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Alexis Rockman

Born in 1962 in New York, where he lives and works, Alexis Rockman has depicted a darkly surreal vision of the collision between civilization and nature – often apocalyptic scenarios on a monumental scale – for over three decades. Notable solo museum exhibitions include "Alexis Rockman: Manifest Destiny" at the Brooklyn Museum (2004), which traveled to several institutions including the Wexner Center for the Arts (2004) and the Rhode Island School of Design (2005). In 2010, the Smithsonian American Art Museum organized "Alexis Rockman: A Fable for Tomorrow," a major touring survey of his paintings and works on paper. Concurrent with Rockman's 2013 exhibition at Sperone Westwater, the Drawing Center mounted "Drawings from Life of Pi," featuring the artist's collaboration with Ang Lee on the award-winning film "Life of Pi." His series of 76 *New Mexico Field Drawings* was included in "Future Shock" at SITE Santa Fe (2017-18). "Alexis Rockman: The Great Lakes Cycle," a major touring exhibition of large-scale paintings and watercolors, as well as field drawings, of the Great Lakes opened at the Grand Rapids Art Museum (2018) and traveled to the Chicago Cultural Center (2018), the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland (2018-19), and Haggerty Museum of Art at Marquette University (2019). It is on view at Weisman Art Museum until January 2020 and will travel to the Flint Institute of Arts. Rockman's work is represented in many museum collections, including the Baltimore Museum of Art; Brooklyn Museum; Grand Rapids Art Museum; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; New Orleans Museum of Art; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Smithsonian American Art Museum; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; and Whitney Museum of American Art.

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Alexis Rockman
Selected Press

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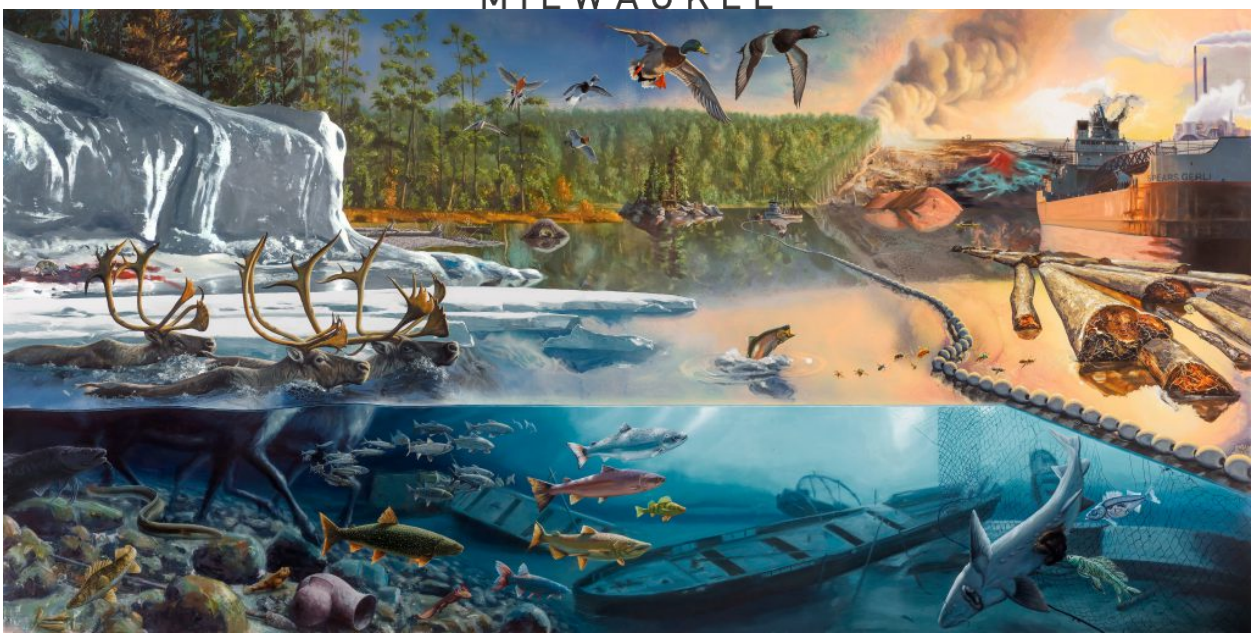
Jozwik, Catherine. "The Not So Great Lakes." *urbanmilwaukee.com (Urban Milwaukee)*, 26 February 2019.

