Selective Preparation of Canvas as an 'Artistic Device' in David Hockney's Early Paintings (1964-1972). Impact of This Hybrid Priming Technique on Perception by the Viewer, with a Particular Focus on *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)* and *Mt. Fuji and Flowers*

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Abstract: In the mid 1960s and early 1970s, David Hockney opted for a particular application of primer in the ground layers of some of his paintings – that is, a partial or 'selective' type of preparation. By selectively preparing certain areas with one or more layers of (gesso) priming, Hockney introduced a slightly higher and white pictorial plane in selected areas whilst retaining the properties of raw canvas in others. In one of Hockney's most discussed paintings, *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)*, for instance, selective preparation divided the surface and set the stage from the ground up. This paper examines the impact of this highly original and hybrid formula on perception by the viewer, focusing on how the eye registers the change in properties of the paint layer. It outlines Hockney's investigation of the primed/unprimed opposition through the use of selective preparation, and the variety of effects it allowed him to achieve in one canvas. From its anecdotal use in 1960s road trip paintings to its more pronounced use in pool paintings in which Hockney used unprimed canvas to convey the 'wetness' of water, selective preparation was a device for him to compellingly increase contrasts and tension. Far from producing mere formal effects or serving solely as citations (of stain paintings for instance), the perceived technical oddity produces meaning. From the ground layers up, it deeply influences the perception, and thus the interpretation of the discussed paintings.

Keywords: David Hockney, selective preparation, gesso primer, ambiguity, hybrid technique, semantic instability, stain painting, painting grounds, pool pictures

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1. Introduction.

1.1 Selective or partial preparation

In Western painting, the preparation of a canvas implies the application of size and primer evenly and *all over* the surface of that canvas in (a single or) a number of layers (Note 1). The all-over quality is an inherent part of the definition of the preparation (Stoner and Rushfield, 2013, p.161; Stols-Witlox, 2014, p. 67). Throughout the history of Western art, traditionally, a canvas is either prepared or left bare. Whatever the variables of the preparation may be (number of layers, thickness, chemical composition, whether it entails sizing, priming, or both, etc.), a given surface finds itself wholly in one state of preparation or lack thereof. But there is a hybrid scenario; in very rare cases, painters have chosen to prepare a selected area of the canvas. By doing so, they combined the effects of primed and unprimed canvas in a single painting on a limited surface. This text is the first to name and to define this hybrid technical oddity as 'selective' or 'partial' preparation.

Selective or *partial* preparation is the selective or partial application of a preparation on a (canvas) surface. Unlike a reserve which solely introduces an interruption in form, selective preparation introduces a simultaneous interruption in form *and* in substance.

In a few of his mid 1960s and early 1970s paintings, David Hockney (English, born 1937) opted for this peculiar application of primer in the ground layers. By selectively coating certain areas with one or more layers of acrylic gesso (Note 2), Hockney introduced a slightly higher and white pictorial plane in designated areas whilst retaining the properties of raw canvas in others. This gave rise to a threshold between unprimed (stained) canvas and primed grounds; the pictorial surface presents itself in low-relief. Though a few other painters have relied on the technique (Note 3), at present it appears that David Hockney stands alone with his confirmed and repeated uses of selective preparation, in at least eight paintings: *Arizona*, 1964; *Rocky Mountains and Tired Indians*, 1965; *Portrait Surrounded by Artistic Devices*, 1965; *Rubber Ring Floating in a Swimming Pool*, 1971; *Deep and Wet Water,* 1971; *Pool and Steps, Le Nid du Duc*, 1971; *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures),* 1972; *Mt. Fuji and Flowers*, 1972 (Fig. 1).

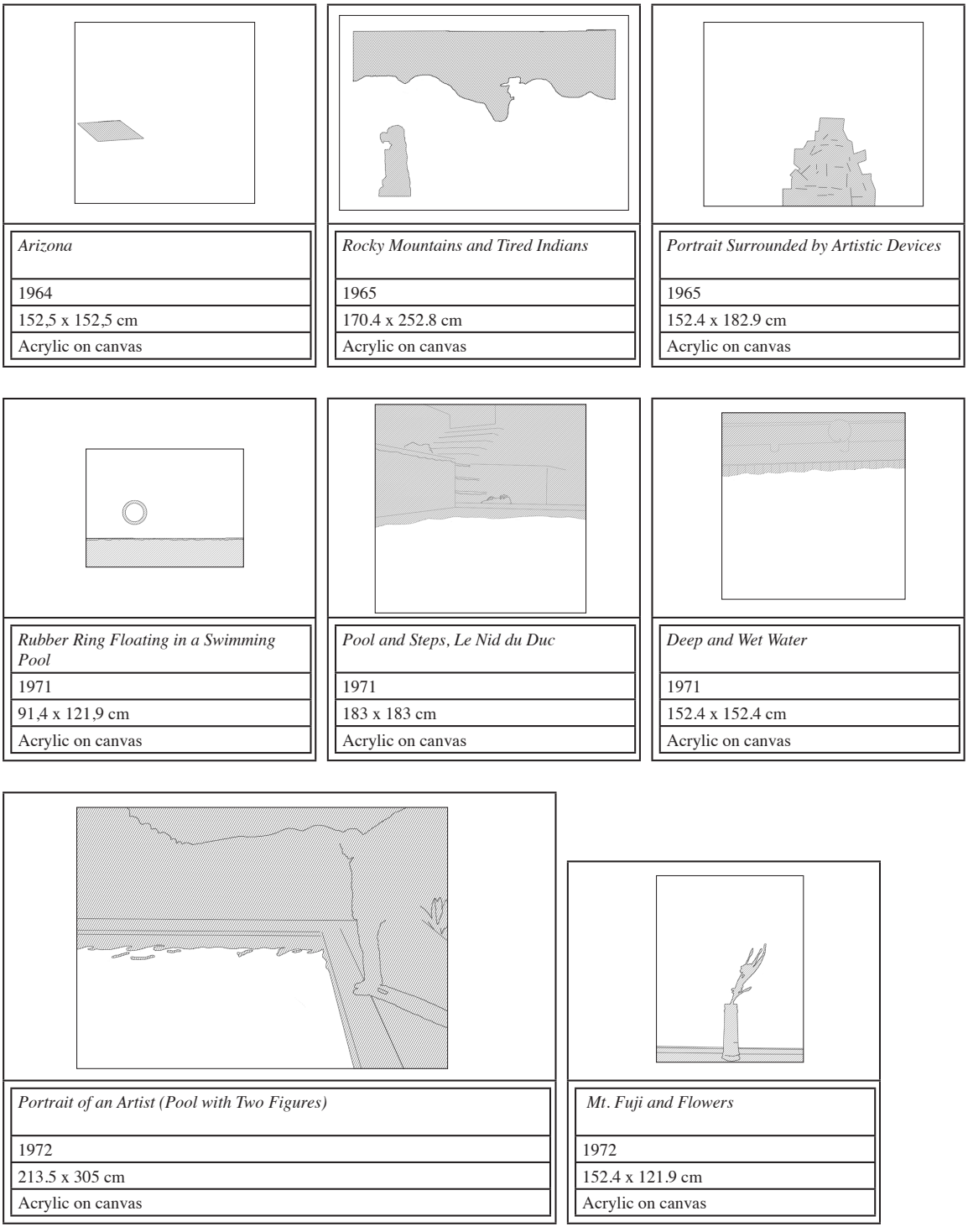


Figure 1. Schematic overview of selectively prepared paintings by David Hockney, with hatching for primed areas

Unprimed canvas

Primed canvas

Authors and Hockney himself have only briefly mentioned areas of preparation and partial coating of the canvas in his paintings (Alteveer, 2017, p. 225; Sykes, 2011, p. 261). With this article, I propose a first corpus of selectively prepared paintings by Hockney and a first synthesis of its effects.

