By DOUGLAS C. MCGILL

David Hockney’s Journey to a ‘New Cubism’

David Hockney, the artist whose recent work encompasses everything from painted sets for the Metropolitan Opera to a series of abstracted photographs of the Brooklyn Bridge and other American landmarks, has produced a new style of painting that he calls “a new Cubism.” To understand this new style, he based it on his study of Picasso, quantum physics, and Chinese philosophy.

To be sure, the important events in Mr. Hockney’s life this month appear to have much more to do with art — and even the making of a popular media personality — than with science and philosophy. A film about Mr. Hockney and his art, “A Bigger Splash,” opened Friday at the Guild’s Estes Theater with its first commercial run in the United States since it was made in 1969. This week will bring the publication by Alfred A. Knopf of a new book by Mr. Hockney, “Camaraworks,” a hardcover collection of 117 plate reproductions of his Polarroid and 35-millimeter photomontages of the past two years.

In the elaborate stage sets that the artist made for the 1976 production of Stravinsky’s opera, “The Rake’s Progress,” at the Glyndebourne Festival, the mural were revived in the recent New York City production. In addition, “Hockney Paints the Stage,” a collection of his many stage sets and watercolours at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art through Oct. 11. Finally, a collection of Mr. Hockney’s “new Cubist” paintings will be on display at the Emmerich Gallery at 5th and Market Streets, from next Saturday through Nov. 3.

In an interview during a recent trip to New York, however, Mr. Hockney seemed less interested in discussing these events than in explaining his recent forays into the world of science. His current reading — forming a pile of books on his Mayflower Hotel room coffee table — told the story: books on Einstein’s theories of relativity, quantum physics, the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu in the back room. “Most people don’t notice, but I started making connections, and found myself in a deeply fascinating subject. I realized that Picasso is very deeply related to recent scientific ideas, which fits very well into the idea that we can’t separate ourselves from the world.”

In his customary stripes (button-down shirt, tie and golfer’s cap), mismatched socks (red and blue) and gold wristwatch, Mr. Hockney sat at the edge of his chair and spoke excitedly about his recent voyages across the boundary of art into science. He spoke with passion, as if driven by the fear that the world is an island.

“Where the old, Newtonian view of the world,” he said, “is ‘the universe was out there, separate from us, and it was also like a mechanical clock. But quantum mechanics puts you right back in it — it’s virtually saying we are the center of the universe, and you come up against ancient wisdom again. I am an uninterestingly interesting subject for an artist. Absolutely more interesting than the minor art quagmires that I’ve been used to.”

“People may think I’m going mad,” he said. “But I know I’m not too far off the track.”

Now, let the road be tamed. To follow Mr. Hockney further in his investigations requires a treacherous climb through such territory as: how one’s point of view changes if you look at a painting from the side or the front; how a single point of view can give the viewer the illusion of a world that goes on forever; how photography paves the way to madness; how Chinese scroll painting shows the way back to sanity; why Hitler and Stalin loved photography and hated modern art; how he invented Cubist television and a new style of painting; why Lau- nel and Haby are the best television. And why we must change our way of thinking or blow ourselves up.

For Mr. Hockney, the journey began quite simply. About three years ago, despite the fact that for years he had said he felt photography to be inferior to painting, Mr. Hockney picked up a Polaroid camera and started taking pictures. This, in turn, led him to discover what it was about photography that he didn’t like, and then, to be using a form of photography that satisfied him.

“My instinct always told me there was something pictorially wrong with a photograph,” Mr. Hockney explained. “Most people don’t notice, because they don’t look at a photograph very long. A photograph only works if it is very strong, and yet very few photographs do that. Most of them you forget immediately.”

In addition, Mr. Hockney said, most photographs gave him a sensation of being "outside" of the picture. Practically no photographs could give him the feeling — as many paintings could — of being involved, mentally and even physically, with the reality portrayed. He began to wonder why this was so, and found much of the answer in thecrucifixion paintings of the 15th century — the same century that "one-point perspective," the way the camera "sees," was invented.

While looking at a 15th-century crucifixion, painted with one-point perspective, Mr. Hockney realized why he felt "left out." It was because the painting was a picture of a moment frozen in time. Yet no moment in real life is frozen, Hockney realized, and the "distance" he felt resulted from his looking at a profoundly distorted view of reality — at an absurdity.

"In the 15th century, the church wished to get a message across — Christ dying for the sins of man," Mr. Hockney explained. "Perspective helped the painters to strengthen that image, to give it weight and solidity and emotional strength. Yet there is a loss," he added. "Putting the body of Christ on the cross, so to speak and the view- er’s body, one-point perspective por- trays a single, frozen moment, seen by a single, unmoving eye. But human do not see that way. Their eyes are constantly moving, seeing in the fall, but has yet to make it to these shores.

Since last year, Mr. Hockney has returned to photography to merge his insights from photography with his recent viewing of Chinese scroll paintings, which, he believes, is not per- spective. Instead, they use a method in which everything is set up in one view. A picture of a mountain, for ex- ample, shows the top of the mountain, at the top of the canvas, another viewer as the riverbed at the bottom.

One of Mr. Hockney’s new paintings — a 20-foot-long canvas that will be the centerpiece of the upcoming show at the Emmich Gallery — shows Mr. Hockney’s view of the Los Angeles home of his friend, the writer Christopher Isherwood. It is colorful and accomplished in the style of his previous paintings, yet it is full of the Cubist "glances" of his photography, and has the foreboding look, also of a Chinese scroll painting.

"It’s the most complicated painting I’ve ever done," Mr. Hockney said. "I thought I could just lay it out, but I couldn’t, actually, because I kept going back to this other way of seeing. We keep thinking we’re seeing rectangles.

Mr. Hockney said that his investi- gations are "seeking the world in a new way." Without being more specific, he added that "we have to do this because if we don’t, I think we’ll blow ourselves up." But does he really think that people will work as hard as he has to see in this new way?

"Oh, yes," Mr. Hockney said. "Everybody will make the last 20 yards up the hill if you tell them you can’t stop until you get to the top. Or if it will say, ‘Oh, I don’t want to go all the way up.’ They’ll all struggle up. It’s instinctual."