JOHN HOCKNEY is a storyteller by profession, a writer and a musician. He migrated to Australia in 1968 but has retained strong ties with his large family. His brother is world renowned artist David Hockney and over the years John has acquired an unusual collection of artworks reflecting the remarkable range of David’s work.

David Hockney studied at the Royal College of Art in London and came to fame with his contribution to the Pop Art Movement of the 1960s. His practice has included drawing, painting, printmaking, collage, set design, photography and film. He has spent most of his life living between London, Los Angeles and Yorkshire. His stylised landscapes and vivid portraits of himself and those close to him are among the iconic images of 20th century art history.

John’s exhibitions and talks about his brother David began by chance in 2007. His friend artist John Hatton had shown work at Shoalhaven Arts Centre and it was he who suggested that John Hockney lend the gallery some of his collection of David’s work. The resulting exhibition, which included originals, lithographs, etchings, photostats and laser prints of originals, in all about 60 pieces, filled the main gallery. This visual correspondence between two brothers was a huge success with visitors.

To add a personal perspective to the exhibition John decided to give some talks about David and his work. Relationships between the siblings of the Hockney family are close and David has always shared his passion with his brothers and sisters so that John has a keen interest in David’s work and his knowledge of David’s techniques is extensive. These first talks included public talks and school visits. Over the years the content has changed as David has changed and added new techniques such as iPad and iPhone pictures and, more recently, his moving collages made by using a bank of video cameras filming simultaneously.

David isn’t much of a writer, his communications are visual and on any morning John can go to his emails to find a stunning new drawing, just as in the past the fax machine would be the main means used by David to communicate his drawings. He even adapted his style to suit the fax machine. The entire family, scattered across the globe in Australia, the UK and with David living at Malibu in the United States, had fax machines and would be receiving David’s latest ‘masterpiece’ within minutes of it being sent. In this way the family has kept in touch.

David always signs with ‘Love David’ and this is the title given to an exhibition held recently at the Penrith Regional Gallery and the Lewers Bequest (to 10 November). ‘Love David’ highlights David’s deep affection for his family. The works have been taken directly from John Hockney’s home and include etchings, lithographs, drawings, greeting cards and family photographs, and together with John’s commentary, they offer a rare, personal insight into the life, practice and endless adaptations of one of the world’s most prolific living artists.

David has always enjoyed painting portraits in oils of family and friends. These he calls his one-hour portraits. After finishing a work he would make a colour copy on his laser printer and give that to the sitter. Hence the laser prints that are part of John’s collection. Nowadays David has moved on, having discovered the iPad and the iPhone. He uses software called Brushes to create portraits and landscapes, vases of flowers (lots of vases of flowers – giving a new meaning to ‘sending flowers’) which again he sends to family and friends.
If a famous painter whose works are worth hundreds of thousands, sometimes even millions of dollars, is sending his original works constantly around the world, how does he retain copyright of the works? Can't they be sold on? In fact these works are not signed and in this particular format they cannot be enlarged. David went to the creator of the software and commissioned a version which would enable him to create large format works which he can now print in a limited edition and this he does, to sell.

From the very beginning David was fascinated by technologies which helped reproduction – photostats, laser prints, Polaroid photographs. In 1989 John was in Bradford at Saltsmill when David faxed, live on camera, 144 A4 sheets which were then assembled to form a giant fax picture called Tennis. This was a newsworthy event, with Yorkshire television filming David in Los Angeles sending the faxes at the same time that the faxes were being received in Bradford. He had exploited the technology to its fullest and this was to be the last of these giant pictures. The big pictures were inspired by David’s experience designing opera backdrops for some of the world’s major companies. He loved to work with space and was intrigued by space.

Next to come were the photostats where David found he could manipulate the colours. The early Rank Xerox colour photocopiers had separate trays for the four colours and David would vary these to give different effects. He would put a sheet through numerous times and the colour would gradually fade and that would be the number of copies for that print.

Polaroids were another adventure in reproduction which David embraced with enthusiasm. The first Polaroids had a white frame and he liked the way the different images were delineated. David started to make visual diaries with Polaroids. Anyone who came to visit would be photographed, anything that interested him would be captured, and he created hundreds of albums. He realised that he could photograph people and objects to create a collage. Then he started using his own camera, with film, in a similar way and he would take dozens of photographs of, for example, the Grand Canyon, and at that time he would have to race off to have them developed at the one-hour photo shop. The ultimate picture made in this way was the Pear Blossom Highway, by which time he had exhausted what he felt he could do with photography.

Many in Australia will recall the purchase by the National Gallery of Australia of The Bigger Grand Canyon. Made up of 60 canvases, each measuring 207 x 744 cms, David had photographed the canyon and had used a huge studio in Los Angeles where he was able to work on such a massive painting.

Photography led David to that incredible technique called ‘secret knowledge’. He believed when he looked at old pictures, because he had spent such a long time with photography, he could understand the way some of the Old Masters had made their pictures. He believed they used lenses or mirrors and he set out to prove this. He began by using camera lucida, a
prism on a stick that creates the illusion of an image of whatever is in front of it on a piece of paper. David believes that Ingres used this technique and he began to do portraits in the same way with the same detail. He published his findings in a book called Secret Knowledge, Rediscovering the lost techniques of the Old Masters (Thames & Hudson).

Last year a major retrospective of the work of David Hockney was held at the Royal Academy in London. Members of David’s family arrived from all parts of the world to join in the celebration, a tribute to an extraordinary and internationally regarded man.

David’s life-long motto is Get Up and Work. He has had this simple dictum written on a piece of paper in front of him from his youth. Ever active, he pushes every idea to its very limits. His philosophy of art always goes back to ‘the hand, the eye and the heart’. Today he has returned to drawing in charcoal, which seems quite traditional. The great artist so noted for his drafting skills has come full circle. But this is David and if this medium can be transformed in any new and unexpected way, then he will most certainly pursue it.

Love David,
John

Hockney’s personal collection of the work of his brother David Hockney, at the Penrith Regional Gallery & the Lewers Bequest, Emu Plains, until 10 November 2013.

John Hockney is an Accredited Member of Storytellers NSW.

Since there aren’t any postcards in this hospital I can’t send my friends pictures of:

- my swollen testicle (left),
- my infected bladder,
- my pneumonia,
- my mild heart attack.

Red alert: another nurse coming to collect more unmentionables such as:

- blood,
- urine,
- sputum,
- faeces.

Yesterday afternoon Alan stopped by for a chat about art, in my case:

- the art of gritting your teeth when you piss (because it burns),
- the art of squeezing out one small marble (because I’m constipated),
- the art of not vomiting after eating (because I’m nauseous)

and, by the way, before I forget, there’s the matter of my art show at Orange Regional, titles & prices to sort out, etc. It’s a survey show not, as I keep saying, a retrospective. Apparently a retrospective is what you have after you’re dead which, in moments of self-pity, I feel I might soon be. Anyway, survey or retro, the head doctor assures me that I can go to my opening in a wheelchair, a thin grey ghost packed to the gills with excrement.

AND FURTHERMORE for Alan Sisley

From Detroit,
by Philip Hammial
(Island Press Co-operative)