Most of the time, reproductions of paintings do not suffice to determine the status and type of preparation, let alone a case of selective preparation. Because surface texture and differences in relief are easily lost in photographic reproductions and contrast between the smoothness of prepared areas and the wovenness of uncoated areas of canvas greatly diminished, in-person analysis is required, and where possible technical examinations by conservators and restorers should supplement the looking. To delineate selective preparation precisely in Hockney's paintings (Figs. 2–9), I have observed first-hand the encounter between Hockney's cotton support, his acrylic gesso and paints. Detailed photographs of the discussed surfaces are accessible through this web link: https://flic.kr/s/aHsmNDqBnC (Imgs. 1–20).

Selective preparation cannot be ruled out without in-person examination and many works by David Hockney are unavailable for viewing (inaccessible in museum storage or private collections). Consequently, the present corpus might come to include more titles as Hockney's oeuvre is further examined for indications of selective preparation.

This paper examines the impact of this highly original and hybrid formula on perception by the viewer, focusing on how the eye registers the change in properties of the paint layer. In some of Hockney's selectively prepared paintings, the perceived detachment between figures or between a figure/shape and its surroundings is anchored (at least in part) in the earliest application of paint on the canvas, at the root, in the preparatory layers. The perceived detachment between forms lies in the substance they are made of.

Therefore, I propose an analysis of selective priming in Hockney's oeuvre with the perception of substances at its core. First, a description of the solid colour shapes gessoed underneath in a few paintings of the mid 1960s will introduce the subject. Then follows an analysis of pool paintings with particular attention to *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)* and *Mt. Fuji and Flowers,* for the pronounced separation between painted areas/pictorial planes in both paintings. Selective preparation in the paintings forms the basis of a comparison of their images, suggesting that the elevated planes in specific areas of the painting can be

interpreted in line with their subject matter. Increasing contrasts and tension, selective preparation allowed Hockney to exaggerate *foreignness* between parts inside the same painting. This study aims to approach Hockney's oeuvre through the lens of contrasts: between coated and raw, between primed and unprimed, between wet and dry, between in and on the canvas; it is a new way of looking at his early work (Note 4), with this dual tension as a backbone.

1.2 Hockney's firsts: bare canvas + solid colour shapes. Selective preparation as an 'artistic device'

In the 1960s, like many artists, David Hockney used raw, unprimed, cotton canvas as a painting support (Note 5). In his road trip paintings – based on his travels to Italy in 1961 and in the Midwest and West of the United States in 1964, he left the surface of the canvas largely unprimed, and painted and drew with acrylics or oil on its fabric. Occasionally, he introduced preparation on parts of the canvas. He delineated a relatively small surface and applied a layer of acrylic gesso priming to it before covering that exact area with colour.

In paintings such as *Arizona* of 1964 (Fig. 2); *Rocky Mountains and Tired Indians* of 1965 (Fig. 3); and *Portrait Surrounded by Artistic Devices*, also of 1965 (Fig. 4), solid colour surfaces (*des aplats* in French) are *selectively primed* before being painted. In *Arizona*, the pale-yellow parallelogram floating on the left-hand side of the painting is composed of a layer of white gesso primer and one layer of regular acrylic (Img. 1). In *Rocky Mountains and Tired Indians*, the sky blue of the upper half of the painting inside the rectangle frames is primed, with white drips of the gesso appearing around the blue layer (Img. 2); the stone statue on the left and the mountain it is adjacent to, also appear to correspond to primed areas. Visible everywhere else, the fabric does not appear through colour where it has been primed, and therefore the gesso introduces a break in continuity of the fibrous surface of the canvas.

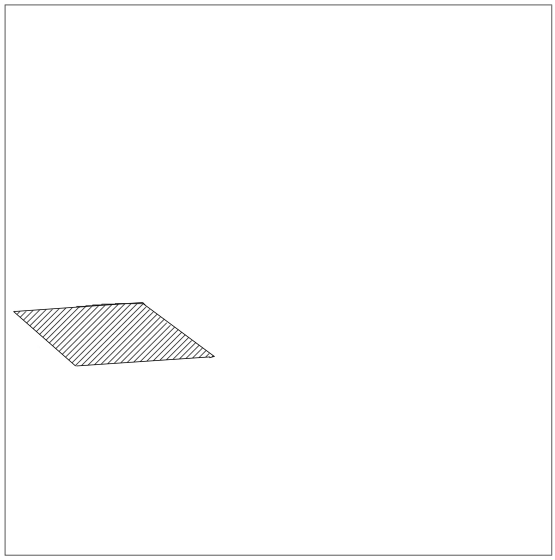


Figure 2. Schematic representation of David Hockney, *Arizona*, 1964, acrylic on canvas, 152.5 x 152.5 cm, Private Collection. © David Hockney

Figure 3. Schematic representation of David Hockney, *Rocky Mountains and Tired Indians*, 1965, acrylic on canvas, 170.4 x 252.8 cm, National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh. © David Hockney

In person, the primed areas stand out. They seem to appear in front of the other elements in the painting, and – from afar – demand the foreground like no other element, or on the contrary, from up close, the same painted surface can appear imprinted in the canvas. However, the settling of those shapes on the foreground is static, there is no protruding action to speak of as the effect perceived by the eye corresponds to a simple physical heightening. Additionally, in the road trip paintings, the space generated by that physical heightening is very shallow, and the selective priming rather anecdotal – I will discuss them briefly.

Generally, when the primer is located on a limited area, it at once creates a detachment between two zones and affirms the flatness of the canvas as it is placed over what elsewhere is the pictorial plane. The whole pictorial plane is in shallow-relief, with a slight threshold making the primed shape take on the appearance of a collaged element – so much so that it has been mistaken for a collaged paper cutout in *Portrait Surrounded by Artistic Devices* (below). Combined with optical effects and illusions, selective priming can strongly increase an already present illusion of depth (see *Mt. Fuji* below). However, if no other strategies are mobilized to create depth, the space introduced by selective priming is shallow.

Even so, it can partake in upsetting the organization of a fictive space in the eye of the viewer. Take the sky in *Rocky Mountains and Tired Indians* (Fig. 3), the largest area of one colour and the most luminous one. On an unprimed ground, the same blue paint would have sunken into the canvas (the fibres take in the carrier or medium rendering colours more dull through absorption, and canvas fabric with its irregularities and 'natural texture' tends to reflect light from individual fibres, in accordance with its woven structure (Komatsu and Goda, 2018), scattered in a broader range of directions) whilst over gesso (a smoother, more reflective material which prevents paint getting sucked in by insulating and coating the canvas), the blue acrylic reflects light more and more directly (or 'specularly'). So, on the one hand, the primed blue is bright, smooth and reflects light directly. On the other hand, the sandy canvas which has sucked in most colours where not left bare, suggests the drought of the depicted landscape. Against that arid ground, the protruding shield of blue recalls the dazzling quality that light can have in the desert. The blue shape attracts the attention, shifting to the foreground where it indeed physically lies (on the same pictorial plane as the foreground statue); however, in fictive space, the sky is expected to extend to the horizon – a thought that withdraws the blue into the background. Yet, then again, it clearly appears on the first plane: back and forth it shifts according to the hints for the organization of space that the eye attaches itself to, in the "indeterminate spatial expanse" of the painting (Hammer, 2017a).

