

## On Not Cutting Corners

Lawrence Weschler



fig. 1

*Red Pots in the Garden*, 2000  
oil on canvas, 60 x 76"

*Garden with Blue Terrace*, 2015  
acrylic on canvas, 48 x 72"

*Garden #3*, 2016  
acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48"

For starters, he's emphatically not cutting corners, as the wags would have it. Or so David Hockney likes to insist these days, adamantly. If anything, he says, he's multiplying them, and opening fresh vantages in the process.

A good place to have gotten a sense of what he's been getting at, recently, was in the last room of the last iteration of his 2016–18 world-traveling retrospective (the one that started at the Tate in London, moved on to the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and concluded this past winter at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, closing just a month before the opening of this current show of new work, sixty blocks south, here at Pace). That room at the Met consisted largely of a series of variations on the blue deck overlooking the garden and pool at the back of his Hollywood Hills home, one of his favorite subjects over the past several decades. (Indeed, not long after he moved into the home in 1979, he first painted it, from memory, while back in London on a visit; disappointed, upon his return to Los Angeles, at the way that the vibrant colors of his London recollection didn't quite match the house, he took to repainting the house itself, its interiors and decks and brick walls and pool, in much more vivid hues, the very colors that came to infuse his subsequent domestic studies.) But the way the relatively recent blue-deck paintings were laid out in that last room at the Met retrospective, you could see that he seemed to be wrestling with a problem: how to convey the capacious spaciousness of the vantage in question (or, perhaps phrased a bit more technically, how to wrestle free of the confining strictures of tapering, camera-like, one-point perspective) [fig. 1].

Finally, with a painting he began, as it happens, in London around the time of the opening of the Tate version of the retrospective and concluded upon his return to L.A., he seemed to make a breakthrough, recasting the scene in reverse perspective (fig. 2).

fig 2

*Interior with Blue Terrace and Garden*, 2017  
acrylic on canvas, 48 x 96"



fig. 3

*A Bigger Interior with Blue Terrace and Garden*, 2017  
acrylic on canvas, 48 x 96" (hexagonal)



In retrospect, that painting seems to be bursting out of all its contours, like a star, the conventional rectangle barely able to contain it. No sooner had he completed that painting, though, than he turned to his assistants, traced out a shape on a piece of paper, and asked them to generate a brace of canvases in that shape as quickly as possible. They did, and within a few weeks, Hockney had completed a painting that was to prove to be the very last canvas in the Met show (fig. 3).

“The indented sides enforce the kind of reverse perspective that that earlier painting was clearly striving toward,” Hockney was telling me as we pondered life-size reproductions of the canvases in question back in his Hollywood studio a few months later (the originals were still at the Met). “The indentations paradoxically *widen* the sense of space and invite all sorts of fresh lines of sight. Still, though, as you can see, far from cutting corners, I was adding them.”

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If you ask Hockney these days what exactly he means by “reverse perspective,” he’s likely to respond with an old story, the one about how he was at La Scala in Milan one day in 1985, preparing his production of *The Magic Flute*—Christmas Day, to be exact, so the rehearsals were in abeyance—when he and Ian Falconer got a hankering for *rösti* (a sort of Swiss potato fritter). They decided to get themselves some by zipping over to Zurich by way of the recently opened Gotthard Road Tunnel, at the time the longest in the world, more than ten miles in a nearly straight line. “Once inside the tunnel,” Hockney recalls, “we realized that we were just about the only car on the road, it being Christmas after all. Had there been another in front of us, I’d probably have been keeping my eyes on its rear lights—if they grew redder I’d have known to slow down—but since there weren’t any such cars, our view was unobstructed

all the way down to the tiny pinprick of light in the far far distance, all the lines of sight converging relentlessly on that tiny dot, endlessly, for minutes on end. It got to be quite disturbing actually, and at one point I said to Ian, 'This is like a one-point perspective hell,' *and it was*. And I suddenly realized how that is the basis of all conventional photographic perspective, that endless regress to an infinitely distant point in the middle of the image, how everything is hurtling away from you and you yourself are not even in the picture at all. But then, as we got to the end of the tunnel, everything suddenly reversed, with the world opening out in every direction. The effect was fantastically invigorating, you suddenly felt yourself at the focal point of vantages spreading out in every direction. And I realized how that, and not its opposite, was the effect I wanted to try to capture."

