

David Hockney

Review

## David Hockney review - a dazzling victory parade from a boundless lover of life

★★★★★

### National Portrait Gallery, London

Whether channelling Picasso, depicting Celia Birtwell or capturing Harry Styles, the artist communicates profound joy - and his most recent paintings really boom with energy and hope



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A new bloom ... Self Portrait, 22 November 2021, in the Drawing From Life show. Photograph: Jonathan Wilkinson/© David Hockney

**E**njoying life sounds like a simple, even banal aim. Yet the art of David

Hockney shows what an achievement it really is to stick with that goal and raise it to an ideal. He has dedicated his gifts to the pursuit of pleasure since the 1960s and, in the bubbly, enthusiastic new paintings unveiled in his latest exhibition, he's still at it. Insisting on your pleasures, from sex to cigarettes, has rarely looked as fun, nor as serious.

Hockney holds a cigarette emphatically in a recent self-portrait, which comes at the beginning of this victory parade of an exhibition. It's a happy and accepting work: in his mid-80s, no longer looking much like his younger, iconic self, he contentedly sits before you in a multicoloured houndstooth suit and flat cap, smouldering ciggy in one hand, paintbrush in the other.



Soft, wistful, entrancing ...  
Celia, Carennac, August 1971.  
Photograph: Richard Schmidt/©  
David Hockney

David Hockney: Drawing from Life restages a show that was cut short by Covid, but it is transformed by new paintings like this one. It is also changed by the passage of time. Hockney had a good pandemic. He made iPad pictures of new spring life in his Normandy garden and shared them widely as images of hope. It was a new blooming in his long career, a symbol of what it has all been about: affirmation.

That passion to celebrate life and love glows afresh in this joyful tour through more than six decades of portraying people. In his 1961 etching *Myself and My Heroes*, the two prophetic people he stands beside are Walt Whitman and Mahatma Gandhi: Whitman's poetry explores the mystery of being alive, while Hockney shows Gandhi with the word "Love" emerging from his head.

Hockney also notes Gandhi's vegetarianism. He too was a vegetarian early on, having grown up in a liberal Bradford family with a father who was a passionate peace campaigner. Hockney's dad looks perky and absorbed in the 1975 painting *My Parents and Myself*, while his mother gazes melancholically towards us. Hockney is in the mirror between them, blond, bespectacled, observant, in a blue shirt and tie.

What did they think of their remarkable son? Hockney's story is one of rebellion, but not of a conventionally angry kind. Raised to be idealistic, his breakout was an embrace of absolute personal freedom. He discovered the delights of the US, an awakening recorded with wide-eyed glee in his *A Rake's Progress* series, rightly shown in full here, giving the

artist's own account of how he discovered the open and confident gay culture of early 60s America. Thin, shy Hockney watches men running, visits a gay bar, and is amazed by an earphone-wearing, T-shirted gay male crowd. He's in heaven.

Hockney's hedonism and libertarianism were typical of the 1960s, but such absolute positivity is so far from 21st century mores that he gets misunderstood. Even to call him a gay artist is a kind of ideological corralling, a rationalisation. This exhibition reveals what he truly is: a lover of beauty, who sees no need to apologise for finding it.



Big and bold ... Gregory 1978.  
Photograph: Richard Schmidt/©  
David Hockney

One big room is given over to portraits of his friend Celia Birtwell. They are so entrancing I'd willingly see an entire show just of her. In the early 1970s, Hockney lived in Paris and sketched Celia with crayons and coloured pencils in soft, wistful evocations of glamorous beauty. Her hair falls in complex freedom, she poses in stylish clothes and underclothes – and she smokes, of course. There's a reverence to these portraits: on the evidence of his art, Celia might seem to be the true love of Hockney's life. He weaves a lush romance around her in portrait after portrait: those ringlets, those eyes. The idea of a male artist obsessed with a female "muse" is now considered oppressive, but to be Hockney's muse feels very different.

In fact, Hockney's artistic hero is a now notorious artist. When Picasso died in 1973, Hockney immediately made two prints in his honour. *Homage to Picasso* depicts Hockney as an attentive student making a pilgrimage to the giant head of Pablo on a plinth. In *Artist and Model*, Hockney dreams that he is Picasso's muse. He sits naked across a table from Picasso, who is comparing Hockney, his model, with the drawing he's done of him.

Hockney magically assimilates Picasso's style. The print, with its incisive line and fleshy shading, perfectly mimics Picasso's series of erotic etchings *The Vollard Suite*. Hockney would love to be Picasso's nude, illuminated by those crisp lines. Instead, he becomes Picasso – and once you see this, you see Hockney channelling Picasso everywhere.

What they share is appetite. Picasso's line wants to touch and hold everything and everyone, to grasp the meat of existence. That line lives on in Hockney. He uses it to capture his lover Gregory Evans asleep or relaxing at Fire Island. Hockney's drawings of Evans are big and bold, as large as life.

Hockney still communicates such joy, infectiously, at the age of 86. This show culminates with a new series of paintings of his neighbours and visitors in Normandy, all done since the end of lockdown. Celia Birtwell and Ossie Clark's grown-up children are among them, booming with life, along with French country folk. A farmer poses on his tractor – and here's Harry Styles, just popping in.



📷 He just popped in ... Harry Styles, May 31 2022. Photograph: Jonathan Wilkinson/© David Hockney

Are these portraits as complex, precise and replete as Hockney's early works? Of course not – no more than most of the songs on the new Rolling Stones album are as great as the band at their best. But just as the Stones win your heart with their determination to rock loudly against the dying of the light, Hockney's new portraits are deeply moving. Here is an artist simply, even naively, doing what he has always done, with stripped-back gusto, capturing what matters. Everyone has come together at Hockney's place, the pandemic over, to celebrate being alive.

- **David Hockney: Drawing from Life** opens at the National Portrait Gallery, London, on 2 November.

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/nov/01/david-hockney-national-portrait-gallery-harry-styles-celia-birtwell>