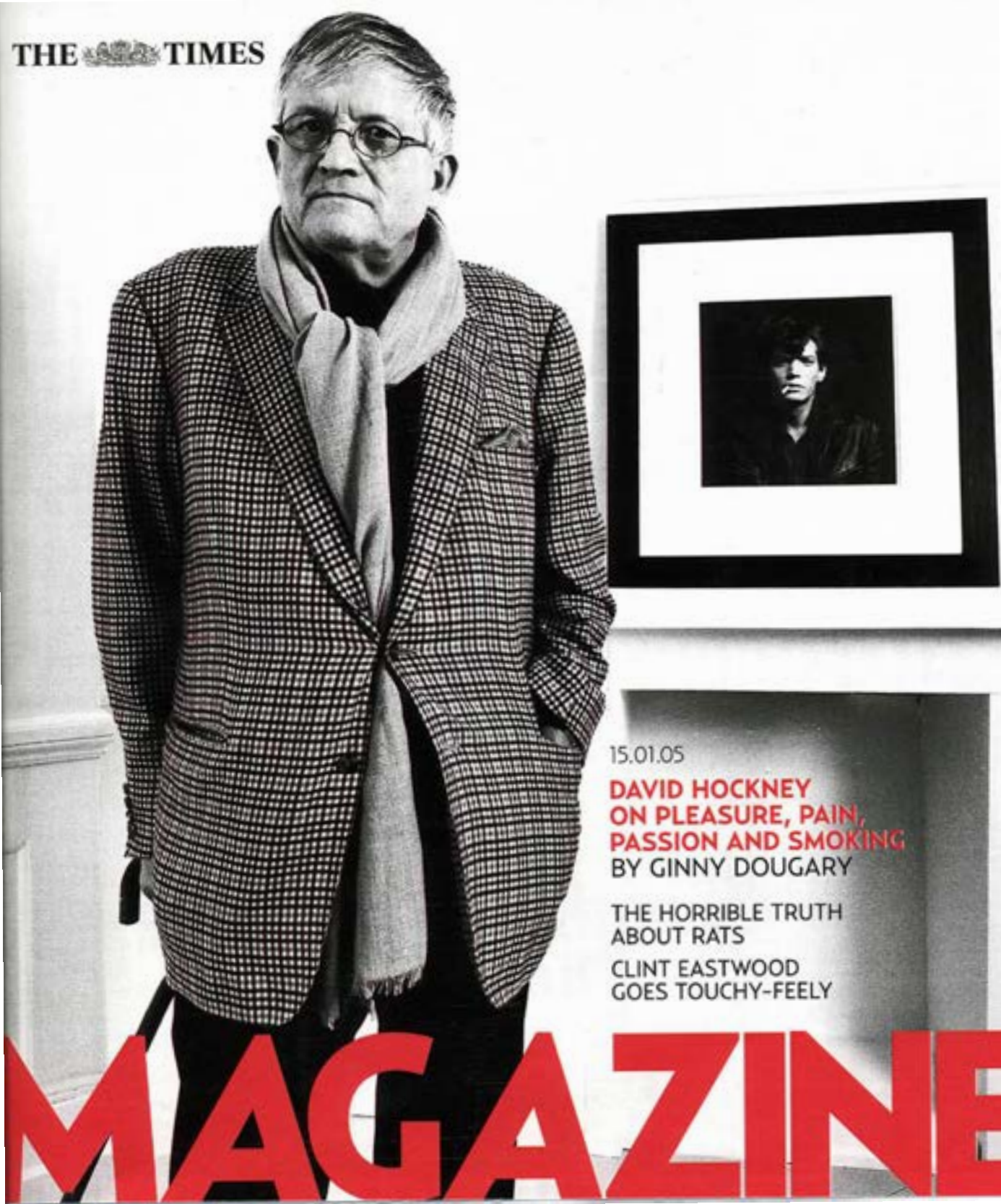
THE TIMES



15.01.05

DAVID HOCKNEY ON PLEASURE, PAIN, PASSION AND SMOKING

BY GINNY DOUGARY

THE HORRIBLE TRUTH ABOUT RATS

CLINT EASTWOOD GOES TOUCHY-FEELY

MAGAZINE

THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

David Hockney's passion for life (and smoking) is undimmed. He's even embracing a new role, as curator of an exhibition of work by the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe

