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David Hockney's Long Road Home

By CAROL KINO OCT. 15, 2009

Jean-Pierre Gonçalves de Lima

BRIDLINGTON, England

IT was a brilliantly sunny autumn day in East Yorkshire, and the artist David Hockney was taking me for a drive through the countryside. "What it is I'm going to show you is an alleyway of trees," he said in his gruff Yorkshire burr as he turned his open-topped Audi roadster off the one-lane road into an even narrower byway bordered by swaying beech, sycamore and ash trees. "When I moved up here, I recognized this is really very rare and beautiful."

Because Mr. Hockney has been going deaf since his early 40s, he tends toward opinionated monologues, often delivered as he gesticulates with a cigarette. But at 72, even with hearing aids in both ears, he remains lively, gregarious and enthusiastic — especially when it comes to looking at the world, thinking about the world and making art out of what he sees.

As we drew close to the trees, he fretted over the sun's position. "The lighting is made for going the other way," he complained. Then he slowed down so we had time to appreciate each tree individually, and began issuing orders about how to look.

"Watch!" he called out. "The ash tree now comes in — look at the shape of it! And now then on the right, another tree. There's a point where each one stands on its own. There. Now. It's surrounded by sky. Now the next one, and it stands on its own. You see?" It was as though he were giving director's notes.

Eventually the trees grew small behind us, and Mr. Hockney's clear blue eyes, shielded by a white linen cap, turned back to the road.

Although he had filmed and photographed the alleyway on many occasions, and studied it from every direction, he still hadn't managed make "a marvelous painting of my experience," he said. "I haven't quite figured out yet, simply because it's not one viewpoint. But I will."

Mr. Hockney, renowned for his portraits, has been working with Photoshop and a Wacom tablet. This painting, "Jean-Pierre Gonçalves de Lima," and the three below are Inkjet-printed computer drawings on paper, all from 2008.
Credit Drawings by David Hockney

In 2005 Mr. Hockney — temporarily, he says — left Hollywood, where he had lived full time since 1978, to transform the manicured green and golden slopes, woods and farmland of the East Yorkshire landscape into spare, quickly worked compositions charged with pink, orange and violet. In the next two weeks 28 of these paintings will go on view in New York in a two-gallery exhibition at PaceWildenstein, both in Midtown and in Chelsea, through Dec. 24.

Although this will be Mr. Hockney's first New York painting show since 1996, he didn't seem perturbed. "I live in the United States," he ruminated as he drove. "And if you live there, you have to show in New York country. I suppose it was time."

But he seemed more interested in the country up ahead.

Many days over the last few years he and his assistant, Jean-Pierre Gonçalves de Lima, a convivial Parisian swing accordionist, have loaded up a van with canvases and pots of thinned-out oil paint and driven out to some secluded area where Mr. Hockney sets up his easel and works furiously, often completing two or three canvases a day. He has figured out a way to make very big paintings — so far up to 40 feet wide — by fitting many smaller paintings together, a method that allows the canvases to be easily transported back and forth. (It also means that he can work on individual segments in the studio without standing on a ladder.)

"I never dreamed of painting large landscapes here," he said. "On the other hand, every stage previously, it looks as though that's what it's leading to."

In the annals of art history the idea of an elderly English artist turning his hand to landscape painting is not particularly surprising. After all, Mr. Hockney is routinely referred to in his native country as "Britain's most famous living artist," and landscape has been a linchpin of British art since John Constable and J. M. W. Turner transformed it into a serious form in the early 19th century.

On the face of it, however, landscape does seem quite a departure for Mr. Hockney — in part because he has been predominantly celebrated for his contribution to that other major British art form, portraiture, and also because he has always embraced the new.

Yet Mr. Hockney has never shown any hesitation about going his own way. When he entered the Royal College of Art in 1959, the dominant avant-garde trend was abstraction; he went against it by painting figuratively, often in bright colors and a primitivist style. He also became notorious for work that openly referred to homosexuality, still illegal in England at the time.

"Paul Hockney 2"

"He took the very English preoccupation with portraiture and turned it upside down by eroticizing it," said Chrissie Iles, a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art. "He was a major cultural symbol of '60s London — of a new confidence, a generation that was overturning everything."