The point is that Hockney has been thinking about these sorts of issues—conventional perspective and its discontents—for many decades. Indeed, for years now, exploring, critiquing, and trying to transcend the limitations of conventional perspective have all been near the center of his creative practice. He recalls how, though he'd long enjoyed taking casual "snaps" of friends and family, he first began using cameras as sketching aids around the time of his *Beverly Hills Housewife* (1967). Almost immediately, though, he started being bothered by the distortions such photographic studies entailed, especially toward the tops and bottoms of the pictures, a problem he took to addressing by the end of that decade by way of his so-called "joiners," vertical stacks of photographic images—say, five of them, shingled one atop the next, to sketch out the full length of his friend Peter Schlesinger, standing in as the model gazing down on a figure swimming in a hillside pool, for his painting *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)* (1972). This, too, proved the context for Hockney's growing involvement over the ensuing decade with Picasso and his Cubist phase in particular—Cubism, that is, understood as a far-reaching critique of the prior

fig. 4

California 138 (Pearblossom Highway), south view

*Pearblossom Hwy., 11-18th April 1986 (Second Version)*  
Photographic collage, 71 1/2 x 107"



hegemony of conventional perspective, and a way of instead infusing the work with multiple perspectives and hence (and this was crucial for Hockney) the *time* of actual lived experience.

“Photography is all right,” Hockney began pronouncing around then, “if you don’t mind looking at the world from the point of view of a paralyzed cyclops, for a split second.” Such withering comments seemed all the more surprising to observers of his career when in the early eighties, Hockney fell into a veritable photographic delirium, taking tens of thousands of photos (initially Polaroids and then Pentax snaps), for several years to the seeming exclusion of any other medium, and then collaging them into combinations of all sorts; but once again, Hockney’s was a critical enterprise, he was trying to demonstrate all the sorts of things that single, conventional, one-point perspective vantages failed to capture, and to celebrate, by contrast, the manifold richnesses of such alternative ways of looking. Consider, in this context, the difference between Hockney’s *Pearblossom Hwy. 11–18th April 1986* (1986)—arguably the climax of this whole season of exploration, fashioned out of more than 800 snaps—with his simultaneous rendering of the same vista with a single conventional shot (fig. 4).

From the seventies through the nineties, Hockney’s passionate immersion in opera and theatrical design likewise proved a staging ground for such concerns, in part as he wrestled with the multiple lines of sight from which an audience would view any single set, along with the fact that individual audience members would be shifting their gaze in time across the length of the performance, catching one detail and then the next (and the necessity of designing sets with all of that in mind). But increasingly, such opera work was where Hockney first began noticing how he was losing his hearing. In 1985, he thus wrote his friend R. B. Kitaj, “Over the last years, to compensate for my muffled ears, I’ve been developing a strong visual space sense. I say this because I’m very aware that I seem to see in another way that has to do with noticing movement of the eye (time) and perception of space. A blind man develops his hearing to define his space; could not a deaf man develop his sight? Anyway, there’s no doubt that either from the theater or somewhere else, I’ve been becoming more aware of time and space.”

Such concerns in turn kept circulating back into his conventional painterly practice. As early as 1980, time—the time of making but also the time of viewing—began to come to the fore. In that year’s celebrated *Mulholland Drive: The Road to the Studio*, “drive” is a verb, and the viewer’s eyes veritably go for a ride, snatching a whole different sequence of vistas along the way (fig. 5).

To cite another example: In 1996, following a fresh spate of opera design, Hockney took to painting a series of floral studies—or rather staging, as it were, flowers in vases portrayed as if they were resplendent divas on a stage. In one instance in particular, the effect was startling, for the table upon which the



fig. 5

Installation photograph of *Mulholland Drive: The Road to the Studio*, 1980 at Los Angeles County Museum of Art

fig. 6  
*Halaconia in Green Vase*, 1996  
 oil on canvas, 72 x 72"



magisterial vase had been placed looked entirely different depending upon the vantage (left, head-on, or right) from which the canvas was viewed (fig. 6):

Likewise, Hockney kept returning to the same few visual subjects (the Grand Canyon, the blue deck, and so forth), from different avenues of approach—approaches informed each time by his immediately prior investigations—arriving at fresh interpretations (some of them, however, uncannily similar) each time as if for the first time. Thus, for example, as far back as 1984, Hockney (coming out of his photo collages) rendered a reverse-perspective version of the blue deck that he seemingly had to struggle through the better part of three decades to attain once again in the mid-2010s (figs. 7 & 2).



fig. 7  
*Terrace, Pool and Living Room, Feb. 1984*  
 oil on canvas, 36 x 60"

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What's new and unprecedented, though, with this latest series, is the lateral indentations, the hexagonal canvas. And what actually happened was this:

In March 2017, fast on the completion of that reverse-perspective blue-deck rectangular painting, Hockney had his assistants conjure up those hexagonal canvases. As soon as they arrived, he set to work on a quick fantasy scene, a sort of proof of concept, a reverse perspective room with flower vases upon two facing tables (fig. 9a). Shades of that operatic diva from 1996!

