

VISUAL ART

# How we made the immersive David Hockney spectacular

The director behind the new hit exhibition tells Rachel Campbell-Johnston about bringing the artist's vision to life



David Hockney: Gregory Swimming Los Angeles March 31st 1982 at Lightroom

Rachel Campbell-Johnston | Monday February 27 2023, 6.45pm GMT, The Times

It's David Hockney meets Hollywood. Or at least that's what the artist hopes. His immersive spectacular *Bigger & Closer (not smaller & further away)* — a gloriously illustrated summary of all he has achieved over a lifetime of painting — has been

open in London for almost a week. And Hockney, unbeknown to the (so far) sell-out audiences, has been monitoring the responses of an enthusiastic public via a FaceTime link.

“He has been thrilled,” says Richard Slaney, CEO of Lightroom, the vast King’s Cross venue within which a succession of Hockney’s pictures, replicated by digital projection technology, now unfurl in all their myriad-hued vibrancy. The £25 baseline price of a ticket might, as [Richard Morrison](#) pointed out in this paper, sound prohibitive, but it does not appear to be putting people off. “We were sold out with 3,200 visitors on Friday and Saturday,” says Slaney. But then, as the entrepreneur behind the project, he always expected it to be remunerative — as, presumably, did Hockney, who gets royalties.



David Hockney: The Arrival of Spring in Woldgate, East Yorkshire in 2011 (twenty eleven) at Lightroom

It was about five years ago that Slaney first tried out this type of immersive experience. He was in Paris when he went to see *Gustav Klimt* at the Atelier des Lumières. Slaney is a director of 59 Productions: a design company which has contributed to a number of visual art exhibitions, the V&A’s *David Bowie Is* and the

National Gallery's *Leonardo: Experience a Masterpiece* among them, as well as providing the video element to several theatrical productions, including *War Horse*. He immediately saw the potential of the immersive art experience.

“I watched people in Paris having a lovely time. They were really enjoying themselves. And it seemed so democratic. There was a great vibe,” he enthuses. Moreover, this sort of production was becoming increasingly popular. Van Gogh, Kahlo, Dalí and Picasso have also been subjected to similar treatments. But what they were all missing, explains Slaney, was “the storytelling potential”.

It was this that he found through Hockney. It didn't take him and his collaborator, Nick Starr, the ex-National Theatre executive director, long to decide that Hockney should be their focus. “He was the obvious choice, hugely popular, an innovator, his pictures are full of colour and joy, he has a huge body of work and he loves scale. We knew that would appeal,” says Slaney. And so, having made contact with him in mid-2019, they plucked him out of his Normandy seclusion as soon as the pandemic lockdowns were over and brought him to London to see how massively scaled-up projections of his work might look.

The results delighted them. It wasn't simply that the colour was so mesmerising, explains Slaney. Nor that works done on an iPad can translate well on to screen. As Hockney stood there and watched that first test trial he realised that this immersive experience could amount to something more dramatic than he had previously achieved. “We talked about space and perspective and movement and how we could convey things differently from a traditional gallery,” says Slaney. “We could project on to the floor and walls, we could use the corner of the cube, we could show how images sprawl out over the edges, we could show things from all sorts of different angles.” Little wonder that Hockney, who rails against the tyranny of fixed-point perspective, who is fascinated by the concept of unfurling space, by the idea of a picture that can capture a sense of time, was fascinated by the possibilities.

A rented space was found — a huge auditorium (roughly the size of a tennis court) which in three and a half years will become a venue for the London Theatre Company, co-founded by Starr and the former National Theatre artistic director Nicholas Hytner. Hockney has been heavily involved with the project. “From the very first day he came in,” says Slaney, “we realised how much more he could bring to it than even we had realised. We had thought about asking him to voice his piece but when he stood there, casting into his memories and talking, we realised quite how brilliant he was. He has the ability to take something complicated and convey it so simply and purely that it really reaches people. His voice is so key — it’s the only voice in this show — from a 20-year-old to the man in his eighties that he is today. And I think it gives a real sense of presence. He feels really strongly there. And the visitor has a really intimate experience, it’s like sitting round a table with him and hearing him talk.”



David Hockney: Wakefield and Nine Towns Christmas Trees at Lightroom  
JUSTIN SUTCLIFFE

Hockney has been involved with all sorts of other aspects of the production. It was he and his team, for instance, who decided to put a strong focus on his designs for opera sets. “Some of his opera productions that were shown in the Eighties have not been seen since,” explains Slaney. “We were also particularly keen on people feeling that they were within the set. He insisted that they should feel that they were on the ship in *Tristan and Isolde*.” Did that give Hockney vertigo, I wondered? I met at least one person who, while immersed in the production, had felt motion sick. “We actually had to moderate the movement quite a lot,” admits Slaney. “But in the end the pacing was Hockney’s. He sat there in the space with us for at least four months: a genuine inspiration and a driving force.” The final production might be, he suggests, “a bit of a whistlestop tour. But he gets it right. What I love is that it can hold the attention of a child.”

And what about deflecting attention from the real thing? Do these exhilarating spectacles take away visitors from traditional galleries, drain original pictures of their thrill? Slaney suggests it is emphatically otherwise, that it is not only radical but revelatory. “I think people will go and seek the originals out.” This isn’t a gimmick, he argues. He has big plans — and not just for the art world, but for music and science and theatre and dance. “We are not using technology for technology’s sake.”

**To June 4, Lightroom, London N1, [lightroom.uk](http://lightroom.uk)**

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/how-we-made-the-immersive-hockney-spectacular-2qmks8l5v>