

Spring Cannot be Cancelled: David Hockney in Normandy Martin Gayford

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HOPE AND SOLACE

Martin Gayford is an art critic and historian who has known David Hockney for over 20 years. In 2010, Gayford published *Man With a Blue Scarf: on Sitting for a Portrait by Lucian Freud*, a fascinating exploration of painting and the lives and work of artists, based around conversations during the 250 hours he spent sitting for his portrait by Lucian Freud. In *Spring Cannot be Cancelled: David Hockney in Normandy*, a series of email and telephone exchanges between Hockney and Gayford during most of the lockdown period of the pandemic forms the skeleton of an arresting and entrancing account of Hockney at work in Normandy, and both men's reflections and ruminations on some of the big, and not so big, questions in the visual arts.

Visiting Normandy with his longstanding studio assistant and friend J-P (Jean-Pierre Gonçalves de Lima), Hockney was captivated by a sunset at Honfleur, at which he gazed for 3 hours. He decided to rent a property there — the light, an escape from 'mean spirited' England, and from Los Angeles, where there is nowhere to smoke, are all possible motives. A few days later he had bought La Grand Cour, a traditional

Norman farmhouse in 4 acres of fields and orchards, with a pond, a river, and a barn that was converted into Hockney's studio. The 83-year-old artist then launched into a sustained period of astonishing creativity, painting for hours every day, often using an iPad that he had started to experiment with in 2010, sending emails and copies of his work to Gayford and other friends, sometimes twice a day, capturing every change in foliage, weather, blossom, the sky, and the river in the beautiful surrounding Norman countryside.

Gayford and Hockney engaged in an extended, relaxed, and warm correspondence and exchange of ideas over this period. Just as he did quite masterfully in the Lucian Freud book, Gayford has picked up thoughts and ideas about technique, or subject, or art history and developed them into fascinating disquisitions, ranging across a huge range of art and literature. The result is an enormously enjoyable, beautifully illustrated, and life-enhancing book, a thing of beauty in itself, and a powerful reminder of the limitations of digital literature.

The scope of the writing is exhilarating. How did Monet work at Giverny and van Gogh at Arles? How did Hokusai and the 18th-century Japanese masters paint water and the rain? Or Brueghel the snow? Where are the parallels in Proust with Hockney's preoccupations with the relationships between time, place, and space? What was in Hockney's mind when he painted *A Bigger Splash*? How did a Hockney drawing find its way onto the front cover of Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot*? What are the limitations of photography in capturing the essence of a picture? What happens when an artist does away with classical ideas of perspective and a single vanishing point? How many points of view are there (this in relation to the Bayeux Tapestry)? And time again, reflections on his great hero, another hard-working genius, Pablo Picasso.

In the spring of 2020, Hockney's vivid iPad

drawings appeared on the front pages of newspapers and on the BBC news. They seemed to represent a source of hope and solace to a fearful public. The electronic medium, of which Hockney is a peerless exponent, seems right for this present curious virtual world. It is a wonder that this grand old man of painting should be blazing a trail like this, yet he seems tireless.

He loves to work, and among the book's many memorable epigrams are, paraphrasing Noël Coward, *'Work is more fun than fun'*; and Alfred Hitchcock's *'All work made Jack'*. Hockney thought it was Degas who said, *'I'm just a man who likes to draw'* — *'Well, that's me — I'm just a man who likes to draw.'*

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