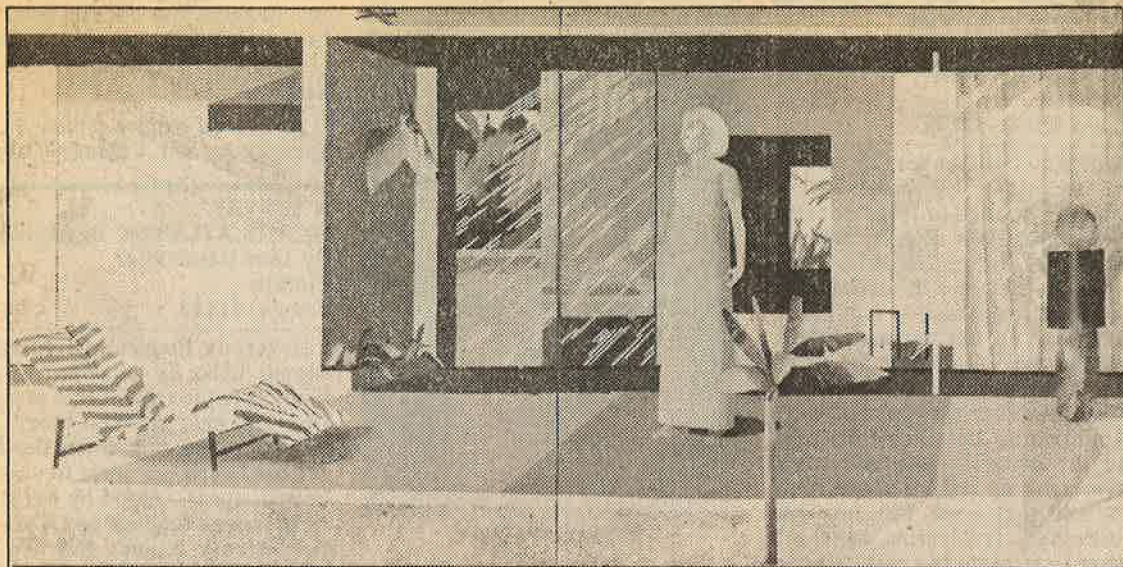


Art



"Beverly Hills Housewife" (1966), from the David Hockney show at Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

A Hockney retrospective

By Edward J. Sozanski
Inquirer Art Critic

LOS ANGELES — Though entirely coincidental, the juxtaposition was thoroughly appropriate — and almost too Hollywood.

Several days before the Feb. 4 opening of the David Hockney retrospective at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Stephanie Barron, one of the show's two curators, was bustling around the museum's new special exhibition galleries putting the last few pictures in place.

Outside, workmen with a mobile crane wrestled several dozen 40-foot-high palm trees into a neat row along the sidewalk in front of the museum on Wilshire Boulevard. It was as if the museum wanted to establish a regal setting for the show's gala black-tie opening, which attracted more than 2,500 of Hockney's friends and admirers.

The tree-planting was simply a delayed finishing touch to the year-old Robert O. Anderson building, which houses the museum's 20th-century collection and special exhibition space. But if the museum had trucked in the trees especially for the opening, no one would have considered the gesture extravagant.

The 50-year-old Hockney is easily the city's most famous and beloved artist, not just because he's a sociable and relatively modest chap, but because his art has put Los Angeles on the international cultural map in a serious way.

It wouldn't be far-fetched to say that the city's art community has adopted Hockney as its avatar. His

(See HOCKNEY on 6-1)



"Self-Portrait with Cigarette," 1983 charcoal.

Los Angeles hosts a retrospective for David Hockney

HOCKNEY, from 1-1 paintings aren't about Los Angeles per se; but like Raymond Chandler's novels, they embody a distinctive sense of the city's visual and social ambiance. And they're generally easy to read and easy to like.

The Hockney retrospective, then, is as much a celebratory tribute to a favorite son as an examination of a productive career. It's also a way for the Los Angeles County Museum, now that it has a new building for 20th-century and contemporary art, to assert itself as a major player in that field.

