

# FINE ART CONNOISSEUR

# FAVORITE

## NIAMH BARRY

Lighting designer  
and sculptor  
Photo: Simon  
Watson



*Mr. and Mrs. Clark and Percy*  
**DAVID HOCKNEY (b. 1937)**  
1970–71, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 120 in.  
Tate, London; presented by the Friends of the Tate  
Gallery, 1971, T01269  
© David Hockney, photo © Tate

While some people metaphorically light up a room — as the expression goes — with their personality or sheer presence, Niamh Barry actually does light up a room. In fact, as the Dublin-based designer says of her preferred medium of LED technology, “It allows me to write with light.”

Barry’s polished and patinated bronze fixtures are as much sculpture as sources of light, some assuming the presence of abstract objects seemingly floating in space, magically aglow. Not surprisingly, light is something she thinks about whenever she’s looking at art; she says, “Light in my life is very important and I’m always drawn to it.”

Even as a young girl she was drawn to a rectangle of daylight that pours through an open window into a bedroom in one of her favorite paintings, David Hockney’s *Mr. and Mrs. Clark and Percy* (1970–71), which hangs at Tate Britain in London. Barry first saw it in an art book in her parents’ house, and even then she knew it reflected something about her own household at the time. “I grew up in a bohemian, creative home,” she recalls, “with my mother and my father equally successful creatives. There was a dynamic between the two figures in the painting that I could relate to, though I didn’t understand it then. The painting represents to me some of the ways I grew up in a home.”



Hockney depicts two friends of his, Ossie Clark (1942–1996), at the time a noted dress designer, and his wife, Celia Birtwell (b. 1941), an equally noted textile designer, along with their (indifferent) cat, Percy. Despite their successful creative collaboration and their appearance in a bedroom, the couple divorced shortly after Hockney completed the painting. Barry notes that her own parents divorced when she was 13, not long after she first spotted Hockney’s image. “The stance of Mrs. Clark looks assertive, while Mr. Clark is laid back — that dynamic between the two of them is something I can relate to.”

When Barry finally saw the real painting in London, she was astonished that it is nearly life-size. “Because of its scale and the way the figures look out, the viewer is immediately engaged,” she says. “You feel you are actually a part of it, drawn into their room. To see the painting is to have an experience of being inside, as opposed to observing the room and the figures.”

As an active artist and artisan herself, Barry appreciates that David Hockney, now 83, remains productive. She cites his ready embrace of new technologies, notably his iPad drawings. “I admire his ingenuity and his engagement with life and making art.”

While perusing a photo of the painting she has pinned to her studio wall, Barry remains entranced by certain details — “the way Ossie’s toes are anchored deeply into the rug, the physicality of his legs, how he’s positioned in the chair, the way the cat is perched and in command.” And in assessing the light coming from the balcony through the louvered shutters, Barry is aware of how “the light is balanced, with backlighting and light coming directly across Ossie.”

Barry is convinced that the Clarks want viewers to be a part of the dynamic between them, whatever that might be. As she says, “Given the scale and gazes of the subjects, you’d never be lonely if you owned this painting and had it hanging in your home.”