

## Visual Arts

**Bigger & Closer: plunge into the hypnotic world of Hockney**

Still innovating at 85, David Hockney's monumental, immersive show at Lightroom brings a blaze of sun to wintry London

Jackie Wullschläger YESTERDAY

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David Hockney once joked that he was “brought up in Bradford and Hollywood” — on Yorkshire's landscape and grounded good sense, on American movies and dreams of glamour. His work has always dovetailed an instantly appealing representational clarity with flamboyance and yearning, a mix so potent that it made him a celebrity, entering the public imagination like no artist since Picasso. The blonde British bombshell who turned California's pools and highways into icons of heat and dust, speed and lust, and also emblems of postwar freedom, he is a draughtsman so pictorially ingenious that he could reinvent painting to embrace photography, film and iPad.

It's all there in *Bigger & Closer (not smaller & further away)*, his enveloping, irresistibly entertaining show launching Lightroom, London's new venue for artist installations — a Turbine-Hall-sized lightbox and hybrid cinema/gallery/theatre. Through vast digital projections of his most famous images, *Bigger & Closer* plunges a promenading audience (there's also tiered, cushioned seating, but it's more fun to wander about) into the crystalline, brightly stylised rendering of visual reality which is Hockneydom.

The effect is hypnotic. One moment, a quartet of giant screens enfolds you into Woldgate woods, meandering the same path all at once through saplings and summer abundance, golden leaves and snowy luminescence, in “The Four Seasons”. The next, “Wagner Drive” pulls you into a dizzy encounter with younger Hockney at the wheel of an open white Mercedes hurtling through California's hills to the roar of *Ride of the Valkyries*. From there you're suddenly dropped into the chill of ancient carved stone — the frame for his hawthorn blossom window in Westminster Abbey (2018), illuminated to the rhythmic chant of Allegri's “Miserere Mei”.



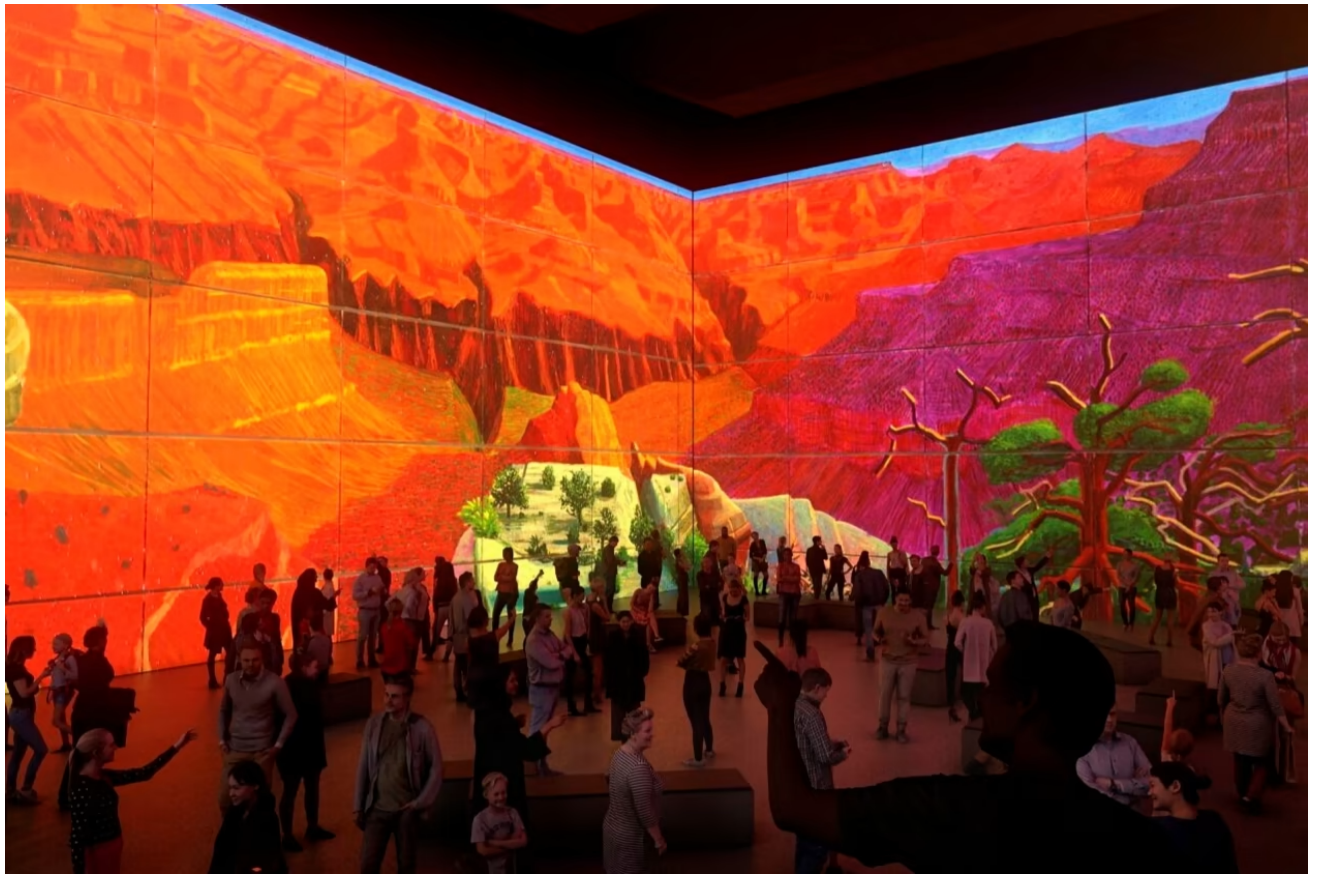
David Hockney at Lightroom in King's Cross, London © Justin Sutcliffe

