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David Hockney Is Not Afraid to Go High Tech

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In cultural spheres, “immersive technology” is a suspicious phrase. Associated with metaverse experiments and 4D cinemas, it is dangerous territory for serious artists. Which is what makes David Hockney’s *Bigger & Closer (not smaller & further away)*, a nearly hour-long exhibition of multimedia projections that opened in London this week, even more of a triumph.

Using pictures and videos from every stage of his prolific career, *Bigger & Closer* transforms and elaborates on even the most familiar of Hockney’s work, from 1960s paintings to 2020s iPad drawings. “I wanted to see the paintings new, and I think that’s what I’ve done,” Hockney said in an interview before the unveiling this week, wearing canary-yellow spectacles and a button affixed to the lapel of his checked suit that read “End Bossiness Soon”. “I think it’s now a new work of art in itself.”

Hockney’s is the inaugural show at the new exhibition space Lightroom, a collaboration between Nicholas Hytner’s London Theatre Company (also behind *The Bridge*) and 59 Productions, whose director Mark Grimmer worked hand-in-hand with Hockney on the show. Housed in a bunker several storeys below the King’s Cross Central development, Lightroom is a black box in which all four concrete walls and the floor are used as canvases for projections so vivid they look like LEDs and sound design so precise it can pinpoint audio to a couple of square metres in the room. In theory, *Bigger & Closer* is not dissimilar to recent Van Gogh and Monet “experiences”, but the comparisons end there.

The six chapters of *Bigger & Closer* range from the art historical to the hallucinatory, making even Hockney’s most familiar work feel new. The show begins – although it can be entered at any point – with its most didactic chapter, “Perspective Lesson”. Like the world’s most extraordinary wall label, it traces the use of perspective from Brunelleschi to Canaletto in comparison to traditional Chinese landscape painting, and differentiates between the “geometric perspective” of a camera and the “psychological perspective” of the human eye – giving viewers a deeper understanding of Hockney’s well-known photographic montages.



Hockney attended the opening of *Bigger & Closer* in canary-yellow glasses and matching Crocs.

Justin Sutcliffe

That perspective lesson sets us up to see all Hockney's familiar work in new ways. In a chapter about his iconic "Pools", the squiggly lines of "Sunbather" (1966) – representing sunlight refracted over water – spill over the whole space, dancing with each other in an animated ballet. The effect is like swimming. "Each time I've gone back to painting water and pools I've done it a different way," Hockney narrates in his Yorkshire accent.

In an adaptation of a 2012 video, we are surrounded by the San Gabriel Mountains, able to experience multiple perspectives at once: the view of a driver looking ahead at the road, and that of a passenger watching the arid hills zoom past, with Wagner blasting on the radio all the way. It recalls Hockney's earlier comment: "I realised everything in LA is meant to be read at 25 miles an hour. Because everybody's driving."

The back wall offers another kind of perspective, giving a glimpse behind the scenes of Hockney's process – at one point revealing a photograph of Peter Schlesinger in Kensington Gardens as a preparatory image for "Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)" (1972), a painting set in a Southern California landscape far from Central London.



Wagner plays in a room that brings to life the San Gabriel Mountains, a reference to Hockney's famous Wagner drives with friends. Justin Sutcliffe

The most surprising section, though, is dedicated to the artist's numerous set designs for opera, "Hockney Paints the Stage". Here, we get less familiar work, primarily from the late 1970s and 1980s, completely illuminated by music and movement: *Parade*, *Le Rossignol*, *Turandot*, *The Magic Flute*,

and *Tristan und Isolde*, from which a stage boat is projected on all sides, sails billowing and waves crashing. “The amount of people who have seen all the operas I’ve done is very, very small,” Hockney said. “When I took it on, I never treated it as a side issue; I did my best at it.”

The impression is that all mediums are equally important for Hockney: his operas, his paintings, his videos, and even his 1985 portfolio for *Vogue France*, which also makes a cameo in *Bigger & Closer* (and which, no coincidence, also covered the subject of perspective). “When it came out, a lot of people just didn’t get it, really. Didn’t get quite was I was talking about. I didn’t care. I thought, well, in the future they might. Well, it’s here now, isn’t it? It’s arrived.”

Before our interview, Hockney sent over a 2012 essay he first published in *The Financial Times*, which positioned technology as a source of hope for artists, at the time referencing new devices such as iPhones and iPads. The implication was that the same was true of the innovations Lightroom offers. Asked what he thought of artists using Artificial Intelligence, Hockney replied, “In that essay, I just noticed that I’d say there’d be some chaos before things are sorted out, and someone will come along and sort things out. Now we’re in this period of chaos.” It’s hard not to wonder what Hockney would do with Dall-E.

The easy criticism of *Bigger & Closer*, however it’s phrased, will be that it’s overly approachable. In fact, this is the show’s deepest strength. It pulls a six-decade career into the present and future and, because it requires no museum loans, could easily travel or run in multiple locations simultaneously. It is an impossible retrospective, the kind that uses existing works to make new ones. One hopes it will inspire other artists to experiment in other mediums and technologies with more confidence. David Hockney, of course, has nothing to prove, and so is fearless, but the art world as a whole has everything to gain from his kind of open-mindedness. It turns out that “immersive” can work, if you allow it.

<https://www.vogue.co.uk/arts-and-lifestyle/article/david-hockney-bigger-and-closer>