URBAN MILWAUKEE



"Cascade," 2015, oil and alkyd on wood panel, 72 x 144 inches. Commissioned by Grand Rapids Art Museum with funds provided by Peter Wege, Jim and Mary Nelson, John and Muriel Halick, Mary B. Loupee, Karl and Patricia Betz, and general accessions funds. Grand Rapids Art Museum, 2015.19

New York artist and environmental activist Alexis Rockman's latest exhibit acknowledges the breathtaking beauty of the five Great Lakes ecosystems, while commenting on how factors like climate change, mass agriculture and industry have affected, and continue to affect, these vital natural resources.

Organized by Michigan's Grand Rapids Art Museum, "The Great Lakes Cycle" will be on display through May 19 at Marquette University's Haggerty Museum of Art. The exhibit features five large-scale (6 x 12-foot) oil and alkyd paintings, more than two dozen field drawings, created with natural materials including soil, sand and leaves, and six watercolor and acrylic paintings.

The exhibit "is mostly about the majesty of nature, and the impact we are having on it," said Susan Longhenry, Haggerty director. Milwaukee, which is fortunate enough to be located on the picturesque Lake Michigan, is a city increasingly known for its water management and water quality technologies.

Rockman, who was born in New York City in 1962, has had an interest in nature and the environment since childhood, watching nature documentaries, frequently visiting the city's Museum of Natural History, and drawing animals from books.

The Great Lakes—Michigan, Superior, Huron, Erie, and Ontario—contain more than 20 percent of the world's fresh water and are home to a staggering number of flora and fauna. With laminated cards listing plant and animal species portrayed in each oil painting, "The Great Lakes Cycle" is as much a lesson in natural history as it is a collection of stunning works of art, and showcases Rockman's extensive knowledge of nature.

Rockman's works explore how the lakes have changed over more than 10,000 years, largely due to human and industrial activity. "Cascade" chronicles the lakes' history, from serenity to tragedy to what seems like irreparable damage. To the left of the painting, several moose swim, mallards fly through the air and a waterfall cascades, while on the right, a ship belches smoke near a river of what appears to be toxic waste and burning logs float on the water. Below the waterline fish and a shark swim by a broken lifeboat (or canoe), wire fencing and car tires.

Rockman's use of detail in works like "Cascade," from the scales on the fishes to the wings of mallard ducks to billowing smoke clouds of distant freighters, is stellar. His vivid colors of nature, icy whites, tranquil greens, and many shades of blue, contrast with the sickly yellows, grays, and oranges associated with chemicals, pollutants and industry.

"Watershed," oil and alkyd on wood panel, 72 x 144 inches, collection of Jonathan O'Hara Gallery

Rockman explores how invasive species and pollutants can significantly disrupt and alter a freshwater ecosystem.

In his watercolor "Chimera" (2017), for example, a series of brightly-colored fish and crustaceans appear to be cannibalizing one another, perhaps to represent how native species can be "swallowed up" or driven out by invasive ones. An oil painting, "Forces of Change" (2017), illustrates a mass of tentacles, symbolizing harmful bacteria that have upset the ecological balance, either a consequence of pollution or invasive species, while his watercolor and acrylic work, "Drop of Water" magnifies several brilliantly-colored microbes found in a single miniscule drop of water.

Rockman also examines how large-scale farming has affected great lakes habitats, particularly in 2015's "Watershed." A jewel-colored ear of corn and a mutated chicken mark the results of genetic modification, while a drone flies overhead. There are no human figures pictured. Harmful fertilizers contaminate the once-pristine blue water, turning it a pale green.

The artist's monochromatic field drawings of plants and animals, among them a raccoon, tree frog, double crested cormorant, wood duck, and river otter, bring to mind vintage natural history textbooks. The

"Raccoon," 2017, Sand from the Cuyahoga River, Whiskey Island and acrylic polymer on paper, 9 x 12 1/2 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Sperone Westwater, New York.

drawings, created from pigments made up of sand, soil and leaves from Great Lakes areas (including Wisconsin's Presque Isle) are earthly colors—olive green, reddish brown, and charcoal gray. By using natural materials, Rockman is truly preserving nature through his art.

Two watercolors, "Upper Peninsula" and "Ice Fishing," embrace quiet contemplation. A moose sits placidly in a body of water, munching leaves. A lone fisherman casts his rod on a frozen lake, illuminated by yellow-greenish lights while a shark and a handful of smaller fish appear preserved below the surface.