The 50-minute sequence, loosely arranged in six sections covering varied places and media, runs on a loop, and you can walk in any time. But whenever you arrive it won't be long before you're floating with beautiful boys, immersed floor to ceiling in the arcs and curves and squiggly white lines with which Hockney depicts intense sunlight hitting water. The show's title alludes to "A Bigger Splash", and the balance of geometry and voluptuousness in that painting is reiterated here in the close-ups of translucent pools held within an enormous all-over grid.

**At last week's preview, visitors were already lying dreamily on the (carpeted) floor — reminiscent of Tate audiences at Olafur Eliasson's 'The Weather Project'**

As the images unfold, everything is pleasingly recognisable yet refreshed by the grand scale of the projections, and shifting contexts. Fred and Marcia Weisman, the "American Collectors" as rigid and grotesque as the totem pole in their Los Angeles sculpture garden, become giants looming above us: his clenched fist tight as his dark suit, she grimacing as she clasps her sugar-pink kaftan protectively around her. The paving stones fizz in the heat; raking light, extended shadows and smooth blue sky memorialise a slice of privileged 1960s America.

Celia — wide eyes, green eyeshadow, rosebud lips — is twisted into Picasso-like distortion for the cover of French Vogue but keeps her warmth and enquiring gaze. "A Bigger Grand Canyon", a composite painting of 60 canvases, unfurls on all sides here in wrap-round, fat, Fauvist hues. Textures are surprisingly differentiated: rain in Normandy thuds in stylus strokes splashed on to the iPad; photo collages from "Pearblossom Highway" to "My Mother, Bolton Abbey" have the sheen of sharp Polaroid colours and highly saturated surfaces.

