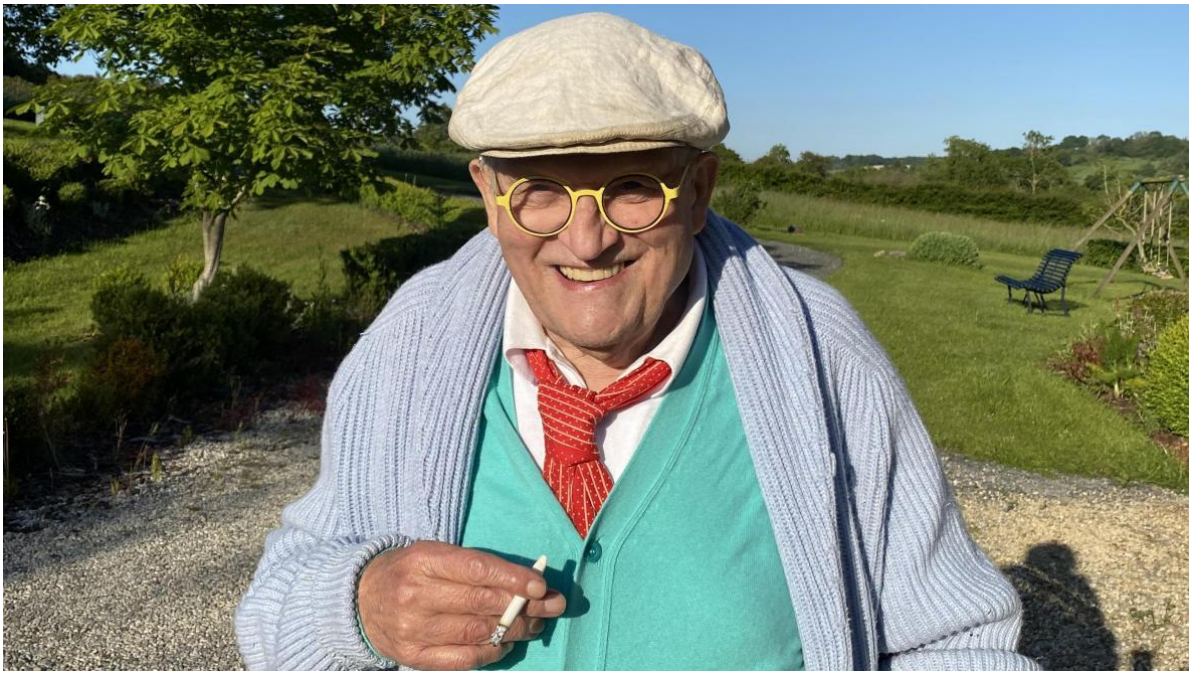
VISUAL ART

David Hockney: ‘It’s wonderful here. Every window I look out of I see trees’

David Hockney, 83, tells Rachel Campbell-Johnston about spending the pandemic in his home in Normandy as a show of his new iPad and acrylic paintings opens in Paris



David Hockney in Normandy

JEAN-PIERRE GONÇALVES DE LIMA

Rachel Campbell-Johnston
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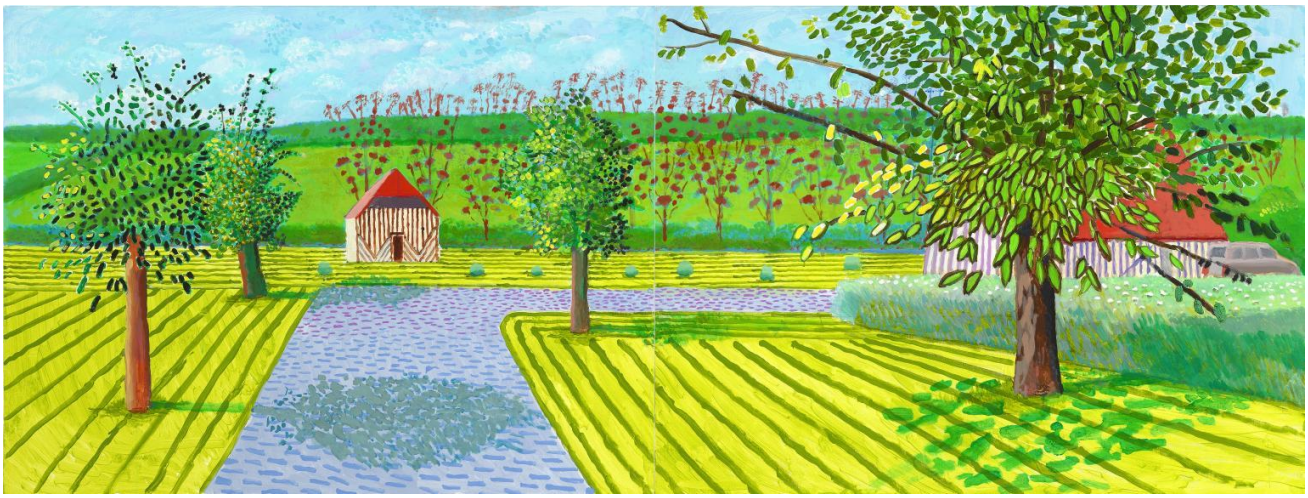
“I am living here in a little seven dwarfs’ house in the middle of a four-acre field, and I am perfectly happy,” David Hockney says. “I haven’t left since March 2. And I don’t want to leave. It’s an idyllic place. Absolutely idyllic.”