Rocky Mountains and Tired Indians is merely a first example of a disturbance of the spatial organization due to the physical properties of selectively applied primer – a strategy that Hockney implements more explicitly in later pictures like *Rubber Ring Floating in a Swimming Pool*, for instance. Initial considerations about the properties and effects of primer and canvas on perception pertain to all subsequent discussions.

2. A foreign element. *Portrait Surrounded by Artistic Devices*

In *Portrait Surrounded by Artistic Devices* (Fig. 4), the heap of rectangles (sometimes referred to as 'cylinders' (exhibition label, Metropolitan Museum, 2017)), is painted on a layer of primer on the canvas. The primer emerges as a thin white border peeping out from under the grey rectangles (Img. 3). Combined with the gradient transitioning from dark to light, it generates a strange effect. Whilst globally the heap appears on the foreground, the light grey part looks pressed into the canvas. The grey gradient in each rectangle (should) introduce(s) some kind of volume but creates mostly two-dimensional shapes: barely any of the rectangles connect two or three planes to form cuboids; the fireplace or mountain looks like it is a print on an upright cardboard, placed in the foreground (Img. 4).

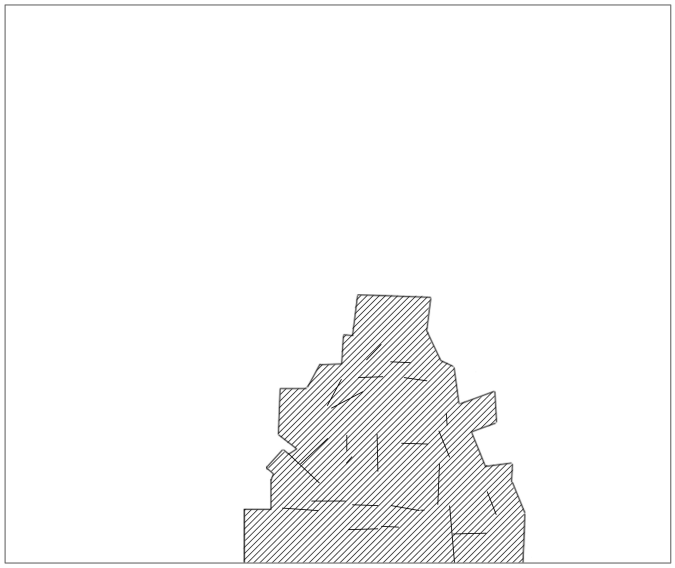


Figure 4. Schematic representation of David Hockney, *Portrait Surrounded by Artistic Devices*, 1965, acrylic on canvas, 152.4 x 182.9 cm. Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre. © David Hockney

The sitter in the painting is based on another work, a drawing by Hockney of his father. Around the transposed portrait are gathered more or less vague citations from other artists' works: a thin lax arc from Color Field painting, a shelved display of tooth-like biomorphic forms, a grey mountain of Cézannean and cubist touch, little splashes on the raw canvas evoking drip and stain techniques, a pink semi-circled arena said to stem from a work by Francis Bacon (Gayford, 2017), which might also be the case with the blue stain underneath the sitting portrait (or it could easily reference other 'artistic devices' like coloured shadows).

Hockney was preoccupied with what was fashionable in painting and with what his British dealer, John Kasmin, 'fancied,' looking to him to see what was in demand. Kasmin was a passionate fan of North American Color Field painting and of Kenneth Noland in particular, so much so that – to best show Color Field paintings – Kasmin had added a glass ceiling to his unusually large London gallery to introduce zenithal daylight in the gallery (Stangos, 1976, pp. 87–88). Hockney's paintings abound in references to Noland's stained targets and rings of primary colours in the 1960s but also to Jackson Pollock's 'splashing' and Ellsworth Kelly's 'hard edges.' Hockney was acutely aware of the art scenes in the United States of America and in his homeland Great-Britain. Very early on, as a student at the Royal College of Art, he played with influences as *styles*, and mixed and matched them (Westerman, 2015).

Here, the devices mentioned in the title are both formal and technical. They include not just the cited list of forms and techniques but also the primer and the raw canvas. The technical treatment of *Portrait Surrounded by Artistic Devices* not only matches the formal reference (Pollock, Noland and Bacon painted on raw canvas, Cézanne and the cubists did not), it is an artistic device in itself; Hockney works with the opposition of primed/unprimed as an instrument at his disposal.

Commenting on the protrusion of the foreground of *Portrait Surrounded by Artistic Devices*, Martin Hammer writes: "the pile of cylinders literally comes between us and the figure;" the interference is so strong that Hammer designates the pile of cylinders as "in fact painted on a piece of paper, which was then neatly cut out and attached to the canvas." (Hammer, 2017b, p. 210). Though neither the Arts Council Collection to which the painting belongs nor the David Hockney Foundation include 'paper' in the listed technique, the catalogue of *David Hockney: Portraits* at the National Portrait Gallery in London does similarly list 'paper' in the technique of *Portrait Surrounded by Artistic Devices* ("acrylic on canvas and paper") (Howgate and Stern Shapiro, 2006, p. 218).

The gouged appearance of the borders of the cylinder pile and the paper-like texture with seemingly foreign brushwork (which indeed recalls acrylic or gouache on paper) do make the collaged paper a valid supposition. But up-close examination of the surface reveals that the gridded weave of the canvas continues to run through the (grey gradient) paint of the pile. The canvas' diagonal lines (which correspond to the crisscrossed fibres, woven in a grid) can be made out to continue underneath the supposedly collaged paper (Img. 4, 5). A collaged

element however should obstruct the weave from view and prevent it from leaving an imprint in the paint layer; the only way that those woven lines align and remain visible through the acrylic paint of the canvas is if the substance separating canvas from subsequent paint is a layer of acrylic gesso. A layer of synthetic gesso can act as a thin and supple film that transmits an imprint of the canvas' texture to subsequent layers of paint only if both the gesso and paint layers are thin enough (which is not the case everywhere; wherever the paint has clotted, the weave network is interrupted).

The gouged edges can be explained by Hockney's recurring use of masking tape to selectively prepare and paint straight lines and surfaces. The masking tape around the pile of rectangles does not seem to have held off all the gesso, letting white slip ever so slightly underneath some of its borders, forming a thin contour. Additionally, removal of the adhesive tape takes with it chips of paint that can indent the edges of the applied paint. Up-close, the indented edges indeed make the cubist-inspired mass appear like a paper cutout.

Notably, it was the cubists who introduced the techniques of collage and *papier collé* (pasted paper) with their pictures. It might well be that Hockney set out to reference the cubists not just with colour and shape but with a play on material perception, intending the gessoed mountain to look like a cubist paper addition. Based on the possibilities of recently developed paints and selective preparation, Hockney proposed his own version of cubist collage.

Akin to a foreign incursion on the canvas, the foreground thus "literally comes between us and the figure." Gesso is able to separate something from the canvas ground so fiercely that it appears as a collaged element. This highlights the impact of preparation on perception, not just in *Portrait Surrounded* and in other Hockney paintings but generally in painting; it shows the versatility of gesso, a material at once thin enough to leave the weave partly legible yet thick enough to evoke a material object (like cylinders or wood logs) and even to suggest the presence of another material (believed to be paper).

3. Liquidities of the canvas. Pools (and landscapes)

3. 1. Pools

After brief use in the mid 1960s with the gessoing of geometric shapes, Hockney returned to selective priming in the early 1970s. This time, the unprimed surface of the canvas was no

longer a place for elements to float like on a drawing (Stephens and Wilson, 2017, p. 210**).** This time, the endeavour was a much more painterly one.