INTERVIEW **GINNY DOUGARY** PORTRAITS **GRAHAM WOOD** AND **ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE**

From left: David Hockney today; photographed by Robert Mapplethorpe in 1978

David Hockney, I had been instructed, will only wish to talk about Robert Mapplethorpe. But, it transpired, this must have been wishful thinking on the part of the gallery owner. For although the English artist has curated a show of the American artist's photographs, 15 or so years after the latter's death in 1989, there is only one subject which really fires Hockney up when we meet in London: smoking.

He is passionately pro-fags (perhaps even more in the English than the American sense of the word); almost obsessively so. I admit to being partly to blame for opening up the subject, sharing many of his views on smoking. The problem is particularly acute in Los Angeles, the flaxen-haired Yorkshireman's adopted home for the past three decades where it's considered almost more of a crime to light up a cigarette than to shoot someone down.

The anti-smoking lobby is "quite tyrannical, people should be appalled really... if you go to New York everybody's on Prozac and drinking water. The pharmaceutical companies are taking over. That's what replaces cigarettes: pharmaceuticals. It's a fraud. Nobody's saying anything and they think they can just get away with it. Well, it's a great pleasure – smoking – and they've got to be realistic that there's going to be a hard core for ever," he says, sounding very put-upon and Alan Bennett-ish.

"The choice is not between smoking and immortality; you're gonna die anyway. It's absurd," he continues. "Do you know the poem: 'Give me a doctor, partridge-plump/short in the leg and broad in the rump/an endomorph with gentle hands/who'll never make absurd demands/that I abandon all my vices/nor pull a face in a crisis/but with a twinkle in his eye/will tell me that I have to die'?"

I have to confess that I'm not familiar with the poem – Hockney doesn't know who wrote it although he suspects it might be Auden – but think it splendid both in its sentiment and its rendition. He used to read a great deal of poetry and memorise it: "Well,

if something tickles you, then you read it again and you remember it, don't you?" But as he retreats further into the deafness which runs in his family and first afflicted him many years ago, poetry has been abandoned along with music – one of his other great loves.

"I have difficulty with a lot of poetry now because I don't know enough about pop music, and I sometimes think there are a lot of references I'm not getting because I'm assuming that the folks writing it are younger than me... and so... I'm too deaf really to listen to music or the radio or television," he says. "And what people never understand about people who are going deaf is that it isn't the silence that's the problem, it's that it's a very confused sound. It's such hard work that you give up when you're out, and think, 'OK, I'm going home now.' I'm always the first to leave. I've got to a point in life where I need to accept it. I'm unsocial because you have to be. Art openings, for instance, are the worst for me. I won't go. And it will always be that way because there's nothing you can do about it, actually."

This is delivered in a tone more of sorrowful resignation than anger, which is reserved for another subject – and so, pretty soon, we're back to nicotine. One of the reasons why many of my questions, however seemingly unconnected, lead Hockney to the same response is that smoking – the lack of debate, the increasing restrictions – has become a metaphor for him of so many modern-day ills. There was a time when he used to rail against the up-tightness and illiberalism of England. But now, for someone who chose to live in the Sunshine State because of its wide, open spaces and the attitudes that landscape reflected, he must find himself fenced in by the bossy health police, and the fearful vigilance against the onslaught of age.

Politics and the media, in particular, but really any subject – religious intolerance, the censorship of his early art or Mapplethorpe's – are all informed by his views on smoking, and his sense of being besieged. *Private Eye* is "still terrific, actually" but he is all too aware that newspapers have an agenda, "Meaning: they're not very critical of certain things at all. Smoking, for instance, they all assume is bad for you. All of them. Well, I don't."

And again, "I'll tell you what newspapers are no good at. For instance, take smoking..." and so on. He can be quite funny on the subject. I was amused by (and sympathetic to) an account of his total outrage when as a guest-of-honour at some up-scale Hollywood party he was asked to leave the dinner table and smoke outside. Now, he says, if he's invited somewhere he'll just light up regardless: "I assume if they're inviting me, they're not going to give me lectures the moment I get in their house. Is that reasonable to assume that?"