“Would you like to have a look?” He picks up the iPad on which we are holding our Facetime meeting and takes me on a quick virtual tour of the Normandy farmhouse that is his home. I see small rooms with wood panelling and comfortably tatty sofas, a fire in the grate and the kitchen tabletop clutter. A few stalks of ripe wheat have been plonked into a white enamel jug. They shine, gold against the soot-blackened stone of a big old-fashioned hearth. Right by it, pinned to the wall, is the picture that Hockney has done of this impromptu still-life. “I find scenes to paint all over the place. Look at that window.” He swings his iPad towards it. “I was just looking out of it when I realised, well, I should draw it, so I did, with the droplets of rain on it, and then again with the electric light.

“I can always find something interesting to draw. And it’s wonderful here. Here, every window I look out of I see trees,” he says happily as, stepping outside, he shows me the orchard that stretches as far as the eye can see. A river runs through it, apparently, bordered by tall poplars. “It looks like a Monet,” he announces. “And I feel like Monet . . . And I’m still a smoker like Monet.” And, no, he didn’t even think of giving up cigarettes during the global pandemic. “Why would I? Aren’t they supposed to be a prophylactic?”



The Entrance by David Hockney

DAVID HOCKNEY

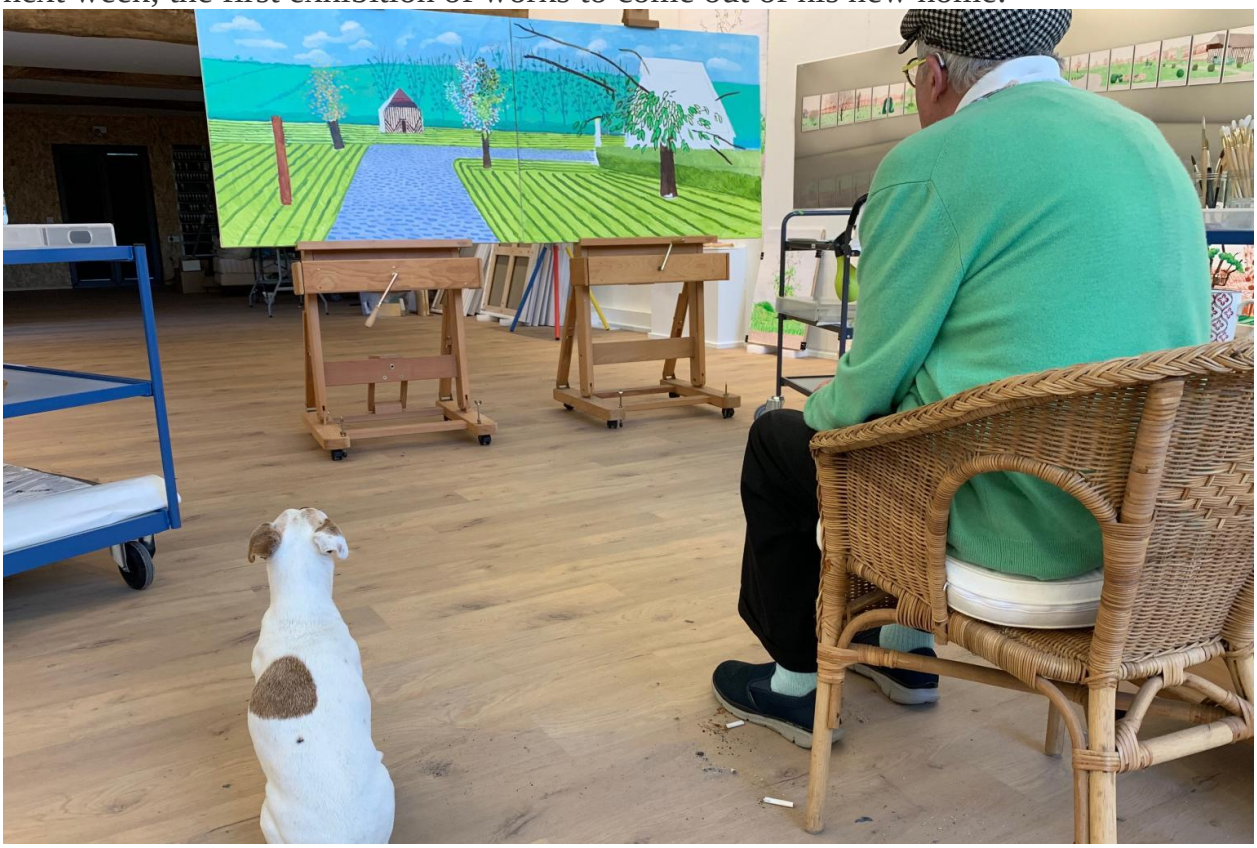
Hockney came to live in Normandy pretty much by chance. It was autumn 2018. He had been visiting London for the unveiling of a stained-glass window he had designed for Westminster Abbey. He was reluctant to return immediately to Los Angeles. Transatlantic flights are draining — not least for an octogenarian. But he knew that if he remained in the capital he would be besieged with visitors and various other demands, so he and JP, his friend and long-standing studio assistant, jumped into a car ("because at least in a car you can smoke if you want") and headed across the Channel.

Hockney wanted to see the Bayeux Tapestry. He had seen it once before, in the Sixties, but in recent years he has become increasingly fascinated by the sophistication of its narrative techniques. Unfurling like a Chinese scroll, it contains no shadows, no reflections and no perspective, he explains. But its sense of time captured in pictorial space is what he too sets out to achieve.

