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REVIEW

David Hockney talks death, smoking and his NGV Melbourne show

David Hockney in his studio in Los Angeles. Picture: Shaughn and John

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An Uber driver named Jesus is expertly dodging parked cars as he tackles the blind corners of Mulholland Drive, leaving behind the Los Angeles flatlands and climbing into the Hollywood Hills. The hills are the midpoint between the fake Hollywood that entraps tourists on the Sunset and Hollywood boulevards and the Studio City area around Ventura where the movie studios —

the real business of Hollywood — are housed. It's not the most likely place to be the home and art studio of arguably Britain's greatest living artist, David Hockney.

After about 20 minutes the concrete streets have narrowed to little more than single lanes. Jesus stops the car outside a bland grey wall.

The nondescript street frontage conceals a leafy oasis hugging a hillside, home for most of the past four decades to Hockney, 79, a Yorkshire native who settled in LA in 1978 after a decade of living peripatetically between the US and Europe.

The door is answered by Hockney's studio manager Jean-Pierre Goncalves De Lima, known within the compound walls as JP.

JP offers a warm albeit practised welcome; Review is hardly the first reporter to have travelled across the globe for a peek inside the artist's studio. He leads the way along a marine blue painted path shrouded by dense tropical foliage and into a bright, sunlit workroom humming with activity.

Hockey is perched on a chair in the centre of the room, smoking contentedly, master of all he surveys. Any misconception the artist might be a Morrissey-like LA misfit, still grousing about his homeland and defiantly taking elevenses in the stark Californian sun, quickly dissipates. He beams a warm welcome and on the subject of his adopted homeland says: "I felt liberated there. I felt emboldened."

On the day of my visit this charming English grandfather of contemporary art is trying to decide whether he will come to Melbourne for the November 11 opening of the National Gallery of Victoria's summer survey focusing on his work in the past 10 years. (The gallery has since confirmed he will be making the journey.)

He's no stranger to the antipodes. Two brothers emigrated to Australia, and he has previously visited Canberra to see where his epic 60-canvas series from 1998, Bigger Grand Canyon, had been displayed in the National Gallery of Australia.

"It was OK, could be better," he says of the hanging in a rare moment of discontent.

Moments later he wrings some fun out of the subject, wondering aloud if he could compare Canberra with San Francisco. "A million different people, a hundred different stories," he chuckles.

Hockney has also visited Sydney a few times. One particularly memorable trip to the harbour city was in 1996 for a season of the Covent Garden production of the Strauss opera Die Frau ohne Schatten, for which he designed the sets.

Hockney had made an off-the-cuff comment that one of his brothers, who lives outside Sydney, wouldn't appreciate the opera. He laughs as he recalls how he had to eat his words after his brother, an engineer, came to the opening night and enjoyed it so much that he came back for every performance.

These days, Australia seems somewhat farther away. The prospect of a 16-hour flight at the age of 79 is not to be taken lightly, mostly on account of the smoking prohibition.

David Hockney: 'People tell me I'm going to die of smoking.' Picture: Shaughn and John

Hockney is possibly the most committed smoker you will ever encounter. He advocates for smokers' rights, rails against the nanny state and has built up a mental database of the benefits of tobacco.

He leans forward, his blue eyes twinkling, and says in his gentle Yorkshire lilt: "When they stopped the smoking on the planes they used to change the air every 20 minutes, but now they change it every two hours and that gives you colds and things. I know all about it.

He continues: "I write to the newspapers: I back it up, I point out my colleagues Picasso smoked [and] died at 93; Monet smoked, died at 86; Renoir smoked, died at 86; Matisse smoked, died at 85. Could you now tell me the young smokers who died?"

He recalls picking up smoking in 1953 when they were called "coffin nails" and battling his fanatically anti-smoking father. Yet he's convinced of the "benefit": "You don't get Parkinson's disease and you don't get dementia because would you forget to smoke?"

During a two-hour conversation in the studio before we move into his house, Hockney chain-smokes, switching between Camels and Davidoff, letting ash from the cigarettes tumble on to the floor around his feet.

When we break for a joyous lunch — in what is a grand tradition enjoyed by many visual artists, with six of us gathered around a circular dining table — his place is denoted by a giant ashtray and a huge lighter. He takes just a few bites of the fish before putting down his cutlery and lighting up.

"Davidoff I love," he says, a satisfied grin spreading across his face. "These are the best cigarettes of all. But you can't buy them here, you have to buy them in Germany, but I have a lot of them."

