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Multiplying Figures

Oscar Rejlander and David Hockney

Is it art or technology? The question has bedeviled photography since Day One. Is a photograph the expression of a creative human mind or the soulless output of a machine? Two artists, one working at the infancy of photography and one working today, illustrate the absurdity of the dichotomy. Both found photographic technology not just another tool in the artist's kit, but a spur to creativity.

Coincidentally, two Los Angeles art spaces recently presented concurrent solo shows of these painters who discovered a multiplicity of possibilities in photography. Each artist combined dozens of separately photographed human subjects into a single print. Both pushed the limits of photographic technology of their time. Oscar Rejlander did his pioneering work in the 1850s, at the dawn of photography. David Hockney, decades after his experiments with multiple-perspective Polaroids, remains on the cutting-edge of photography as it has advanced in the digital age.

The Getty Center presented *Oscar Rejlander: Artist Photographer*, March 12–June 9, 2019. The Getty curated the exhibition along with the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, where it was first seen (as *Oscar G. Rejlander: Artist Photographer*, October 19, 2018–February 3, 2019). L.A. Louver gallery presented *David Hockney: Something New in Painting (and Photography) [and even Printing] . . . Continued*, February 7–March 30, 2019.

In the early twentieth century, "straight" photographers reacted against Pictorialists who tried to gain legitimacy as artists by emulating the soft focus and lyricism of paintings. Today's straight, or "pure," photographers believe the final image should be captured in-camera. Cropping and darkroom or digital manipulation degrade the purity of a photograph, they claim. Retouching and refining is for painters; photography is about the instant. Rejlander and Hockney, two painters working a century or more apart, turned to photography, not to document a moment, not for speed or ease, but for the way new technology expands creative possibilities and extends time. Why simplify when you can complicate endlessly?

The Getty show spotlighted a forgotten pioneer whom a 1973 biographer called the "Father of Art Photography." At the press preview co-curator Lori Pauli quipped that Rejlander could now be called the "Grandfather of Photoshop." Swedish-born Oscar Gustave Rejlander arrived in England at the age of twenty-five in 1839, often considered the birth year of photography, and set up a painting studio in Wolverhampton in the West Midlands. Following a whirlwind introduction to photography over a single afternoon in 1853, he launched into an exploration of the new medium with zeal, photographing architecture,

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landscapes, genre scenes, and studies for painters. In 1855, he exhibited twelve works at the Photographic Society of London's annual exhibition. Prince Albert purchased two, adding to the collection of photographs he and Queen Victoria had begun amassing.

Although Rejlander gained renown as a portraitist, photographing such important figures as Lewis Carroll, Charles Darwin, and Alfred Lord Tennyson, his greatest contribution to photographic art was in his innovative use of combination (or multiple exposure) printing. Painters had long created works depicting multiple figures by sketching and painting one model at a time and placing the figures together in a scene. Artists had moved trees and even mountains to improve the composition of a landscape. But no one had thought of rejiggering a photograph.

Rejlander told of a painter who praised one of his photographs, but said, "Now, if I had drawn that, I should have introduced another figure between them or some light object to keep them together. You see there is where you photographers are at [a disadvantage]."[1] Two days later Rejlander presented the painter with the same photograph containing the suggested additions produced via multiple exposure, astounding him.

Rejlander's magnum opus, *The Two Ways of Life (Hope in Repentance)* (1857), caused a stir when it was displayed that year in *The Art Treasures of Great Britain*, a show that went on to attract more than 1.3 million visitors. It brought him fame and infamy. The tour de force of combination printing, composed of more than thirty negatives, presents an allegory of two young men choosing between the paths of vice (depicted by men gambling and a bevy of barely clad female beauties lolling and twisting seductively) and virtue (represented on the right by men at work or study and a modestly dressed young woman reading). For the most part, critics and professional photographers deemed it a masterwork, but the public was scandalized, perhaps because the nudes were flesh-and-blood women caught by the photographer's lens, not products of a painter's imagination.

IMAGE 1. *The Two Ways of Life (Hope in Repentance)* (1857) by Oscar Reijlander.

1. Lori Pauli, *Oscar G. Rejlander: Artist Photographer* (Ottawa: Canadian Photographic Institute of the National Gallery of Canada, 2018), 25, 330.

William Hogarth's morality tales told through paintings and engravings a century earlier, especially the series *A Rake's Progress* (1732–34), may have inspired *The Two Ways of Life*. Coincidentally, Hockney produced a series of etchings called *A Rake's Progress* in the early 1960s, spoofing Hogarth as well as his own exploration of New York as a young gay artist. In 1975 he designed the sets for Igor Stravinsky's opera of the same name.

