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Hammer, Martin (2017) *The photographic source and artistic affinities of David Hockney's 'A bigger splash'*. Burlington Magazine, 159 (1370). pp. 386-393. ISSN 0007-6287.

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David Hockney's 'A Bigger Splash': Taking a Critical Plunge

Martin Hammer

David Hockney's *A Bigger Splash* (1967 - FIG) has gained a definitive place in the canon of English modernism, indeed of British art in general. The picture is currently celebrating its fiftieth birthday, and starring in the artist's eightieth birthday retrospective touring London, Paris and New York. *A Bigger Splash* doubtless owes its popular appeal to many factors: legibility and economy; the visual wit inherent in implying human action although no figure is actually visible; the evocation of an idyllically sunny environment, the dream of arcadia transplanted from the Roman Campagna to modern California; the precise, well-crafted execution; its reproducibility; and a residual association with the Swinging Sixties. *A Bigger Splash* epitomises Hockney's affection for Los Angeles, as the antithesis of dreary, repressed England. Yet the recent recycling of Hockney's title for that of a rather dark film, about a Mediterranean holiday that goes badly wrong, suggests not merely the continuing resonance of the work, but also its availability to less up-beat readings.¹

In this article, I want to explore how a close reading and a comparative analysis might illuminate *A Bigger Splash*. Such an approach is in line with the way the work has been displayed in recent years at Tate Britain. In the 1960s gallery, we have become accustomed to peering at *A Bigger Splash* across the open centre of Anthony Caro's constructed sculpture *Early One*

Morning (1963). Beyond the visual coincidence of Hockney's diving board and the projecting horizontal plane in the Caro, the two works evoke a hedonistic, colourful sensibility, transcending the divides between painting and sculpture, abstraction and Pop figuration. A confrontation between the Hockney and Caro's *Prairie* (1967) would offer a still more striking affinity. The two works share a planarity, weightlessness and horizontality, and a preference for bright, synthetic colour, not to mention the American allusion implicit in the imagery of one and the title of the other, evoking the transatlanticism of these two artists and the period in general.

Confronted in the original, *A Bigger Splash* irresistibly draws the viewer in, spatially and imaginatively. Judging from the understated grisaille reflections in the window, the urban setting wraps around the location that we occupy, having been in conversation (or so we might fantasise) with the individual who has just plunged into the water, their human presence reduced to the merest suggestion of fleshy pink at the base of the splash. The diving board projects and recedes from our side of the pool. Metaphorically speaking, too, we are encouraged to take the plunge, to seek out layers of meaning and association beneath the serene, flat façade. Yet that immersion coexists with an inbuilt distance. The diver has absented him- or herself, leaving us high and dry. The editing out of the nearest section of the pool surround serves to disembodify the viewer. And although the picture contains naturalistic detail, it comes across overall as contrived and simplified. An image of implied momentary action and perhaps spontaneous behaviour is suspended within a

painting that looks controlled and careful in the manner of its execution, and emphatically ordered in formal terms. As Hockney aptly remarked, it is 'a balanced composition'.² Analytically, we might register, for instance, that the white patch at the heart of the splash is also at the dead centre of the painting's central vertical axis. The unbroken transverse band at the far side of the pool likewise occupies the horizontal centre of the painting. The area above is bisected by zones describing the building and the flat blue sky. Spatially, the perspective of the diving board recedes in the direction of the small chair, while its ochre colour is picked up in the simple eaves of the building. A vertical, continuing the more visible of the two trees, coincides roughly with the meeting of the horizontal and diagonal lines describing the right-angle at the end of the diving board, viewed in perspective; and so on.