In 1964 Mr. Hockney, already something of a celebrity, shocked the London art world further by decamping to Hollywood. There he bleached his dark hair blond and began making his lushly azure "Swimming Pool" paintings. His colors grew brighter and his style became more austerely realist, as in "Beverly Hills Housewife" (1966-67), a 12-foot-long acrylic that depicts the collector Betty Freeman standing by her pool in a long hot-pink dress. (Last May the painting went for $7.9 million at Christie's New York, the top lot of the sale and a record price for Mr. Hockney.)

Since then he has explored many different forms of expression without seeming to care much about how the art world perceives them. He has dedicated years to creating opera sets and costumes, a pursuit that many dismiss as mere design. He has also enjoyed a long romance with photography and other reproductive media. In the 1970s he began using Polaroid photographs in his work, often combining them into collages that create a multiperspective view of a person or place. Later, his restless creativity prompted him to make work that was intended to be photocopied, laser-printed or faxed.

"Dr. Elizabeth Barton"

"I thought, 'Ah, this is a telephone for the deaf!' " he said of discovering the fax machine. "But I quickly realized not only can I send notes, but I could send drawings. And I decided if you made drawings especially for a fax machine, you could make interesting things."

In 1999 Mr. Hockney made his most surprising move yet: for two years he stopped painting, while developing a controversial theory, namely that from the 15th century on — long before the invention of the camera — Western artists created many paintings with the help of mirrors and lenses. He published his conclusions in the 2001 book "Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters," which was revised in 2006. Many took his meaning to be that the old masters cheated, which was never his assertion.

To some, this constant experimentation suggests that Mr. Hockney is something of a lightweight. "His work is often as hard to resist as it is to take seriously," Roberta Smith wrote in The New York Times in 1996. "It skims across the surface of art, borrowing liberally from earlier masters."

But there are many who find Mr. Hockney's ceaseless explorations exciting. That's one reason Ms. Iles included him in the famously cross-generational 2004 Whitney Biennial, where his portraits appeared in a gallery with those of a younger art star he had inspired, the portraitist Elizabeth Peyton. "The ease with which he moves between the '60s and the present, his rebellious character and his refusal to be defined makes him very attractive to younger artists," Ms Iles said.

Mr. Hockney's newfound passion for English landscape painting strikes some observers as peculiarly retrograde. "I think for many people this kind of representation is something which belongs in the past," said John Elderfield, the chief curator emeritus of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and a Yorkshireman himself. "But David doesn't give a damn."

In Mr. Hockney's eyes, his interest in his native landscape evolved naturally. He was born and raised in Bradford, a smoky Industrial Revolution-era metropolis in the western part of the county. Yet he has always had strong ties to the east: as a teenager he spent two summers stacking corn on a farm in Huggate. "It made me fall in love with this part of the world," he said. "I cycled all over it. And cycling, you really do realize it's quite hilly. It's not flat at all."

In the 1970s his family began migrating eastward. First an older brother, Paul, got a place in the coastal town of Flamborough. Soon after that his sister, Margaret — who is even more deaf than Mr. Hockney — moved to nearby Bridlington, a démodé seaside resort where strands of colored lights decorate the esplanade year-round. When his mother joined Margaret there in 1989, Mr. Hockney bought them a grand house on the seafront and became a frequent visitor. "I was the only unmarried son, and an unmarried son always spends Christmas with his mother," he explained.