Hockney had been multiplying techniques and supports to depict water since the mid 1960s. He chose raw canvas as a way to convey the transparency and the 'wetness' of water (Note 6). He soaked an entirely unprimed canvas, "layer over layer," for *Japanese Rain on Canvas* of 1972, for instance (Alteveer, 2017, p. 225).

And in several pool pictures of that moment, Hockney used selective priming. In doing so, he broke the picture up in two areas. Isolating the water, he separated the liquid parts of the painting from the solids. He used the canvas raw to paint water using detergent and acrylic washes, replicating Helen Frankenthaler's recipe for staining the canvas (Alteveer, 2017). In addition to the unprimed 'cotton duck' canvas support and the newly developed acrylic paints that North American stain painters such as Frankenthaler typically relied on to soak the canvas, she incorporated detergent to facilitate absorption of the paint between the fibres. Before selectively priming, Hockney soaked his cotton canvas blue for the swimming pools of *Rubber Ring Floating in a Swimming Pool* (Fig. 5), and *Pool and Steps (Le Nid du Duc)* (Fig. 6), *Deep and Wet Water* (Fig. 7), all of 1971, and *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)* of 1972 (Fig. 8).

To paint the water of those swimming pools, he relied on the canvas' capacity for absorption. The result is a sort of demonstration of the capillarity of the canvas, which he uses in a figurative way, however minimal it may be. Various degrees of figurativeness coexist inside the same pool. Hockney shows the effect of water on textile, on the canvas. He thinned down acrylic with water and soap to "approximate perfectly the limpid liquidity of a sunlit pool." (exhibition label, Metropolitan Museum, 2017). By relying on known staining techniques, he ensured the canvas would continue to look as though it was wet, as it was the moment he had applied the diluted paint, ensuring it wouldn't dry in the eye of the viewer. The canvas retained its 'wetness' (Note 6). Authors have attributed the "more naturalistic" treatment of water in these paintings to staining (Webb, 1989, p. 120). Andrew Wilson, co-curator of Tate Britain's latest retrospective of the painter describes Hockney's pool pictures as follows: "The paintings are about how you represent the immaterial: water and light, transparency, different kinds of liquidities. And they are interested in the conventions of picture-making. The way Hockney paints water in his swimming pools employs abstract strategies, like [those

in] paintings by Bernard Cohen, Jean Dubuffet, or Helen Frankenthaler. He uses [abstract] techniques to paint something as impossible to fix as light on water or the passage of bodies underwater" (Sooke, 2017).

3. 1. 1. Red Ring

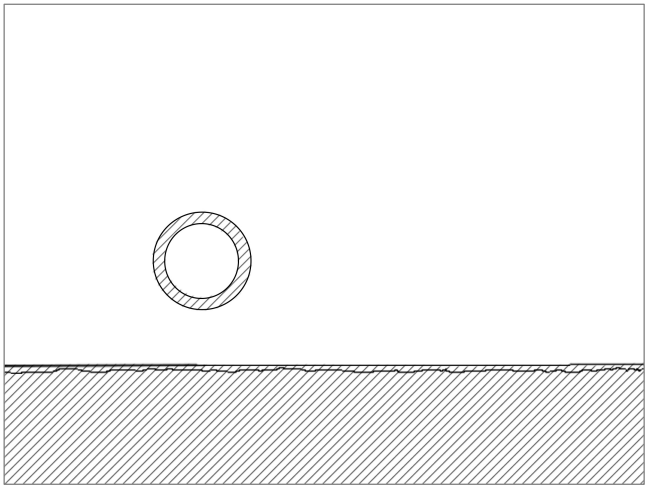


Figure 5. Schematic representation of David Hockney, *Rubber Ring Floating in a Swimming Pool*, 1971, acrylic on canvas, 91.4 x 121.9 cm, Private collection. © David Hockney

For *Rubber Ring Floating in a Swimming Pool* (Fig. 5, Img. 6, 7, 8, 9), Hockney carefully applied a ring of gesso on the canvas, then painted it red so that the ring appears to float both on the surface of the water and on that of the canvas (Alteveer, 2017). He added diluted white paint on the stained area, in the water, to paint circles for bubbles and applied strokes of diluted white to highlight the edges of the ring. The bright red ring brings to mind something Hockney said about another painting, *Snake* of 1962: "[a]t that time I was much more conscious of the current ideas about painting. For instance, flatness: flatness was something that people really talked about then, and I was interested in it. Everyone was going on about Jasper Johns's pictures: here was the flatness thing, and it appeared in later abstractions too. *The Snake* is my comment on it, a version of it, in that the only illusion is that inside the frame the snake is lying on a canvas; the canvas itself isn't painted." (Stangos, 1976, pp. 87–88). It is questionable whether the snake appears as lying on top of the canvas. Not many means were put forth by the painter to make the snake look three-dimensional, it lacks 'body'; especially in the lower half of the image, the snake appears to be drawn on the canvas with paint, with a dark (charcoal or graphite) contour. Much more convincing is Hockney's attempt at letting a red ring drift on the canvas of *Rubber Ring Floating in a Swimming Pool*. To disengage the ring from the adjacent blue stains, Hockney allowed a thin border of white around the inner

and outer circles of the ring and used priming and bright red from the contrasted ends of the colour spectrum.

The rubber ring isn't painted, it is floating as a smooth plastic skin on top or rather, in front of the canvas. In fact, it looks more to be in front of the canvas than it does on top of the water, so disconnected is it from the blue canvas around it; it stands out tremendously (Img. 6) such that it seems to hang in front of the painting rather than on it, maybe even shine outwards (like a light from within the painting). Immaterial and unmoved by the stream of bubbles, it is as unaffected by the water, as the water is by it. Like a loop placed on a photograph or slide during development that would have left a blind spot on the printed photograph, the ring is a foreign element – now part of the resulting surface and image.

A second primed area, the edge of the pool on the bottom of the painting, counteracts the detachment between ring and water. The border of the pool functions as an intermediary between the viewer and the pool, as a kind of second frame or edge. On that edge, the water stains of the stone are primed and painted in trompe l'oeil while the water of the pool has uniformly stained the canvas. The bright plaster of the exposed stone edge is a line of acrylic gesso left bare that brings to mind the fact that gesso is traditionally a plaster-like material (Note 2); Hockney here uses a polymer version to suggest the gypsum material.

Between the beige and the blue, the white border of exposed primer suggests the depth separating the stone from the water (Alteveer, 2017). The stone edge anchors the toy closer to the pool's water surface (Img. 8, 9). The glowing ring's position fluctuates in our view, depending on where we are looking, floating closer to the surface of the pool when our focus is on the edge of the pool but floating away from the water when our focus settles on other parts of the painting.

To understand how the push and pull of the ring operates between different grounds (background, in and on the water; on and above the water; foreground, on and in front of the canvas), let us consider the image from which Hockney drew the painting.

The painting is based on a photograph that Hockney took in 1971, in Spain. "It's almost copied from it," wrote Hockney in his autobiography (Stangos, 1976, p. 241). The operative word here is 'almost'.

A scan of archival material from Hockney's green albums (captioned "GA-022, p.31" by the David Hockney Foundation, see https://thedavidhockneyfoundation.org/chronology/1971)

shows a yellowed and trimmed version of the original photograph (Note 7). In any case, compared to the canvas, the photograph reveals a different organization of a very similar image. On canvas, Hockney removed recognizable elements from the poolside (a knee and two sandaled feet). He magnified the ring and made its positioning ambiguous.