Aesthetic detachment might be seen to reflect the circumstances of the picture's creation. *A Bigger Splash* was actually completed in Berkeley, where Hockney was teaching from April to June 1967. In fact, the painting was the elaboration of an idea explored in two pictures produced the previous year, *The Little Splash* and *The Splash*.³ In that sense, *A Bigger Splash* comprised a distillation of Los Angeles, a simplified and idealised representation that he realised with the benefit of geographical and emotional distance. Moreover, the two previous variations had both been exhibited and sold in New York at the Landau-Alan gallery, during Hockney's successful one-man show of April 1967, organised in conjunction with his London dealer Kasmin.⁴ The decision to make the larger version that spring may therefore

also have had a commercial dimension, looking ahead to his next show. *A Bigger Splash* was shown early the following year at Kasmin's, and acquired by the gallery's backer.⁵

The splash pictures evidently spoke to audiences and collectors remote from Los Angeles, who relished the exotic theme but also appreciated the contemporary aspect of Hockney's idiom. The intensity of colour, underlying clarity and geometry, and the use of flat, unmodulated paint, acrylic rather than oil, applied with a roller and with masking-tape establishing sharp edges, would all have brought to mind the large abstract paintings of Kenneth Noland or his British counterpart Robyn Denny.⁶ Such artists were being exhibited to critical acclaim at Kasmin's, which, aside from Hockney shows, largely operated as a London outpost of Post-painterly Abstraction.⁷ Hockney described building up *A Bigger Splash* initially as an arrangement of blocks of flat colour, which were then rendered spatial and representational through the insertion of pockets of detail. Similarly, he noted that *A Lawn Sprinkler* 'looked at one point exactly like a symmetrical Robin (sic) Denny painting'.⁸ In *A Bigger Splash*, Hockney's palette and diving board could be seen to allude to Denny's such as *Ted Bentley* (1961) and *Little Man* (1964-5). In the latter, the central vertical strip, more animated surround, and white border may even have triggered associations for Hockney with swimming pool imagery.⁹

For viewers, then, *A Bigger Splash* must have seemed poised, knowingly and appealingly, between abstraction and figuration. In tone, the painting is likewise ambivalent. The sophisticated

viewer might perceive an ironic aspect to Hockney's depictions of the Californian good life, implicit in the insubstantial architecture and vegetation. But most commentators have presumed a celebratory motivation. Outdoor pools were bound up with an erotic frisson in both heterosexual and homosexual milieux. The motif offered one obvious pretext for the display of nearly naked male bodies, as adapted elsewhere by Hockney from magazines such as *Physique Pictorial*.¹⁰ Given the current status of the pool in Los Angeles houses as the focus of family life, a latter-day 'hearth' for one commentator in 1967, Hockney's several variants can be seen to extend his 'assimilationist', domesticated vision of homosexual identity.¹¹ One reading has discerned oblique self-portraiture in this image of 'undiluted pleasure and satisfaction':

The subject of *A Bigger Splash* is both a disappearance and an immersion – the vanishing of the diver, his entry into the pool – which was surely Hockney's way of dramatising his own feelings on having arrived in America. He too had made his getaway, had plunged into a new and delightful place. The artist does not actually show us his alter ego, the diver, revelling in the sudden silence of underwater. But he makes much of the splash that hides him from us... a flurry of excited white paint into which the painter seems to have distilled all the happiness and energy of being young, and in love, and exactly where you want to be; an ejaculation of joy.¹²

By extension, we could even locate the picture within a minor artistic tributary, rooted in Dada, whereby the splash motif is

associated with sexual excitement.¹³ The idea was launched by Francis Picabia around 1920 and elaborated in Marcel Duchamp's 1946 *Paysage Fautif*, an ironic response to the macho, gestural aesthetic that was currently emerging in his vicinity in New York, and a work which has been recently revealed to be masturbatory in the literal sense.¹⁴ The association with Hockney's image may seem far-fetched, although we should note that Duchamp was in the air following his 1963 retrospective in Pasadena. In *A Bigger Splash*, too, one might well discern an ironic reference to Abstract Expressionism. Hockney doubtless knew the recent work of Willem de Kooning, which channelled a newly pastoral sensibility into colourful abstractions, as in the evocation of water, sunlight, sand and flesh in *Door to the River* (1960). More vividly still, De Kooning's *Merritt Parkway* (1959 - FIG), with its dramatic explosion of white, floated against deep flat blue and audaciously applied with house-painters' brushes, offered a striking visual precedent for *A Bigger Splash*.¹⁵ Hockney surely conceived his own fastidious and more illustrative variation on the splash theme as a knowing reference to such precursors, given that De Kooning's 1959 sell-out show at the Sidney Janis Gallery, featuring works like *Merritt Parkway*, was reviewed in *Time* magazine under the title 'Big Splash'.¹⁶ Hockney's familiarity with the issue and review, whether encountered back in London or more recently in America, is further implicit in Hockney's subsequent comment on how he had relished the idea of taking two weeks to render painstakingly a momentary splash in paint. The *Time* piece had noted how De Kooning 'has clearly moved toward landscape...