Rejlander spent six weeks conceiving the work and more than three days executing the first print. His nine versions varied slightly in the placement of components. Victoria and Albert bought three of them, one for each royal residence.

Phil Kingston of the Wolverhampton Photographic Society Photohistory Group speculates that Rejlander began by making a full-size drawing of the composition, measuring 31 × 16 inches. He outlined the shapes, like puzzle pieces, that he would need to shoot separately and traced the shapes onto the photographic paper. As he printed each glass negative, he masked around the figures, so only the correctly shaped piece of image would transmit light to the paper.[2]

Although *The Two Ways of Life* might strike a viewer as amusingly Victorian in the way it seems to use a morality tale as an excuse for a display of eroticism, the pieces do blend into a coherent composition. The background figures and architecture recede, not just because they are smaller, but also because Rejlander gave them less contrast while highlighting the central figures. Dark draperies at the top and shadows at the sides and bottom of the composition form a natural vignette.

Rejlander continued photographing, lecturing, and writing on photography until 1874, the year before he succumbed to diabetes. Although he continued experimenting with techniques throughout his career, combination printing remained by far his greatest contribution to photographic art and science.

British-born David Hockney, who came onto the scene more than a century after Rejlander, is another painter long fascinated by photography who today, at age eighty-two, is eagerly exploring the latest technology. Early in his career, Hockney often took photographs to use as painting references, but they didn't interest him as artworks in themselves. "Life is precisely what [photographs] don't have—or rather time, lived time," he told Lawrence Weschler. "I mean, photography is all right if you don't mind looking at the world from the point of view of a paralyzed Cyclops—for a split second."[3]

In 1982, after the Pompidou Center in Paris convinced Hockney to exhibit a sampling of the numerous photographs he had taken at various angles and times of day as studies for portraits and other paintings, he took up the rolls of Polaroid film left behind by the curator and began snapping details of his home from different angles and arraying the instant prints into collages. Then, focusing on groups of friends, he composed more than 140 collages over the next three months. He was not trying to create a narrative à la Rejlander, but, "This sort of picture came closer to how we actually see . . . not all-at-once but rather in discrete, separate

2. Phil Kingston, "How Rejlander May Have Produced 'The Two Ways of Life,'" YouTube video, July 7, 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPGLTtINJBU.

3. David Hockney, *Cameraworks* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 9.

glimpses which we then build up into our continuous experience of the world."[4] As our eyes scan the groups of people, we see them not as figures frozen in an instant, but we witness the passage of time as their heads and hands take several positions, gesturing or looking up. Hockney called these photo-collages "joiners," saying that they were a form of drawing, because "there is no single way to join them. If you make a decision about something like that, isn't that exactly what you are doing when you are drawing?"[5]

Visual perception, perspective, and optics have long intrigued Hockney. In 2001 he published *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters*, in which he supports the argument that artists have been using the camera obscura as an aid to painting for centuries. He highlights anatomical distortions in Caravaggio's work that he claims could come only from piecing together projected images with the lens at slightly different angles.

Despite his love-hate relationship with photography, the artist has ever been eager to experiment with the newest technologies. And the electronics industry has made sure he gets his hands on the latest and greatest, from Photoshop in 1989 to Cinema 4D in the last few years. He believes that the advances in technology, rather than moving photography farther from painting, can bring them together, allowing the hand of the artist to be seen in the work. In the early 1990s, when he learned that Annie Leibovitz was shooting exclusively digitally, he asked her, "Isn't it nice to be back painting again?" But, not everyone in possession of Photoshop has the hand of an artist, Hockney cautions: "Being able to draw means being able to put things into believable space; people who don't draw very well can't do that."[6]

In 2015, Hockney spoke about his photographic works in a London exhibition:

> Everything in the photographs is taken very close. The heads the jackets and shirt and shoes are all photographed up close. Each photograph has a vanishing point, so instead of just one I get many vanishing points. It is this that I think gives them an almost 3D effect without the glasses . . . . Digital photography can free us from a chemically imposed perspective that has lasted for 180 years.[7]

Hockney's recent "photographic drawings" in the L.A. Louver exhibition were a significant departure from the joiners. They showcase Hockney's and his technical assistant Jonathan Wilkinson's techno-wizardry. Rejlander's process for making combination photographs was complicated, but Hockney takes the complexity and labor-intensiveness to a new level. Circling each object or person with a stereo camera, he takes hundreds of exposures, which are then stitched together and rendered into a 3-D model with photogrammetry software. Another program allows him to place the model into a 3-D photographic drawing, view it from different angles, light it, paint in shadows, change colors, and move it around the space.