Rockman's highly educational exhibit also includes a digital component: a variety of short informational videos about a number of Milwaukee organizations involved in freshwater initiatives, including Alice's Garden and the public art initiative Watermarks.

"The Great Lakes Cycle," through May 19 at the Haggerty Museum of Art, 1234 W. Tory Hill St., Milwaukee.

Left: "Ice Fishing," 2017, Watercolor, ink and acrylic on paper, 74 1/4 by 52 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Sperone Westwater, New York. Right: "Upper Peninsula," 2017, Watercolor, ink and acrylic on paper, 74 x 52 inches. Collection of Jonathan O'Hara Gallery.

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Litt, Steven. "Great Lakes portrayed vividly in Alexis Rockman's MOCA Cleveland show."
www.cleveland.com, 28 October 2018.

cleveland.com

Alexis Rockman's "Pioneers." Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer

CLEVELAND, Ohio – The American landscape painter Thomas Cole painted series of paintings in the 1830s and '40s dealing with the "Course of Empire," and the "Voyage of Life," themes appropriate for a young nation that was just then getting a sense of itself and its place in the world.

Each cycle of four paintings is a panoramic morality tale with a grand narrative arc from youth and innocence through maturity to age and death, conveyed through changing moods of landscape.

Contemporary artist Alexis Rockman revives and elaborates on this tradition in his "Great Lakes Cycle," a suite of vivid, entertaining and highly accessible oil paintings, watercolors and sketches that anchor the fall season at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland.

Like Cole, Rockman narrates a series of journeys from innocence and purity to corruption and decay. In Rockman's case, however, mankind's industrial exploitation of the Great Lakes is the wellspring of the stories the paintings tell, the source of their drama, and the focus of their moral message.

The show is well-timed in the season just ahead of the 50th anniversary year of the 1969 fire on the Cuyahoga River that helped launch the contemporary environmental movement.

The show also coincides with a like-minded exhibition at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, in which photographer Linda Butler explores that health and welfare of Lake Erie in a series of 50 photographs made over the past four years.

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Alexis Rockman at MOCA Cleveland. Photo: Marvin Fong, The Plain Dealer

Alexis Rockman's "Ice Fishing," 2017. Photo: Adam Reich

Each of the five major paintings in the Rockman series – which measure six feet high and 12 feet wide – frames a journey from purity to pollution, from virginal freshness to lethal threats.

Time and space get scrunched in each painting, along with relative scale. Glaciers retreat, skylines emerge, shipwrecks and sunken airplanes loom in shadowy depths, and Native Americans cruise in canoes alongside square riggers and 20th century ore boats.

Viewers can see the lakes above and below the waterline in each painting with perfect clarity, creating a link between land, sky and water that could never be encompassed by the human eye.

Meanwhile, freighters disgorge scary looking micro-organisms from their bilges that wreak havoc among wild creatures all the way up the food chain, crippling birds and turning fish into tumor-stricken nightmares.

Rockman zooms in and out in his paintings, presenting microscopic creatures at the same scale as birds, fish and ships.

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Detail of Alexis Rockman's "Forces of Change." Marvin Fong, The Plain Dealer

Detail of Alexis Rockman's "Pioneers." Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer

Detail of Alexis Rockman's "Watershed." Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer

In one painting, a salmonella bacterium nearly a foot across lurks through bilious green water that flows from an industrial pig farm toward a crystalline inlet where a kingfisher, heron and turtle unwittingly await oblivion.

Rockman, 56, a New York-based figurative painter with strong interests in natural history, biology and landscape, has made a career chronicling environmental topics that include the hazards of genetically modified foods, or what New York would look like after sea levels rise and flood its boroughs.

Trained at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, RI, and the School of the Visual Arts in New York, Rockman said that as a child, he loved poring over nature illustrations in Golden Books published by Random House and peering at diorama paintings at the American Museum of Natural History in New York.

Rockman's visual roots make him an artistic populist with a message. He's clearly interested in issuing warnings about environmental depredations of mankind and the need for change.

His twist on artistic activism is that he creates pictorial linkages between his work and those of American artists who celebrated unspoiled nature ahead of its conquest by the axe, railroad and factory.

