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## David Hockney has just completed his biggest ever painting, a vast open-air landscape. Martin Gayford visits him in Yorkshire to ask how he did it – illustrated overleaf – and why he thinks art should engulf us

On Good Friday this year I went, in company with a small group of fellow travellers, to visit a warehouse on an industrial estate in Bridlington, East Yorkshire. The object of our pilgrimage was not this nondescript structure but the painting that was briefly hung within it. There on the far wall was the largest picture David Hockney has ever created – and perhaps the most sizable ever to be painted in the open air. This is also a first for the artist, who has never before seen the entire work assembled together.

It is made up of 50 smaller canvases, adding up to an area 40 feet wide by 15 high. The subject is what you might call ordinary English countryside: a small copse of trees, with another in the background behind it, and one larger sycamore in front spreading its network of branches above your head. To the right is a house, to the left a road curves away. In the foreground a few daffodils bloom. It is the solution to a problem that perplexed and defeated many of the great painters of the nineteenth century: how to paint a mighty canvas outside in the landscape, 'en plein air'? To make it Hockney has employed the most up-to-date of digital technology, and the most old-fashioned – the human hand, arm and eye. It will soon occupy the space which it was designed to fill – the end wall of the grandest gallery at the Royal Academy.

This is not the largest oil painting ever made – that distinction is usually accorded to Tintoretto's *Paradiso* in the Doge's Palace, Venice. But it has little in common with an ordinary, easel-sized canvas into which one looks as if into a window. So enormous is this picture that the experience of looking at it is like standing in front of a real tree. As Hockney puts it, 'it engulfs you'.

This vast painting is, as Hockney explained to me, a development from what he had been doing before in Bridlington, where he has been working in the quiet surrounding landscape for almost two years. He had painted nine large landscapes, each made up of six sections. When he returned to Los Angeles for a break last February, he took with him a digital photographic reproduction of all nine – that is 54 separate canvases. He put it in his bedroom, and looked at it.

'Then I realised it was possible to make a single picture that size in the same way that we'd done the others – using computer technology to help you see what you are doing. I thought, my God it would be enormous but that it would be good on the end wall of the largest gallery at the Royal Academy. I'd found a way to do an eye-catching landscape for the Summer Exhibition. It was quite a challenge.'

**Left** David Hockney at work on 'Bigger Trees near Warton'. He had to work furiously over a six-week period in order to capture the bare branches before they started to bloom. 'I love looking at trees in winter,' he says, 'because you're actually seeing the life force – all the branches are reaching for the light.'

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That idea had come to him six weeks before the day we stood in that warehouse. The first three had been spent organising the project. 'The logistics were hellishly complicated,' he says. 'Among other necessary preparations, a special rack had to be constructed capable of storing 50 wet canvases – because otherwise, where on earth do you put them?'

Hockney also spent time just looking at the subject he was going to paint. 'I'd go and sit there for three hours at a time just looking, lying down practically so I looked up.' The subject of the Big Picture is one of several spots in the landscape west of Bridlington where he has been working. It consists principally of an immense net of interconnecting twigs and branches, and that was what Hockney was gazing at so hard (because he contends, it is only by looking very long and hard that you begin to understand what you are seeing). 'A picture this size just has to be of certain kinds of subject. Nature is one, because there is an infinity there that we all feel.'

Then he began to make drawings, which weren't detailed because he didn't want to make a painting that was simply a blown-up drawing. The drawings were to locate where each canvas went in the composition. The painting itself was

essentially done in one breathless, three week sprint that left Hockney's assistant, Jean-Pierre looking exhausted and the painter himself exhilarated [SP?]. Both had grown beards; as a result Hockney slightly resembled Cézanne. 'The painting had to be done in one go. Once I started, I had to carry on until it was finished. The deadline wasn't the Royal Academy. The deadline was the arrival of spring, which changes things. The motif is one thing in winter, but in summer it's one solid mass of foliage – so you can't see inside and it's not as interesting to me.'

Executing a really big painting outdoors was a project that gripped several nineteenth-century artists, Constable and Monet among them (the latter had a trench dug into which his 'Dejeuner sur l'herbe' was raised and lowered so that he could work on different parts of the surface). The most crucial difficulty of painting a huge picture outside to Hockney – as to Monet – was the difficulty of stepping back so as to relate what he was doing in one part of the work to the rest. But digital photography in conjunction with computer technology solved that. As Hockney worked, Jean-Pierre constantly photographed what he was doing, and fitted

1. In order to complete his massive composition of fifty canvases entirely in the open air, David Hockney worked on ten canvases at a time to capture the scale and light of the scene he was painting. 'I could only ever see ten canvases at a time – that's the most the eye can encompass. No photograph could ever tell you what it looked like.'  
 2. David Hockney painting a farmhouse QUOTE?  
 3. A panel showing a detail of plants and daffodils QUOTE?  
 4. David Hockney alongside a van with a rack that was specially designed to hold 50 canvases, so that he could have all the panels with him whenever he was painting.

that image into a computer-mosaic of the whole picture. So Hockney 'could' step back – albeit in virtual space – to see what he was doing.

But Hockney certainly didn't want to create a photographic look in the final work. 'A photograph couldn't show you space in this way. Photographs see surfaces, not space. I had in my head a kind of anti-photographic painting – such as Chinese scroll painting or late Picasso, in which the marks are all visible and boldly made with the arm, the shoulder, even the whole body. I said to my assistant Jean-Pierre, I think I've found my true scale.'

Close up, the painting is made up of quick, free, calligraphic brush-strokes – Hockney has been painting ever more quickly in recent years, but never with such verve as here. He combines the virtues of the on-the-spot study, quick and immediate, with the carefully-considered monumentality of the studio picture. That dichotomy was familiar to Van Gogh; Hockney has used hi-tech means to over come it.

'Technology is allowing us to do all kinds of things today, but I don't think anybody previously has thought that it could

help painting. A great big landscape, on a big wall – that's what the Royal Academy should be encouraging!' Perhaps that will be the theme of his lecture later this summer, 'The Royal Academy in the Post-Photographic Age'.

Hockney's assistants had produced a couple of mock-ups of the picture hanging in that room. One was entitled 'A Bigger Picture', the other 'A Bigger Sensation'. Of course, there are multiple references in those two cheeky phrases: to Hockney's 1967 pool painting, 'A Bigger Splash' – which lent its title to a documentary film in 1974 – and to the Royal Academy exhibition 'Sensation' of 1997 which launched the Britartists of the 1990s. In the end, he has decided to call it 'Bigger Trees Near Warter'. Whatever the title, the painting opens up a wider, more spacious visual world that Hockney believes is beyond the scope of photography. That's the bigger picture that interests him.

'Bigger Trees Near Warter' is on show at the Summer Exhibition, Main Galleries, Royal Academy of Arts, London (020 7300 8000), 11 June – 19 Aug; David Hockney's talk *The Royal Academy in the Post-Photographic Age*, Royal Academy of Arts, 15 June. See [Events & Lectures](#), page 104

5. David Hockney considering digital photographs of 'Bigger Trees near Warter' as a work in progress. At the end of each day he would look at photographs of the panels he'd painted so far, in order to get a sense of the whole composition. 'I kept a print-out of it next to my bed and would wake up at 2am and start drawing on it.'  
 6. David Hockney looking at part of the completed work for the first time in a warehouse in Bridlington. QUOTE?