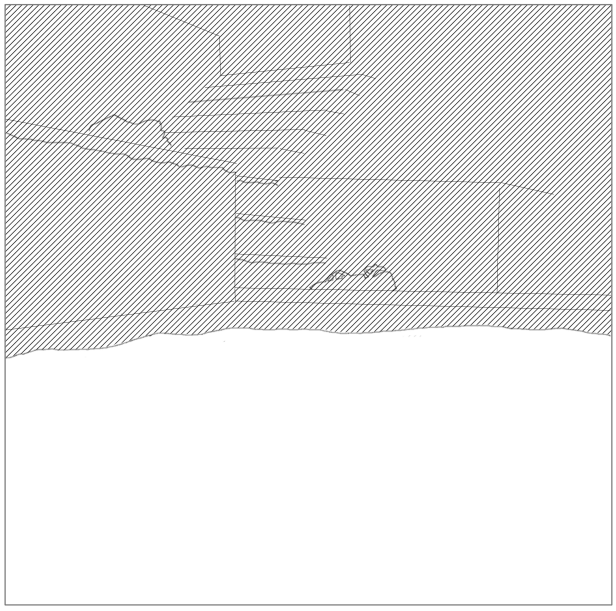
In the photograph, the red ring lies further back. It has sunk below the surface of the water, possibly resting on the bottom of the pool (which would explain why the bubbles are not engaged with the ring – neither in the photograph nor the painting, because the ring is much lower than the water stream). By adding gesso between the canvas and the red paint (and by removing indicative foreground elements), he neutralized the dominantly recessive space of the photograph to install a more ambiguous space.

This seems to have been the painter's aim. Hockney explains the workings of the picture as follows: "[a]t first glance, it looks like an abstract painting, but when you read the title the abstraction disappears" (Stangos, 2011, p. 240). Rather than the one-way switch Hockney describes (abstract as such; representational with the title), the painting allows for a back-and-forth. It can move backwards, from representational to abstract, too. Because the gesso forms a heightened pictorial plane, poolside and ring are on the same plane. When the eye focuses on the ring rather than on the edge, the red ring floats up towards the (plane of the) edge of the pool and it becomes – representationally – an impossible picture, thus it is then easily read as geometric shapes above a blue ground. Conversely, when the eye focuses on the pool's edge, the effect approaches that of reading the title: the ring recedes towards the water and the "abstraction disappears," again. The ring pulls one way, the edge and title another.

From the photograph, Hockney thought out the painting to do what it does (create an "abstraction" as he called it and shift in the eye). Selective preparation allowed him, on the canvas, to reorganize space and render it more uncertain. *Rubber Ring* seems to keep active more than one possible spatial organization and several possible readings, including generally conflicting perceptions of where and what things are, in and on the canvas. The compelling contrast between juxtaposed areas sustains a certain ambiguity and instability, even. In perceptual theory, one formulation of the appeal of sustained ambiguity in art (of which selective preparation can be an example) is the notion of semantic instability. Among other things, the study of 'semantic instability' aims to understand if and how competing views of an artwork can coexist; how switches can occur between them; if materiality and

illusion, for example, can both be truly considered in the same moment (Muth and Carbon, 2016, pp. 145–146, 167–168). It shows, for instance, that the right mixture of predictive elements and surprise – norm and deviation or ambiguity – fascinate the eye and might explain aesthetic pleasure (Muth and Carbon, 2016, p. 172), and that perceived instabilities can produce insights (Muth and Carbon, 2019). Pertaining to selective preparation in Hockney's case, the following questions may emerge: can surfaces of one picture be in different places, in different organizations of space, in the same or immediately subsequent moments of viewing? And can those conflicting impressions be held in mind at the same time?

3. 1. 2. Pool and Steps



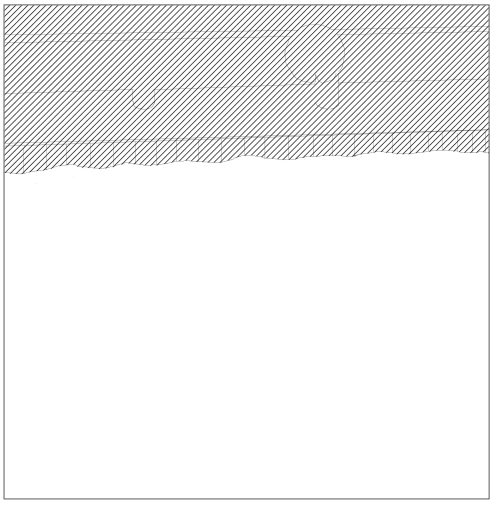


Figure 6. Schematic representation of David Hockney, *Pool and Steps, Le Nid du Duc*, 1971, acrylic on canvas, 183 x 183 cm, Private collection. © David Hockney. **Figure 7.** Schematic representation of David Hockney, David Hockney, *Deep and Wet Water*, 1971, acrylic on canvas, 152.4 x 152.4 cm, Private collection. © David Hockney

In *Pool and Steps* (Fig. 6) and *Deep and Wet Water* (Fig. 7), both dated 1971, Hockney's pools stain the lower half, reserved for the water, while the upper half is primed and reserved for the poolside, its stone architecture, plants and traces of presence. In the lower third of the *Pool and Steps* painting (Fig. 6, Img. 10, 11, 12, 13), the largest and darkest stains tilt the image completely flat, affirming the flatness and capillarity of the canvas (as though we are suddenly seeing the water from above – only if we believe the perspective in the rest of the pool). The grey 'Z'-shaped wave followed by other waves in the water introduce a type of perspective which is picked up by the architecture in the primed upper part. Though reminiscent of North American stain paintings and with a technique explicitly borrowed from

them, the dark blots look not just like diluted paint applied on an absorbent surface but like an actual *stain* on fibre. As though Hockney had left a hefty and saturated brush, forgotten, on the surface and an excess of paint had been absorbed – little by little – by the textile (the quality of the stain evokes that of a forgotten pen dispensing ink intermittently, in the pocket of a shirt or that of a water stained letter, partly erased). The stains aren't drawn like the rest of the pool water. Although called 'stain painting,' most of the American way of staining is more directed, not much is left to chance (apart from the halos which stain painters at times struggled to control or predict). Helen Frankenthaler – as can be deduced from photographs of the artist at work – *applied stains* to canvas while Louis stained the canvas and did not *paint stains* like Frankenthaler but did direct the staining. With Hockney, the result in this single area is dramatic and the relation to the quotidian strong. In that bottom area of the painting, it is no longer a paint used like watercolour as Clement Greenberg had described the staining technique (Upright, 1985, pp. 49–58). It is less a staining technique with paint than a proper stain. It reads not as an application of paint but that of an accidental and uncontrolled shape that possibly hasn't dried yet, foreign to all other elements of the painting. Something dissolved. A stain happened. The borders of the stain dried in a manner that could only have happened in a horizontal position – contrary to other Hockney examples, here is a trace of the way the painting was made: with liquid yet strongly pigmented paint, pre-stretched (see the overlap of the canvas, Img. 13), painted and left to dry horizontally, probably on a desk (Note 8).