images swim closer and more sturdily to the surface'. The artist was quoted on his spontaneous method of working: "I'm not trying to be a virtuoso," he explains, "but I have to do it fast. It's not like poker, where you can build to a straight flush or something. It's like throwing dice. I can't save anything". In contrast, Hockney's picture, which was bigger than *Merritt Parkway*, was generated by means of calculated adjustments, within the process of execution and from one painting to another.

In terms of imagery, *A Bigger Splash* was the culmination of a series of pool pictures projecting Hockney's highly selective vision of Los Angeles. In reality, the city was noted for its banal architecture, suburban sprawl, its traffic and freeways, and for its significant social issues and inequalities. The Watts Riots, prompted by racial tensions, had caused spectacular levels of destruction in August 1965. Hockney focussed not on the public sphere, but on private existence in interiors and secluded gardens with pools, once a preserve of the very rich but now an increasingly widespread feature of middle-class housing. *A Bigger Splash* echoes a strand of imagery surveyed in the recent exhibition *Backyard Oasis*.¹⁷ Imagery of domestic pools were ubiquitous in the windows of real estate agents, and in architectural journals and lifestyle magazines such as *House Beautiful*, showing off the fashionable modernist houses which had been sprouting up since the war in Palm Springs, Beverley Hills and elsewhere in southern California.¹⁸ These were the springboard for stunning photographs by the likes of Julius Shulman, as in the richly tonal black and white images of, for instance, the Edgar J. Kaufmann House in Palm Springs (1947),

or the later colour shots of the Case Study houses in LA.¹⁹ The elimination of figures and general air of theatricality in such imagery, combined with their compositional virtuosity, could well have appealed to Hockney and informed his conception of *A Bigger Splash*. The pool theme featured too in more vernacular kinds of photography, notably the postcards and brochures that sought to project a favourable image of vacations in the west, from Las Vegas to California, as mass, driving-based tourism took off in the US. Hockney's picture alludes to the exaggerated colours and aura of fantasy pervading this imagery, with the wide white border signifying not just postcards, but also polaroid photography. The Polaroid Swinger had been launched in 1965, and Hockney recalls acquiring his first camera at this time.²⁰

In sum, the initial impression of *A Bigger Splash* begins to give way to a more complex sense of reality mediated through artistic invention and through layers of photographic reference. As the artist commented, pools were a perfect vehicle for pursuing his ongoing interest in the relationship, necessarily oblique, between art and external reality. In particular, pools permitted him to engage with the problem of depicting in paint something as transient, insubstantial, multi-layered and sparkling as the substance of water. The splash pictures explore the related paradox of describing a momentary splash in works whose laborious execution inevitably required hours, if not days. The artifice involved is dramatized through Hockney's exaggeratedly painstaking rendition of a sensation that we can in fact only experience through the intermediary of an instantaneous photograph. In that sense, too, viewers gazing at *A Bigger Splash*

will instinctively grasp that they are contemplating a painting of a photograph.

Hockney acknowledged that in this case he had used ‘a photograph I found in a book about how to build swimming pools I found on a news stand in Hollywood’.²¹ Indeed, the specific source for *A Bigger Splash* was, I can reveal, the utterly banal image employed as the cover of a popular technical manual, which had first been published in 1959 and went through several subsequent editions (FIG).²² The splash, diving board and general structure of the motif, along with details of the building behind the pool and the landscape backdrop, were all quoted in *Little Splash*. A good deal was already omitted: the trees, pool furniture, complex reflections on glass and water, and above all the couple looking admiringly at their athletic offspring. In Hockney’s second version and then in *A Bigger Splash*, the replacement of the folksy architecture with something more modernist, the substitution of a pair of palm trees for the mountains and other picturesque details, and the general sense of order, serve to heighten the effect of distillation. In the absence of explicit figures and setting, we are left with the Platonic idea of house and pool as the collective fantasy of wealthy, sophisticated Los Angeles society.