Except that Hockney's own immediate associations were to an annunciation, the flowers in the left vase in full epiphany, those to the right reeling back in astonishment. This in turn reminded him of the poster of Fra Angelico's *San Marco Annunciation* (1437–46) that used to grace the upper corridor back in his days at Bradford Grammar School, one of his earliest favorite pictures ("for its clarity," he would recall, and its sublime definition in space). Whereupon he immediately launched into his own version, flipping the

fig. 8  
 Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation*, around 1450. Fresco in the former dormitory of the Dominican monastery San Marco, Florence, Italy. Museo di San Marco, Florence, Italy.  
*Annunciation II, after Fra Angelico from The Brass Tacks Triptych*, 2017  
 acrylic on canvas, 48 x 96" (hexagonal)



tightening one-point recession of the original into the well-ventilated openness of reverse perspective (fig. 8):

He knocked off that version in just a few days (he was obviously not trying to match the sublimities of Fra Angelico, but rather to experiment with fresh ways of rendering space, while paying evident homage to the master, especially in the tenderness of his treatment of the messenger and the virgin and the palpable regard passing between them), and almost as quickly turned to a third image (fig. 9c), this one welling up in response to T.S. Eliot's famous lines (from *Sweeney Agonistes*), "Birth, copulation, death: That's all the facts when you come down to brass tacks." The mewling baby off to one side, the loving couple in the center, the staring skull off to the other side—all of it depending on the viewer's vantage point. In subsequent weeks, Hockney would come to see these first three hexagonal paintings as elements of a single triptych which he took to calling "Brass Tacks." (fig. 9)

It was only then (though still in April), that, having limbered up with these first three hexagonals, Hockney returned to the blue deck that had launched the whole rapid sequence, recasting the bulging rectangular version of a few months earlier in more spacious and commodious hexagonal reverse perspective (fig. 3). And he even managed to complete all four of those canvases in time for inclusion in the last room of the traveling retrospective's second installment, which opened at the Pompidou that June.

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It was during those weeks that he came under the spell of a new intellectual hero. Hockney had always been a ferocious autodidact, and in the past, entire bodies of work had come into being in tandem with his discoveries of one fresh contemporary influence or another: the physicist David Bohm and his implicate order, the historian George Rowley and his ideas on moving focus in Chinese art, the art and science historian Martin Kemp and the optical physicist Charles Falco and their notions on mirrors and lenses as possible contributors to the rise of one-point perspective (and the optical look it began enforcing as far back as the start of the Renaissance). Approaching eighty years of age, Hockney was as susceptible to such sudden passions as ever, only the inspiration this time around proved perhaps his most surprising yet: a Russian Orthodox monk and his writings from almost a full century ago.

fig. 9

- a) *Annunciation I, Interior and Exterior with Flowers* from *The Brass Tacks Triptych*, 2017 acrylic on canvas, 48 x 96" (hexagonal)
- b) *Annunciation II, after Fra Angelico* from *The Brass Tacks Triptych*, 2017 acrylic on canvas, 48 x 96" (hexagonal)
- c) *Birth and Copulation and Death. That's all the facts when you come to brass tacks* from *The Brass Tacks Triptych*, 2017 acrylic on canvas, 48 x 96" (hexagonal)



Early on in the creation of these new notched paintings, Hockney had been rhapsodizing about the virtues of reverse perspective, and one evening one of his friends and assistants, Jean-Pierre Gonçalves de Lima (universally referred to around the studio as JP), decided to burrow into the World Wide Web in search of further clarification on what his boss kept yammering on about. He quickly came upon a long essay, from 1920, titled “Reverse Perspective” and credited to one Father Pavel Florensky of Moscow. JP printed out a copy of the eighty-page monograph and left it on Hockney’s studio chair for the artist to discover the next morning, which indeed he did, becoming progressively more engrossed. “Positively thrilled” was how he described his reaction later that day when he called me up, along with many other friends no doubt, positively ordering us all to download the text ([https://monoskop.org/images/1/11/Florensky\\_Pavel\\_1967\\_2002\\_Reverse\\_Perspective.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/1/11/Florensky_Pavel_1967_2002_Reverse_Perspective.pdf)) and get back to him with our reactions.



