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Enticed by Bright Light; From David Hockney, a Show of Photocollages in Los Angeles

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Thirty years ago David Hockney began a serious exploration of the uses of lenses, mirrors and cameras in art. Before then, the British-born painter -- best known for his fascination with swimmers and lush swimming pools in Los Angeles, tropical California canyons and beautiful friends -- used a standard 35-millimeter camera just like everyone else.

"I stuck almost every photograph I took in an album -- if you go to anybody's house and they show you a photograph album, it's often pictures taken on holiday," Mr. Hockney said with a smile. "That's the way I was. I never got into it seriously."

But advances in digital imagery -- in which photographers gain control over their images and can technologically manipulate them -- coupled with Mr. Hockney's enduring fascination with problems of perception and reality led one of Los Angeles's most famous painters not only to create photographic images but also to examine the uses of similar techniques by Renaissance artists and the old masters.

The result is "David Hockney Retrospective: Photoworks," the first major survey of the artist's work in photography, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in downtown Los Angeles. The show, which was initially organized by Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Germany, remains on view until Oct. 21. Los Angeles is its only American venue.

What seems most striking about the show is that the photocollages -- in which the artist often used Polaroids or Pentax cameras -- resemble Hockney paintings and reflect his enthusiasm for Cubism. In the photos Mr. Hockney returns to some of his favorite themes of swimming pools, water and showers, a hedonistic image of Los Angeles. There are also photocollages of some of the friends that Mr. Hockney had painted in the 1960's and 70's, like Christopher Isherwood and Don Bacardy, as well as Henry Geldzahler and the art collectors Fred and Marcia Weisman.

"I'm interested in all kinds of pictures, however they are made, with cameras, with paint brushes, with computers, with anything," Mr. Hockney said.

Few artists have been so identified with Los Angeles -- or at least, one glittery world in Los Angeles -- as Mr. Hockney. Jeremy Strick, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, said the museum actively sought to bring the Hockney show to Los Angeles because it seemed so appropriate. Mr. Hockney had been a founder of the museum in 1979.

"Hockney is an artist who really defined the way we see Los Angeles -- he created a whole aesthetic territory," Mr. Strick said. "Whether it's the swimming pools, the mountains, the clear air, the bright colors -- these are things that Hockney, in his vision, crystallized and made visible."

Mr. Hockney, seated in the sun-splashed living room of his airy home off Mulholland Drive, in the hills above Hollywood, said matter-of-factly: "I was always interested in images. If you're interested in images, you're interested in all of it. All painters are interested in photography to a certain extent."

Mr. Hockney, who is 64, still speaks with a Yorkshire accent -- he was raised and still has family in the northern English town of Bradford, which has been beset by racial rioting this summer. His once bleached-blond hair is turning gray. A serious hearing loss -- he wears tiny hearing aids in both ears -- has made it more difficult for the once highly social artist to go to parties or even travel a lot. But Mr. Hockney remains gregarious, unpretentious, eager to please and still enthusiastic about his art and those artists in his pantheon.

Asked if the hearing loss had impeded his work, Mr. Hockney took a puff of an unfiltered cigarette and said: "I actually think the deafness makes you see clearer. If you can't hear, you somehow see. I read in John Richardson's book about Picasso that he didn't like music. It was rare then. He was the only artist who didn't go to concerts. I'm assuming he didn't hear the music. I'm assuming he was tone deaf. But he actually saw more tones than anybody else. He was actually the great chiaroscurist of the 20th century. Seeing and hearing -- there is a connection."

Mr. Hockney's fascination with Los Angeles began, he said, in childhood when he watched Laurel and Hardy movies in a theater in Bradford. The climate of that city was mostly chilly, often damp and dark. "I knew even as a child that it was sunny in Los Angeles because even though Laurel and Hardy wore overcoats, they cast long shadows," he said. "There were no long shadows in Bradford. I noticed that. I thought, 'Boy, it must be very sunny there.' "

Mr. Hockney came to Los Angeles for the first time in 1964, with little money. "It was free and sexy," he said with a grin. He stayed six months. He moved permanently to Los Angeles in 1978, at first renting the canyon house he currently lives in and later buying the property and expanding it to include his studio.