A Bigger Splash registers a general shift in Hockney’s work towards a more naturalistic treatment of space, texture and light, which culminated in the big double portraits of the late 1960s. The closest parallels are found in his other pictures from 1967. *A Lawn Sprinkler*, *A Neat Lawn* and *A Lawn Being Sprinkled*

similarly play off the frontal structures and spaces of manicured gardens against the ephemeral, transparent forms produced by the emissions from sprinklers.²³ In other works, such as *Savings and Loan Building* and *The Room, Manchester Street*, a portrait of Patrick Proctor, observed detail is combined with a high level of geometric rigour.²⁴ The greater simplification in *A Bigger Splash* was attuned to the larger format, and calibrated to Hockney's descriptive purpose: 'The clear light of California suggested simple techniques as the light in a London room suggested an older 'chiaroscuro' technique'.²⁵

At the time, informed observers might have positioned such works in relation not just to abstraction but also to an emerging tendency variously known as super-realism, hyper-realism, and photo-realism. This trend had been launched in 1966 with the show *The Photographic Image*, organised by critic and curator Lawrence Alloway, a fellow expatriate Brit, for the Guggenheim Museum in New York.²⁶ The exhibition included work by Richard Artschwager, Lynn Foulkes and Malcolm Morley, alongside artists who transposed photographic images more directly into their work by means of collage or silkscreen transfer, as opposed to transposing imagery from photograph to painting.²⁷ Subsequent surveys concentrated more exclusively on this latter possibility, embracing figures such as Chuck Close and Richard Estes. Alloway explained his insistence on reference to photographic sources in the experience of making and viewing this type of work:

... when we look at a photographic realist painting there is a double image: we see both a painting and an image clearly derived from a photograph. The painting carries a reference to another channel of communication as well as to the depicted scene or object... Such a view seems to accord with the fascinating realism of everyday subjects oddly distanced from us, of complex references rather than substantial preferences, that characterize photographic realism.²⁸

Hockney identified with this tendency to a degree, but in hindsight insisted that his own practice stood apart:

In America, it was the period when photo-realism was becoming known, and I was slightly interested in it... I never used their technique of projecting a colour slide onto the canvas, so that you're really reproducing a photograph. I just drew the photographs out freehand. It was still similar to using a photograph from *Physique Pictorial*... In photo-realism the subject-matter is not the actual objects represented on the canvas, it's a flat photograph of those objects.²⁹

For Alloway, the exemplary practitioner of the new aesthetic was Morley, whose one-man show of paintings of ocean liners and cabin interiors took place at New York's Kornblee Gallery in February 1967, a few weeks before Hockney's show in the city.³⁰ The two artists were in friendly contact, since Morley's chateau and castle pictures were said by Alloway to have been based on a postcard from Hockney.³¹ They presumably got to know one

another in America, given that Morley had left London for America a year before Hockney moved down from Yorkshire. There is an intriguing convergence between *A Bigger Splash* and Morley's *Diving Champion* (1967), which was based on a page from a Good Year calendar, as the inscription makes clear.³² Beyond the shared imagery, both works employ a wide white border, evoking photographic formats, and a bright, synthetic palette, dominated by intense blues, suggesting commercially-produced imagery. Yet the comparison also highlights Hockney's more ambivalent attitude towards the hedonistic theme, epitomised by the visibility and youthful glamour of Morley's diving figures. *Diving Champion* (FIG) flaunts its origin in routine, clichéd imagery, and invites the viewer to reflect on the transposition from an ephemeral, disposable source, typically encountered in a quite working-class social environment, into a large, hand-made painting. *A Bigger Splash* triggers subliminal associations with vernacular imagery and predictable feelings. Yet it interposes, as noted, a sense of distance, aesthetic, emotional and imaginative, between spectator and imagery, a space into which darker resonances might also intrude.

