Peering Beyond the Edge

Hockney's photos give visibility to the unseen.

Art Review
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TRAVEL ART CRITIC

Artists often find motivation for their work within an acute awareness of their own invisibility. They look at the world around them, don't find themselves included anywhere in the sphere of human society, and so make art to invent a habitable realm. What's not represented in the world can be as important to an artist as what is.

British-born painter David Hockney was among the first postwar artists to make homosexual desire an explicit feature of his work. Heterosexual desire had been an artistic staple for centuries—not least for Picasso, the Modern artist Hockney most admired. But images of gay desire were suppressed.

After his first visit to Los Angeles in 1963—he moved here full time the following year—Hockney reinvented a traditional subject of European art: Classic 19th-century paintings by Ingres and Cézanne showed bathers indoors or in the landscape. They replaced the biblical Garden of Eden with the Lost Golden Age of classical antiquity. Hockney gave this secular paradise a homoerotic spin: His signature paintings of men in tiled loincloths.
Hockney: Similar Subjects Recur in Photos

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showers and sun-dappled swimming pools were bathers for the 20th century.

Not surprisingly, these and similar subjects turn up in Hockney's photographs, too. In the retrospective exhibition of his photo work that opened Sunday at the Museum of Contemporary Art, experience is not reproduction, in mainstream art before are made as important as what is commonly seen.

That same recognition, however, assumes an additional role:

It's a function specific to photography. Hockney's art undermines photography as a camera film with an implicit connection to invisibility—what's not in the picture.

Hockney's innovative photographic works date from the 1980s, when he composed by assembling dozens of Polaroid or 35-mm negatives into one large picture. They invoke a subjective sense of quiet engagement. Look at the image of a Left Bank street in Paris, a man sitting in a chair or the yawning abyss of the Grand Canyon, and you see a scene that actually seems to overflow with compelling visual incident.

Yet, as the individual snapshots trail off the page, or as they overlap one another to pull together a visually comprehensible section of the composite, you also see something else. Inevitably, your eye is drawn to the photographed edges.

Each edge makes you subconsciously mindful of what's not in the picture, of what was left out by the artist when he looked through the camera's viewfinder and chose to snap the shutter. The strategy builds on one developed by such street photographers as Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand, whose seemingly haphazard scenes, shot at odd angles, also emphasized the photographed edges.

Multiply that awareness by four for the number of edges in each snapshot, and then by 60 or 160 for the number of snapshots in each Hockney composite. The result is a picture of space, if not time, the recent large-scale photo works with the number of edges. Everywhere you look you're reminded of what's not in the picture, as well as seeing what is.

The richness of Hockney's best photographic works is a function of this particularity of perception, of the edges. It makes your experience of looking at his art extremely self-conscious. Looking at pictures—any ordinary activity that is serious, fun, mysterious and social—comes to the foreground as a principal subject.

At the entrance to the show, a wall-size mural is made from a grid of laser-printed color photographs. It shows the artist on his side, an easel with a landscape photograph at the other side and a curling photograph with her back to the camera. She's looking at a nude surgical enlargement of the landscape picture on the easel. That picture shows three people, also seen from behind, standing at a fence and looking out over a verdant landscape.

The mural mimics what you are doing. You're looking at pictures of people looking at pictures of people looking at what? Nature? Or a picture?

A field of grass, flowers, trees and sunshine becomes a landscape when entered by the eye and mind, rather than the body. The landscape, in other words, is nature made pictorial.

It's probably no coincidence that Hockney's paintings became prominent in Western art in the 19th century, after having languished as a minor subject for hundreds of years. Photography, which was invented at the same time, had the power to make anything ordinary, everything, pictorial. That power helped democratize the world. The camera gave every kind of pictorial representation a sense of equality. The established hierarchy of major subjects and minor subjects collapsed.

The MOCA show, which was organized by the Ludwig Museum in Cologne, Germany, is installed according to subject. First came two galleries of portraits. Next are swimming pools, followed by travel photographs (Paris, Rangoon, Shanghai, London, sites around LA, etc.) and the artist's studio. Last are landscapes. The installation plan doesn't shed much light, because subject matter doesn't seem to drive these photographs.

Pictorial problems are instead at the core of Hockney's enterprise as an artist. The full Hockney retrospective in 1989 at the LACMA Museum of Art showed that his mature work has three loosely overlapping phases—painting beginning in the 1960s, stage design in the 1970s and photography in the 1980s—and that each one was explored as a complex set of pictorial problems.

This exploration is one reason Hockney's work is so consistently popular with the public. An artist almost always expresses a deep fascination with the experience of looking at pictures, which is never as simple or straightforward as it might seem. And who doesn't like to look at pictures?

Indeed, lots of Hockney's photo works show people engaged in layered acts of looking. An art dealer looks at a portrait of Picasso reproduced in a book. A curator cleans his eyeglasses, which he needs to see. A standing man looks down at his seated lover, who looks out at us. A couple looks at snapshot portraits of the artist, spread out on the bed. Clearly, Hockney includes himself as a playfully explicit element in the picture. Sometimes his reflection in a mirror or his looming shadow appears. Elsewhere he begins his fragmented photographic survey of a photo with pictures of his feet, which turn up at the bottom of "The Brooklyn Bridge" and his view of the contemplative Zen garden at Ryoanji Temple in Kyoto, Japan.

The references underscore his concentration on the act of looking in the process of making art. The insertion can also be very silly. The couple who is shown looking at snapshots of Hockney is mirroring the unseen activity of Hockney looking at snapshots of the couple, as he assembles the composite portrait of them.

Like most people, Hockney always made photographs—the earliest ones in the show date from the 1960s—and often he's used them as an aid to painting, something in the manner of drawings. A 1968 double-portrait of the late LA art collectors Fred and Marcia Weisman standing poolside on their patio, for example, shows the same figure who turns up standing by a swimming pool gazing at an underwater swimmer in the 1971 painting "Portrait of an Artist (Pool With Two Figures)."

Around 1962, however, Hockney began using a Polaroid instant camera. The photo works quickly assumed a sharper, more inquisitive focus. In the early '80s, a host of artists, mostly in the United States and Europe, initiated a wholesale revision in the way photography began to be regarded. This shift generally came as a second generation of Conceptual art. Probably because Hockney was an established painter, his photographic interests were considerably different.

Space is the No. 1 pictorial problem for a painter. A picture has only two physical dimensions—height and width—but the world has three. Plus, there's the dimension of time. Hockney, in his composite photos, attempted to reconcile space and time with the two dimensions of a picture.

In the show, the reconciliation fails in the recent large-scale works, made by enlarging photographs with a laser printer. These photo blowups of the Grand Canyon, taken as snapshots in 1988 and enlarged last year, come uncomfortably close to wallpaper, recalling photo-mural landscapes once common as commercial décor. Photo wallpaper looks cool to the Doctors of the Standard Daily but not so cool in MOCA's galleries.

The problem is one of scale. Hockney's best composite papers are based against the human body, which makes their pictorial qualities vivid. But the Grand Canyon photo-mural is unimpressed by that physical relationship. When a handrail shown at the edge of the canyon's awesome abyss is large enough to be grasped but can't be, all you see is the ungiving photographic illusion. Before it you become, well, invisible.

The rest of the show demonstrates quite the opposite. Giving visibility to what had previously been marginal—outside the frame—is central to Hockney's artistic achievement.