

# David hockney essay



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Artist David Hockney's arguably most famous works are those that portray the sunny environs of California. But within his California paintings there is a large variety of tones and moods. In this essay I will compare and contrast "Mulholland Drive: The Road to the Studio" painted in 1987, and "California" painted in 1987. Hockney is often viewed as a pop artist alongside the likes of Andy Warhol and Richard Hamilton. Pop art used "popular" images in a novel way, injecting both American and occasionally British popular culture into art (Concise 416). Television, movies, advertisements, and movie stars all found their way into pop art.

At its basic level, pop art was a reaction to the seriousness of the art world, and a method of bringing humor into art. Perhaps no other place was so suitable a subject for pop art's satiric and laughing tone as glamorous sun-baked California. Hockney spent the early part of the Sixties in L. A. The images that he saw there provided fuel for years of art. He portrayed and glamorized both the landscape and the lifestyle. While working in L. A. he began to utilize acrylic paints to more accurately capture the bright light of California (Dictionary 9).

He felt that the somewhat heavier oil paints could not fully depict the power of the sun (Dictionary 9). The landscape directly influenced his choice of medium. His most famous California works are part of the "Pools" series. These paintings reveal a slow, sunny world by a deep, gently-moving swimming pool. Hockney's paintings of California express an integral part of American cultural history. He depicts the "American Dream" of the late Sixties, that hope for a bright sunny place and a better life analyzed by such writers as Hunter S. Thompson.

After the turmoil of Vietnam, all David Hockney America wanted was a rest, a sunlit world without conflict. Hockney painted this world, not without instilling it with his own sense of humour. "California" is a 5-foot by 6-foot painting of acrylic on canvas. It is dominated by the image of a swimming pool, whose swirling depths seem to suck in the observer. The serenity of the two male bathers is belied by the commotion of the water. The continuous motion of the water contrasts with the absolute stillness in the rest of the painting. The two bathers seem frozen and unnaturally stiff, imbued with some inner tension.

Except for the water the scene is quiet. There is a loneliness that pervades the painting- the bathers seem each in their own world. The observer can almost hear the silence and the occasional lone slap of water. The empty beach chair on the green background emphasizes this sense of loneliness. It seems like someone has just left the chair and exited the painting- as if someone is missing. The single potted plant in the background suggests an uncultivated, rather empty backyard. The two men seem to be living just that- an endless, empty afternoon baking by the pool.

The hectic swirl of the water is the only motion. It suggests a deeper tension, a battle in the depths. The fine swirling lines create a hysteric background to the sleeping men. The effect is ominous- it looks like the men will drown if they slip off the floats. The colors are bright and flat and alive and the men look just a little sunburned. The photograph-like appearance of the men is testament to Hockney's experience with photographic collages and other forms of technologically influenced art (Hoffman 118). The twisted position of their bodies is slightly Cubist, as is the knotted swirl of the water.

David Hockney " Mulholland Drive: The Road to the Studio" is a 5-foot by 20-foot landscape in acrylic on canvas. It is a whimsical painting full of bright colors and playful patterns. Its sheer size makes it dominate a room. In the background of the painting a road winds itself across the tops of hills. The patterns making up the hills and trees show a markedly Impressionist influence. The point of view, with the observer looking over the edge of a hill downward into a landscape, recalls Van Gogh's " Starry Night".

The placidity of the nature scene is broken by radio towers on the left and right of the canvas. But in Hockney's hands, the towers and the highway breaking the landscape seem like they belong there. The colors are unnaturally bright-pink hills, blue grass and orange sky. Again Hockney displays his penchant for finely-drawn lines and hectic surfaces. The observer can see the movement of each blade of grass on the central hills. Like " California" this painting is filled with moving surfaces but dominated by an overall sense of stillness. Hockney has captured Mulholland Drive in that split-second as the sun sets.

The distribution of orange-yellow light and blue-black shadow suggests that the sunset will be over soon and the moment will be lost. There is the same sense of stillness and timelessness found in " California". But the bright colors and moving patterns enlighten the usual sense of loneliness found in Hockney's work. This loneliness seems temporary, spurred only by the arcane silence of the sunset. Hockney's use of bright blocks of color in the divided sky and clearly-delineated hills also shows a Cubist influence. But in this painting Hockney's Cubism is more about color than form.

It is his use of contrasting colors to define the hills and valleys that gives the landscape a jagged, Cubist look. He accents each surface in turn, exaggerating their meeting points and showing the seams of the earth beneath the landscape. At the same time it also suggests a David Hockney collage- another example of Hockney's love of collage seeping into his painting. But here his Cubism is only slightly abstract. Hills, trees and towers are all instantly recognizable. "California" and "Mulholland Drive: The Road to the Studio" both depict the imminently desirable world of California.

But while "California" is both a celebration of and a commentary on the L. A. poolside lifestyle, "Mullholand Drive" is an appreciation of the ageless and often unsung beauty of California's natural terrain. "California" is solely about man, "Mullholand Drive" is about nature and man's attempt to leave a mark on it. Both paintings are influenced by Pop and Cubism, but reveal their influences in distinctly different ways. "Califonia" is outright, in-your-face, a "dont- you-want- this" call to attention with an ironic twist.

"Mulholland Drive" is a slow, subtly unfolding landscape that reveals layers of color and light and almost soothes with its sense of mortally- interpreted timelessness. Hockney paints a world that we all want to inhabit, but paints it in a way that makes us look again and question our own motivations. He creates scenes that are both are idyllic and tense, scenes that draw the observer in only to startle them with some suddenly-revealed twist. In both these paintings, he has created scenes that are deliberately, quintessentially American, scenes that underline and explore the ageless "American Dream".