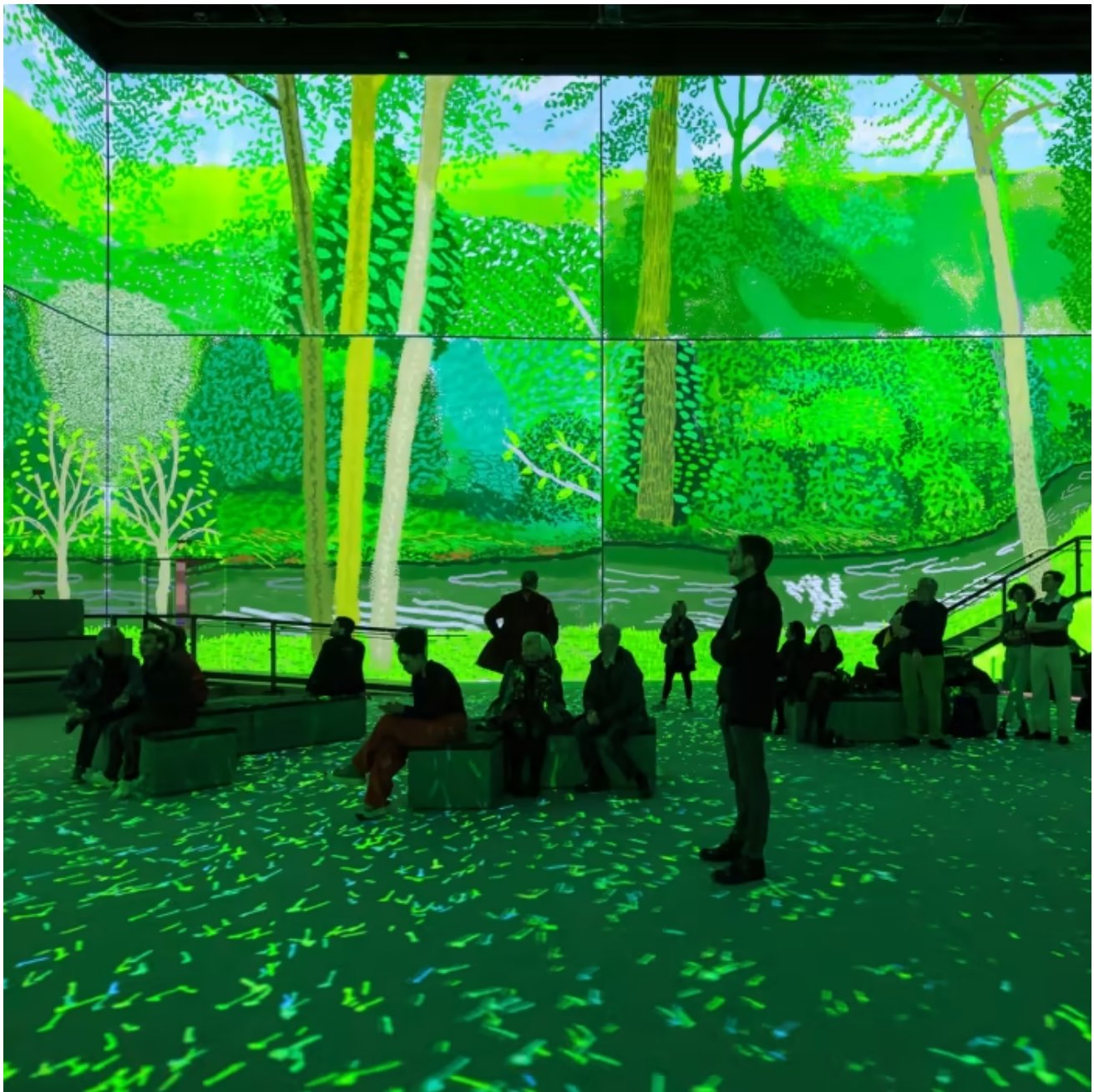


Installation of 'A Bigger Grand Canyon' (1998)

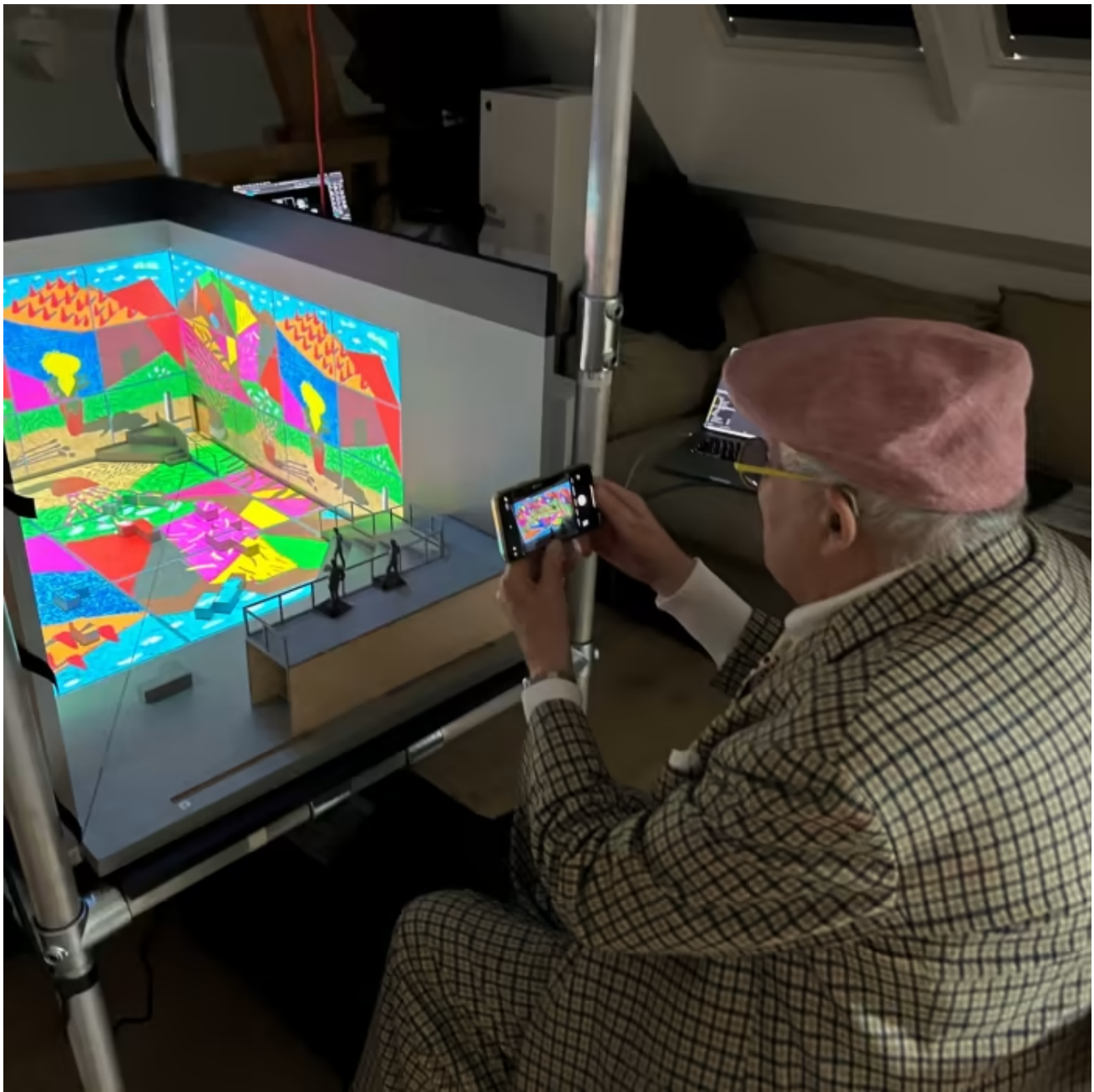
Soaking up these changing scenographies that wash over the Lightroom like waves, visitors at last week's preview were already lying dreamily on the (carpeted) floor — reminiscent of Tate audiences at Olafur Eliasson's "The Weather Project". Like Eliasson's installation, *Bigger & Closer* brings a blaze of sun to wintry London, and is inclusive, accessible, joyful.

