repeat themselves in old age, Hockney continued to innovate into his eighties, his work retaining the excitement of someone still discovering the world afresh.

Beneath Hockney's exuberance runs a quieter current: for all its brightness, his art is haunted by time. *A Bigger Splash* shows only the aftermath of an unseen event; the diver has already vanished. The double portraits preserve relationships whose futures feel uncertain, while the Yorkshire landscapes record a countryside increasingly vulnerable to change. His images capture moments already slipping into memory.

His monumental *A Year in Normandie*, created during the 2020–21 lockdowns, made this explicit. More than 100 iPad paintings form a continuous journey through the seasons, despite the unfolding human catastrophe. Painting, Hockney understood, cannot stop time—only persuade us to look more carefully as it passes. His devotion to pleasure was an attempt to preserve beauty against disappearance.

Hockney's extraordinary concentration on private experience raises a larger question: what happens when an artist devotes immense powers of observation to the intimate world while allowing the wider movements of history to fall away? A paradox sits quietly at the centre of his achievement.

No British artist of the post?war period looked more intently at the visible world. He believed painting should concern itself with love, friendship and beauty—commitments that gave his work its warmth but also limited it. The world he chose to paint remained deliberately *small*. The same anarchistic spirit, more properly the same extreme individualism, that rejected restrictions on his life, sexuality and methods accepted a self?imposed limitation on content: a belief that private experience was sufficient, even as the world around him was reshaped by deindustrialisation, class conflict, war, economic crisis, neoliberal restructuring and widening inequality. These forces, which transformed the society that produced him, remain outside the frame.

Yet what he preserved endures. Hockney's art holds fast to moments of attention, to the fragile brightness of things glimpsed before they vanish. His legacy is to remind us that careful looking is the beginning of understanding—but not its end. The task for those who follow is to widen the gaze, to bring beauty and history back into the same frame, and to see the world with the fullness that Hockney, for all his gifts, chose not to claim.

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