And the text was indeed something—as was its author. Florensky, born in 1882 in Azerbaijan, the scion of secular Westernizing parents (his father a Russian railway engineer, his mother the cultured product of ancient Armenian nobility), proved a mathematical prodigy from his earliest years and went on to do path-breaking work in non-Euclidean mathematics while also pouring himself into wider scientific studies. Following a visit to Tolstoy in 1899, he apparently fell into a growing spiritual crisis in which he came to doubt the primacy of the scientific positivism that had guided his studies thus far. After graduating from Moscow State University in 1904, he declined the offer of a teaching position in mathematics, instead repairing to the nearby holy city of Sergiev Posad (site of the Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius, the most important monastery in the Russian Orthodox Church), where his theological studies culminated in his ordination as a priest in 1911 (he was nonetheless allowed to marry, and he would eventually father five children). Although he wrote widely on philosophy and theology (his essays on the idea of the Divine Sophia would later become central to the concerns of feminist theologians), he nevertheless continued his equally far-flung scientific investigations, all the while trying to meld the two vocations. Following the Bolshevik Revolution, and even though the Communists shut down many of his most beloved Orthodox institutions, he threw himself into technical work, particularly on behalf of the electrification of rural communities, under the sponsorship of Trotsky himself (notwithstanding Florensky’s insistence on wearing clerical robes all the while). By 1932, however, Trotsky was gone and Stalin, finding the charismatic and querulous cleric an increasing nuisance, had him exiled to Siberia, where Florensky launched into investigations on the nature and properties of permafrost, further path-breaking research that has become increasingly relevant in the current era of climate change. In 1937, at the height of his Red Terror, Stalin had Florensky brought back to St. Petersburg and following a brief trial, summarily executed. As it happens, that was the very year David Hockney was born in Bradford, England.

On top of all of that, Florensky was also a hugely influential art critic and aesthetic theorist, one of the leading lights of Russia's Silver Age and well known to the likes of Malevich and Kandinsky (and such writers as Andrei Biely and Sergei Bulgakov). His "Reverse Perspective" essay, in particular, dates from a moment in 1920 when Bolsheviks were busily imputing the value of the medieval Orthodox icons they were tearing off the walls of museums and monasteries. Such icons were dismissed as hopelessly "primitive" for their allegedly clumsy handling of modeling and perspective (the way, for instance, a nose might be seen going in one direction, while the lips went in another and the eyes a third—not in any way like "real life"). But Florensky fired back, marshaling tremendous erudition to argue that if, as far back as Babylonian and Egyptian times, artists and craftsmen continually made similar "errors," it was not because they didn't know about rigorous one-point perspective (they would have had to call on such knowledge to be able to build pyramids and the like) but because they sensed there was something wrong with its practice when it actually came to the depiction of "real life" in all its timely and timeless vivacity—and *they chose not to use it*. In Ancient Greece and Rome, Florensky showed how conventionally one-point perspectival tricks first began being deployed on theater sets with the express intention of deceiving audiences, such illusionistic effects being likewise prized on the walls of decadent villas in, say, Pompeii, even though they really only registered as accurate from one specific location, completely falling apart from any other point of viewing. Over and over again, Florensky adduced arguments that Hockney himself would start deploying more than sixty years later as he launched into his photo collages around 1982 (100 years almost to the day after the good monk's birth, though Hockney obviously hadn't known this at the time). For example, Florensky pointed out how young children, when asked to draw their house, say, will likely include the front, the back, the tree, and the doghouse in the backyard, and so forth (all of that correctly, since all of those details form the entirety of the house they *live* in), and they have to be rigorously trained instead to draw in an "approved" manner—which is to say as if arbitrarily standing stock-still with only one eye open, and then to accept only that way as accurate. Florensky, like Hockney after him, pointed out that we ourselves never ever see in rigorously abstracted perspective (the way a camera does) because, for starters, we look out at the world binocularly, from two eyes simultaneously, and for that matter, our eyes and bodies are always in motion, as we construct our actual sense of the world across time from all those multiple vantages.