Perhaps Hockney was also feeling a little lost. In the early 2000s he had returned from America to live in East Yorkshire and had planned to remain there. Then in 2013 his life was horribly disrupted by the accidental death of Dominic Elliott, his young assistant and close friend. Shocked, saddened and presumably bruised by the anger of the few who tried to lay the blame at his door, Hockney returned to LA; to the world

of plate glass and palm trees, swimming pools and lawn sprinklers that is so familiar from his most famous works.

He had hugely missed the changing seasons, however. And the idea took root that he might settle in Normandy. A small farmhouse was found, with an old disused cider press close by that could be converted into a studio. Builders set to work and, the next spring, Hockney moved. “We arrived late on Saturday at the beginning of March [last year] and on Monday morning I started drawing.” He had some concertina-like Japanese sketchbooks, he explains, and he began to walk round the house, drawing as he went, and finishing up where he began. This was the beginning of a pair of 360-degree panoramas that, a bit like the Bayeux Tapestry, will run the length of one wall when Hockney opens his new show, *Ma Normandie*, at the Galerie Lelong in Paris next week; the first exhibition of works to come out of his new home.



David Hockney and Ruby in the Normandy studio

JEAN-PIERRE GONÇALVES DE LIMA

There has always been a strong autobiographical element to Hockney's paintings. The people and the places — not to mention the dogs — that he knows or loves have long been his subject. Now, through his art, he started acquainting himself with a new spot. He painted the house, a "higgledy-piggledy" mixture of beams, cob, timber and brick. "There are so many paintings of Normandy, but nobody ever painted the buildings much. They probably thought they were too Hansel and Gretel. The impressionists wanted to be modern. They wanted railway stations, bridges and factory chimneys. But I realised that I am modern anyway, so I would do them," he says, explaining that he sees them as a counterpart to the thatched cottages painted by Rembrandt and Van Gogh, both of whom he is obsessed with at present.