He buys his cigarettes in Baden-Baden, the health resort he visits on a regular basis: "They're a third of the price there, so I go and fill up my car with them. You can also buy ashtrays from Baden-Baden which I take back to California," he says, as I clap my hands in glee. "I know, people get freaked out. But that is my idea of a health spa. I go to the baths there. Of course, you can't smoke in the baths because it's wet. Otherwise, you can smoke. It's great, Baden-Baden. I love it."

Moving on from cigarettes, I attempt, let's look at Mapplethorpe's photographs... was it outrageous that his work had been banned? But Hockney is having none of it: "Look, this is the real problem. About three years ago, *The New York Times* ran an advertisement about actors in movies, suggesting that if they were smoking the film should have an X certificate. Now I've pinned this page up on my studio wall..." He was shocked and appalled that something so trivial was being pinpointed but noticed that nobody else to whom he showed it seemed to interpret it the same way. "So I thought, 'If I'm the only one doing this, what does it matter? I won't bother saying anything any more. I withdraw it.' Now you're trying to pull me out," and he laughs his head off in an engaging way.

Hockney is engaging, in fact, albeit in the slightly disengaged way that some artists can have: preferring to deal in abstractions than the concrete; taking odd tangents to straightforward questions. He can sometimes come across as rather older than his 67 years: his habit of banging on about the same subject; the hint of querulousness; the slightly ponderous verbal mannerism he has of making a statement and then feeling the need to explain it: "Meaning..." The deafness would probably contribute to that aura of diminishment but at no time do I get the sense that he cannot hear what I am saying. And when something excites him, in a positive way, his face opens up wonderfully, radiant with light – so for a moment he looks as schoolboyish as he used to do in the old photos in the Sixties.

I had read about his love of vibrant colour – something you would get from his work, in any case – the pop-arty blues and pinks, reds and yellows of his deck and home, with the famous "Bigger Splash" swimming pool, in Hollywood Hills. There was a period

'I BUY ASHTRAYS FROM BADEN-BADEN TO TAKE BACK TO LA. THAT'S MY IDEA OF A HEALTH SPA'

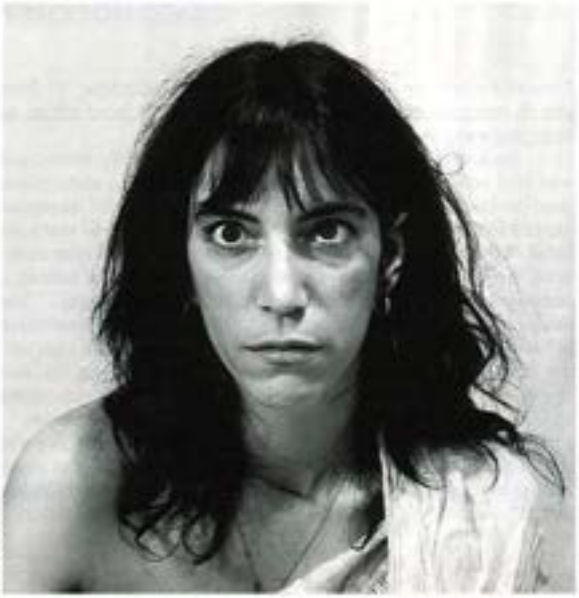
when he adapted the same wild colour scheme to his hearing aids but, alas, no more. Today such flamboyance is restricted to a flash of violent cerise in a handkerchief drooping from a hound's-tooth jacket. Everything else, from his immaculate chocolate-brown suede loafers to his pale-mushroom cashmere scarf, looks restrained and expensive: very Bond Street indeed, which is just round the corner from the gallery in which we meet.

