The Review Reviews

DAVID HOCKNEY RA A BIGGER PICTURE

Royal Academy, London until 9 April 2012

The posters for *A Bigger Picture* in the Royal Academy courtyard show Hockney painting, his back to the viewer, in a pose almost identical to that in which Joshua Reynolds gazes out from his pedestal over the queues waiting to get in to this heavily promoted, some would say over-hyped, and crowded exhibition. Hockney is now hailed as our greatest living painter, stepping into the

shoes vacated by the late Lucien Freud. What ever drove Hockney, now 74, to fill Burlington House with light and colour, this show is certainly a wonderful celebration, perhaps a re-discovery, of landscape painting. It is a true tour de force, if not of subject — it does help if you like trees — so much as method and technique. The tour starts with the early photocollages and red grids of the Grand Canyon but soon explodes into a huge, if a touch repetitive, range of arresting, vibrant studies of the changing seasons in East Yorkshire, most often Woldgate Woods.

Hockney works in oils and in watercolour, painting fast out of doors or, more leisurely, in the studio from sketches, and by drawing on his encyclopaedic visual memory. He was a very early adopter of the iPad — ‘a marvellous tool’ he says, which enables you to ‘get colour down even faster than with watercolour’ — and has used its painting

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programs to make images which are then blown up to many times the size of the screen to create works over a metre square. The last gallery of recent paintings includes four huge iPad-generated studies of Yosemite, made less than 6 months ago, which are truly awe-inspiring.

Hockney has his detractors. His old drawing master says that he has become a mere ‘decorator’; Brian Sewell excoriated the exhibition in the *Evening Standard*, and was particularly scathing about Hockney’s re-working of Claude’s *The Sermon on the Mount*. You’ll enjoy making your mind up about Hockney at this show. There is a good audio guide, with plenty of Hockney on Hockney, which ought to be included in the high ticket prices being charged by the RA.

Roger Jones,
Editor BJGP, London.

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THE IRON LADY

Directed by Phyllida Lloyd, Produced by
Damian Jones and Anita Overland.
Pathe Films, 2012. On UK general release

The Iron Lady follows Margaret Thatcher, in flashback, from her modest beginnings to becoming the first female and longest serving Prime Minister in the UK, but the central focus of the film is her declining mental health and the ravages of dementia.

Many of the scenes portray Thatcher as frail and confused; in the opening scene she is buying a pint of milk. She has difficulties with short-term memory and struggles to remember Mark’s wife’s name, yet remembers the past vividly. She turns on kitchen appliances unnecessarily and is locked in conversations with her deceased husband. While these are all symptoms of dementia, the opportunity to demonstrate that there is more to dementia than declining faculties and waning abilities was missed. The film does, however, try to show that the essence of Thatcher remained, at least in some form, for example, her visit to the GP and forthrightness in telling him how she was interested in

thoughts and ideas not feelings, and her determination not to die washing up teacups, intoning forcefully ‘I will do it myself’. However, these positive aspects of her remaining abilities were subsumed in the overall portrayal of decline. This was powerfully reinforced in the clothes she wore; the pale blue dressing gown a contrast to the vibrancy of her dark blue clothes while in office.

This film raises broader issues about negative stereotypes of people with dementia. With its focus on lost abilities and the risks seen to be posed by demented people, it reinforces the likelihood that, despite the best intentions of families and carers, independence may be taken away prematurely. Examples include Carol (Thatcher’s daughter) moving her mother’s GP appointment forward without discussion with Thatcher, and her aide’s over-protectiveness. These observations mirror the experiences of people with dementia, especially the perception they represent a risk that needs to be managed.

I was uneasy about the ethical implications of the film’s portrayal of a person who is still alive as having dementia. Were Mrs Thatcher

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and her family consulted about how she would be portrayed? Was she involved in any of these decisions? I suspect not, and again this reflects the lack of involvement of people with dementia in decisions about their care, and about dementia research.

In summary, the film tells us little about the experience of living with dementia. Had it avoided negative stereotypes and not focused upon what Margaret Thatcher has lost but, instead, emphasised what remains, such as her performance at the high-powered dinner party, there could have been a much stronger and positive message, rather than one of simply fading into opaqueness and nothingness.

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David Hockney. *A Closer Winter Tunnel*, February–March, 2006. Oil on 6 canvases. 182 x 365 cm. Collection Art Gallery of New South Wales. Purchased with funds provided by Geoff and Vicki Ainsworth, the Florence and William Crosby Bequest, and the Art Gallery of New South Wales Foundation 2007.