Pictures at an Exhibition (2018), at nearly twenty-nine feet wide, spanned an entire wall of the gallery. The scene is the artist's studio. The upper half of the picture is a wall filled

4. Hockney, *Cameraworks*, 11.

5. Martin Gayford, *A Bigger Message: Conversations with David Hockney*, updated and expanded pap. ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2016), 116.

6. Gayford, *A Bigger Message*, 119–20.

7. "David Hockney: Painting and Photography," archived exhibition, May 15–June 27, 2015, Annely Juda Fine Art, London, www.annelyjudafineart.co.uk/exhibitions/painting-and-photography-david-hockney.

IMAGE 2. *Pictures at an Exhibition* (2018) by David Hockney.

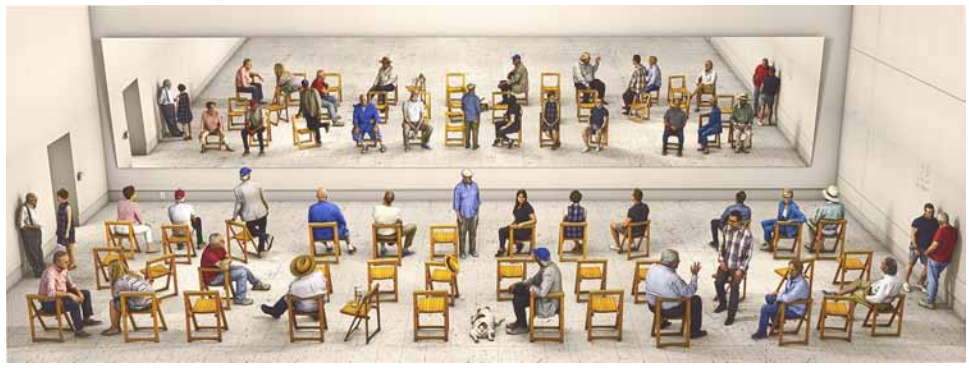

IMAGE 3. *Pictured Gathering with Mirror* (2018) by David Hockney.

with Hockney's intensely colored paintings. In the lower half, two dozen people stand or sit in three rows of folding chairs, most with their backs to the viewer, studying paintings. The viewer seems to be floating above the crowd, but the paintings seem to be at eye level. The picture is so large that we cannot take in the entire array of figures at once.

Stretched across the opposite gallery wall was a slightly less expansive photographic drawing, *Pictured Gathering with Mirror* (2018). The bottom half of this work is identical to that of *Pictures at an Exhibition*: the same people caught in the same poses, including Hockney leaning against the left wall. But in place of paintings in the upper half, we see a mirror running the length of the studio, reflecting the three rows of chairs and people. In contrast to the animated people of the joiners, the figures here are motionless, frozen in time. Yes, they are amazingly detailed for such a giant work, but the 3D effect isn't any greater than what a painter or a photographer with a very high-resolution panoramic camera could get with well-placed light and shadow. The technology is mind boggling, though, when one realizes that there never was a mirror in the studio. It's not "all done with mirrors"; it's all done with a computer.

Those who expect Rejlander, a Victorian artist, a favorite of Queen Victoria herself, to be prim and proper, even prudish, might be surprised by the obvious enjoyment he took in the sensuality of his nudes. Although *The Two Ways of Life* is earnest in tone, other Rejlander works take a winking approach to their subjects. *The Bachelor's Dream* (c. 1860), for example, is a lighthearted look at male desire.

IMAGE 4. *The Bachelor's Dream* (c. 1860) by Oscar Reijlander.

Conversely, if the name Hockney conjures the Dionysian (paintings of young men and big splashes—swimming pools, sprinklers, and showers—or of the Grand Canyon amped up in hues of orange and magenta, or videos of the artist careening through the Santa Monica Mountains in an open convertible with Wagner blaring), the photographic drawings display an Apollonian facet of the artist. I applaud Hockney's gusto for experimentation, but the passion spent on the process doesn't come alive in the prints. These photographic drawings are like earnest embroidered samplers with none of the spontaneity and joy of the joiners or of his quickly sketched portraits in the same exhibition. Maybe the purists are right: photography is about the instant. ■

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