Rockman's work clearly shows those influences, along with nods to Cole and other landscape painters of the 19th century Hudson River School, including Frederic Edwin Church.

In "Forces of Change," one of the big paintings in the show, which deals with environmental problems in the Buffalo region of Lake Erie actually quotes a Church painting of Niagara Falls.

Rockman's work also has a sense of brilliant chromatic intensity and magical, sci-fi realism typical of digitally enhanced movies.

The makes it no surprise that film director Ang Lee recruited Rockman in 2009 to help create the visual style for the film "Life of Pi," based on the Yann Martel novel about a boy adrift at sea in a lifeboat with a tiger.

The Great Lakes Cycle grew out of an invitation from Dana Friis-Hansen, the director and CEO of the Grand Rapids Art Museum, who asked Rockman to create his dream project for the museum.

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Alexis Rockman with his “Field Drawings” at MOCA Cleveland. Marvin Fong, The Plain Dealer

Alexis Rockman’s “Upper Peninsula.” Adam Reich, Grand Rapids Art Museum

The museum arranged an extensive study trip through the region for Rockman. It then organized a five-stop tour for the exhibition at venues in Chicago, Cleveland, Flint and Minneapolis, and bought “Cascade,” one of the five big paintings in the cycle.

The work, perhaps the best in the cycle, is a left-to-right journey across time that shows caribou swimming through icy fresh waters released by retreating glaciers on the left, and a hellish industrial landscape on the right.

More than anything, the picture evokes the natural history dioramas that constitute such an obvious inspiration and source for Rockman’s work.

The best dioramas, such as those created during the 20th century at the natural history museum in New York, blur the difference between the faraway and the nearby, while placing the viewer in a privileged, all-seeing viewpoint.

Rockman very much wants to create that same sense of omnipotent visual power in his paintings. But while natural history murals suppress the painterly hand of the artist and aim for a dry, didactic verisimilitude, Rockman is a bold virtuoso who paints with impressive technical command.

Alexis Rockman with his "Field Drawings" at MOCA Cleveland. Marvin Fong, The Plain Dealer

Alexis Rockman's "Bubbly Creek." (Courtesy | GRAM, Alexis Rockman) Photo: Adam Reich

His paintings are rarely pinprick precise in detail, but instead show an almost uncanny ability to convey a sense of realism while vigorously moving paint around with brushes and palette knives in ways that give his surfaces unexpected vitality and freshness that doesn't come across in reproductions.

When he paints water, for example, Rockman's technique looks fluid and wet; he drips and pours the paint. His skies, sometimes troweled with palette knives, convincingly convey the look of turbulent clouds and blazing sunsets.

Rockman shows similar command in a series of six large-scale watercolors on view in the show, along with 28 astonishing and delightful small-scale studies of fish, birds and insects painted on paper with water, dirt, sand and other natural materials.

Rockman's technique conveys a huge sense of delight that the artist takes in his materials. It's that sense of delight and discovery that helps keep his works from becoming somber or tendentious.

Make no mistake, however. Rockman's art is an admonition. He has a point to make, and his abundant abilities as a painter help him get it across in ways that capture and hold attention. That fusion of message and material lifts his work out of the realm of illustration and makes it as delightful as it is provocative.

Alexis Rockman's "Forces of Change." Collection of Jonathan O'Hara and Sheila Skaff.