The opening-night party, the largest the museum has ever given, established the show's tributary character with a flourish. The naturally gregarious Hockney, still boyish-looking thanks to his straw-colored hair, was constantly surrounded by an impenetrable knot of admirers and well-wishers, some of whom had flown in from New York and Europe for the event.

Earlier in the day, at a luncheon for those who had lent art to the show, each guest had been given a small cake with a Hockney painting reproduced on it in colored icing. The lenders' cakes were personalized — each lender received a cake decorated with the painting he or she had provided. One German lender remarked that he couldn't bear to eat his cake and had decided to save it, if only he could find someone who could advise him on the best way to do so.

At the evening party, paid for by corporate sponsor AT&T, the cake idea was elevated to high confectionery art. A large Hockney painting called *A Walk Around the Hotel Courtyard Acatlan* was reproduced in startling fidelity as a flat cake roughly 2 by 7 feet. The party-goers didn't share the German collector's compunctions;

once they discovered the centerpiece cake on the dessert table, they quickly reduced it to shards and crumbs.

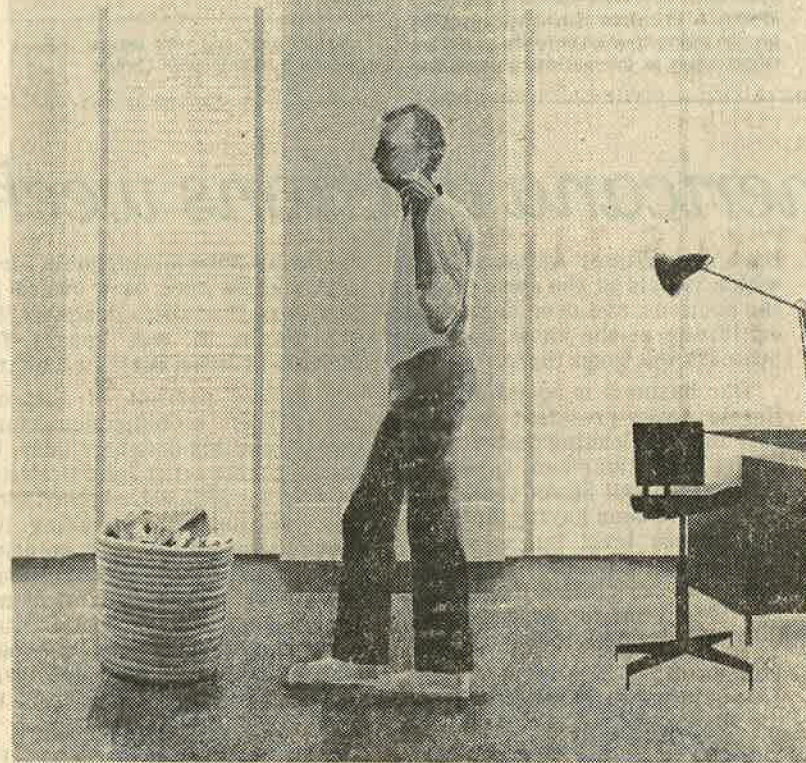
Typically at such affairs, the exhibition itself received cursory attention — not that anyone could see very much of it through the crowd.

Organized by Barron and her boss, Maurice Tuchman, it consists of about 250 items. About two-thirds are paintings, for despite his highly publicized successes in photography, Hockney remains committed to easel painting. The remainder includes drawings, photographic constructions, prints and maquettes for Hockney's celebrated stage sets for Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, mounted here in December by the Los Angeles Music Center Opera.

Although the show — which will travel to New York in June — covers Hockney's career all the way back to art school in his native Bradford, England, Tuchman and Barron have structured it more as a thematic review of his interests than as a strictly chronological, didactically analytical examination of his aesthetic development. Its themes include "problems of depiction," flatness and depth, self-portraits and double portraits, "elusive surfaces" (mainly the swimming-pool pictures), theater, "breaking the frame" and "fixed and moving focus."

By themselves, these categories indicate that Hockney is far more interested in the mechanics and *raison d'être* of art than in its content — an attitude that puts him, like his contemporary Frank Stella, at odds with contemporary trends.