Hockney paints the fires in his grate, the pears ripening in orchards, the boughs of apple and quince trees heavy with fruit, paths through green fields that wind away into mist, a pond fringed with rushes, the square of the local town (Beuvron-en-Auge) where he occasionally lunches. Some of the pictures are painted in acrylic. Several are done on his iPad. He has always been fascinated by technology, enjoying the fresh possibilities that over the decades have been offered by the photocopier, the Polaroid or the fax machine. He started working on an iPad in 2010, he says, using the Brushes app. Apple updated it six years later. "They said they were making it better. I found that they were making it worse and I told them so." They invited him to work with a designer on improving it. "Now I think it's really good. I'm sure Picasso and Monet and Van Gogh would have loved it.

"I had always planned to do lockdown here in Normandy," he says. "Lockdown was good for me. Though it wasn't good for other people," he adds. "Look at the students. They are stuck in one little room and they just throw a meal at them through the door and that's about it. Well, that's not all right. That's not all right at all." What does he think of the way the British government has handled it? "I think they've swindled us all," he says.

“But I didn’t mind being locked away, just doing what I do. No visitors. That was good. I get fed up with visitors. I don’t like crowds.” This is probably in part because of his hereditary hearing impairment. He can’t tell what direction a sound is coming from, although, typically optimistic, he believes that his loss of hearing has had the effect of letting him see space more clearly. “If you’re blind you use sounds to locate space, don’t you? And I’m using it the other way now.”