In the roll-call of Hockney's own exhibitions, the show reads as a sequel to the Royal Academy's 2012 sellout *A Bigger Picture*, which similarly converged media (huge iPad "paintings" which are really prints, a photographic reproduction of the seven-metre canvas "Mulholland Drive") to present figurative painting as monumental spectacle.

Is *Bigger & Closer* substantively different from the experiential blockbusters that cut-magnify-and-paste modern masters' greatest hits into similarly immersive projections (and which feel so inauthentic in their connection to the original paintings)? Hockney comments that "they are just using Van Gogh and Monet, and they're dead. They can't add anything to it. Well, I'm still alive, so I can make things work better." At 85, he remains an innovator, intrigued by what the newest technologies offer a traditional figurative artist.



'The changing scenographies wash over the Lightroom like waves' © Justin Sutcliffe



David Hockney viewing the model box containing 'August 2021, Landscape with Shadows', Twelve iPad paintings comprising a single work © Mark Grimmer

If the biographical element is enhanced by his droll comments on the show's soundtrack — "I'm a space freak, actually", "we see psychologically, the camera sees geographically" — much is nevertheless familiar. But there's one aspect of the show which is revelatory and absolutely captivating: the long section devoted to theatre décor, a mini-retrospective of Hockney's magnificent opera designs. Whereas works on canvas inevitably lose something — physicality, the eloquence of paint itself — when translated into projections, that's not true of the digital animations of the opera sets: accompanied by the music, they burst into a life of their own.

As the theatre curtains sweep across the Lightroom, the space is transformed into a stage for all the world to tread. In the darkness, visitors appear to mingle with the dancing velvety stick-figure bats, leaping frogs and pink dragonflies from Ravel's *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*, or with the stark black residents of Peking flitting among the colossal vermilion diagonals and curves of *Turandot*. The cultural references are dense and sophisticated, the theatrical magic immediate and engrossing.



Visitors linger by the projections of Hockney's works on the walls © Justin Sutcliffe

We begin in Glyndebourne in 1975, with the highly patterned *The Rake's Progress*, set and costumes executed in dramatic black-and-white cross-hatching, twinning references to Hogarth — 18th-century prints — and the composer Stravinsky's restrained modernism (“I will lace each aria into a tight corset”). The experience liberated Hockney's painting — “a release from naturalism”, he said.

*The Magic Flute*, a fantasy of faux Egyptian architecture and French formal gardens, followed: Hockney sees the narrative as “a progression from chaos to order”, and “the music crisp and clear, with a lot of colour and fun”. By contrast the sets for *Tristan und Isolde* (1987) at the Los Angeles Music Center Opera — huge moving coloured beams, jutting promontory, ship's sails billowing towards us, blinding light — correspond to the thunderous mountain landscapes he was making at the time.

Tristan dies asking “Do I hear the light?”; Hockney says “I want people to see the music”. *Bigger & Closer* foregrounds his exceptional engagement with multiple media, his pleasure in collaboration, and the push-pull throughout his work between painterliness and design. It confirms his unique status: no other living painter has created enough beloved, defining images to sustain such a performance.

*‘Bigger & Closer (not smaller & further away)’*, to June 4

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