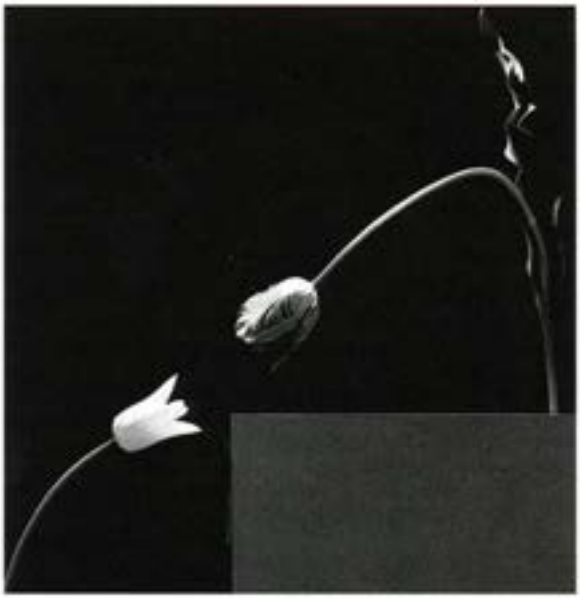
Despite his leg-jigging, smoking and a habit of licking the corner of his mouth, it is rather soothing being around him. This may have something to do with the sense that I have of him being a good person. In Hockney's large cuttings file, there are numerous instances of him putting himself out for other people for no personal gain: sending his fax-art pieces to a schoolgirl who wrote to him asking advice for a project; agreeing to exhibit his shows at a gallery in the North owned by an old boy from his school.

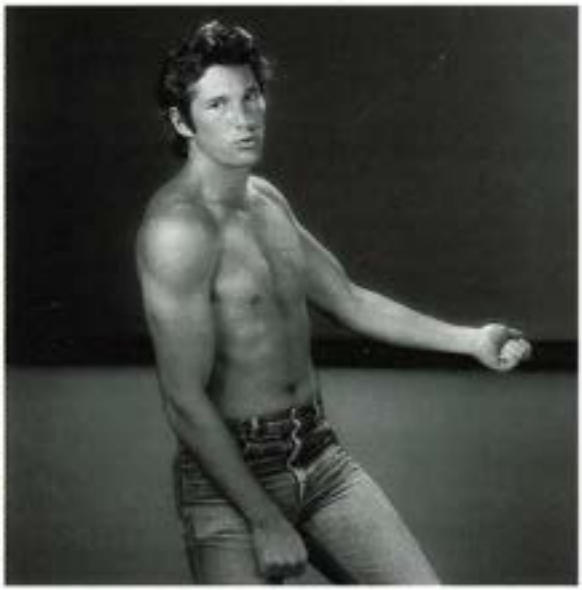
Hockney is also endearingly unswept up with the sense of his own importance which, having just read Patricia Morrisroe's acclaimed Mapplethorpe biography, could hardly be more different from the man whose show he is curating. I was struck by the words of the young Patti Smith, Mapplethorpe's psychic twin, when she wrote: "I am an American artist; I have no guilt."

In Morrisroe's book, the sentiment certainly attaches itself to Mapplethorpe who comes across as a singularly unpleasant person: anti-semitic, racist, self-obsessed, manipulative, exploitative, arrogant and a social climber par excellence. His sexual tastes extended to coprophilia and the most extreme forms of sado-masochism; his methods of recruiting models included picking up homeless men in the Bowery and offering them drugs, sex and money in exchange for performing acts which even they, desperate as they must have been, found unspeakable. But from the many friends and admirers who feature in the Mapplethorpe biography, he doesn't appear to have suffered a flicker of remorse or even self-reflection.

I ask Hockney whether he believes that artists are governed >>







Hockney's Mapplethorpe images, clockwise from top left: Patti Smith, 1978; Two Tulips, 1984; Iggy Pop, 1981; Richard Gere, 1982. Right: Marianne Faithfull, 1976

<< by different rules from other people. Does he think they are above any sort of moral code? "No, I wouldn't take that line," he says. "Some people might, but I wouldn't." Why? "I might have thought so at one time but I'm not sure I would now. I'm not sure that artists are that special. Meaning: I have a very nice life as an artist, I admit that. But although people may need art, it needn't be very high art. Meaning: television is art. It's just a low-level art."

I wonder whether he still retained the strong sense of right and wrong he inherited from his parents; his father, Kenneth, was a conscientious objector and, interestingly, an early and vigorous anti-smoking campaigner. "Yeah, it's still with me," his son says. "If you're living in a place you've got to be tolerant. Meaning: one of my arguments about the smoking thing is that it's spreading intolerance, isn't it?"