The dilute paint stains that were providing the viewer clues about the placement of the water in its surroundings (the pool and its steps, the reflection of the sunlight) and thus still representing water in a pool, abruptly dissolve into a stain in the bottom part. Between that dark lower stain and the recessive space of the steps, the fabric of the canvas extends upwards until a relief introduced by the primer mid painting halts it. The rupture in the continuity of the textile leaves the onlooker to speculate that the pictorial skin – once an intact layer covering the whole surface? – may have been cut following a wavy horizontal line from left to right, and the primed skin peeled away in the lower half (Img. 11, 12). It is as though – for half of the picture – *that which is underneath* the primed and painted layer is revealed. In fact, the idea that the blue continues underneath the primed part aligns with what is known of the painting process; Hockney first stained the entire canvas before applying gesso with masking tape over the blue. Masking tape was used again to paint onto

the gesso keeping the stained canvas protected still. This has left slivers of white primer along the contours of prepared forms (on the verge of the unprimed and primed areas – exactly like in *Portrait Surrounded by Artistic Devices* and *Rubber Ring*) which only increases the separation between the primed and unprimed parts. Conversely, it is as though (from mid painting to the very bottom) the pictorial skin progressively melts *into* the canvas. A sense of absence that stems from the composition is translated in the tension between primed and unprimed, between empty and full, and resonates with the subject of the painting. Authors have noted that *Pool and Steps* concentrates on absence (Webb, 1989, p. 120) and entails the "suggestion in the finished work of a relationship with somebody who is no longer there" (Sykes, 2011, p. 260).

In front of *Pool and Steps*, the eye's focus also varies between each area (primed/unprimed), reading it alternatively as empty and as full. The eye is able to see the stained pool as in front of the primed poolside (as perspective would have it) and as behind the primed poolside (as the application of materials suggests – as it physically is). There are enough indications for both readings to keep the eye indecisive. Like *Rubber Ring*, *Pool and Steps* sustains a back-and-forth between conflicting sensations, keeping active more than one possible spatial organization and several possible readings.

3. 1. 3. Two Figures

In *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)* (Fig. 8, Img. 14, 15, 16), a detachment can be observed between the swimming figure and the standing one. Just like the red ring and its adjacent water, the figures belong to two distinct planes, each plane made from a different substance; the figures emerge from a separate physicality/material. Hockney said that he used "thin acrylic washes to emphasize the 'wetness' of the water and the swimming figure" (Alteveer, 2017, p. 225), in juxtaposition with the more neatly painted figure of photographer Peter Schlesinger (Hockney's partner at the time with whom he was separating, he applied the portrait to a prepared area of the canvas) standing poolside. "A 'watery' technique to represent a watery subject," commented Marco Livingstone (Livingstone, 1996, p. 147).

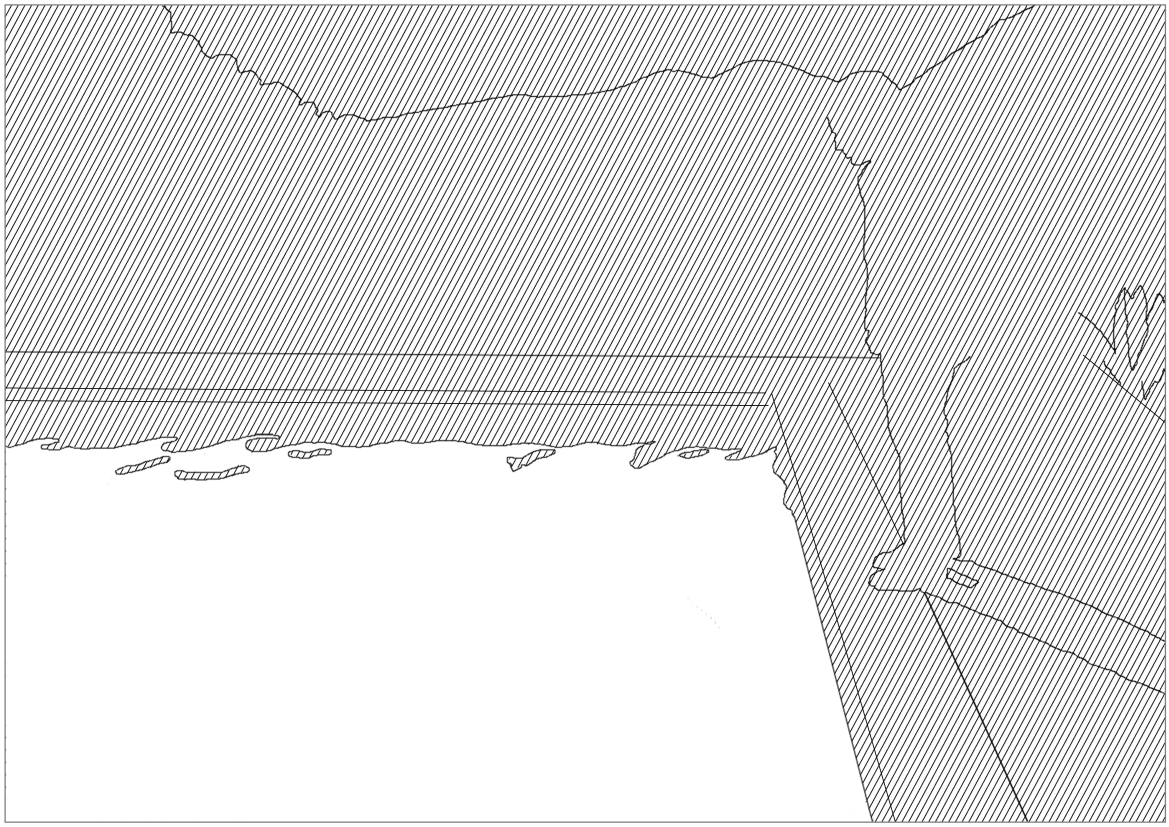


Figure 8. Schematic representation of David Hockney, *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)*, 1972, acrylic on canvas, 213.5 x 305 cm, Private collection. © David Hockney

The detachment between the figures, on the one hand, and between the background and the figures on the other is often brought up in relation to this painting. Hockney describes the detachment as a struggle, "[t]he figures never related to one another nor to the background. I changed the setting constantly from distant mountains to a claustrophobic wall and back again to mountains. I even tried a glass wall" (Sykes, 2011, p.261). Solely a primed surface could allow such changes of compositions and seamlessly hold the application of many layers. Having selected unprimed canvas to stain the pool and having primed the rest meant that the basic composition and the positioning of the pool in relation to the standing figure could not be modified. Although everything on the primed surface could in theory be altered indefinitely, the stained pool could not be enlarged, only reduced by extending the primed area from outside of the pool.

Though Hockney describes the detachment as a struggle, it seems to have been present early on in the process of making the picture. Not only did the picture originate from two photographs fortuitously lying next to each other on his studio floor (Sykes 2011, p. 261), the distinction is visible in a watercolour and gouache study for the painting, in which each figure

is a cutout and the pool with underwater figure part has been (re)fastened with adhesive tape (Img. 17). The paper study already presents with various techniques: pencil and watercolour in the water, gouache for the poolside and surroundings. The distinct materiality of the two figures was translated from the accidental montage on the studio floor to the study on paper before being transferred to the large painting through selective priming.

The initial attributions for the juxtaposed surfaces present in the gouache Hockney prepared for the painting and introduced on canvas, marked the picture from the ground up and installed a radical divide that Hockney – not for a lack of trying according to his own account – could not overcome.

In this instance, Hockney mentions selective preparation. About the juxtaposition of unprimed canvas and primed canvas in *Portrait of an Artist*, Hockney had this to say: "I... liked the idea that the eye could sense the difference between this watery effect of the acrylic paint with detergent in it [on unprimed canvas] and the effect of acrylic paint painted onto gesso ground...two very distinct things" (Stangos, 1976, p. 247).