You can see what thrilled Hockney. At one point, for example, Florensky wrote how "it was not in pure art that perspective arose, it came out of applied art sphere"—theater design in antiquity, and subsequently alongside the rise of positivist science on the far side of the Medieval era—"which enlisted painting in its service and subordinated it to its *own* purposes.



opposite, top : Pavel Florensky at time of ordination, 1911

opposite, bottom : Pavel Florensky in his office at the State Experimental Electrotechnical Institute (GEEI), Moscow, 1925

above : Pavel Florensky shortly after his arrest by the GPU, 1933





fig. 10  
 Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation*, c. 1426  
 Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain

[However (Florensky continued),] the task of painting is *not* to duplicate reality, but to give the most profound penetration...of its meaning. And the penetration of this meaning, of this stuff of reality, its architectonics, is offered to the artist's contemplative eye in living contact with reality, by growing accustomed to and empathizing with reality, whereas theater decoration [for example] wants as much as possible to replace reality with its outward appearance.

(One of the problems with conventional photography, as Hockney often says, is the way it can only capture surfaces.)

For that matter, you could see what thrilled *me*, for in the sentences that followed, Florensky insisted that “stage design is a *deception*, albeit a seductive one, while pure painting is, or at least wants to be, *true to life*”—his italics, though as it happens, those last three words track exactly with the title I gave my own 2008 collection of twenty-five years of conversations with Hockney (starting with those photo collages in 1982)—“not a substitute for life, but the symbolic signifier of its deepest reality.”

It's interesting how Florensky located the original sin of perspective in antique theatrical design, whereas contemporary opera staging proved one of the places where Hockney himself chose to elaborate his critique of one-point perspective. But that was only because Hockney was consciously trying to wrestle radically free from what Florensky saw as the very foundations of a prior perspective-infused tradition.

Florensky had a slightly different take from Hockney's on the waning of the reverse (or multiple, or moving) perspective traditions that had, as far as he was concerned, sublimed the art of the Middle Ages (both in the West and in Mother Russia). Although Florensky saw the growing Renaissance focus on humans in their secular individuality, as opposed to their sacred community, as one of the wellsprings renewing the antique theatrical bias toward a one-point perspective that by definition required a solitary individual's solitary gaze (out of one eye), and of the positivist science such a revolution in turn helped occasion, he declined to point to a particular moment when the world views suddenly flipped. (Hockney was to do exactly that with the Great Wall that formed the heart of his research program leading up to the book *Secret Knowledge* (2000), in which he argued that something revolutionary must have occurred between 1425 and 1435, a point at which artists from Bruges to Florence, from Van Eyck to Brunelleschi, must have suddenly started using optical aids and it was “as if from one decade to the next, European art put

on its glasses.”) Florensky argued that the transition was more gradual and extended, pointing out that as late as Leonardo (*The Last Supper*, 1495–97) and Raphael (*The School of Athens*, 1509–10), masters were deploying multiple perspectives to heighten spiritual interpretations of their material.

Notwithstanding Florensky’s demurrals in this regard, I myself was thoroughly startled a few weeks later in Madrid, when, visiting the Prado, I came upon another Fra Angelico *Annunciation* (c. 1430), similarly squeezed into a tapering one-point perspective (fig. 10).

For underneath the main image was a predella consisting of five scenes, all of them (but especially the second and the fourth) laid out in pure Hockney-esque notched-reverse perspective (fig. 11).

So, go figure.

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Speaking of notches, as Hockney continued emailing me further instances of his growing hexagonal passion (sometimes two or three a week), I couldn’t help bringing another association to bear, this one from the work of Trevor and Ryan Oakes, young identical twin artists whose ideas I’d been following for several years (as had Hockney, after I introduced them to him) [fig. 12].

Unlike the sorts of identical twins who develop secret languages from infancy, Trevor and Ryan (b. 1982), out of West Virginia and before that Colorado, had been carrying on a conversation, virtually since toddlerhood, on the nature of binocular vision—what it is like to see with two eyes. So, notwithstanding their tender age, they’d been thinking about this stuff a long time—almost as long as Hockney (who only started his Polaroid collages the year they were born) has been.