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Hockney is considered one of Britain's greatest living artists — if not the greatest, in what appears to be a split decision, with the immovable Londoner Frank Auerbach — even if he has lived abroad for much of the past 50 years.

And Los Angeles has adopted Hockney. He doesn't go out much these days but the artist has been active in the city's arts firmament, a champion and sponsor of some of LA's key cultural infrastructure developments of the past half-century, among them the growth of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Frank Gehry-designed Walt Disney Concert Hall, which opened in 2003.

His 6m x 2m painting Mulholland Drive: The Road to the Studio hangs in all its sunstruck saturated colour at the entrance to the American galleries at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

"Never mind it's painted by an Englishman and it's been there for the longest time," he says with a chuckle. "Well, they don't take it down much because its 20 feet long!"

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Born and raised in Yorkshire, Hockney moved to Los Angeles in 1964 and lived there for two years before returning to Britain and then moving to Paris. He eventually settled in LA again in 1978, buying the Hollywood Hills bungalow that is still his home.

In 2004 he returned to live in Yorkshire, but after remaining there for nine years he returned once more to LA in 2013.

The Yorkshire years were slower and more contemplative than his life in the Hollywood Hills, resulting in work that is at odds with the colour-saturated acrylic canvases that became Hockney's signature and most marketable style. After having been attracted to the colours of California and its bewitching light, a quality that transformed his work, he went back to Britain looking for seasonal texture.

He began experimenting with iPad drawings during that time as well as with filmmaking, while year in and year out he sketched seasonal changes in the Yorkshire countryside, which he found gently fascinating after so long in the desert climate of LA.

4 Blue Stools (2014) (detail).

Then, in the months before Hockney returned to LA, a studio assistant, Dominic Elliott, died at his property from a combination of drugs, drinking acid and alcohol. A coroner eventually put Elliott's death down to misadventure. A few months later, while in London, Hockney suffered a minor stroke.

The artworks from this era, leading up to the present, are being readied for exhibition at the NGV in *David Hockney: Current.*

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With the artist in his 80th year, art museums around the world are in a Hockney frenzy. Given that work is a constant narrative of Hockney's life, the surveys promise to be varied and fresh, rather than cynical efforts based on an inability to aggregate his most popular works from around the globe

In February, the Tate in London will stage its largest single-artist show when it presents a Hockney retrospective, while Hockney's first exhibition in Ireland — an examination of his drawing, featuring early graphite to later iPadwork — ended last month in Belfast. A Hockney exhibition at London's Royal Academy, called 82 Portraits and 1 Still-Life, also concluded last month. Many of those portraits will be exhibited at Melbourne's NGV before they are packed up and dispatched to Venice and then to Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in Spain.

A Bigger Card Players (2015) (detail).

Hockney says the flurry of excitement by museums in his 80th year was in large part triggered by an earlier exhibition of his work at the Royal Academy that exceeded expectations.

"I did a big show there four years ago. They got 640,000 people in to see it, that's why [the Royal Academy is] doing this new show: they made a lot of money, they made about £10 million profit on my show," he says.

Given the current workload, the offer to also show his work in Melbourne initially seemed too much.

"Because of the big Tate show happening at the same time, I was just going to ignore [Melbourne]," he says. "But then Gregory said no, we shouldn't, because it was technological a lot of it, and so Gregory's doing it — he did the show in San Francisco that was very good and I think this will be very good."

Gregory is Gregory Evans, Hockney's former partner and now manager and exhibition curator who, along with JP, is one of the men bustling about in the studio during Review's visit. The San Francisco show Hockney mentions was the hit survey David Hockney: A Bigger Exhibition at Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco in 2013, preparation for which triggered his return to the US.

In addition to the hectic exhibition calendar, the German art publisher Taschen was also finalising during Review's visit a volume on Hockney's output, due to be published in its metre-tall "sumo" scale.

The "sumo" books have previously showcased seminal 20th-century talents such as Helmut Newton, Annie Leibovitz and the Rolling Stones. The Hockney volume will have a print run of 9000, each housed on a display lectern devised by Australian wonder-designer Marc Newson. The artist has clearly enjoyed the experience of revisiting and reflecting on his oeuvre, and choosing the works to be included.

"It contains work from 1953 when I started at Bradford [College of Art] to this year," he says. "It is almost chronological and entirely visual. And it's good," he smiles in an uncommon moment of self-regard. "Every page is a zinger!"

