

Nushin Elahi's London Letter



Spring has come early in London. **The Royal Academy** is ablaze with all the colour and life of a new season; the air is heavy with blossom, leaves form a tunnel and a clearing in the woods takes on a green hue. **David Hockney's A Bigger Picture** (until 9 April) is not billed as a retrospective, although it includes some signature older works to chart the artist's interest in interpreting nature. It kicks off the 2012 season with what is predicted to be a blockbuster. Hockney has filled the enormous space of the Royal Academy largely with work from the past seven years in a joyous celebration of landscape painting. The hedonistic and cerebral works of the past are only recognisable in the intensity of colour and light. There is hardly a figure in sight as he explores the Wolds of his birthplace Yorkshire in compelling depth.

There is great theatricality in the sheer scale of his works. Canvasses are huge, the largest consisting of 32 individual pieces, and they immerse the viewer in a grand spectacle of nature in all her seasonal glory. Seasons are one thing that Los Angeles, Hockney's home of many years, lacked, and he revels in the changing moods, often revisiting a spot again and again. Much of the work consists of series, sometimes a view at different times of year, but also, as with the 52 pieces of *The Arrival of Spring*, a changing vantage point of a familiar area. One cannot leave without feeling that you have actually experienced a bit of the magic of Yorkshire. Some colours may seem garish, at times forms are too stylised, and purists may carp about his use of an iPad for the latest series. What Hockney does give the viewer though, is a sense of his delight in nature and the ability to look at it anew.

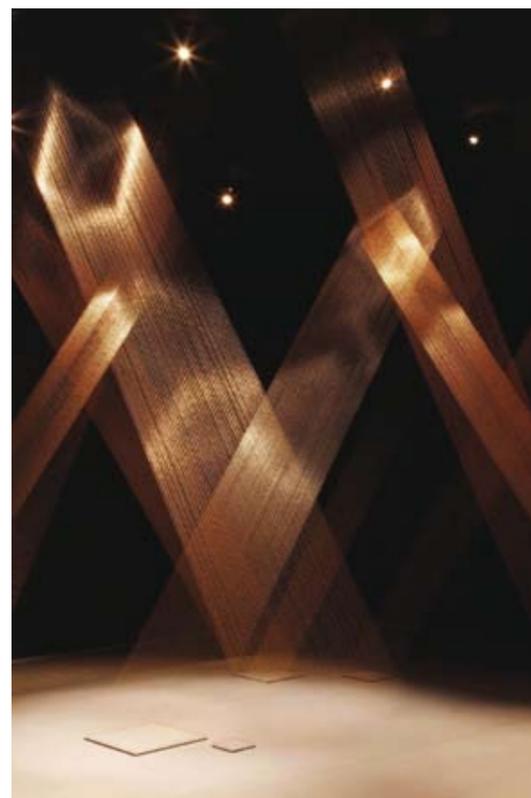
This is a very different Hockney to the one on display at the **Haunch of Venison's The Mystery of Appearance**, featuring ten post-war British artists (until 18 Feb). Although the luminous quality of light is there, the subject matter is much more brittle in a painting such as the erotic *The Room Tarzana*. Also on show is an early Lucian Freud drawing of Francis Bacon, Bacon's snarling Pope in a cage, the thick impasto of both Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff, whose subjects are sometimes hard to decipher beneath the paint. Michael Andrews' picture of *The Thames at Low Tide* gives a fascinating and disorientating perspective of the shoreline. The varied elements of the chosen artists are perhaps most interesting when viewed across the perspective of time: while Hockney has continued to develop, Patrick Caulfield's work, for example, has hardly changed at all.

Damien Hirst has covered **Gagosian** galleries worldwide in spots. For over a month (until 18 Feb) all eleven galleries – from New York to Hong Kong will host *The Complete Spot Paintings 1986 to 2011*, with an added bonus that if you visit all the locations you can win a signed Hirst print. The galleries each have a different emphasis on which spots they show, and the small Mayfair one features only little canvasses, with somewhere between half a spot and four spots, and some as tiny as a matchbox. Bright and colourful they may be, but it's hard to give them much more than a cursory glance and not feel that this is

one big marketing ploy. In the cavernous space near King's Cross it is easier to grasp some of the fascination with the subject, as larger canvasses play with patterns and shapes. Apparently no colour is repeated, and although they look as if the colour is applied mechanically, there is an army of art students choosing random colours and making them look perfect. The ones I enjoyed most were the slightly flawed ones – after all, polka dots were a fashion statement long before Hirst, and it's hard to see the reason for the exorbitant price tag. Gerhard Richter's exploration of the spatial tension between blocks of colour in his work somehow had an integrity that this facile theme lacks. It will be interesting to see what Hirst's forthcoming retrospective at the Tate, which forms part of the Olympics, says about the artist.

The Serpentine Gallery presents the first major exhibition of one of Brazil's most famous artists, **Lygia Pape** (1927 – 2004) in *Magnetized Space* (until 19 Feb). Pape was renowned for her experimental work, and a founder member of the Neo Concrete movement, which is often seen as the start of contemporary art in Brazil. The work ranges from delicate woodcut prints of geometric shapes, to three-line poetry and crackly films of people breaking out of boxes. As you enter, her short film, *Eat Me*, with its probing close-ups of a hairy pair of lips aquiver with saliva, competes with the familiar images of the heads of favela children popping up from an enormous sheet as they move in unison. The political content and provocative power of her avant-garde work are certainly diluted by time and distance, but the wall of tiny wooden cut-out shapes - one for each day of the year – that forms her *Book of Time* from the early Sixties, is as captivating in its own way as the almost mystical golden threads that shimmer and catch the light in the recent installation *Web*.

An older generation of German artists is well known in Britain – Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer and Gerhard Richter, to mention a few. **Gesamtkunstwerk: New Art from Germany** at the **Saatchi Gallery** until 30 April introduces some new names that reflect the scope of German contemporary art. Bizarre, grotesque, surreal, and rarely beautiful, they don't all have the collective strength and emotive power of their predecessors, but certain names stand out. There is a lot of humour in Georg Herold's delightful reclining figures in vivid colours, the surreal pageantry of the brothers Gert and Uwe Tobias's bright woodcuts, the brash photomontages of Kirstine Roepstorff and Zhivago Duncan's hypnotically playful *Prententious Crap*, with its strange engines circling an endless track. A work such as the wall of 170 exquisite ceramic tiles that make up Andro Wekua's *Sunset* has rich and glowing colours, as do Thomas Kiesewetter's abstract sculptures in metal. The impact of the group as a whole though, leaves one with an impression of loud, wild contortions, a generation with the same inner angst but perhaps not quite the same depth. The largest exhibition ever in London of **Anselm Kiefer's** work, *Il Mistero delle Cattedrali*, is on at the **White Cube** in Bermondsey until 26 February. **The Halycon Gallery** shows work by the contemporary glass artist **Dale Chihuly** until 23 February.



(Top left) **Damien Hirst:** *Spot Paintings*, Gagosian Art Gallery, London
(Top right) **Daivid Hockney:** *The Arrival of Spring in Woldgate*, East Yorkshire The Royal Academy

(Middle left) **Lygia Pape:** *Têia 1, C (Web)* 2011, Serpentine Gallery, London
(Middle right) **Lygia Pape:** *Livro do Tempo (Book of Time)* 1961-63, Serpentine Gallery, London

(Below) **Georg Herold:** *Untitled*, 2010, Batten, canvas, lacquer, thread and screws Image courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery, London