Apple Tree

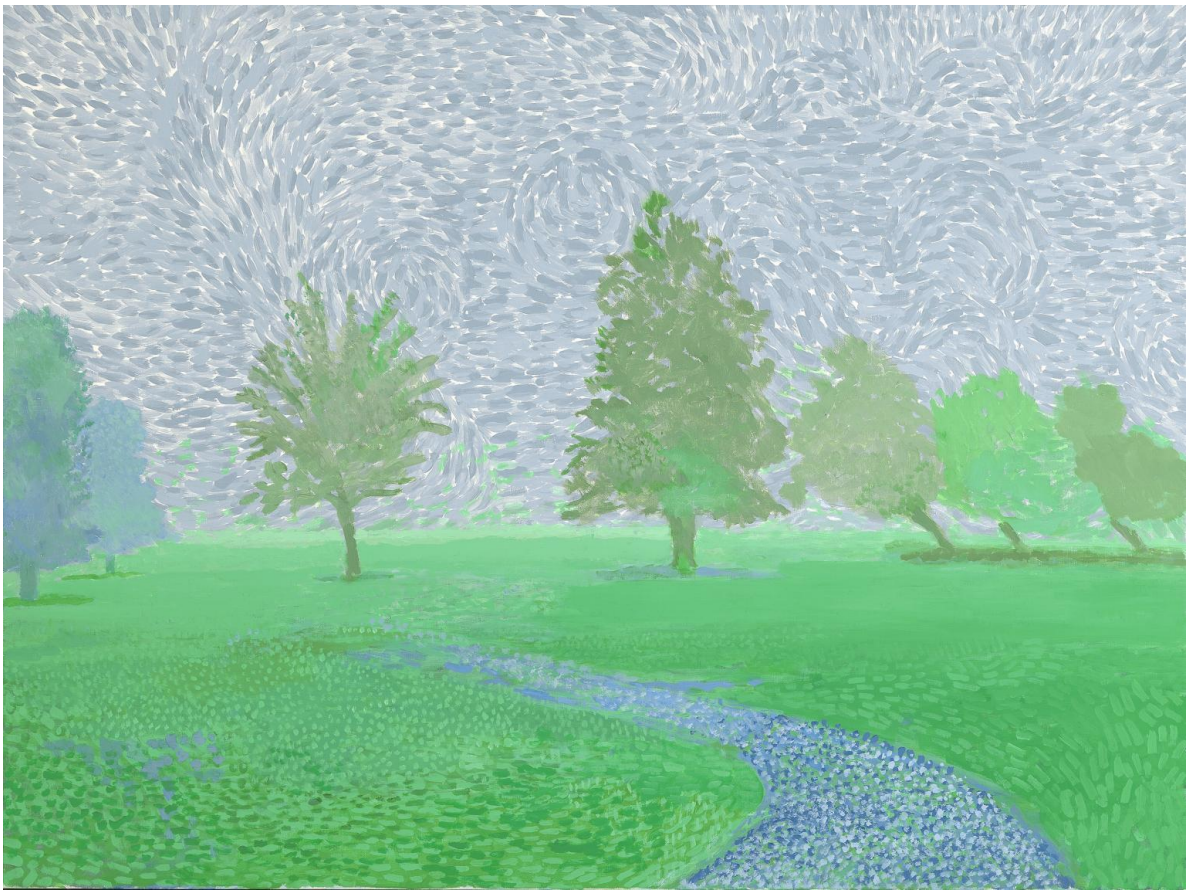
DAVID HOCKNEY

The artist who made his name as the playboy pin-up of 1960s pop, a poolside flâneur with a life of Californian hedonism, now prefers solitude and early bed. In a sense he probably always has. He has an all but Calvinist work ethic, one of his friends once told me; a legacy of his working-class upbringing in Bradford. I remember visiting his

studio and spotting a scrap of paper saying, “Inspiration: she does not visit the lazy” hung on the wall, much like a Victorian might have had a moral sampler.

“I like being free to just think about art 24 hours a day. I can always find something to draw,” Hockney says. “I don’t think that a day has gone by when I haven’t drawn.” Drawing is of fundamental importance. “The teaching of drawing is the