In 1967, especially perhaps in California, it was hard to escape a sense of the American dream turning into a nightmare. That summer, racial tensions escalated into full-scale urban riots in Detroit, Newark, Cleveland, Washington, D.C., Chicago, and Atlanta.³³ In Los Angeles, June witnessed a massive march protesting against the Vietnam War. American involvement had been escalating over the past couple of years, leading the previous month to the bombing of Hanoi. The campus at

Berkeley, where *A Bigger Splash* was realised, was the single most intense focus of protest and anti-establishment agitation anywhere in the country, uniting students and faculty. Hockney was not immune and evidently attended some anti-war meetings.³⁴ A relevant parallel is R.B. Kitaj's 1967 painting *Juan de la Cruz*, a surreal but also politically-charged image of a black soldier inside a helicopter, with an incongruous view through the window of a naked woman walking the plank towards the sea at the behest of pirates, the latter motif loosely recalling *A Bigger Splash*.³⁵

However, what the juxtaposition with Kitaj also emphasises is Hockney's distinctive focus on purely architectural motifs. This was compatible with the abstract impulse in his work, but suggests too a certain affinity with art of the inter-war period. It can be argued that Hockney retained a sense of his English identity, as a filter through which to describe American subjects. We might perceive in *A Bigger Splash* a remote echo of Paul Nash's faux-naïve insertion of geometric elements into depopulated landscapes, triggered in turn by an interest in the early work of Giorgio de Chirico. At the Tate Gallery, Hockney could have seen Nash's *Landscape at Iden* (1929) and the more obscure *Blue House on the Shore* of around 1930 (FIG). The latter, especially, prefigures the simplifications of *A Bigger Splash*, and even the mountainous backdrop of the first version. In a sense, The Hockney presented California as the new Mediterranean, the terrain to which Nash was alluding. At the same time, *A Bigger Splash* can profitably be regarded as Hockney's homage to a specifically American realist mode

concurrent with Nash. This was epitomised by Edward Hopper and the Precisionist Charles Sheeler (both of whom had died recently, in May 1967 and May 1965 respectively, having been hailed as precursors of new trends). According to his friend Henry Geldzahler, Hockney greatly admired their work, in which vivid description of light, space and architectural detail was combined with emphatic compositional order and often with an elimination of the figures who traditionally served to animate the scene.³⁶ Both artists were virtually unknown in Britain at this time, but Hockney would undoubtedly have become aware of their work in public and private collections in America, as well as via reproductions. Sheeler foreshadowed the practice of working from photographs, and a painting like *Classic Landscape* (1931) provided a model for the structural rigour, clarity of light, spatial frontality and emphatic perspective that Hockney employed in *A Bigger Splash*.³⁷ Hopper, on the other hand, produced a seemingly dispassionate realism suffused with subjective feelings of alienation and loneliness, an undertone that we might equally project into the Hockney.

The Los Angeles art scene provides additional points of reference for *A Bigger Splash*. It is well known that Hockney was somewhat involved in the city's artistic community (his friend Nick Wilder ran a gallery). During the 1960s, Los Angeles was second only to New York in sustaining a practising avant-garde, embracing diverse commitments to Neo-Dada, abstraction and Pop aesthetics.³⁸ The key figure was Ed Ruscha, whose most original contribution was his series of photobooks, launched by *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations* (1963), extending a deadpan Pop aesthetic

to a fresh medium, and to subject-matter centred on vernacular LA buildings and urban spaces (such as parking lots). In his synoptic account of the 1960s, Thomas Crow extolled Ruscha's virtues at the expense of Hockney, whom Crow portrayed as a superficial consumer of the LA spectacle. He remarked of Ruscha's 1966 'fold-out production *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*': 'The treatment of that uniquely linear and discrete urban district as a ready-made, the refusal of artful arrangement or commentary, distribution through cheap, endlessly duplicatable means, all made for fresh application of Duchampian strategems...'.³⁹ *Every Building's*:

cognitive rewards and formal acuity put in the shade better-known 'Pop' appropriations of the Los Angeles landscape, such as David Hockney's embodiment of the Northern Englishman in paradise: his *A Bigger Splash* of 1967 returns to the more accessible precedents of De Kooning and Franz Kline, turning the broad expressive movement of the loaded brush into a souvenir of exuberantly chlorinated tourism.⁴⁰

In this account, Hockney is patronised as a 'Northern Englishman' and so presumably not very sophisticated (although Ruscha, who grew up in Nebraska and Oklahoma, is not similarly captioned a 'mid-western American'). Hockney comes across as a camp globe-trotter, whose proclivity for bleaching his hair as an emblem of his homosexuality is hinted at in the 'chlorinated' tourist jibe.