"Cascade," by Alexis Rockman. Photo: Adam Reich

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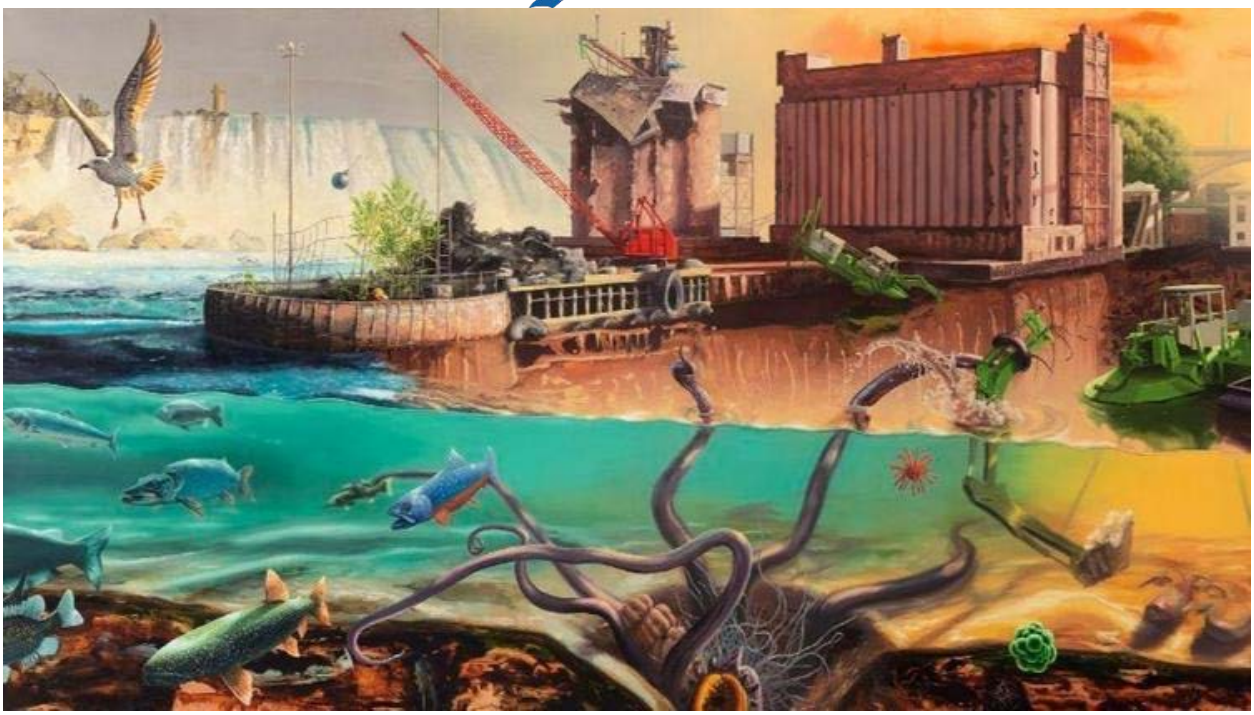
Waxman, Lori. “Alexis Rockman’s large-scale works bring an essential show to the Cultural Center.” *www.chicagotribune.com (Chicago Tribune)*, 24 July 2018.

Chicago Tribune



A detail from “Forces of Change,” by Alexis Rockman, part of a show on display at the Chicago Cultural Center. (Adam Reich photo)

Do I appreciate Lake Michigan? Sure I do. My drinking water comes from it, as does all the other water I use at home. I regularly bike along the lakefront, frequent a local shoreline bistro and take my kids to the beach. We’ve been to the dunes in Indiana. I sometimes buy lake trout from Whole Foods. I’ve read that an invasive species of mussel, the zebra mussel, is responsible for the lovely clarity of the waters. I plan to rent an SUP and go out paddling one morning soon.

This familiarity did little to prepare me for the wonder and devastation of Alexis Rockman’s “The Great Lakes Cycle,” a masterly suite of monumental paintings and experimental drawings on view at the Cultural Center through early fall. Rockman, a talented figurative painter famed since the mid-’80s for his environmentally acute artwork, here offers a stunningly ambitious visual synthesis of the past, present and future of one of the world’s premier ecosystems. Oh yes, it is: the interconnected Lakes Erie, Huron, Michigan, Ontario and Superior together hold 20 percent of the planet’s fresh water, cover a surface equal in size to the United Kingdom, and anchor a $5 trillion regional economy.

These are lakes whose waters have caught on fire from rampant pollution, whose native fish populations have been decimated by invasive species, whose provision of drinking water to 48 million people in two countries is threatened by massive algae blooms. Formed 14,000 years ago by receding glaciers, the Great Lakes have been deeply altered by human forces over the past two centuries, and as the planet continues to undergo the effects of global warming, they promise to become a fiercely fought-over source of fresh water across the continent, even the world.

I had no idea.

Ignorance like mine can be perilous for the lakes — they need all the environmental protection they can get and that takes governmental support, which requires a knowing and impassioned citizenry. Fortunately "The Great Lakes Cycle," which debuted at the Grand Rapids Arts Museum, will travel through 2020 to museums in Cleveland and Minneapolis, with a final stop in Flint, where the need for clean water will surely not be lost on residents.

