

HOWARD HODGKIN
ABSENT FRIENDS
NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON

23 March - 18 June 2017



Going for a walk with Andrew, 1995-98
There is a readable image here in the Normandy coastline with the figure of Andrew Allfree in the foreground.



DH in Hollywood 1980-4
David Hockney stands to attention among the palm trees

Wordsworth said “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.” If this is the case, then Howard Hodgkin is the real deal - a true poet. He died earlier this month, aged 84, as this show was being prepared. This was a sadness for many people; those who knew him, those of us who were taught by him aeons ago, and the general public who loved his painting. I saw many of his friends standing in front of their portraits at a private view, in a state of communion with his evocation of their friendship. They were present. He was now absent.

I don't think this exhibition of Hodgkin's “portraits” reflects much of Wordsworth's vaunted tranquility, but it certainly contains oceanic emotion and powerful feelings in bucket loads. Hodgkin was given to gusts of tears when looking at his own work and when talking about it too. He was someone who embraced the subjective, the romantic, the lyrical, the intuitive,

and the personal – a man to whom both joy and melancholy were vividly familiar – stalked both by his creative “daemons” and his psychological demons.

These portraits are not portraits in any familiar sense of the term. They are not literally descriptive nor are they transcriptive in any way at all and “reading” them for meaning is very difficult if one is searching for clarity. He is interested in presence and absence. His currency is memory and emotion recollected. Titles are important and we are told in accompanying text the precise place and names of his “sitters” but these are very private paintings - evocations of very private moments. We really don’t need to know any of this. The paintings should speak for themselves. They are variously glorious, bloated, bombastic, over-egged, subtle, exuberant, unrestrained, pretentious, elegiac, beautiful, ugly, overwhelming and ultimately deeply mysterious. In his own words, it is all about “simply a matter of seeing and feeling” and paintings “should be like memorials.”

This is now a memorial exhibition.

RIP Howard Hodgkin 1932 -2017