As a corrective to this clichéd polarisation, it is productive to explore the compatibilities between a pair of artists who moved in the same LA circles and were at least acquainted. In the 1960s, Ruscha was better known for his paintings, and we might note the conjunction between imagery of fleeting, gravity-defying liquid motion in *A Bigger Splash* and that in Ruscha's *Glass of Milk, Falling*, a work of 1967 which was exhibited at the Whitney Biennial (FIG).⁴¹ The Ruscha also projects, to playful effect, a representational corollary for gestural mark-making, with a hint perhaps of it proverbially being no use crying over spilled milk, so injecting darker connotations. Painstakingly rendered liquid is another point of contact, as in word pictures such as *Ripe*, also from 1967.⁴² It is also worth comparing the Hockney with Ruscha's monumental *Los Angeles County Museum on Fire*, begun in 1965, as the museum's new wing opened, but only exhibited in 1968. Both paintings include expanses of water, and seem subtly poised between perspectival naturalism and an effect of stylisation, whereby architectural imagery is simplified and extracted from any larger urban setting, so that we seem to be looking at a model or blueprint. At a thematic level, both undercut the utopian connotations of sub-modernist LA architecture with a note of threat and transient disturbance, notwithstanding the absence of figures. Hockney's splash, with its elusive narrative suggestion, is matched by the fire afflicting Ruscha's museum at the far left of the composition, to enigmatic, almost Magrittean effect.

It is even possible that Ruscha had Hockney in mind when producing the book *Nine Swimming Pools (and a Broken Glass)* in

1968.⁴³ This was Ruscha's only exercise in colour photography, but otherwise typically laconic in its approach to this ubiquitous, increasingly banal fixture of post-war housing in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, where he shot several of the images. The absence of human activity, and hence the disconsolate atmosphere, seem more obviously poignant. In *Nine Swimming Pools*, there is the coda of the broken glass, floating in the pool as if to suggest the night before, and to evoke the physical and emotional hazards latent in the most benign of circumstances. The affinity brings *A Bigger Splash* within the trajectory of the pool as a site of death and destruction, deriving additional pathos from the subversion of associations with sensual delight. In Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, the eponymous hero took his only swim of the summer in the pool of his palatial abode, only to be shot dead in retaliation for a crime he had not committed. With reference to film and TV iconography, Dick Hebdidge remarked that 'the body in the pool as metonym for trouble in paradise is... a recurrent motif bordering on cliché in West Coast sunshine noir'.⁴⁴ *Sunset Boulevard* is the archetypal movie reference. Another case is *The Graduate*, like *A Bigger Splash* a work of 1967, first released that December. As it happens, the movie was mainly set between Los Angeles and Berkeley. The pool scenes evoke Ben's successive moods of depression; his emotional alienation from his bourgeois family; and his sexual fulfilment with Mrs Robinson, notably through the daring edit from Ben thrusting up onto the inflatable to landing, as it were, on top of Mrs Robinson in the bedroom. Overall, the coming-of-age narrative projects a 'a scarifying

picture of the raw vulgarity of the swimming-pool rich', according to reviewer in the *New York Times*.⁴⁵

The notion that whatever we treasure is undercut inevitably by transience was captured by the phrase *Et in Arcadia Ego*. The idea had migrated from Erwin Panofsky's learned discourse on Poussin.⁴⁶ Literary elaborations included W.H. Auden's 1964 poem of that title.⁴⁷ The sense that all may not be well in paradise was explored in relation to gay sexuality and Los Angeles in the novel *A Single Man* (also from 1964) by Christopher Isherwood, an old friend of Auden's and a new one of Hockney's. This tells the poignant story of a day in the life of a 58-year-old gay man, struggling with the recent death of his partner, the crushing boredom of his job as a University lecturer, the exasperating neediness of his neighbours and friends, and with his own physical and mental decline. Cumulatively, these induce in George a profound loneliness and melancholy, exacerbated by the frantic but ghastly development of Los Angeles, and the seediness of the older suburbs in which he lives. At the end, after an adventure in and by the sea, he dies. We might discern in *A Bigger Splash* comparable intimations of the fate of an aging, solitary individual, the emptiness of his or her existence echoed by the arid domestic surroundings, who has decided to get up from his or her poolside director's chair, and to seek fleeting release from life's cares in watery sensation, or even a more permanent oblivion. The inclusion of the chair (a chair and lilo were initially present on the terrace of *A Splash*, but then replaced by the cactus bed) and the absence from view of the

diving figure are calculated to trigger speculation about who might have dived in and why.⁴⁸