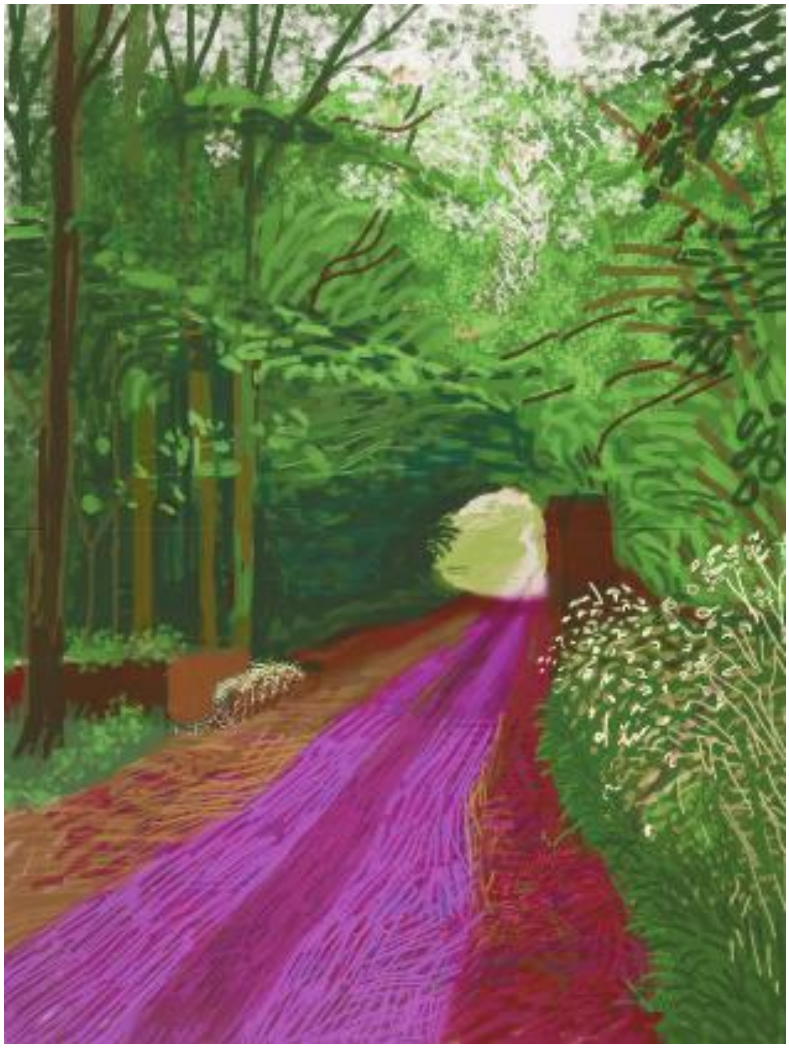
"I have the artist's vanity; I want my work to be seen but I don't necessarily need to be seen," he adds.

While success can bloat and slow artists, the artist influenced most particularly by Picasso and Matisse remains engaged in the broader art world as a student, aesthete, historian, critic and active participant.

Hockney has recently co-authored a book, A History of Pictures: From the Cave to the Computer Screen, and he does not shy away from expressing strong opinions. Last year he hilariously critiqued his German peer Gerhard Richter as always making "the same stuff with the squeegee".

Stagnation isn't an attribute of which he can be accused. In the 1960s, he took the big risk of moving from oil to acrylic paints, which helped make his US works so vibrant.

In his later years, he has continued experimenting and adapting. His fondness for sending faxes morphed into experimentations with iPads; those works, and videos of them coming together, will feature heavily in the NGV show.



Hanging around the white-painted walls of his studio are some portraits from the series at NGV, characters from Hockney's life seated on chairs in front of mix-and-match blue backgrounds.

His studio is dominated by a large screen where he shows Review a video of an iPad picture being painted. In this case the distant focal point of the mountainous landscape is rendered first, before the artist zooms out on the picture, effectively expanding his canvas and filling in the foreground.