Oh no. ...Ah, moving on *swiftly*, I say, do you share any of the discomfort that some commentators have now about the way Mapplethorpe used his models? The photographer's portraits of flowers – austere and beautiful – are as famous as his graphic sexual images. "Mapplethorpe treated his flowers [which he apparently loathed] no differently than the men who modelled for him," Morrisroe wrote. "...he tossed them in his garbage tin before they wilted and died."

"They're saying 'used', you see. That word 'used' is a bit loaded. What did he do really? He 'made' a picture. I mean, I would question that word a little bit," Hockney says.

COURTESY OF ALISON JACQUES GALLERY, LONDON © ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE FOUNDATION, USED WITH PERMISSION

The two men met in the late Sixties and mixed in similar gay, arty circles – although they were by no means close. Hockney often mentions the Chinese saying that to make good art you need the engagement of "the hand, the eye and the heart". I wonder whether he felt that Mapplethorpe was capable of bringing his heart into that equation. "Ummmm. Sometimes, perhaps." Can he point out any of the portraits he has picked where this could be true? "These are photographs anyway," he says, "which is a different thing."

I remember being stunned by Mapplethorpe's photographs in the Seventies and early Eighties: they were unlike anything else at the time and almost shocking in the beauty of their form, regardless of the subject. Because of their heightened aesthetic, it was possible >>

'MAPPLETHORPE WAS A STRANGE PERSON. I KNEW QUITE A LOT ABOUT HIS TASTES...'

to use much more confrontational images than would normally be acceptable in a newspaper. But now – although still undeniably arresting – they seem to me to be chilly, almost clinical.

Does Hockney not think that there is something detached about them? A lack of empathy with the subject? "He was..." Hockney laughs knowingly, "a strange person. And I didn't know him that well. Meaning: I knew quite a bit about his tastes..." This he illustrates, recalling the first time he visited Mapplethorpe's studio to view the American's leather sculptures. The friend accompanying Hockney turned and whispered, "I bet he'd like us on the walls as well."

The gay scene in New York at that time – post-Stonewall pre-Aids – was at the height of its hedonistic excess. While heterosexuals were wife-swapping and partying at the likes of Caesar's Palace and Studio 54, gay men were crowding into the dark back rooms of bars for anonymous sex or cruising the abandoned piers of the Hudson River and the notorious S&M scene at the Mineshaft. Mapplethorpe was both an active participant in that scene and its chronicler; endlessly pursuing its most extreme manifestations and creating photographs that reflected his own fetishistic obsessions. It was an atmosphere in which detachment and anonymity were an intrinsic part of the excitement.

Hockney's paintings of beautiful boys, languidly draped around his Californian swimming pool, were nakedly homoerotic but the New York clubs appear to have been a bit too hard-core for

'SEAT BELTS IN TAXIS. IT'S BONDAGE, ISN'T IT? THE MANUFACTURERS MUST ALL BE INTO IT'

him. "I must admit it didn't truly interest me too much," he says. "I mean, I went there once but it's not my world to be honest. My curiosity was very easily satisfied. On the other hand, all photographers must be a bit voyeuristic – otherwise you could hardly be a photographer. You're making a record of this visual thing.

"Pain, in a certain way, is enjoyable, but I do turn away from it a little bit. It was an amusing sight to me. There are all types of people out there and I'm amused by some of it. I'm just pointing out it's not to my taste. But we are all frail and I'm well aware that sex has a certain violence. Bondage, for instance. I'm quite aware that bondage can turn people on everywhere and anywhere. Seat belts in taxis. Why do I want to strap myself into the corner of a taxi when I've never heard of people being injured in one. It's bondage, isn't it? I put it down to that. Well, I suppose the seat-belt manufacturers are all into bondage."

