The Hockney Industry

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New Left Review, no. 73, January/ February 2012.

First, outside the Royal Academy, you see the long, rain-drenched queue of people waiting to see the latest David Hockney exhibition; once inside, it is often hard to see the paintings for the throngs of mostly elderly and well-heeled folk who crowd

appreciatively before them. So the question of this artist's long and extraordinary popularity is bound to come to mind. Why has he exerted such a hold on the English imagination?

Praise of Hockney from many quarters, particularly from the conservative press, uses the sycophantic and absurdly exaggerated language usually reserved for the Royals and other national treasures. For one Lord and ex-Tory Minister for the Arts, writing in the weekly magazine, *The Spectator*, aside from being the conqueror of abstraction, Hockney is witty, truthful and entertaining: 'In the unfair way of life, he happens also to be well-read, musical, eloquent and Britain's snappiest dresser.'[1]

While he remains best known for his Pop-era figure painting, the Royal Academy offers a very large exhibition of Hockney's recent landscape painting, interspersed with a few older landscapes (to show that it has been one of the artist's abiding concerns) and some videos and iPad sketches. The works—like Hockney's earlier experiments with photo-collage—are arranged in grids. Displayed without gaps between the elements, they form single, museum-scale paintings; with gaps, they appear as series of landscapes made at a uniform size. The style oscillates between Post-Impressionism and Fauvism, and contains their faux-naïve rapidity of touch, tension between pattern and depth, and childlike distortions of perspective. All this was new a hundred years ago, and for more hidebound audiences, it still serves as a signpost of modernity. The subjects are fields, trees and roads which oscillate, too, between a depiction of the eternal cycle of nature (the passing seasons) and gentle signs of industry (the fields are farmed in monocultures, trees are felled for logging, and sometimes there are old terraced houses or a traditional red phone box).

For those accustomed to the metaphorical gloom of much artists' video, Hockney's video work—also presented as a grid, an array of overlapping frames from eight cameras—comes as a light, frothy and cheery riposte. The sets are confected in bright primary colours, amid which decorative and charismatic actors cavort. As in the paintings, colours are intensified to near painful and ridiculous effect. The soundtrack of a dance piece even carries its own applause—hardly needed, since it sufficiently charmed the Royal Academy audience.

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[1] Grey Gowrie, 'A Bigger Message: Conversations with David Hockney by Martin Gayford', *The Spectator*, 29 October 2011.

The videos and the iPad sketches are a reminder of Hockney's long career of technical experiment, in which his essentially retrograde style and subjects are yoked to cutting-edge photographic and computer technology. The combination gives a clue to Hockney's success: it is not just that he offers a conservative vision of the old, but rather a mix of old and new, in which the new is yoked to the service of the old. Technology, like landscape painting, is treated lightly, with a small boy's wonder and enthusiasm, and bent to a charming and affable vision with occasional gestures towards profundity. So Hockney, like the TV personality Stephen Fry (another national treasure who combines technophilia with avuncular comfort), offers a way of seeing the modern world that is conservative but without rancour or mournful nostalgia, but instead overflows with light, colour, curiosity and optimism.

Yet this bright vision does contain disturbances. Another recent *Spectator* essay pointed to Hockney's considerable talent for publicising himself and his works, suggesting that there was little substance behind the hype.[2] (For this show, Hockney's PR people have proposed that he has come up with a new computerised technique for the restoration of discoloured ancient paintings, and that some jibes that he made about artists paid others to make their works were directed at Damien Hirst; both, predictably, had some coverage in the newspapers.) Similarly, a well-known conservative critic, Brian Sewell, saw the Royal Academy show as an engine for drawing money from the Academy crowds with a greatly over-inflated display of garish, crude and discordant painting.[3] The integrity that a conservative vision needs to convince comes into contradiction with Hockney's publicity apparatus. There is so much work on offer in the exhibition, and of such vast scale, that this, along with the Hockney mugs, bags, pencils, books, tea-trays and necklaces in the Academy shop—bring the viewer unavoidably to reflect on the Hockney industry.

In the paintings, dead industry sometimes leavens the conservative rural vision. An old mill building may after all be a pleasant reminder of a bygone age when people 'knew their place' and even (in England, at any rate) of the passing of working-class power. To have your face rubbed in contemporary commerce, though, is another thing entirely. The grids that are seen throughout Hockney's work—and wasn't it, says the cultural

[2] Niru Ratnam, 'Hockney the Self-Publicist', *The Spectator*, 19 January 2012.
[3] Brian Sewell, 'David Hockney RA: A Bigger Picture, Royal Academy – Review', *The Evening Standard*, 12 January 2012.

conservative, with grids that all the trouble started?—are pried from landscape and nature and returned to industry. It is as if the grids are infected by the lineage of conceptual art with its critique of creativity, and its bored, alienated artists mechanically churning out standardised products day after day.

Reviews of the Academy show have been, at best, mixed. Some critics have contrasted the relative subtlety of Hockney's earlier American work with the blaring colours and crude handling of his latest products.[4] The credibility of the Hockney industry seems to falter. Did it, in any case, have much hold beyond England, where a middle class held to aristocratic values for so long, dreaming of being country gentlemen, living amidst regulated nature? Modern life produces, predictably and regularly, cultures of nostalgia, romantic visions of traditional life, and exercises in primitivism. Many urban dwellers still decorate their apartments with rural landscapes, just as they did at the time of the Impressionists. Yet a newly urbanised, globalised cosmopolitan class has left that vision of the old, good life behind as its plausibility became ever more remote from their experience. As for Hockney's products, reduced and flattened by reproduction, they are quite nice pictures to have on a bag or a tea-towel, and that, perhaps, is enough.

[4] Sewell, an admirer of Hockney's earlier work, makes this complaint in his *Evening Standard* review. For Alasdair Sooke, writing in the *Telegraph* (16 January 2012) the recent works resemble those of 'amateur Sunday painters'; Charles Darwent in the *Independent* (22 January) wonders whether the show will damage the artist's reputation.