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Howard Hodgkin – Last Paintings review: A riot of colour, wit and style

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Howard Hodgkin, Knitting Pattern, 2015-2016. Howard Hodgkin Estate Photo by Prudence Cuming Associates Courtesy Gagosian

For years before his death Howard Hodgkin talked, quite undramatically, about his awareness that he didn't have much time left. Artist friends had told him at the end of their lives that they hadn't done enough. It made him greedy for studio time; all he wanted to do was paint.

That urgency was matched by an increasing confidence in picture-making in his head. So for his last decade, as this stunning exhibition shows, his paintings were sparer and the wood he painted on more powerful as a texture and colour.

But he lost none of that shock of colour, those whooshing expressive marks that defined his work over the decades. If anything, with fewer other dots and swirls and lozenges around them, his gestures gained greater intensity and emotional resonance.

The final six paintings he made in a five-week burst in India just before he died are extraordinarily vivid. Over to You features a bloody red wrenched over a hypnotic green; in Indoor Games, three pink forms huddle amid grey and blue, like figures in the gloom; Cocktails for Two is like a warm interior at sunset, with a spectacular muddied orange slash at its heart.

Hodgkin was free and experimental, turning an old frame around to paint on its battered back in Seaside, boldly creating a painting from three wet-on-wet swaths of red and yellow in *Now*. And his understated wit was present to the end: *Knitting Pattern*, with its undulating painterly stitches, is outright funny; *Through a Glass Darkly* could not be more luminous.

Hodgkin left us at the peak of his powers. What a magnificent, blazing, defiant end to a long, distinguished life of painting.