This crystallises the issue of what it was that Hockney responded to in that particular photograph from the publication about pool construction. In *A Bigger Splash*, he devised an image that in any other aesthetic context would have been deemed a rank failure. What was the point, outside the realm of fine art, of an image that was neither classically still and empty, nor animated by visible human activity, the two recurrent means to celebrate the spectacle of the domestic pool? One concern was surely to generate ambiguity. From the start, one imagines, Hockney read his source image against the grain of its own uplifting connotations. This could have involved the perverse conjecture that something unexpected had just fallen from the sky, causing the dramatic splash. Such an interpretation might have occurred to somebody familiar with the famous classical myth reworked in Auden's poem 'Musée des Beaux Arts' (1938). The old masters, for Auden, were never wrong about suffering and its human position:

... In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns
away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen

Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.⁴⁹

Was it a remote Brueghel echo that attracted Hockney, an artist more devoted than most to old master traditions, to the pool image? It does not seem entirely ridiculous to see in *A Bigger Splash* an allusion to the fall of Icarus, and to read the painting as a pictorial variation on the notion that even in arcadia, personal tragedies can occur, individuals can overreach and do terrible harm to themselves, while the rest of us just get on with our everyday lives, armoured by self-protective indifference. I do not want to present Hockney as a misunderstood tragedian, but rather to suggest that the camp, life-enhancing façade of his work may at times veil a proverbial heart of darkness. The emotional ambiguity of the painting may prompt a final juxtaposition with Andy Warhol's electric chair paintings and prints, from a couple of years earlier, in which the silkscreened image is floated against bland, seductively coloured grounds, all the more disquietingly for the absence of human presence and action.

After submitting his vernacular source to the transformations described, Hockney ended up with a large-scale painting in which he presumably felt that he had reconciled multiple objectives. He had produced an eminently accessible and saleable picture; depicted Los Angeles as imbued with arcadian and positive homosexual associations; explored the interchange between art and reality, as well as painting and photography; flirted with contemporary abstraction, both expressionist and 'post-

painterly', and at the same time aligned his practice with British modernist precursors and with a 'photographic' realism extending from the likes of Hopper and Sheeler through to contemporaries such as Morley and Ruscha; and he had hinted at darker readings, in tune with treatments in recent film and literature, and in line with perceptions amongst his and younger generations that things were alarmingly awry in contemporary America. The engaged viewer might shift pleasurably between these and other possibilities, fresh perhaps from absorbing a charismatic critical text, published that same year in America, which insisted on the demise of the author as the authoritative source of meaning, and on the corresponding birth of active, even playful readers, able and willing to dive into the text, or for that matter painting.⁵⁰