And one of the things they began noticing early on is the way that our noses are continually present in our fields of vision, though not (as one might expect) in the center of that field, but rather to the two sides. Try a few experiments and see for yourself. Extend your right arm at shoulder height straight out to your side, with the thumb of your right hand pointing upward; now, with your head facing forward (perpendicular to your arm) and your right eye closed, gaze with your left eye past your nose to the right as you slowly slide your extended right arm forward until you can make out the thumb emerging from beyond the interference posed by your nose. That point will likely be well farther along than you were expecting. Try the same thing with your right eye and your left arm. It is only in the relatively narrow area between the two emerging



fig. 11

Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation*, c. 1426  
(details from the predella)  
Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain



fig. 12

Trevor and Ryan Oakes with David Hockney

thumbs that you can be said to have actual binocular stereoscopic depth perception. Even though your overall field of vision is much wider (and perfectly stitched and modulated laterally from one side to the next), your nose (to both sides) and eyebrows above frame a shield-like area that is the only field where you can be said to experience the world with real depth perception (fig. 13).

The point here is that you are always aware of your nose to either side, even if only subliminally, as a kind of unconscious barometric pressure, because the brain is constantly occluding the nose to each side and filling in the scene with information it's getting from the other eye. Still don't believe me? Okay, try this: Close your right eye and with your left look to your far right. There's your nose, correct? Now do the opposite with your other eye: same thing. Now, though, with both eyes open, look to your far left and far right and you won't see any nose, even though you know your eyes are seeing it (your brain is seamlessly stitching the full view together out of information coming from both eyes, even though it's only the central shield-like area that is actually experiencing depth perception).

The fascinating thing here is that, as the years passed, the twins began to notice curious sorts of triangle-like shapes emerging to either side (but especially on the side of the dominant eye) in the lower left and/or right quadrants of the canvases of painters all across history: Cezanne, Morris Louis, Matisse—even David himself (fig. 14)! To be clear, the twins are not arguing that these effects result from conscious choices on the parts of the artists in question—merely that artists who are by definition surveyors of the visual field might be more sensitive to the barometric pressures evinced by their (otherwise unnoticed) noses, and that that sensitivity could be expected to register in their renderings of the world.

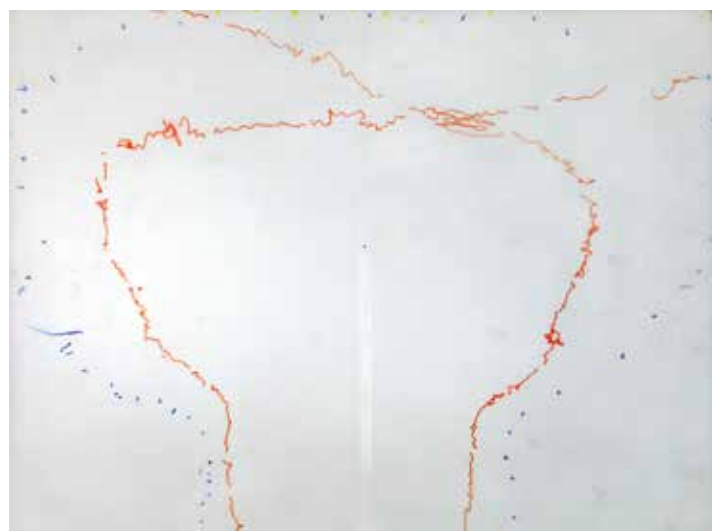
Similarly, I've begun to wonder lately whether one reason Hockney's notched hexagons feel so somehow right, or at any rate seem to evoke the

left : fig. 13

A tracing of his own visual depth of field, nose to either side. Ryan Oakes, 2003.

right : fig. 14

*Pacific Coast Highway and Santa Monica* 1990  
oil on canvas, 78 x 120"



phenomenological feel of one's actual depth of field, is that they are in fact mimicking the way we actually see, as revealed to us by the Oakes twins.

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April, May, June, July...Hockney was once again on a tear, exploring the manifold possibilities and implications of his new notched hexagonal canvases. By the end of the year he would have produced more than 15 of them.

Generally speaking, there were two sequences of images with a few transitional and side ventures scattered in between.