Mr. Hockney said that friends initially thought he was crazy to move from London to Los Angeles. "I needed peace and quiet," Mr. Hockney said. "I couldn't get any in London. It's not very big, England. I came here and found it a terrific place to work. Absolutely stimulating. I could get more work done here than anywhere else." He added: "They leave you alone here. There are so many movie stars and all that. You're not bothered here."

When Mr. Hockney arrived in Los Angeles decades ago he was plainly entranced by the climate, by the sense of hedonism, by the ocean and the

pools and the well-tended landscape and youths sunbathing and swimming. But most of all Mr. Hockney was lured by the abundance of colors -- mostly light, cool hues as well as the bright blues, the turquoise, the intense reds.

"They do animate me," he said. "In England you get this luscious green. There are the red buses in London, I suppose. But you don't actually see much color. Here it's light. That's why one is here. The light. That's why the film business is here. The midday sun is too bleached. You don't see much color in midday. Only in the morning and evening."

"I prefer living in color," said Mr. Hockney, elegant and casual in khaki pants, a purplish shirt and suspenders and multicolored slippers. The walls are blue and red. "This house is very pleasing," he said. "The harmonies and colors. I change the colors every now and then. It probably needs some changing now."

He continued: "It suits me here. I smoke. I don't go out of the house all that much. And unlike New York, there are restaurants here with terraces so you can smoke."

Mr. Hockney achieved renown in the early 1960's for his drawing, printmaking and painting, often tied to the Pop Art movement. His distinctive style and use of color and light -- Mr. Hockney has spoken of the influences of Picasso and Matisse -- led him to an extraordinarily successful and eclectic career, ranging from paintings, etchings and photographic collages to designing sets for the Metropolitan Opera and Covent Garden.

In some ways, Mr. Hockney's fascination with cameras as well as fax machines and computer-manipulated images may have reached a culmination in the current show as well as in his book "Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters," to be published by Viking Studio in October. The book examines Western artists' use of optical devices as far back as the 15th and 16th centuries.

What especially intrigued Mr. Hockney about photography in recent decades, he said, was its increasing resemblance to painting and drawing; digital techniques and computers had left photographers in full artistic control of their work. It is Mr. Hockney's view that the invention of contemporary photography -- or as he put it "the invention of chemicals to fix an image already seen" -- lasted about 160 years, until computers took over, allowing photographers to "draw" on their work like painters.

"The veracity is beginning to go -- it's going like painting, which isn't necessarily about veracity," Mr. Hockney told some reporters shortly before the opening of the museum show late last month, as he walked past his vast photographic collage of the Grand Canyon. "It's a big change, and we're really only at the beginning of it."

Perhaps the most famous work in the show is the photocollage "Pearblossom Highway, 11-18 April, 1986." The work is an assembly of photographs of a deserted highway with photographs of the road and sky layered one upon the other like paint on a canvas. "My photographer friends said it was a painting," Mr. Hockney said. "I said it was a photograph. I used a camera."

Christopher Knight, art critic of The Los Angeles Times, in reviewing the current show, said that implicit in Mr. Hockney's photography and photocollages is a "connection to indivisibility -- to what's not in the picture." Mr. Knight wrote that the eyes of viewers of Mr. Hockney's photographs are inevitably drawn to the photos' edges.

"Each edge," Mr. Knight wrote, "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 show is divided into four themes: landscapes, still lifes, pools and portraits -- all of which dominate his paintings. Reinhold Misselbeck, the director of the department of photography and video at Museum Ludwig, who was curator of the current show, wrote of Mr. Hockney: "He is well aware the media, like photography, video and film, are losing the documentary quality hitherto attributed to them because of digital manipulation and that they are converging more with painting in their relation to reality."

Mr. Hockney said that for all of his pleasure in California, he resents the aesthetic limits placed unwittingly on him and others.

"Things change in odd ways here," he said, sipping a cup of tea. "For years I used to go to a Japanese restaurant on Sunset called Imperial Gardens, and I would always eat the Sabu Sabu, which was beef in a big dish with a rock to keep the broth simmering. One day I ordered it, and they bought out this thing with an electric plug and heater. And I said, 'What happened to the hot rock?' And they said: 'Oh, new health regulations. Somebody thought it was unhealthy to use the hot rock.' And I thought: Unhealthy? What about my eyes, the offense to my eyes. I've got to look at this hideous thing instead of that beautiful rock. Isn't that an offense to my health too?"