

# David Hockney Returns Home

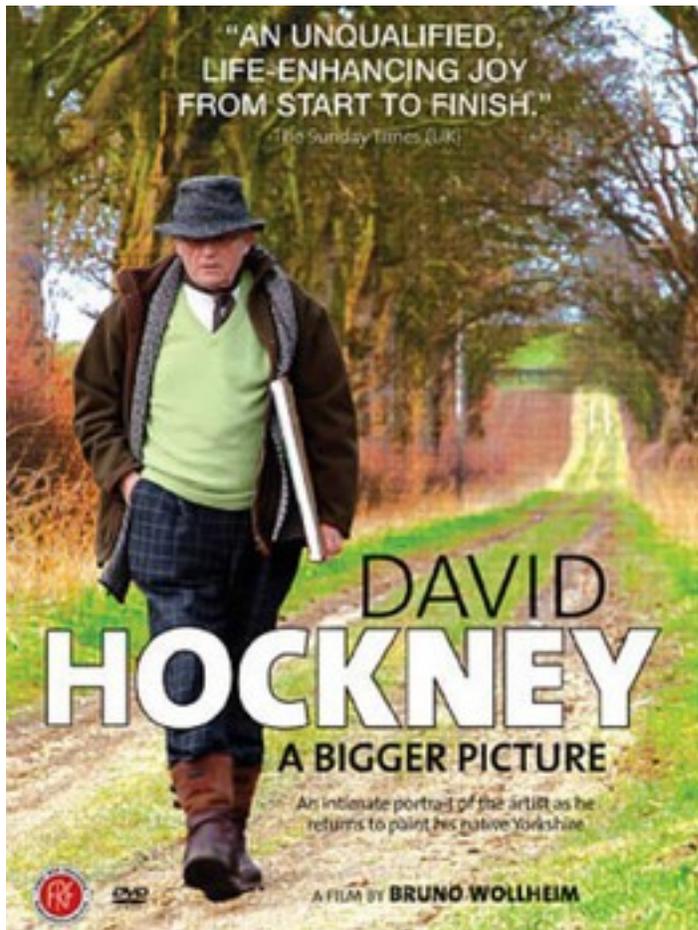
by Patrick Neal on March 30, 2012



*Hockney painting outdoors. (photo by Jean Pierre Goncalves de Lima, © David Hockney)*

Columbia University's Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America is a treasure New Yorkers have all to themselves. With two downstairs gallery spaces and an upstairs theater, the programming offers art exhibits, concerts, films and symposiums all in a gorgeous setting. The Academy recently screened the filmmaker Bruno Wollheim's *David Hockney: A*

*Bigger Picture*, which was followed by commentary from the director, questions from the audience and a champagne reception on the outdoor terrace. This was the documentary's New York premiere; it has been making the rounds of cultural institutions but has not had an extended run in theaters.



The film is a much more straightforward account than Jack Hazan's 1974 movie *A Bigger Splash*. It brings Hockney's life full circle — the earlier film followed the artist's move from London to Los Angeles while

Wollheim's film deals with Hockney's return many years later to his childhood stomping grounds of East Yorkshire.

The sickness of his close friend and the death of his mother were what drew him back to Britain. He had always kept a studio in his mother's attic in Bridlington, using it during occasional visits, but now takes up a more permanent residence with his partner and assistant (Hockney's sister Margaret, also on the premises, eventually moves out). The drives to and from his friend's sick bed fascinate Hockney as he navigates changes in the lay of the land. He compares the winding terrain of the countryside to the changing vantage points found in Chinese Scrolls and is exhilarated by this as a pictorial device so different from the fixed frame of Western art. His residence in LA serves as his West Coast office but with the eight hour time difference, he and his entourage are left undisturbed to enjoy a bohemian daily existence.

