

Art

Hockney's Neo-Cubism

by Hunter Drohojowska

A couple of boys in swimtrunks, with beautiful, sunburned legs, lean in the doorway of the L.A. Louver Gallery and ask, "Could we have David Hockney's autograph?" The artist hesitates imperceptibly, then obliges. The boys smile sweet thank you's and, suddenly self-conscious, walk on toward Venice beach. Hockney grins after them. After all, boys like that tempted the artist to come to L.A. back in 1963. The boys, palm trees, swimming pools, the whole picture-postcard reality of this city, it was so foreign and exotic compared to his home in Bradford, England. A love affair without end, L.A. found its way into his heart, and his art. After decades of travel, it is here that he bought a home three years ago.

Apart from Ed Ruscha, no artist has so accurately captured the sense of voluptuous excess, and the seedy, amoral character of Los Angeles. Hockney's paintings from the mid-1960s through the early 1970s — bare-bottomed boys, in pools, in showers; Beverly Hills art collectors; a lawn being sprinkled — were simple compositions of mundane scenes in flat, acrylic color. They were associated, inaccurately, with the movement of Pop art, and they made him famous.

One senses, however, that fame was



The Crossword Puzzle, Minneapolis.

Hockney's destiny, a fate bound up with the artist's theatrical disposition. He was not always this way. Life as an extrovert began with a visit to New York City in 1961, when the artist was 24. He dyed his hair platinum blond, a shocking decision at that time. It was a regular magnet for attention, and became his trademark. The flamboyant decision was a semaphore of

change, and thereafter, by his own admission, he became more gregarious, sociable, and theatrical. Hockney doesn't hold an interview, as you will read. He holds court. But his opinions were so lively, his talent so manifest, he became that rare creature, a celebrity accepted in the milieu of both high art and high society.

Hockney, 46, received a traditional art

education, learning to paint and draw by observing from life. He studied at Bradford College from 1955 to 1957 and did his post-graduate studies at London's Royal College of Art from 1959 to 1962. Along with many other artists of this period, he was caught in the Late Modernist squeeze, the primacy of the paint surface versus the depiction of life. Yet Hockney was always interested in painting people and scenes. In 1960, there was a Picasso exhibition at the Tate Gallery in London that Hockney visited eight times. In grand understatement he has said, "It was a very liberating influence." He found that, "Style is something you can use," as opposed to something that governs your work. Picasso has been hero and inspiration to the artist ever since, and he has returned to cubism in many mediums, many times, to discover new directions in his own work. During the mid-1970s, Hockney was trying to loosen himself from the constrictions of his popular, carefully developed, naturalistic style. The lessons of cubism were resurrected in a series of etchings, drawings and paintings.

In 1979, he was asked to design the sets and costumes for a triple bill at the Metropolitan Opera, including Erik Satie's short ballet, *Parade*. Hockney had done sets for the theater before, but *Parade* was a challenge since Picasso himself had designed the sets and costumes for the original version in 1917. Hockney's designs make reference to the heroic days of Modernism in France in the 1920s and 1930s. His ideas were formulated in large sketches and canvases painted in London, in a productive frenzy,

during the summer of 1980. The exuberant painterly work for the stage combined with a renewed enthusiasm for Picasso, whetted by the mammoth retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Picasso's example encouraged Hockney to search out a wider range of experience in his art, which might result in failures as well as successes, but would inevitably lend humanity to his art. He stopped worrying about being old-fashioned with such concepts, and returned to a concentration on depiction. After our interview, he quoted to me from John Ruskin's *Stones of Venice*, and it is clear these are his current sentiments toward art. Many may find them conservative.

The whole function of the artist in the world is to be a seeing and feeling creature," Hockney recites. "To be an instrument of such tenderness and sensitiveness that no shadow, no hue, no line, no instantaneous and evanescent expression of the visible things around him, nor any of the emotions they are capable of conveying to the spirit that has been given him, shall either be left unrecorded or fade from the book of record.

"It is not his business either to think, to judge, to argue, or to know. His place is neither in the closet, nor on the bench, nor at the bar, nor in the library. He may think in a byway. Reason, now and then, when he has nothing better to do. No such fragments of knowledge as he can gather without stooping or reach without pains. But none of these things are to be his care. The work of his life is to be two-fold, only to see and to feel."

Since 1981, Hockney has been explor-



Howard Rosenberg

ing the vision of cubism through photography. At first, he used Polaroid SX-70s in an exhibition he titled "Drawing with a Camera," shown here last year. The people and places familiar from his other work were photographed from many different perspectives — maybe 50 or 60 Polaroids would be combined to effect a multifaceted view — which would read as a unit. The white borders surrounding the Polaroids created a distracting, and misinterpreted, grid, so Hockney is now creating the photographs with a Pentax 110. Between 50 and 200 snapshots are collaged, constructing scenes of the Grand Canyon, or portraits of friends such as Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy, or a luncheon at the British Embassy in Tokyo. In these works, the viewer is brought into the photograph, virtually standing in the artist's shoes, which are often included at the bottom of the picture. There are 42 works in the show, and, in theory, they are editions of 60, and can be made to order. Each duplicate is taken from the negatives of the original and is collaged and framed identically. With prices ranging from \$2,500 to \$13,500, the complaint has surfaced that color in photographs is fugitive. This so irks Hockney that he has prepared a stamp reading "Not made for investment, buy for pleasure only."

Although these photographs have engendered criticism and curiosity — William Wilson of the *L.A. Times* referred to them as a hobby — Hockney believes the work holds some of the best ideas he's had. He's convinced we've not

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been seeing accurately, and have never followed through on the mandate of cubism. In the following interview, he explains his reasons.