teaching of looking,” he explains. “That’s the importance of art. To remind us to look and to see. Even if you are stuck inside with only one tree outside your window, you can see the leaves happen, you can see the tree grow and change. I mean, lots of people noticed spring this year and they hadn’t looked at it before. They had been too busy to notice. But when they looked at it they enjoyed it. It was spectacular this year.”

If his art has a purpose, he says, it would be to make people see. “Most people don’t really look, they scan the ground in front of them so they can see to walk. But it’s possible to teach people to look. Really look. And it’s a very beautiful world if you really look at it.”



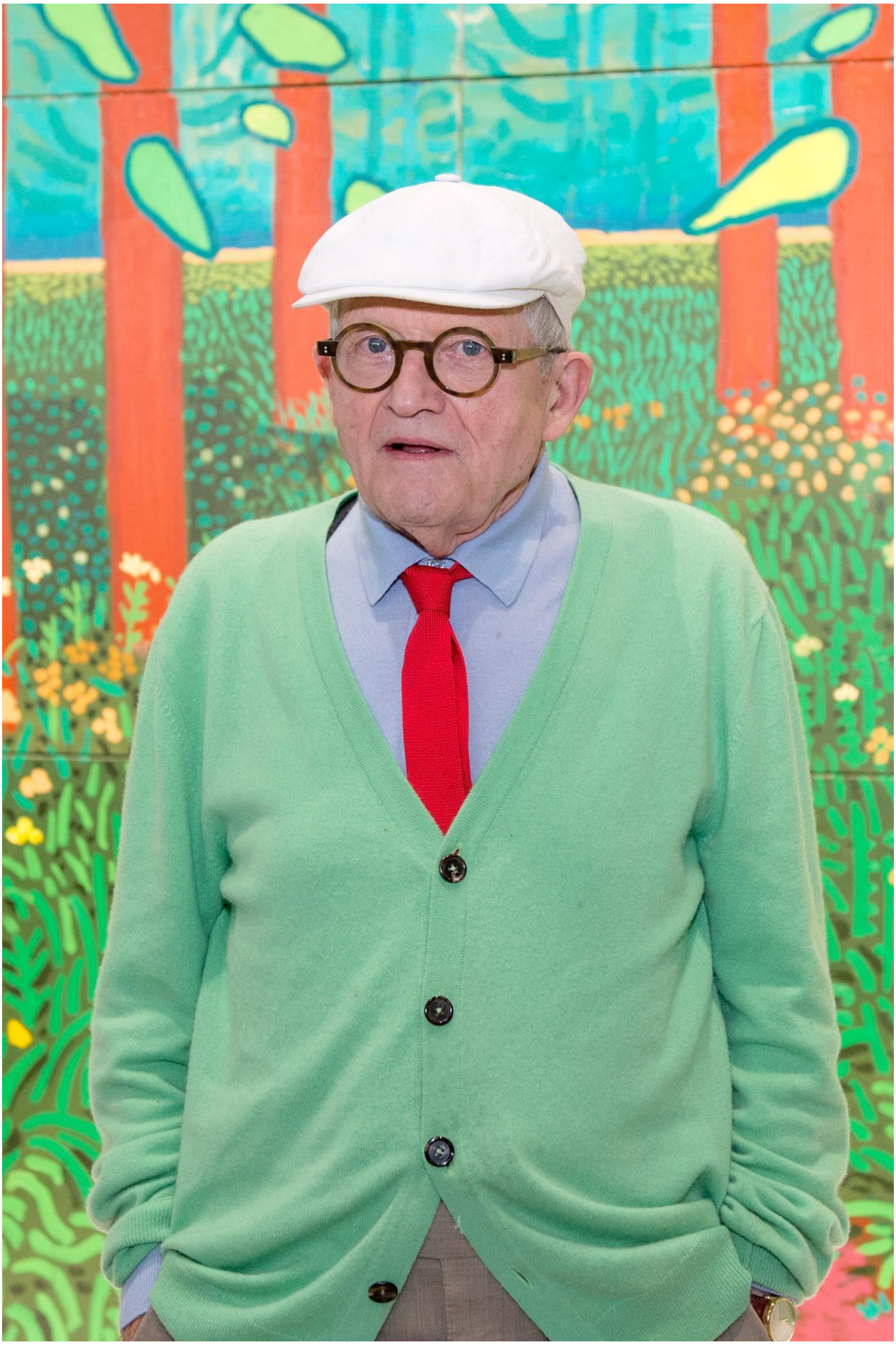
Trees Mist, 2019, will be in Hockney's next exhibition in Paris

