

The Notes You Don't Play

[Jean Dubuffet: *Brutal Beauty*](#) at the Barbican Art Gallery, London
[David Hockney: *The Arrival of Spring, Normandy, 2020*](#) at the Royal Academy London

Robin Richmond, May 24, 2021



Jean Dubuffet: *Garden*, mid-1950s



David Hockney: Main Gallery, RA London

Living through this past year has made me much more aware of materiality. The diabolical, ingenious machinations of the virus, reproducing itself through touch, speech and even song make one almost respectful of its insidious and deeply mysterious survival strategies. Where is it? On my hands? On my shopping bags? On my clothes? On my family? In the air itself? On whatever comes into my home and studio from the still scary world outside?

So thinking about the very “thinginess” of things is very much on my mind right now. As a painter I am interested in transformation, gradation of surface and nuanced tonalities and layers of colour placed in real time. What you put in and what you take out. What you place down in a painting at one moment and what you eventually take out later. As Miles Davis put it so aptly “*the notes you play, and the notes you don't play*”. The complex textures of the material world around me – sometimes called landscape – onto a two-dimensional surface – sometimes called painting is my artistic locus. For me, paintings (I am only talking about paintings here) are unique and independent objects. Reproducible, but with a material existence.

I have always been fascinated by the work of Jean Dubuffet, now on show at the Barbican Art Gallery in London. Almost more than any artist in the 20th century (with the notable exception of his contemporary Picasso) Dubuffet trawls the streets for his collaged paintings, which he aptly called *assemblages*. His eye is

ravenous. Promiscuous. His scratchy mark-making is loose and gestural – like a more humorous Cy Twombly. There is wit. Drama. Irony. Charm. He gorges himself on the material world, making work that he called *art brut* – raw art. He uses images from the outsider art he collected so assiduously. He incorporates twists of string, shards of glass, razor blades, sandpaper, junk, tarmacadam, industrial material, builder’s sand, raw earth, old car tires, dead butterflies (oh dear), and much more. The sum is greater than the parts. It is all about making something new out of something old. Erasure. Addition. Recycling and upcycling. Dubuffet’s interest in the outside world is constant and – if sometimes straying towards the arbitrary and the fey – it is always whole hearted. The *matière* is what matters. The medium is the message.

David Hockney is also whole-hearted. Always. Total conviction. But if I had to conjure up a visual artist who is the very antithesis of Dubuffet, I would pick David Hockney. What an interesting and provocative juxtaposition it is to see these two exhibitions in the same week in the real world – not online, and my first real experiences in an art gallery since March 2020. While Dubuffet’s work demands to be seen in person, Hockney’s is democratically available to all in its original conception. There is no need to go to the gallery. Just turn on your laptop, or phone. There is nothing that is added to the experience of the work by standing in front of these hyper-illuminated works that could not be gleaned from a reproduction, because actually they *are* reproductions. Immaterial and ephemeral. Electricity made manifest. No sense of time, no sense of the material world. Let there be light.

I always worry when an artist’s work is better in reproduction or seen digitally than it is in the reality. I remember being flummoxed by the famous Hockney portraits in the Tate of Ossie Clark and his wife Celia Birtwell when I first saw them after being gifted a poster of this iconic work. Which I loved. And I have always hugely admired Hockney’s drawings. I am sure that he is the greatest draughtsman since Ingres, and Picasso (again). But when eventually confronted by the acidic, plastic tonalities of the acrylic paint of the double Clark portrait in the Tate I was deeply shocked and surprised. I rejected acrylic paint for years as a result of this disappointment.

Hockney is revered by many as a consummate colourist. He certainly is unafraid of colour. I’d love a Hockney scarf, postcard or print. Exit through the gift shop. But no painter interested in paint would tirelessly produce the monotonous acidic dead greens and flat blues, and pinky reds that emerge from his doughty iPad in this latest show of 116 “paintings”, which Hockney sees as a “celebration of the joy of the natural world”, and a reminder to “love life”. They completely lack joy. Blown up from small observational works made *en plein air* using his super-duper iPad, they are digital reproductions and have no immediacy or materiality. His enthusiasm for his subject – the arrival of spring in his latest home,

Normandy, is indisputable. His dogged daily pursuit of burgeoning trees and blossom in his new *domaine*, through the awful pandemic lockdown year of 2020 brims with his boundless enthusiasm, joy and excitement. But, despite his respectful invocation of its art historical antecedents, Hockney's work owes nothing to the exemplar he invokes so lovingly. His mentor and fellow obsessive Norman, one Claude Monet, would be profoundly puzzled by these paintings. Where Impressionism celebrates the real, and emphasises materiality, Hockney exalts the virtual and the immaterial. There is nothing here of what Eugene Delacroix, Monet's mentor, called "the thinking touch".

The garden has been ransacked and the Apple in the garden - that famous one with a bite taken out of it- has no taste and its lustrous sheen is gone.