By mixing paintings, photographs and works on paper together, the exhibition encourages the visitor to think of Hockney's *oeuvre* as he does — as a unity, particularly regarding his photographs. Contemporary paint-



Hockney's "The Room, Manchester Street," 1967 acrylic on canvas.

ers generally use photographs as source material, but Hockney uses them as a novel and equivalent means of achieving his painting agenda — an investigation of space and surface.

The exhibition demonstrates that Hockney is probably revered here for the wrong reasons. People respond enthusiastically to his limpid Mediterranean colors and his narrative content — his cool, slick images of naked men in swimming pools and of Southern California patios. But Hockney's interests are more fundamental, and more in the European tradition.

In that regard, he's an anomaly. As the principal spiritual heir of Picasso, working to extend and refine the te-

nets of European modernism, Hockney seems too intellectual and art-historical for *arriviste*, cachet-conscious Los Angeles. Yet his art is successful precisely because he carries out his formalist program in an appealing way, without compromising its integrity.

When one looks at a broad spectrum of his paintings over the last several decades, it becomes clear that their conceptual structure is more fascinating than their superficial attractiveness or local associations. Thus Hockney is also a paradox: He's indubitably a Southern California painter, whose art embodies the local ethos as no other resident artist's does, but whose

true merit derives from his ability to articulate traditional visual problems in refreshing ways that only incidentally touch on that ethos.

One sees this quite clearly and powerfully in his double portraits, which have become minor classics of contemporary art. Ostensibly they seem to be studies of interpersonal dynamics, but they're really attempts to break away from the Renaissance conventions that persist in contemporary realism.

In pictures like *Mr. and Mrs. Clark and Percy* and *American Collectors (Fred and Marcia Weisman)*, Hockney tries to demonstrate that in life, absolute one-point perspective doesn't exist, that in fact we experience the natural world in multiple perspective. Both pictures are spatially very complex; one's eye is pulled left, then right, then back toward a traditional vanishing point. But at the same time Hockney tries to envelop the viewer, because this is the way we actually perceive space.

He represents the multiple viewpoint more dramatically in his photographic composites, each of which is built up from a number of overlapping image fragments. These composites are more closely tied to classical cubism than the paintings. But like the paintings, especially the more recent ones, they attempt to represent motion as well as multiple perspectives.

Hockney wants the viewer to realize that the world we see isn't static; neither are we immobile in observing it. Even if only our eyes move as we take in a scene, we never see the world as the camera does. Furthermore, Hockney says, we feel three-dimensional space as a physical presence that neither a photograph nor the most realist of paintings can adequately convey.

Hockney's composites reverse traditional perspective; they show an exploding view outward from the observer. Such a view, common in Oriental art, implies motion, either by

the observer or by the objects being observed.

The photo-composites are perhaps Hockney's most original contribution to modern art. Not only are they ingenious and visually exciting, but as one becomes absorbed in them, one realizes that they really are more valid representations of natural space than conventional photographs or paintings. As such, they embody the ultimate truth and triumph of cubism.

That, one suspects, is Hockney's major accomplishment: He has demonstrated anew, in an easily digestible way, that cubism isn't simply a style of painting or even a way of seeing, but a way to understand nature more perfectly. Cubism is the essence of modernism, and Hockney speaks for modernism's continuing relevance.

Hockney didn't always work as a neo-cubist; his work from the late 1950s and early '60s is primitive in the manner of Dubuffet. After first coming to Los Angeles in 1964, he moved toward more representational imagery. He has, in fact, always been a figure painter, as Picasso was.

During the 1960s and '70s, his palette became progressively more intense, to the point where now it's almost strident. Hockney's colors aren't subtle; he relies on intense primaries broadly brushed. Where the double portraits and pool paintings were slick and restrained, the paintings of the past year are athletic and ebullient, as well as less ambitious in scale.

Hockney has lived here steadily since 1976. He says he likes Los Angeles because it's a city that affords considerable seclusion. Because of *Tristan*, he hasn't enjoyed much of that lately, and he's not likely to enjoy much while this impressive exhibition is running through April 24.

After that, it will go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York from June 18 to Aug. 14 and to the Tate Gallery in London from Oct. 26 to Jan. 3, 1989.