DAVID HOCKNEY

Hockney spent lockdown watching the progress of spring as it swept across Normandy, just as he had watched the unfurling of its freshness across Yorkshire for a succession of eight years. "But when I was in Yorkshire, because I was by the sea, I had to drive to see the spring. Here, I'm right in the middle of it. And there's lots more blossom here . . . not just blackthorn and hawthorn; there's all the fruit trees. I didn't have to leave this place. And I did 118 pictures. All different. That's amazing." He is looking forward to seeing them together when they go on display at the Royal Academy in London, then the Orangerie in Paris, next year.

"Spring is so exciting to me. It's the best manifestation of nature in our part of the world. And we are part of nature. I know that. And I have felt that more strongly as I have grown older."

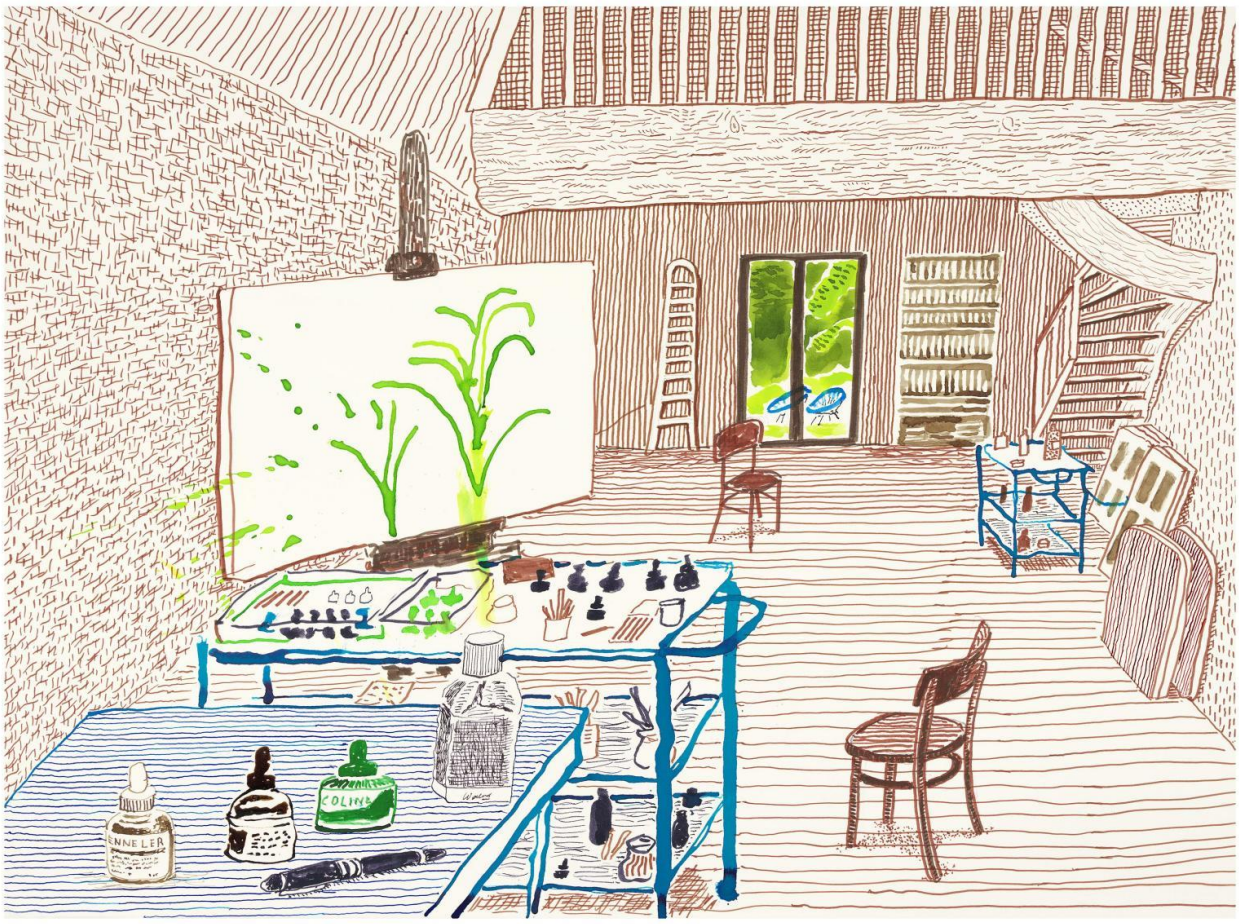
“I am 83 now,” Hockney tells me three times in the course of our conversation. But he is not worried about catching Covid. “It’s all been very exaggerated. I don’t think they know anything much about it, do you?” He is eager to get to London to see the show of Titian’s poesie paintings at the National Gallery. “But I have had 13 years more than my three score and ten. I expect I will die soon,” he declares jauntily. And then what, I wonder? Does he believe in an afterlife? “Then oblivion,” he says. Does that make him fearful? He pauses to puff on his fag. “I love life,” he answers, “and I suppose the opposite thing of love of life is fear of death.”