GRAM initially invited Rockman to visit the region in 2013, setting him off on a series of research trips across eight U.S. states and Canadian provinces, from Pictured Rocks in the Upper Peninsula to the Toronto Power Plant. Along the way he met with scientists, historians, anthropologists and ecologists. He amassed a sizable database of scientific readings and source imagery on topics including the battle of 1812, cargo ships, coal plants, fish anatomy, invasive animals, and phytoplankton.

He gathered sand from the Cuyahoga River and soil from Presque Isle, eventually mixing these and other collected materials with acrylic polymer to create modest studies of local creatures large and small, from a walleye to a spiny water flea. In a twist, Rockman calls these field drawings; though not sketched in the field, they are nevertheless of it. Most of the 28 that hang on the walls at the Cultural Center are innocuous but a few unsettled me, especially a common loon, emerging like a ghost from the black coal dust of the Grand Haven Power Plant. Easy enough to imagine that as a reality.

There are also a half-dozen oversize watercolors on view, but the undisputed stars of the show are five enormous, densely packed panoramic oil and acrylic panels. Six feet high by 12 feet long each, they look like a cross between the natural history museum dioramas Rockman visited as a kid in New York City; classic fantasy films like "Fantasia" (1941) and "2001: A Space Odyssey" (1968); straightforward scientific illustrations of the kind found in Golden Field Guides; high-speed nature photography, with its supernatural, stop-motion detail; and every genre of historical painting save for portraiture. They are fit to burst. Everything is here: the Laurentide Ice Sheet, the once-plentiful lake sturgeon, the remains of a Columbian mammoth, the wreck of the SS Edmund Fitzgerald (a freighter downed by storm along with its crew in 1975), a zebra mussel-encrusted shopping cart, Paleo-Indians and the caribou they are hunting, iron ore mining and its toxic tailings, astronomically enlarged Type E botulism and hepatitis C virus, a fur trappers camp, multiple varieties of non-native salmon, commercial fishing nets, the yellow warbler and the monarch butterfly, a futuristic chicken with six wings, spongefly larvae, Horseshoe Falls, a ConAgra grain elevator and a party of explorers in a canoe.

And that's but a partial list. For complete details, see the handy laminated keys that accompany each painting, identifying every compositional element by silhouette and number. If that sounds didactic, it is and isn't, a combination that proves surprisingly powerful. It's crucial to know what's what if we are to make sense of all that impossible but strangely true pictorial co-existence: millenniums of time, centuries of transit development, species that range in size from the microscopic to the megalithic, the marvels and disasters of nature and of human engineering.

Ultimately the panoramas are as familiar as they are otherworldly, as idyllic as they are apocalyptic. Just like the Great Lakes: right next door lies one of the most significant environmental landscapes in the world, a case study for the endless ways in which humans have used, abused and altered the natural world on which all of life, including but by no means limited to our own, depends.

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Gedert, Roberta. “Artist’s work explores the evolution of the Great Lakes.” *www.toledoblade.com (The Blade)*, 17 March 2018.

THE BLADE

‘Spheres of Influence,’ a 2016 painting by renowned artist Alexis Rockman, is one of five focusing on the Great Lakes featured in a traveling exhibition. Collection of Jonathan O’Hara and Sheila Skaff

Sometimes a trip is just a trip. Other times it’s an inspiration.

As a nationally recognized artist whose work focuses on the natural world and the many environmental and human forces that drive ecological change, Alexis Rockman was both intrigued and inspired during a trip along the shores of one of the Great Lakes about six years ago.

“I saw Lake Erie and thought, ‘What a fascinating and beaten-down lake.’ I knew about some of the greatest hits of invaders: the lamprey, the zebra mussel. It just looked so sad and needed to be taken seriously,” the environmental artist said from his New York residence. “Then I sort of put it in the back of my head. Then Dana called.”

Dana is Dana Friis-Hansen, director and CEO of the Grand Rapids Art Museum in Grand Rapids, Mich., and he had the beginnings of an idea about a contemporary project that would speak to the museum’s commitment as a leader in environmental protection. He wanted the project to involve the museum’s closest and largest resource, the Great Lakes.

Friis-Hansen had worked with Rockman before and knew he wanted him to be a part of it.

“I recalled the ambition and beauty and excitement of Alexis Rockman’s work, because I had shown him a couple of times in different settings,” Friis-Hansen said. “I knew his personality well enough that if he could find something he could sink his teeth into and wrap his mind around, we would get something very special.”