His delivery is so deadpan, it doesn't seem quite right to laugh... So you don't find those sort of images sexy? I gesture to some of Mapplethorpe's more outré photographs. "Not particularly." While most of us would find it difficult to see a photograph of an erect penis without some sort of visceral response, that is, we cannot disassociate what is being photographed from its potency, Hockney seems to see something quite different. Although since he has been an outspoken champion of pornography, I don't quite buy his obliviousness to the content of a photograph. "It's about form, you see," he insists. "In a way, you're talking about content but I'm well aware that without form there isn't any content. They're one and the same really, but you can divide them a bit and I'm always going to see form – because I make pictures... And Mapplethorpe, no matter what he said, didn't *take* photographs – he *made* them."

It is hard to pin Hockney down as to why he agreed to curate the show, other than that he knew Mapplethorpe, as well as a lot of the subjects he took, and that the American was the last of a breed of craftsmen photographers.

The photographers Hockney singles out for greatness are the 19th-century portraitist Nadar – "the very, very best portrait photographs [of Baudelaire, George Sand, Flaubert] ever made, where the exposures were a minute to two minutes – which means you're able to scrutinise the subject – and they've never been topped"; Cartier Bresson and Richard Avedon. And Mapplethorpe? "Certainly, Robert's... well, it depends..."

We start looking at some of the 60 photographs which will be on show: Yoko Ono, a perilously perched Marianne Faithfull, a wired Iggy Pop, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, a boyish Bruce Chatwin, Fran Leibowitz, Richard Gere in a provocative pose which could launch a thousand rumours, and Hockney himself in a stripy shirt, pens poking swottishly out of the pocket, tie and cardie. There are sundry art dealers and curators, four cocks (five if you count the enormous sculpture grasped by Louise Bourgeois, her wicked sense of humour clearly undimmed by age) and a skull and crossbones... the latter imagery replacing Mapplethorpe's pursuit for the perfect penis, as he was forced to acknowledge that he was dying from Aids.

Part of the curating exercise for him was to find out what interested him in Mapplethorpe's work and the order in which he chose to place them: "There's a profile of Lord Snowdon, then a cock on a table with a little plastic devil, and then the next picture is the governor of California," he grins happily. "Well, taken 20 years ago [when he was Arnie the Bodybuilder].

"And what I thought was that they're very beautiful. I mean, he wasn't a glossy photographer. He was a careful craft person, taking pictures with care – they're not snaps. In a way, he was a kind of classical photographer, probably the last one."

There is only one image that I find disturbing in the show: a portrait of John McKendry, the curator of prints and photography at the Metropolitan Museum, who had been besotted by Mapplethorpe and helped to advance his career. The photograph was taken shortly before his death in hospital from liver failure, his face is glistening, the gaze of the one eye shown is fixed on to some point in the far-off distance, the focus of the picture is a plug on the wall. When Mapplethorpe showed the portrait to McKendry's widow, Maxime de la Falaise, she was apparently furious with him for exploiting her husband's confused mental condition: "I was shattered by the picture," she said. "John was dying and Robert had captured him in his tiny room, in his little corner of hell."

Hockney would probably have no such qualms about the appropriateness of depicting someone close to their end. He draws every day for solace and as a way of seeing the world more clearly and for him, one can understand that it was natural to draw his mother, Laura, when she was dying and afterwards. "A drawing is your account of seeing something," he says. "And a photograph isn't necessarily that. Meaning: drawing can't be replaced by that. There's no mechanical thing that can replace it."

His parents come up when I ask him whether he could ever imagine himself as having had the temperament to be monogamous: "I can't now because I'm 67 and haven't been. On the other hand, I could never imagine my mother with any other man – only my father – and the reverse. But they were rather puritanical, in a sense." And you're not? "Well, probably a bit." He used to talk to his mother every two days by telephone until she was about 96 and

GRAHAM WOOD

David Hockney with his portrait of his friends Celia Birtwell and Ossie Clark, entitled *Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy*

then for the next three years, until her death at 99, whenever she was prepared to come to the phone.

He's not an atheist: "Actually, this life is a total mystery. Mysterious forces are at work. I might say that there might be another life," Hockney says at his most equivocal. "Meaning: this is enough of a mystery to me. Yes, it is, if I think about it. Yes. Yes."

And what about the afterlife in terms of one's art enduring. Does he think Mapplethorpe, for instance, will endure? "I've no idea. He probably will. As I say, he was quite a craftsman." And do you care whether you will endure? "Not particularly," he says. "I must admit that I assume that some of the work might survive, although I'm also assuming that we'll probably blow ourselves up at some point, actually."