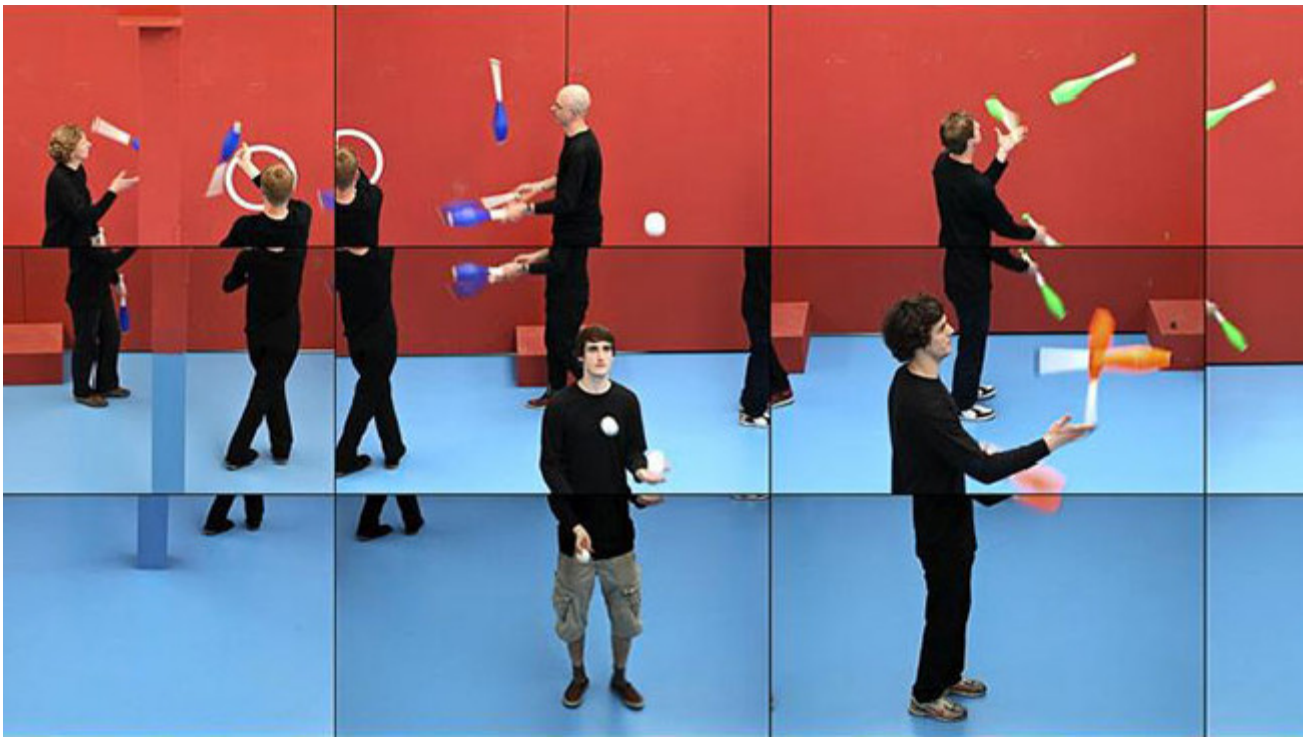
"There's gonna be a drawing on 15 screens," he says. "In the Victorian show there's lots of technology. How does that change the way people look at art, do you think?

"Video brings its time to you — you bring your time to painting, and that's something that can never be altered. I'm aware of it when we did our videos; I play with time and space. The Jugglers [his first video installation in 2012] does that," Hockney says.

"Painting is, in a way, a big document about painting. I know technology affects pictures. European art historians can be very ignorant about shadows. Optics need shadows; that's why I'm ready to dismiss a lot of art history as being Eurocentric — they dismiss Chinese painting. I used to, I used to think it was all the same, but now I know it's not."

The effects of Hockney's stroke three years ago are not plainly evident: he makes use of a wheelchair sometimes and doesn't drink, but that's nothing new.

"It was only a tiny one," he says of the stroke. "It was only visible in my speech, in my sentences, but I could walk round to the store and ... I just hadn't talked to anybody and it was when I was talking to Gregory he said I think you've had a little stroke."



Detail from digital work The Jugglers (2012).

It's a trigger for returning to his favourite subject.

"Look, I'm going to die, I know I'm going to die — but why remind me constantly [it's] because of smoking? People tell me I'm going to die of smoking, but they haven't a clue. The obsession with the body and death — I don't like it. I'm all for living," he says.

"There used to be a joke where the man went to the doctor and he said, 'I want you to give up smoking, I want you to give up drinking, I want you to give up rich food and sex.' The man said, 'Will I live longer?' The doctor said, 'No, but it will seem that way.' "

"That used to be a joke," Hockney says. "It isn't now."

David Hockney: Current opens at the National Gallery of Victoria on November 11 and runs until March 13. Michaela Boland travelled to Los Angeles courtesy of the NGV.