

INTERVIEW

David Hockney on his continued passion for work ahead of his biggest show in 25 years: ‘I will never stop painting’

The biggest living art star meets with his friend and legendary curator Sir Norman Rosenthal for a conversation about their upcoming show in Paris. At the latter’s London home, **Geordie Greig** learns why both of them will carry on making waves in the art world despite being in their eighties



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David Hockney, Self Portrait, 2021 (David Hockney/Jonathan Wilkinson)

Two old men sit in a small kitchen in Kensington, both in their eighties. They are making the final plans for a blockbuster exhibition in Paris, sharing their passion for art like teenagers.

“It’s going to be stunning,” says David Hockney, 87, still a fighting force in a wheelchair, a nurse by his side. He is chatting with the legendary curator Sir Norman Rosenthal, 80, a bit wobbly himself and recovering from cancer. Both, however, have minds that crackle with wit, wonder and vim.

Rosenthal, who has spent two years curating the show, riffs:

“Beautiful *and* important, this is the most extraordinary gathering of Hockneys for a generation.” Just a week before the public sees it, they are sorting the final details of the artist’s biggest show of the last 25 years: “21st-century Hockney.”

“My friends call me Lucky Norman, and curating this show just proves they are right,” says Rosenthal, gathering his thoughts before heading to the Eurostar ahead of its opening.

Wearing a sporty white shirt, hearing aids, canary-yellow glasses and a smile as wide as Broadway, Hockney acknowledges the usual health issues of age, but is insistent: “I will be there. I will survive today, tomorrow and every day until I get to Paris,” and then he laughs, the catarrhy guffaw of a smoker for the last 65 years, cigarettes’ finest friend as well as the world’s biggest living art star.

He has isolated himself from friends for a week, fighting off a chest infection. “It is just a seven-hour car journey and then I am there,” he explains. The force of personality, as well as his artistic vision, is undimmed; “I will never stop painting,” he says. As ever, no one and no thing will stop him from doing exactly what he wants. As the Parisians might say, *plus ça change*: he is in no doubt he will be there next week.

This has been a two-year project ever since Hockney (with JP, his devoted longtime French partner, by his side) called Rosenthal on FaceTime and made him an offer he could not refuse: to curate this bumper exhibition at the Louis Vuitton space in Paris. That call has also spawned an impressive book by Rosenthal on Hockney. The show is a spectacular, no-expense-spared, destination event for all art lovers.

“When they called, I swallowed hard – I was then 78 and doing two other shows – but then gave an instant yes. It has been an education and a privilege. I have learnt even more than I thought [about] how he is such a profound and surprising artist,” says Rosenthal.



David Hockney, Play Within a Play and Me with a Cigarette, 2024-2025 (David Hockney/Jonathan Wilkinson)

Rosenthal continues: “He just sees what is in front of him and he paints. Constable immortalised Dedham, Gainsborough immortalised parts of Suffolk, Turner the whole of the English countryside. David did Yorkshire, LA and California.

“As Beatrice said in *Much Ado About Nothing*, ‘I can see a church by daylight.’ It’s such a beautiful Shakespearean line and what it means is he properly sees the world in front of him. So often, artists want to solve the problems of today rather than just see the world. David doesn’t want to solve problems. He just shows what is in front of him.”

According to Rosenthal, Hockney changes what we see. He creates a language. He reinvented California, with pools and palm trees and boys, and he has done it with Yorkshire, too, with hedges and spring blossom and vistas. Rosenthal remembers Hockney's anxiety in Los Angeles when he was about to go back to paint landscapes in Yorkshire.

"I loved that he worried about precisely when in spring the blossom of the hawthorn would appear in Yorkshire, and that was all he cared about. It was his Monet moment of embracing nature and art, and a language which then spoke to the world."

For four hours, Rosenthal and Hockney reminisce in Rosenthal's London home, discussing the final details of the show. Rosenthal is the most celebrated curator of the age. His 1997 "Sensation" show heralded the Young British Artists with showmanship and intellect, and woke the art world up to a sense of shock as well as the new.