I wonder whether his deafness has prompted him to withdraw from the world in a more significant way than simply avoiding parties. Oh, and concerts, plays, films, operas... all the things he used to derive such pleasure from. He didn't vote in the last election, he doesn't seem unduly concerned about Bush's position on gay rights, saying, "I've never been an activist. I would support them but I just defend myself and my own way of living", and at the height of the war in Iraq, he spent his time painting his garden in California. "Which I thought was the real world as far as I was concerned," he says. "The infinite variety of nature is overwhelming, actually, if you look at it. Bigger than art in a way. When people asked me what I was doing, I said, 'I'm dealing with the real world. You might think that it's my world but my world is as real as your world, actually.'"

He seems to hover between a gloomy acceptance of the horrors of life and a joyousness at the glimpses of beauty. "It's a mad world and I've always thought it's a mad world," he says. "I remember bombing in Bradford in the street and I must have been about five years old. When my mother said, 'They're dropping bombs on people', I thought, 'What a terrible thing to do.' Now he says that he doesn't expect the world to be peaceful "because I think we're rather terrible creatures".

One of his most popular paintings is *Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy* from 1970. It is a wonderfully pleasing portrait of the fashion designer couple, Celia Birtwell and her husband Ossie Clark

'WHEN I VISIT CELIA AND HER GRANDDAUGHTERS ARE THERE, I FEEL OPTIMISTIC'

(murdered by his lover, Diego Cogolato, in 1996) and their cat – both formal in its composition and utterly of the time in its spirit. Hockney and Birtwell became too close for Clark's comfort, and the two men were not in contact towards the end of the designer's life. Birtwell and Hockney, however, remain as fond of each other as ever.

When I ask Hockney whether he would describe himself as optimistic or pessimistic, he says: "A bit of both. When I visit Celia and she has her little granddaughters there, I feel optimistic because children are lovely and lively, and life for them is so interesting. She's thrilled and they're thrilling, charming. I phoned her and said, 'Last night was marvellous, it gave me optimism again.' Otherwise I can get very pessimistic, actually."

His main source of optimism is the pleasure he gets from looking at the world: "I see that as a bit of a privilege, to be honest, because not everyone can do that – and in that sense I was born to be privileged, although back in 1937 when I was born, we wouldn't have thought that way, really."

He has recently gone back to oil painting, after a period of doing watercolours, but drawing is his abiding love: "Drawing makes you see. Just recently I was in Yorkshire and I took out a sketchbook, opened it out like a concertina, and I drew different grasses along the hedgerow. Driving and stopping... all these different grasses. Once you've drawn them, you see them more. As you drive along that hedgerow it becomes clearer and what seemed like disorder seems ordered. Now that's a personal experience that's vivid to me and I say that my pleasure then at looking is deep and I admit that.

"And the landscape of East Yorkshire most people would not see and think rather plain, but once you start to look, you begin to see very, very beautiful forms. I drive slowly and point things out to my friends and, yeah, it's exciting." Finally, drawing himself up on his stick to leave, Hockney recalls one of his most pleasurable days recently. He was in Sicily, with a group of close friends, where he was to be presented with some prestigious prize. In the morning, they were in the cloisters of the cathedral in Monreale: "It was the most beautiful space I'd ever been in. I was almost moved to tears there thinking of the people who made it and felt I could have spent a week in there without a bed.

"Then in the evening, we were given a dinner in the palace that Visconti used to film *The Leopard*. Each room was spectacular and the dining room was amazing – a beautiful oval table for 30 people; everything white and green. And in the morning, we'd been in the most beautiful space that gave you deep thoughts and in the evening, we'd been in the best physical manifestation of the froth of life, and we'd had them both in the same day – which is very rare. As a friend of mine said, 'You've had a grace' – and I thought that was fantastic because we did.

"It's an enjoyable life, actually." ■

Robert Mapplethorpe curated by David Hockney is at the Alison Jacques Gallery, London W1, from today until March 12. For further information, call 020-7287 7675 or visit www.alisonjacquesgallery.com