The primed figure is static and placed in a dominant stance over the water "gazing at the distorted figure," as Hockney described it (Sykes, 2011, p. 261). In the upper half of the water, a cloud-like shadow invades the pool towards the figure. Simultaneously, as the swimming figure approaches the edge of the pool, it disappears into the water and into the canvas, blurred by absorption of the water (of the diluted acrylic) by the canvas, seemingly dissolving under Schlesinger's eyes.

Furthermore, there appears to be no wall on the extreme right of the swimming pool. And the underwater figure is so close to the presumed edge that it looks as if it is a moment away from swimming past Peter Schlesinger, underneath the preparation, a moment away from finding itself *out of the picture*.

Though both figures appear in the same painting, they are foreign to one another, each in its own realm. Choosing to paint "two figures in different styles," (Christie's, 2018) with selective preparation as a basis, the painter never could reconnect them. Hockney made preparatory choices in the initial stages of *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)* which predict and enhance the perceived 'struggle' of connection between the figures. The divide could not be overcome and ultimately became the subject of the painting.

3.2. Mt. Fuji and Flowers

After a trip to Japan, which Hockney summarized in one sentence as "Basically I was disappointed by Japan," he made *Mt. Fuji and Flowers* (Fig. 9, Img. 18, 19, 20). Again, Hockney diluted his acrylic emulsion paints with a large proportion of water and detergent following the method he had gathered from Helen Frankenthaler; a technique first showcased in her own *Mountains and Sea* – the painting alleged to have initiated stain painting in 1952.

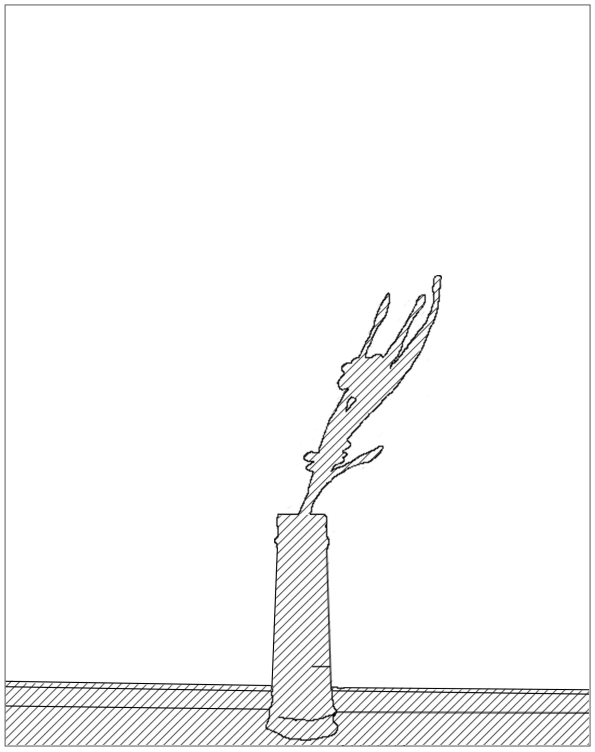


Figure 9. Schematic representation of David Hockney, *Mt. Fuji and Flowers*, 1972, acrylic on canvas, 152.4 x 121.9 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. © David Hockney

Hockney's *Mt. Fuji and Flowers* comprises a partial application of a preparation for components of the foreground as opposed to a soaked landscape 'background.' Closest to the viewer, in the foreground, the primed area protrudes, even through the glass of the frame in which the painting is held (Img. 19, 20). The primed form almost appears to sit against the glass. Without looking at the edge of the window sill (which recalls the edge of the pool in *Rubber Ring* and introduces (mental) distance with the landscape), the vase and flowers still very much protrude, exclusively as a side-effect from the selective preparation.

Hockney solely prepared the surface of the canvas that would receive the two narcissus flowers, their stalks and leaves, the vase they sit in and the windowsill. For the first and only

time, the soaking technique occupied the largest part of the rectangle, proportionally (to the primed part), and it included the whole landscape, sky, mountain and sea – the representation of water being reduced to a part of the unprimed area. Incidentally Hockney left that part out of the title, as opposed to the titles of his pools and his *Japanese Rain on Canvas* which systematically contain a reference to water.

The wetness of the water is no longer the object of the exposed and soaked canvas. The vibration of the water, nevertheless, is evoked through staining in the reflection of the mountains. Barring the reflection of the snowy mountain top, Hockney rendered the whole landscape with lines and surfaces made through multiple purple and blue veils of staining. The ends of the stained veils create horizontal lines: that of the mountain against the sky, the divide between the snowy and earthy parts of the mountain, etc. The lines and the illusion of landscape 'stratigraphy' they create, have a base in the physicality of materials; their drawing – with a darker edge and quivering shape – comes from a *physical reaction* on the canvas between the liquid of the paint and the cotton of the canvas (Img. 19). There is a physical reality to the representation. On the contrary, the volume built with undiluted acrylic to render the plant, vase and windowsill is wilfully constructed; shadow and light are added through colour on a primed base (which augments adherence). It reads as a "hard-edged, glossy, precise still-life" (Melaia, 1995, p. 112) because Hockney called on yet another quality of the gesso he used: its synthetic polymer base.

Emerging from superposed veils, the layered landscape – its water, mountain, snow top, smaller mountains and sky – appears to be made out of an identical substance. The same can be said about the plastic-y or wooden-looking flowers, vase and sill. The artificiality they allude to is in the acrylic substance they are made of, a form of plastic. Though all the paint of *Mt. Fuji* is acrylic and thus made of polymers, the skin of paint laid on the canvas over the primer is palpably plastic.

At first glance, a reading of 'nature versus culture' might be tempting, inferring that Hockney would have rendered a representation of artifice against a backdrop of raw nature. However, given a closer look, that reading is incomplete.

Hockney never saw Mount Fuji as it was obscured by clouds during his visit. He painted it in London, when he returned from Japan and had been disappointed in the industrialization of the country (Note 9). "Basically I was disappointed by Japan," he explains, "I'd expected it to

be much more beautiful than it is. At the time I thought most of it extremely ugly. I had expected factories carefully and precisely placed against mountains or lakes and instead I found that any spare, flat bit of land had the most uninteresting factories" (Note 10). No part of the painting was painted from nature. The landscape part Hockney based on a postcard of Mount Fuji he brought back; for the plant, he looked to a Japanese flower-arrangement manual (Sykes, 2011, p. 267). The two parts in *Mt. Fuji and Flowers* are borrowed representations, already abstracted.

Although some see in *Mt. Fuji* "a very romantic view of Japan" (Sykes, 2011), authors also write that Hockney's experience of Japan contradicted his expectations of an 'unspoiled' landscape (Howard, 1987, p. 440). The painter's disappointment is reflected in the painting. The gessoed flowers appear in front of the rest of the painting as if we're seeing the landscape through a window, maybe in a train. But the window is not open, we see through a kind of filter or a screen: a projection of what Hockney imagined Mount Fuji to be, based on a representation of the mountain on a postcard (and on other representations of the mountain he undoubtedly came across before and during his trip). *Mt. Fuji* evokes the feeling for the viewer of only having access to nature through a filter of the manmade, of (our) manipulations and representations. It suggests – just like Hockney's quote about the trip – the inaccessibility of 'true' nature.

Mt. Fuji features a domesticated and ordered nature against a backdrop of an idealized vision of nature. A presentation of artifice against a vague image of far-away nature, equally artificial, equally produced. This reading finds echo in Hockney's earlier Los Angeles paintings of the mid 1960s like *A Bigger Splash* and *A Lawn Being Sprinkled*. These show an artificialized and ordered nature. *Mt. Fuji*, too, is an arrangement of forms of nature: bamboo plant turned vase, two cut narcissus flowers, and the drowsy fantasy of a legendary mountain.