Millions of people have seen Rosenthal-curated shows, which are as popular as they are serious – and Hockney very much wanted to get Rosenthal to oversee the show in Paris. It has been totally absorbing for them both.



'A Bigger Grand Canyon', 1998 (David Hockney/Courtesy National Gallery of Australia)

The show mostly spans the last 25 years, though it includes works from 1955 to the present day. Among the more than 400 individual pieces is a painting of Lewis, Hockney's nurse, who, of course, like everyone and everything in his life, became a subject. He stares out in his blue nurse's uniform with a Hockney badge pinned on his chest saying "End Bossiness Soon". It's classic Hockney: a reminder that he hates any interference. Smoking, drinking, sex, clothes, convention are all too bossily controlled, as far as he is concerned.

Another picture is called “David Hockney in the garden so up yours, up yours, up yours”. More laughter from its creator. The joy of life and creating and talking is palpable.

The two men go back a long way, and their chat is light and learned, from the different aspects of what art is and can be, to who and what they’ve liked in their 60 years of friendship. They first met at the Hard Rock Café in 1963, and both recall it vividly. Rosenthal remembers: “I was with a friend of mine called Karl Bowen, a painter and Kellogg’s heir who was a friend of David, and we then all had dinner. David always had a very memorable face with that peroxide hair, and, as we know, blondes have all the fun!”

Their lives intermittently interwove. The younger man remains in complete admiration of his artist friend to this day.

“He’s 87. He has smoked, I don’t know, maybe 100 cigarettes a day and he still smokes,” continues Rosenthal. “His lungs are not in a good way, and he accepts that fact. For him, smoking is a symbol of freedom, to end bossiness. He doesn’t like being told on the packet some awful scare warning. He is very conscious of his physical fragility, but his mind is as clear as is his memory.”

As with Mohammed and mountains, Hockney’s world has not got smaller. He summons the world to him and sends out his view from his chair, armed always with brush and paint. The concert pianist Yuja Wang came by and played in his studio. Others are constantly on the phone. But the painting has never stopped.



10th September 2020, David Hockney, 2020 (David Hockney)

As well as Lewis, Hockney has a female nurse, Sonia, also immortalised in paint by her most famous patient. He is fond of whizzing around the park in his wheelchair, blue spectacles and a blue-threaded tweed matching the blue spring skies of London. “He paints what is in front of him; it’s the world of his imagination taking what is in front of him,” explains Rosenthal. The 25 years of landscapes and digital and oil and pencil and photographs: the full kaleidoscopic range of Hockney.

Rosenthal is the perfect interpreter for him. They are both professorial and disruptive, showmen and *hommes sérieux*, who see laughter and light as good correctives to mortality and matters melancholic.

Rosenthal’s home is an 18th-century house in Soho. It is more museum, or perhaps even mausoleum, than traditional home: full of ancient sculptures, ballet shoes, and myriad *objets d’art*. There is even a David Salle painting hanging in the shower. Many pictures were given by the artists he curated. In short, there is a lack of order and discipline at his home that is in total contrast to his art shows.

He is a product of escape from the Holocaust, as his parents only survived by coming to the UK from Slovakia and Germany. His grandfather was born in the

1850s. His father's boss in the Second World War in the Free Czech Army was Captain Robert Maxwell, the polymath and war soldier whose reputation twisted into crookedness.

"Art is just like a bottomless pit of pleasure," Rosenthal volunteers. (Hockney does not disagree.) "It is the point of making life better by looking and making sense of it. I always think life is beautiful, which is why I have always been against those who seem to stem or stop pleasure. Why should we let the miserable people win when there is so much beauty and joy to see – in everything?"

'David Hockney 25' is on at Fondation Louis Vuitton from 9 April to 31 August.

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<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/david-hockney-paris-biggest-show-years-b2724345.html>