Hockney: (Gesturing at his photographs.) Follow your eye, follow it, the way you look at things. The moment you do that, you put time in it, which also gives us a strong illusion of space, and you realize that you cannot perceive space in a picture without time. It is the time that becomes visible in a way.

Weekly: *Why is this so? Why should we dismiss an ordinary photograph because it takes us longer to look at one of yours?*

Hockney: I'm not dismissing it. I'm only saying it's not what we think it is, that's all. The idea that the photograph recorded what was there is naive. It doesn't count. There's no real feeling of space. Your eyes don't see that way. Without time, you cannot feel space. In a painting, you are used to looking at it for a long time. You become aware that it's a stare, a very short moment. The word moment takes longer to say than the time in which

"That's what's wrong with art history. It allocates art as a style in a period. It isn't. It's much more than that."

most ordinary photographs are shot. All I'm saying is that some think the photograph records truthfully. Well, it doesn't.

Weekly: *In another talk, you discussed the limitation of the camera, that it has only one fixed point of vision, whereas we see with two eyes.*

Hockney: Not just one eye, but a fixed position in that eye — as though it never moved. Our eyes do move even if we are looking at a still thing. The problem is that the camera, which sees this way, is much older than photography. Photography is simply the chemical invention allowing us to put the image onto a piece of paper. But Canaletto [an 18th-century Italian painter] made his paintings with a camera. The image of Venice — he traced it onto a canvas [with a camera obscura]. As he's drawing it, he's putting time into it. In short, it's taking time for him to see. He's acknowledging this and as he paints it in, there's even more time there. Though you see the scene from one fixed point of view, your eye can move about in it, because his hand had moved about in it. Your eye follows that. The moment you put the chemicals there and take away the hand, everything is put down in an instant. There is no time. Not long enough for us to see things at all. That creates what I call a "pictorial flaw" in photographs. You cannot look at them for very long. And every time you look back, they look the same. I think Picasso and Braque sensed this pictorial flaw in photographs and in painting that even Impressionism still imitated in a sense. It had one problem, that becomes very apparent in the photograph — the window idea. Where are you located when you see it? If you're looking out a window, there's a wall around you. You are cut off from the world, you're cut off from what's in the picture. The way we look at the world be-

gins with ourselves. This void in pictures became a problem because you never felt sure where you were. Cubism began to say, we don't see things that way. Think of the guitar as the cubists used it. As you play a guitar, walk around a guitar, the accumulation of ways of looking at it makes its shape slightly less definable to us. We've come to accept the shape of a guitar, any version of it, so long as it's from one point of view, and one eye. We don't see that way. But this is hard to grasp because you have all this baggage, all this way of seeing from one fixed point of view. Canaletto's view today still dominates everything, not Picasso's, not

cubism. Because we haven't been able to absorb that yet.

Weekly: *Why is that?*

Hockney: My own particular theory as to why painting went off to abstraction, and did not really absorb the ideas of cubism into depiction of reality — which is what it clearly was about — was because the movie came along at the same time. The movie simply looked as though it was the best and most vivid depiction of reality yet made. Things moved! We've forgotten how thrilling this must have been for people in 1912. A Cubist painting was too much theoretically, too intellectual for most people. The movie seemed to be like

a picture, seen from one point, which is what we're used to, and it moves. The truth is, the cubist idea is actually more interesting and more real but it has not yet been developed. It's complicated. It wasn't worked out as a theory. It was groped for, and very few people outside of the originators of cubism have been able to do anything with it. So realist painting keeps going back to this one fixed point of view, thinking it's true. Well, it's half true, but you can begin to find a more interesting way of depicting reality.

Weekly: *Originally you worked with*

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Polaroids and called it "Drawing With a Camera." Is this still drawing to you?

Hockney: I think it's closely related to drawing in that you've a great number of choices. It isn't mechanical. If you look at the earliest photographs, of the Grand Canyon, where I'm still training my eye, you're looking at an enormous amount of space — the world's biggest hole, a genuinely awesome landscape. So when I was experimenting, I wanted to capture the Grand Canyon as you've never seen it before. To get the grandeur and vastness of it. To get the space of it. In so doing, as you're moving your camera, you have to refocus every single time, and link it with other things.

Weekly: *How is this like drawing?*

Hockney: When you look at something, you've got many choices — the surface of a stone, the color of the wood, the space

around it. Sometimes I'll take four different photographs of the same bit, asking "what does my eye really see?" As it went on, it got more interesting because it got more complex, especially as I went on to do complicated portraits, splitting heads up, making shapes. I was defining things. Normally, photography doesn't have that control over things, only the draughtsman does. It's making a new kind of picture. You've broken some distance, you're getting more involved. The void between you and the bottom of the window is disappearing.

Weekly: *If we agree to that, why is it so difficult for us to look at a cubist painting and feel comfortable?*

Hockney: Because we're used to that other way of making an image. It's 500 years old, practically every image is made and seen that way. Even drawing done straight is seen that way. You sit still. The moment you think another way, it's very hard to find what real shape it was, be-

cause it acknowledges memory. Cubist painters might set up in a studio, but they move around when they move around when they paint. It's about the accumulation of images in a sense that make us think what a guitar is. I'm moving into a way of seeing that I think is more real, getting closer to something. There is a history of depiction, you see. The Renaissance was telling us how to see more clearly, it defined space more clearly than had ever been done before. That continued through cubism, which begins to define it even truer. That's why it must go on, why that aspect of modernism is not finished at all. It's actually not been exploited. We're rather arrogant to think, "Oh, that bit of art history is finished and we'll go on to the next, and the next." It's not like that, it's not as trivial as that, it's much more important. That's what's wrong with art history. It allocates art as a style in a period. It isn't. It's more than that. ■