Though the paint of the whole surface is thus polymer-based, the raw unprimed cotton – on which he introduced a gesso-acrylic base for the flowers-in-vase-on-sill elements – functions as a canvas underneath the stained landscape that soaked up the diluted paint, as a reminder of *a different canvas*, that of 'unspoiled' nature. But the conclusion in Hockney's *Mt. Fuji* seems to be that everything is artifice, that everything is a construct. Hockney merely introduced different degrees of artificiality – various states of plasticness.

4. End remarks

Technical choices, as early as the first layer, can deeply impact the perception of a picture. In the aforementioned road trip paintings and pool-water pictures, Hockney used selective priming as a polyvalent artistic device. He utilized the juxtaposition of primed/unprimed to achieve different effects: to play with multiple references in a single painting; mix techniques and influences; create tension between surfaces and shape the perceived 'subject' of a painting; offer a different status to various elements of the canvas by splitting the surface into distinct materialities; play with effects of (shallow) depth; paint water with water; highlight flatness, but also – and in some cases simultaneously – to boost illusionism; to allow for compositional changes in the primed zones while keeping the textile of the canvas, specifically its capillarity, potent in the unprimed zones...

Hockney first introduced selective priming in the mid 1960s as part of his toolbox: he saw how it placed forms on the foreground, how it gave 'body' and substance to some areas and how this could inform perception by the viewer of the entire painting. In his first experiments, the localized primer appears like an element in a collage, as an add-on; a few years later, Hockney expanded the possibilities of the technique, utilizing the threshold it produces in the pictorial field, specifically harnessing its potential to suggest absence or emptiness (in contrast to fullness) by presenting a gap – an interruption – at once in the paint film and in the continuity of the fabric of his canvas.

Convinced that "the eye could sense the difference" between primed and unprimed, the painter utilized the viewer's sensory experience: "[i]n a sense, this is using texture," he specified (Crook and Learner, 2000, p. 93). If the eye indeed perceived a change in texture – a change in substance of the paint film – it would generate the perception of "two very distinct things," the painter had explained (Stangos, 1976, p. 247). Juxtaposed grounds, one distinct from the other, stimulate the eye to decipher one area in relation to the other. Hockney purposefully relied on the technique to keep the eye moving between different areas. Just like the painter at work, the eye tries to reconnect foreign elements in one picture.

Essentially, by isolating the primer in a restrained area on a canvas, Hockney shows what preparation does all-over in paintings, too. Displaying the effects of preparation and of raw canvas, he demonstrates how paintings work with and without preparation, how space can be suggested over both primed and unprimed grounds and flatness emphasized. His selective

priming shows the extent to which the stratigraphy of paintings influences how we read them. Whilst the eye scans the surface in an effort to localize the paint, interruptions between primed and unprimed enrich the stratigraphy of a painting and keep us looking.

Notes

1. Preparation (of which primer is a form) coats the fabric of the canvas to prepare for the application of paint layers. It fills the pores, decreases absorption by the fibres of the canvas while increasing the adherence of the paint. 'Ground' and 'preparation' are more generic terms to refer to preparatory layers, whilst "primer" is a type of preparatory layer(s) applied habitually over a size. For an overview of the most common grounds, their function and terminology in Western painting since the Renaissance, see *Grounds. 1400-1900* (Stoner and Rushfield, 2013, pp. 161–185) and *The Preparatory System* (Stols-Witlox, 2014, pp. 67–74).

2. Publications identify Hockney's preparation as "gesso" (Alteveer, 2017; Sykes, 2011). Gesso refers both to the traditional preparatory substance and a modern polymer one. Traditional gesso is a mix of an animal glue binder like rabbit-skin glue, chalk or gypsum and (white) pigment. Manufacturers in the mid 1950s developed acrylic polymer preparations (sizes and primers) and kept the term gesso, though synthetic gesso has little to do with the traditional substance (Stoner and Rushfield, 2013, pp.185–187). Hockney appears to have used an acrylic gesso to selectively prepare as the preparation visibly forms a supple, thin, white film deposited neatly on the canvas. Manufacturer Liquitex was the first to bring an acrylic gesso (named Liquitex – the company later named itself after the gesso), on the market. Since it is known that Hockney used Liquitex acrylic paints (water-emulsified acrylic polymer resin paints) for his paintings starting in 1963 or 1964 (Learner et al., 2007, p. 6; Stephens and Wilson, 2017, p. 258), it would not be surprising that he used Liquitex gesso to prepare his canvases.

3. Apart from David Hockney, I have found that the following painters have relied on the technique in at least one work: Jackson Pollock, Robert Ryman, Francis Bacon and Pieter Bruegel. I will address these cases of selective preparation of canvas in upcoming publications.

4. Many sources of information examine Hockney's early work. The here discussed paintings are dated to the following years: 1964, 1965, 1971 and 1972. The David Hockney Foundation

website presents a chronological overview of the painter's work per year (see https://thedavidhockneyfoundation.org/chronology/1964 for the year 1964, and so on) which places the work in context and includes archival material. Another source of information about this time period in Hockney's career, from the painter's point of view, is *David Hockney by David Hockney: My Early Years* (Stangos, 1976). Lastly, for essays on David Hockney's early work and influences (specifically from the mid 1960s to the early 1970s), see the exhibition catalogue of the latest large retrospective (Stephens and Wilson, 2017, pp. 12–121, 208–229, 258–259).

5. Though there are notable exceptions, unprepared canvas was very rarely used as a support in Western painting between the mid sixteenth and mid twentieth century; for hundreds of years paint layers were resolutely insulated from the fabric support by preparatory layers. However, unprepared canvas became a more common support (as it had been in the Middle Ages in the Low Countries) in the second half of the twentieth century, with a peak in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, particularly on the East Coast of the United States, after Jackson Pollock had begun working directly on unprimed canvas in 1946 (De Corte, 2019).

6. Hockney uses the word when he says his goal in the swimming pool paintings like *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)* is to "represent wetness." (Sykes, 2011, p. 261).

7. The original photograph captioned "rubber ring floating in a swimming pool cadaques spain 1971 CH" in handwriting, is reproduced on the cover of *David Hockney. Photograph* (Hockney, 1983) and in other exhibition catalogues of Hockney's photographs. The original photograph (with dark waters, a dark red ring and a blue denim covered knee) was trimmed before being added to one of Hockney's green photograph albums. It has yellowed and now appears overexposed (the water is light blue and the denim over the knee is white, etc.), its colours now closer to the painting's palette.

8. Hockney's *Self-Portrait with Blue Guitar* of 1977 shows him working at a desk.

9. On Hockney and Japan, see *Rethinking David Hockney's 'Reverse Perspective': The Acceptance of Japanese Art in the 1970s and 1980s* (Tanako, 2018).

10. The rest of the quote reads as follows, "We spent just two weeks there; it's not very long, I know. In retrospect it becomes more beautiful...I found something just as exciting because it was unexpected...there was an exhibition called 'Japanese Painters in the Traditional Style'.

They were contemporary paintings done from about 1925 to the present, using traditional Japanese techniques (painting in silk and screens), but occasionally treating modern Japan as a subject. One picture in particular, called *Osaka in the Rain*, I thought exceedingly beautiful. The misty clouds over the river and street were suggested only by the thin bars of the rain, and the little cars and people walking about all had just the slightest suggestion of reflection under them, making the whole thing look extremely wet" (Stangos, 1976).

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