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- ¹ *A Bigger Splash* (2015, directed Luca Guadagnino).
- ² Nikos Stangos, *David Hockney by David Hockney*, London and New York 1975, p. 125.
- ³ *David Hockney by David Hockney*, p. 161.
- ⁴ Exh. cat. *David Hockney: New Paintings and Drawings*, New York (Landau-Alan Gallery) 14 March to 8 April 1967.
- ⁵ Exh. cat. *David Hockney: a splash, a lawn, two rooms, two stains, some neat cushions and a table... painted*, London (Kasmin Ltd) January–February 1968.
- ⁶ The Tate acquired Noland's *Gift* (1961-2) in 1966: see <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/noland-gift-t00898/text-catalogue-entry>
- ⁷ See Lisa Tickner, 'The Kasmin Gallery, 1963-1972', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 30 no. 2, 2007, pp. 263
- ⁸ *David Hockney by David Hockney*, p. 126.
- ⁹ Reproduced in David Alan Mellor, *The Art of Robyn Denny*, London 2002, pp. 74 and 114.
- ¹⁰ On the gay dimension, see Tyler Stallings, 'From Beefcake to Skatecake: Shifting Depictions of Masculinity and the Backyard Swimming Pool in Southern California', in Daniell Cornell (ed.), *Backyard Oasis: The Swimming Pool in Southern California Photography 1945-1982*, Munich, London, New York 2012, pp. 128-171.
- ¹¹ Cécile Whiting, *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 2006, p. 124.
- ¹² Andrew Graham-Dixon, 'A Bigger Splash by David Hockney', *Sunday Telegraph*, 13 August 2000.
- ¹³ David Hopkins, *Dada's Boys*, New Haven and London 2007, Chapter 5.
- ¹⁴ Gavin Parkinson, *The Duchamp Book*, London 2008, p. 63.
- ¹⁵ Collection Detroit Institute of Arts.
- ¹⁶ 'Big Splash', *Time*, Vol. 73, Issue 20, 18 May 1959,
- ¹⁷ Cornell, *Backyard Oasis*.

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- ¹⁸ See Jennifer Watts, 'Swimming Alone: The Backyard Pool in Cold War California', in Cornell, *Backyard Oasis*, pp. 52-59.
- ¹⁹ Illustrated in Cornell, *Backyard Oasis*, pp. 107, 110, 111, 121
- ²⁰ *David Hockney by David Hockney*, p. 99.
- ²¹ *Ibid*, p. 124. *Swimming Pools*, Menlo Park 1959 (my gratitude to Sam Tanis, who had also noted the Hockney connection, for supplying a scanned image).
- ²² *Swimming Pools*, Menlo Park 1959 (my gratitude to Sam Tanis, who had also noted the Hockney connection, for supplying me with a scanned image of this now obscure publication).
- ²³ *David Hockney by David Hockney*, p.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 169.
- ²⁵ *Ibid*, p.
- ²⁶ Exh. cat. *The Painting of Modern Life: 1960s to Now*, London (Hayward Gallery) 2007.
- ²⁷ Exh. cat. *The Photographic Image*, New York (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum) 1966.
- ²⁸ Lawrence Alloway, 'Photo-Realism' (1973), in *Imagining the Present: Context, Content and the Role of the Critic*, London 2006, pp. 193-8.
- ²⁹ *David Hockney by David Hockney*, p. 160.
- ³⁰ See Lawrence Alloway, 'The Paintings of Malcom Morley', *Art and Artists*, February 1967, pp 16-19; 'Morley Paints a Picture', *Art News*, 67, Summer 1968, pp. 42-44 and 69-71.
- ³¹ Alloway, 'Photo-Realism', p. 197.
- ³² Private Collection
- ³³ <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/pacificaviet.html>
- ³⁴
- ³⁵ Collection Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo.
- ³⁶ See Henry Geldzahler, 'Introduction', in *David Hockney by David Hockney*, pp. 17 and 21.
- ³⁷ Collection National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

³⁸ See Rebecca Peabody, Andrew Perchuk, Glenn Philips and Rani Singh, with Lucy Bradnock (eds.), *Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art 1945-1980*, London 2011, pp. 124-85.

³⁹ Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent*, New Haven and London 2004, p. 84.

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ *Edward Ruscha: Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings. Volume One: 1958-1970*, New York, 2003, pp. 250-1.

⁴² Ibid, pp. 244-5.

⁴³ Reproduced in Cornell, *Backyard Oasis*, pp. 205-7.

⁴⁴ Dick Hebdige, 'Hole: Swimming... Floating... Sinking... Drowning' in Cornell, *Backyard Oasis*, p. 195.

⁴⁵ Bosley Crowther, 'The Graduate', *New York Times*, 22 December 1967.

⁴⁶ Erwin Panofsky, 'Et in Arcadia Ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition', in *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, New York 1955, pp. 340-67.

⁴⁷ Edward Mendelson (ed.), *W.H. Auden: Selected Poems*, London 1979, pp. 250-51.

⁴⁸ I am grateful to Chris Stephens for that information about *A Splash*.

⁴⁹ Mendelson, *W.H. Auden*. p. 79.

⁵⁰ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Aspen* 5-6, Fall-Winter 1967.