The first sequence, into which he launched himself immediately following the completion of the hexagonal blue deck, grew out of a series of images he'd already long been making over the preceding decades—teasing capriccios, as it were, schematic experiments, larkish improvisations, which in turn wended their way back to his canvas *Kerby (After Hogarth) Useful Knowledge* (1975; fig. 15), itself a variation on the engraved *Satire on False Perspective* that William Hogarth first produced in 1754 to accompany a pamphlet (by his friend Joshua Kirby) on linear perspective and its potential calamities. Keeping in mind that Hockney was just beginning to wrestle with his joiners and within a few years would be in full-out Polaroid collage mode, the thing about Hogarth's engraving for Hockney at the time was that he actually *preferred* some of those supposed calamities, precisely the way perspectives kept getting turned inside out. He found himself thinking, in perhaps an as-yet-inchoate way, that somehow they worked better as images and were truer to life (in the way, say, that things focused upon in the distance do in fact momentarily appear bigger than same-sized things closer up—*those sheep!*).

Over the years thereafter Hockney would often sketch out further madcap variations and paradoxical whimsies (such as in his *Four Part Splinge* from 1993; fig. 16).



fig. 15

*Kerby (After Hogarth) Useful Knowledge*,  
1975  
oil on canvas, 72" x 60"



fig. 16

*Four Part Splinge*, 1993  
lithograph and screen print on 4 sheets of paper  
24 1/2 x 33" each; 49 x 66" overall  
edition of 48



fig. 17  
 Meindert Hobbema  
*The Avenue at Middelharnis*, 1689  
 National Gallery, London, Great Britain



fig. 18  
*Tall Dutch Trees After Hobbema (Useful Knowledge)* 2017  
 acrylic on 6 canvases  
 63 1/2 x 144" overall

In the current instance, with these hexagonal paintings, he perpetrated an odd dreamlike still-life space with a half-dozen mountains of piled-up Leger-esque cylinders (one of them erupting!) scattered around a strange notched interior (pp. 46–50). Across another canvas, the “picture of a lion” was propped up (enigmatically sized) between a row of curtains and a jungle backdrop, all to one side of the reversed perspective composition, while to the other side, an Astaire-like figure sashayed up from out of an urban boulevard that tapered off into the far obverse distance (pp. 58–62). And so forth.

My own favorite of these pastiches is the confounding *Hither and Dither*, a real mind-boggler (pp. 40–44). Depending on how one interprets the gray scenes beyond the Escher-like stairs upon which the blue figures are either climbing or descending, one is either looking at black-and-white movie projections (or alternatively, monotone paintings), in which case one is actually gazing (in terms of the canvas as a whole) upon a standard one-point perspective scene, receding toward an infinite point at the upper middle-distance behind and beyond the red brick wall—or one is looking through dark-tinted windows at the outside world, in which case we are dealing with a real instance of reverse perspective. Both, or neither—and who knows? In any case, a neat trick.

Shortly after completing those three caprices, however, Hockney reached back into his favorites from art history one more time to riff on the Dutch Golden Age landscape painter Meindert Hobbema’s *The Avenue at Middelharnis* (1689; fig. 17)—a one-point perspective dazzler if ever there was one—and turned it clean inside out with a multi-panel extravaganza from which he’d completely filleted the avenue itself, allowing the viewer to peer with a reversed perspective to either side of the now-disappeared road. And then he did the same thing all over again on a grander scale (fig. 18).

Soon after (from August through November), Hockney launched into his second extended series, broadly defined, recasting several of his own most iconic images in hexagonal reverse perspective. (This entire gambit may have had something to do with the fact that during the couple of years immediately preceding this current hexagonal passion, Hockney's attentions had been largely directed toward two overarching retrospective projects: mounting the internationally touring show and producing a jumbo, career-spanning SUMO book with Taschen, a volume so huge it came with its own stand—so he'd been thinking a lot about prior work.) Many of the paintings he chose to revisit, as it happens, already had evinced tendencies toward reverse perspective in their original rectangular versions: Garrowby Hill, Nichols Canyon, the Hotel Acatlan, the Alhambra Alcazar, and of course several new versions of the Grand Canyon. Perhaps the most interesting of those for me was the new *Grand Canyon 1*, in which he contrived to slide the viewer behind an incurving thigh-high protective wall, separating the viewer from the yawning abyss, a wall along which one could walk from side to side and, much as with that diva flower vase from 1996, experience an entirely different vantage of the scene, depending on which side one gazed from (pp. 92–96).

