

Opinion **Life & Arts**

## I don't need a lightshow to immerse myself in art

Immersive Van Gogh has been a global blockbuster. Now David Hockney is getting in on the act

**JAN DALLEY**

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Visual of David Hockney's 'Gregory Swimming, Los Angeles, March 31st 1982'

Call me an art snob, if you like. Old school. I'll hold up my hands to that. I like to look at works of art in the flesh, face to face, at the size and scale at which they were imagined and created. No messing. I could write you several thousand words about all the reasons why I think this is essential — but I'll spare you.

You can imagine, though, that things such as *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience*, worldwide blockbuster that it is, are rather testing for people like me. To explain, if you are not among the 5mn-plus people across the world who have tried this out, it's basically as if you are entering a huge warehouse with bits of the artist's works projected on to the walls around you, room after room, vastly blown up, with soundtracks and more. Sunflowers and irises float past, disassociated from the paintings in which they were created; cornfields wave crazily, the door of his room opens and closes, that yellow chair floats about, the artist's red beard bristles huge and alarming. It's all mega and magnified. *Immersive* indeed.

Of course, I get that. I perfectly understand the urge to dive headfirst into the world of a painting and wrap its magic around you like some living blanket, to feel every whiff and jot of it, to smell it and taste it and hear it. Isn't that what happens anyway, when you really look at something?

Vermeer takes us right into the hushed, softly sunlit streets of Delft, to scrubbed interiors that smell faintly of soap, of the lavender in the linen press. I can imagine the feel of those fur collars across my throat, the ironed smell of that starched lace.

Cézanne transports us to the Provençal countryside, maquis scrunching underfoot, the exhaustion of a long walk up to distant hills as the light turns purple and gold around us, and a tiny whiff of garlic on the wind as supper approaches.

A single Egon Schiele drawing can transport us to the red-light backstreets of Vienna, where skinny, witty women scrape a living, illuminated by bad jazz, sour cigarette smoke and the reek of sausage.

It's all there. Every one of the five senses. And recently there have been some powerful immersive experiences which are not an extension/corruption of smaller original work but created from scratch as entire experiential works, sensational wander-through pieces such as those by the Japanese collective teamLab, or experience-installations such as Antony Gormley's steam-filled explorative piece "Blind Light".

But these are quite different from the repurposed "immersions" — giant buildings housing a floor-to-ceiling lightshow of Vincent's disembodied sunflowers making crazy balloon-like floatings up the walls, surrounded by the deep blue sky and starry nights from an entirely different painting, for instance. Are we at a Grateful Dead gig?

I don't know, but perhaps those millions of ticket-buying punters can't be wrong. Londoners are soon to decide for themselves, afresh, at a new venue. Lightroom, which describes itself as a "home for spectacular artist-led shows", opens in the King's Cross development on February 22 to house a programme of great artists' work reimagined as immersive digital happenings, and beginning with David Hockney.

It's a clever choice. First, it sorts out the big question — what would the artist have thought? What would Monet have felt about his water lilies all over umbrellas, and Leonardo about the "Mona Lisa" on fridge magnets? Perhaps they wouldn't have cared, or would even have relished it, especially if it paid the rent. Scale, as well as medium, is so essential to works of art — Van Gogh, poverty-stricken, couldn't perhaps have imagined working on a giant canvas: would he have done it, if he could? Old school as I am, I feel that artists have always tailored their vision to their circumstances, their message to their medium — but we can't answer these questions for dead artists, or transpose their sensibility to today's realities.



David Hockney at Lightroom © Justin Sutcliffe

Hockney is different. He's here, thank goodness, to make decisions in the present tense. In a show called *Bigger & Closer (not smaller & further away)*, the giant sliding, metamorphosing panels of his landscapes and swimmers, skies and trees, which Lightroom will feature on monumental walls, are fully meant. His processes and paintstrokes, the build-up of his colours and effects, will unfold in front of us, blown up to giant proportions. It'll be 60 years of his work, explained in a commentary by the artist himself, all of it set to a score by contemporary composer Nico Muhly.

Spectacular, yes, but coherent. In Hockney's career, it has perfect logic. He has always embraced new technologies and been quick to explore their potential in his art, from the unforgettable Polaroid works (possibly the best ever use of that form) to experiments with perspective through cameras, pieces created with film, video, iPad, Instagram and more. This is the latest iteration, and even at a distance we can sense the artist having fun with it. Perhaps even old-schoolers like me will be won over.

*Jan Dalley is the FT's arts editor*

*'Bigger & Closer (not smaller & further away)', February 22-June 4, [lightroom.uk](https://www.lightroom.uk)*

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