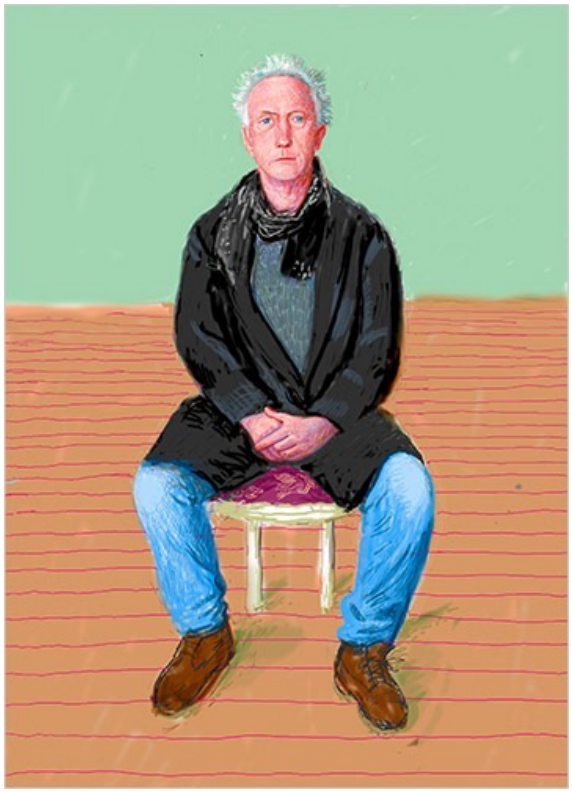
He began spending even more time there in 1997 when an old friend, the collector Jonathan Silver, lay dying in West Yorkshire. As Mr. Hockney drove back and forth to visit, he found himself regarding the landscape with new eyes, a reassessment that intensified with the death of his mother in 1999. Back in Los Angeles, he began painting Yorkshire from memory; he settled there full time in 2005.

Mr. Hockney now occupies his mother's house with a group that includes his longtime partner, John Fitzherbert, and Mr. Gonçalves de Lima, known as J. P. (His sister lives two streets away.)

One reason Mr. Hockney enjoys life in Bridlington is that it's easier on his hearing. "You arrange your life accordingly," he said. "I'm not antisocial. I like people. But you stop going to very big events, because you can't really hear anybody there unless you go right outside."

Another plus is his incredible light-filled 10,000-square-foot studio on the outskirts of town, where he has worked since 2008. It has allowed him to make even larger paintings. "I haven't got this giant studio in L.A.," he said enthusiastically. "I don't have anything like this."

During my visit, much of the Chelsea show was installed in a corner: someone had put masking tape on the floor to mark out the boundaries of Pace's 3,200-square-foot 25th Street space, which was dwarfed by the studio itself.



"Maurice Payne"

Mr. Hockney, wearing one of the old Savile Row suits he likes to paint in ("Even when they're wrecked, they still look good"), was sitting at a table in the middle of the space, holding forth on the stupidity of smoking bans and his theories about lenses, mirrors and image making, and showing off his iPhones. With the program Brushes, he uses them to paint miniaturized sunrises and still lifes; he now has two, because he quickly filled the first.

It was immediately clear that — his new passion for plein-air painting aside — Mr. Hockney has a new love: digital technology. Around the room hung multiple photographs by Jonathan Wilkinson, his full-time technology assistant, of artworks that were also hanging on the walls. They were so exact that it was often hard to tell the originals from the photographs.

The confusion was intensified because some of the originals actually began life as photographs — like the two 27-foot-long friezes depicting a group of trees Mr. Hockney noticed at the edge of town, which he photographed individually, then collaged together and detailed in Photoshop. Others were made at home on a Macintosh, including portraits he painted earlier this year using Photoshop and a Wacom tablet. (A selection will be at Pace Prints.) Near a table covered with video cameras, someone had tacked up printouts of Mr. Hockney's iPhone paintings.

Mr. Hockney also uses the computer to compose his paintings, either to help him step back and regard the whole of a multipanel work or to refine individual canvases. He often tries out colors and ideas on a photograph of an unfinished painting, or plays around with a JPEG of the image in Photoshop. Afterward he returns to the studio to put his ideas on canvas.

"People have asked me," he said, " 'Isn't it boring in Bridlington, a little isolated seaside town?' And I say: 'Not for us. We all think it's very exciting, because it is in my studio and it is in my house.' "

Mr. Hockney is now working toward a mammoth show of these landscapes for the Royal Academy in London, to open in January 2012. "They came to me," he said. "I went to look at the rooms and thought: 'My God, what an opportunity. We'll do it!' So I need this great big studio."

Yet he also has no intention of giving up California. He still has his house in the Hollywood Hills, he said, not to mention his office and archives on Santa Monica Boulevard and his green card.

"I would say I'm on location here," he said, laughing wryly. "That's what we say in Hollywood."

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