Toward the end of the current passion—he had to stop somewhere, as the vans were already arriving to load up and ship the series back to New York for the upcoming show—Hockney began noodling around with another of his favorite themes. This was not so much reverse perspective as *moving focus* (albeit spread across an airy and well-ventilated reverse perspectival expanse), the sort of thing he grew to appreciate during his immersion in Chinese scrolls, where the scatter of locally specific perspectival schemes (blended across the wider expanse) enforced in the viewer an experience of slowed time and sequentially parceled attention. This time out, in high didactic good fun, Hockney even numbered his blocks, daring the viewer not to follow him around with his specifically ordered gaze (pp. 116–120).

\* \* \*

The vans were nearly there, you could almost hear them rumbling up the hill, but Hockney had not yet finished noodling. He gathered all the canvases that were going to be making up the show (along with the life-size reproductions of those that were already waiting in New York) and hung them all about one end of his studio for a final single group photo, a sort of summary documentation, something, say, that he could use in the exhibition announcement. But this proved to be a considerable disappointment (as had been the case with the single snap of the Pearblossom Highway).

In the old days, he'd have known what to do: taken out his little cigarette-pack-sized Pentax camera and started snapping away, gotten the negatives developed, and then set about collaging the results. But for years he'd been hankering after a way of doing much the same thing, only digitally, inside the





hundreds of vantages, feeding them all into the program and then waiting for hours as it churned away at its task, eventually producing its uncanny result, a matrix within which Hockney could really start to play. Shifting to 3D software, they began making 360-degree tours of various individual objects—a stool, an easel, a chair, a rug, the Taschen SUMO book on its dedicated tripod stand (the tour of the stool, for example, comprising 196 separate shots)—and then waited as their laptop churned and churned, eventually generating notional digital objects that could be moved about the notional space. Head-on views of canvases could be reconfigured as if they were ranged on a side wall, falling away toward the distance. Hockney himself stood still as his assistant loped all around him, snapping away. And then, like a child with a dollhouse, Hockney moved the objects about in the notional surround, pushing some of them forward, others back, centering himself in their midst. Once he'd gotten everything just so, he went in with a notional paintbrush, smooshing in shadows, sliding in highlights. And 3,000 photographs and hours of computer time later, they transferred the results to their brand-new cutting-edge Epson printer, which began spewing the finished product, a photomural in seven floor-to-ceiling panels that would presently (and just a few days before I arrived for my visit) take up the entire far wall (fig. 20).

And indeed, the thing just pops. The individual objects in it project a three-dimensional solidity that just seems to deepen and deepen the longer one looks, and the whole wall simply hums. Coming in close, one notices that individual details seem to shimmer, like painted objects varnished over (fig. 21).

fig. 20

*In the Studio, December 2017*  
 photographic drawing printed on 7 sheets of paper  
 109 1/2 x 42 3/4" each  
 mounted on 7 sheets of Dibond exhibition proof #1  
 109 1/2 x 299 1/4" overall

fig. 21

*In the Studio, December 2017 (details)*







fig. 22

*In the Studio, December 2017*  
in the studio (January 2017)

As one steps back, the piece holds the room. Indeed, with the actual paintings now ranged to either side on the lateral walls, it almost seems to *reflect* the room, like a mirror (fig. 22).

“Over 3,000 pictures,” Hockney announced proudly, as I continued to gaze upon the expansive work. “All blended into one. And *site-sized*: The things in the picture feel the right size. Me, I’m three foot six in there, which is what I would in fact look like, placed that far back.”

“I haven’t yet quite figured out what to call the whole process,” he continued, “or for that matter its result. It’s a combination of photography and drawing and printing, each bringing out the best in the other.”

We sat down on two chairs toward the back of the room.

“I want to do another one, though,” he announced. “The folks in New York are telling me we don’t have any more time; we have to wrap things up.” He reached into his pocket, pulled out a cigarette, lit up, took a few puffs, sighed contentedly. “But there’s always time,” he declared.

“You watch,” he said. “There will be time.”

We spent the next hour gazing at the mural, getting up, looking at individual paintings off to the side, talking in grand generalities and focusing in on details. We passed the time.

And presently it was past time for me to be leaving (I had a plane to catch).

We bid each other goodbye.

As I was going toward the door, I noticed one last thing about the mural: Hockney’s sweater (fig. 23).

The green vertical stripes to either side of his sweater’s buttons taper up from the bottom in a tunnel-like one-point focus toward the endlessly receding terminus of his belly button, and then on the far side they open back out—the whole vast world spreading wide, past the blossoming of the cravat to the still-childlike bated expectancy of his face (and his mind): *What next?!*



fig. 23

*In the Studio, December 2017* (detail)