David Hockney in front of his painting The Arrival Of Spring in Woldgate, East Yorkshire in 2011
GETTY IMAGES

Don’t start to imagine, however, that we are on the verge of losing our most famous living artist. Hockney, despite suffering a minor stroke in 2012 that for a while affected his speech (“I just thought, if I can’t speak, I can speak in another way . . . just draw”), emerges fresh, alert and cheerful from lockdown. He may get more easily tired these days, but his intellect and passion for life seem undimmed.

His clothes are as exuberantly colourful as his paintings. His big signature glasses have sunshine-yellow frames. His jacket is sky blue, his tie is striped red. And the radical who, in a career that has spanned more than 60 years, has repeatedly challenged prevailing mores (particularly regarding homosexuality), who has persistently experimented with media and styles, who has constantly challenged established rules and obstinately adopted risqué and emphatically un-PC stances, is optimistic that there may be “another stage to go”.

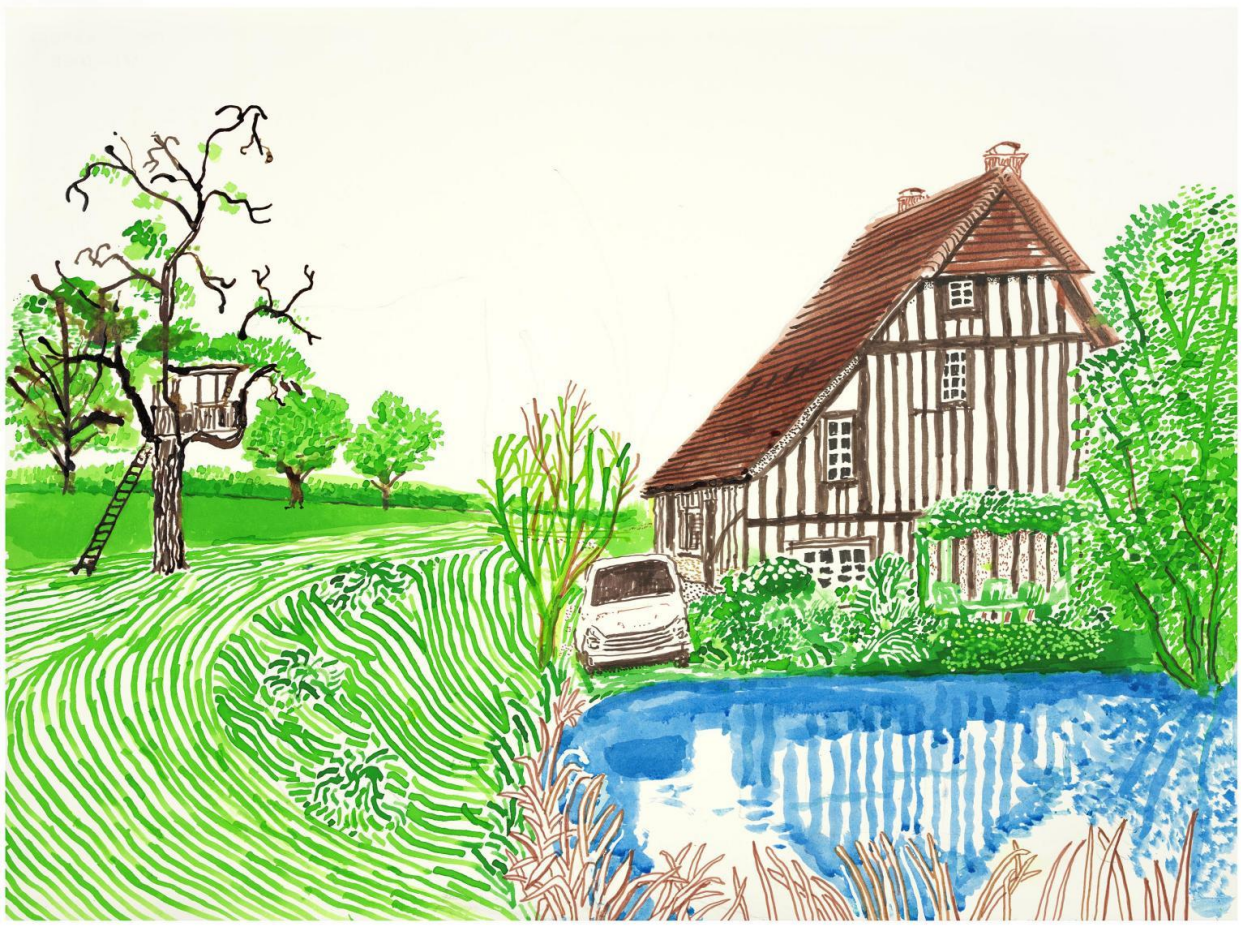


In the Studio (inkjet print on paper)
DAVID HOCKNEY

Which era of his life, looking back, was his favourite? “I always think that my latest work is the best,” he says, although he doesn’t really look back much. Yet when he was forced to fairly recently, while producing a book, he was gratified. “It made me see what I have achieved.” And what did he think of that achievement? “Well, it’s not bad,” he says in his signature flat-as-a-pancake drawl.

“I think that I am lucky because 1960 to 2000 was one of the freest times that we have ever had, and that’s 40 years of my life. Freedom is the secret of a good life. Feel free.” The greatest moment of liberation that he can remember came when he was a student at the Royal College of Art. “Somebody said to me that they had seen me in a

pub with my arm round a boy and I just said to him, ‘So what?’ That was wonderful. That was a moment of such freedom,” he grins.



In Front of House Looking East (inkjet print on paper)
DAVID HOCKNEY

He doesn’t, however, want to involve himself in campaigns for sexual liberation. He doesn’t care, he says, about the politics of LGBTQ. “They are so bossy. I have always avoided bossy people. There are far too many bossy people in England now. When they banned us from smoking that was the start. And it’s getting worse and worse. So I won’t really return to England to live. I’m perfectly happy in France.”

Any regrets, I wonder? “Only that I wish I could speak French better. I can communicate. But not as well as I would like.” Although he can always talk to his

neighbours through his work. “The French, they love painting. It seems to flow in their blood,” he says.

And has he got a lesson to leave us? “Love life,” Hockney says simply. “I have loved mine.” He takes a drag on his cigarette. “I really have.” He breathes out. His smiling face is wreathed in drifting veils of smoke.

***Ma Normandie* is at the Galerie Lelong in Paris (galerie-lelong.com) from October 15 to December 23**