Morning drives through the landscape propel Hockney toward a major new body of work. He has his assistant take off on the highway, driving until Hockney says "stop," then they get out to observe, the artist quickly filling a sketchbook with drawings of the indigenous flora and fauna. This leads to Hockney painting the landscape, setting up an easel on the side of the road, brushing in compositions of green rectangles that capture the pastures, stones and rolling hills of the Yorkshire countryside. We take pleasure watching the artist work; admiring the ingenuity of the tools and setup, witnessing the abandonment of a canvas gone wrong, empathizing

with the locals who stop to ogle and take pictures and listening to Hockney interject with a stray thought or comment on his process.



*Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)*

Eventually Hockney moves on to larger more immersive paintings done on six canvases, three side-by-side stacked atop three below. Positioned in the woodland area of a park, he grapples with changes in the weather and time of day, before bringing the works back to his studio for continued painting. He explains memory is as much a part of the painting process since everything we do is remembered. His variations on the same landscape motif are not unlike Monet's haystacks.

We learn of an invitation from The Royal Academy to showcase Hockney's Yorkshire landscapes, and the last segment of the film chronicles the painter's production, working in a variety of media in preparation for the exhibit. Because they are works in progress, it becomes a bit of a gamble with neither the artist nor museum knowing what the final outcome will be; the film is a remarkable record of an artist preparing for a

show. The scale and ambition increase with only two weeks counting down to the opening — Hockney works on up to 23 panels, pieces of a whole that are too big to be seen all at once. With the help of his assistant, they come up with a technique of taking digital shots of each painted panel at day's end, then assembling all the pieces in Photoshop to form the entire composition. From a computer screen, Hockney is able to track his daily progress. A final huge painting in primary reds, blues and greens, *Bigger Trees Near Warter*, scales 50 by 15 feet, its subject a large crucifix-shaped tree in dead center eclipsing a forest of tangled branches and cottages below.



*Filmmaker Bruno Wollheim Talks with screening guests (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)*

The film touches on Hockney's controversial project during the late 1990s where he researched the master painters of the past and their reliance on photographic techniques. By the time of this film, Hockney has returned squarely to painting, remarking on the limitations of the camera

and reciting the old metaphor of painting being a window onto the world that you can pass through and control. As he states, “In your mind’s eye, you can go to the ends of the earth or even outer space.” But as his landscape project deepens, he becomes invigorated by the possibilities of digital photography, Photoshop, the iPad and filmmaking, producing artworks for the Royal Academy that combine the freehand and technological.

The film raises questions about the decisions an artist must confront over a long career spanning almost a century of constant innovation and change. Often in the contemporary artworld, new mediums and cross-disciplinary work are privileged, with a tendency to ghettoize what are perceived to be “retardataire” practices i.e. oil painting in the genres of portraiture, still life and landscape. If an artist dares to explore the discontents of these older forms does he/she risk marginalization?



*David Hockney's "Woldgate Woods, 21, 23 and 29 November" (2006), Oil on six canvases, 182.9 x 365.8 cm overall (photo by Richard Schmidt, image courtesy of the artist, © David Hockney) (click to enlarge)*

Hockney has walked this tightrope with finesse. He comes off as a bit of a dandified Picasso. Like Picasso, he is prolific, curious and willing to try anything and they both have had pictorial obsessions they needed to work through. Like Picasso, Hockney is well-versed in the painting styles of the past; in his work one sees elements of Fauvism, Cubism, Classicism and Pop and both artists returned over and over again to genre painting as a vehicle for painterly exploration. Just as Hockney is eager to try out the latest in film or pixels, Picasso employed collage and found objects, and the influence of movies on Cubism is of renewed interest to historians.

Both have brought other media into their art with a low tech touch but always return to painting at the end of the day.

*A film by Bruno Wollheim, David Hockney: A Bigger Picture, David Hockney RA: A Bigger Picture continues at the Royal Academy, London through April 11, 2012*

<http://hyperallergic.com/49168/david-hockney-a-bigger-picture/>