Alexis Rockman's exhibition includes 30 companion pieces inspired by his Great Lakes travels, including 'Upper Peninsula.' Collection of Jonathan O'Hara and Sheila Skaff

The solo exhibition, *Alexis Rockman: The Great Lakes Cycle,* is a compilation of progression pieces that offer an evolutionary timeline for the five lakes, from the Pleistocene Era, when the Great Lakes were carved out by glaciers, to the present day and into the future. The main attractions are five very large oil paintings, 6-by-12 feet, accompanied by keys based on Rockman's research. The keys help viewers follow those timelines; find artifacts, species, and significant historical events, and do their own research.

It is a two-year traveling show that closes at the GRAM on April 29 and hits other museums in the Great Lakes region, including the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland from October through January, 2019.

Rockman, 55, describes his foray into building an artistic career focused on the environment as "an organic experience" he was fortunate to break into during his time at the Rhode Island School of Design and School of Visual Arts in New York.

"My lifelong love of natural history seemed like a fertile place to make work. I also was aware that there weren't other people doing it, which was important to me," he said.

The five Great Lakes — the GRAM's close neighbor Lake Michigan, as well as Superior, Huron, Ontario, and, of course, our bordering Lake Erie — make up the largest body of fresh water on Earth and provide drinking water for 48 million people in the United States and Canada, according to the Great Lakes Commission.

After Friis-Hansen's call, Rockman got to work on the Great Lakes series in 2013, although he didn't pick up a paint brush for a while. He read books. He took trips around the Great Lakes and picked the brains of scientists, researchers, and professors about the ecology of the lakes.

He took a Zodiac boat ride up the Grand River to the mouth of Lake Michigan. He visited museums, universities, lighthouses, and shorelines. In 2014, he came to Toledo, visiting the National Museum of the Great Lakes and meeting with a scientist from the Lake Erie Center and then-Mayor D. Michael Collins.

Rockman sought many of his answers from Jill Leonard, a researcher and professor of fish biology and ecology at Northern Michigan University.

"He asked me what's important in the Great Lakes, which is an important question no one ever asks," Leonard said. "They are a place of incredible change. We talked about [change] from a human impact standpoint. We talked about the types of forces in the Great Lakes, and that's what ended up in his paintings."

The show is not small, covering 4,500 square feet over two galleries at GRAM. It also includes six 6-foot-4 watercolor paintings and 28 smaller field drawings of plants and animals created from materials he collected from various sites, including sand from Sleeping Bear Dunes, mud from the banks of the Cuyahoga River, and coal from the waterside Grand Haven utility and power plant.

Leonard said her favorite Rockman piece is *Spheres of Influence*, not only for its artistic components of color and movement but for its essay on migration and its depiction of the Great Lakes not as isolated bodies of water but as linked to the rest of the world.

In this particular piece, Rockman tells the story of a watery world affected by both humanity and natural stresses. Modes of transportation evolve across a wood canvas, from a War of 1812 schooner and canoes of the mid-19th century to coal freighters and contemporary bulk carriers of today.

The unrecovered remains of Northwest Airlines Flight 2501, which crashed into Lake Michigan on June 23, 1950, killing the 58 people aboard, rests on the bottom of the lake waters.

Alexis Rockman's exhibition includes 30 companion pieces inspired by his Great Lakes travels, including 'Lake Sturgeon.' Alexis Rockman/Sperone Westwater, New York

On the right is a visual representation of the effect of invasive species on the food chain: a dead red-breasted merganser floats, a victim of botulism poisoning from the rotted and toxic blue-green algae filtered through the feeding chain of Eastern European-native zebra mussels and round gobies, who are in turn ingested by water fowl.

Although there are five large paintings, conceivably one for each lake, Rockman instead focused the paintings on major issues affecting the region throughout history.

"When we talked about the five issues that the big paintings would be dealing with, one thing that was crucial was the idea of globalism, how the rest of the world affects the lakes — human transportation, pollution coming from other countries, the air, the stratosphere, migration," Rockman said.

Rockman is nationally known for his environment-focused work, including as a concept artist for the acclaimed film *Life of Pi* (based on the Yann Martel novel) and *Alexis Rockman: A Fable for Tomorrow*, a solo exhibition of his paintings and other works at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington and the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus from 2010 to 2011.

He calls *The Great Lakes Cycle* his most ambitious project to date.

"How he builds the paintings is not 'That would be a good view; I like this angle,' but it's really a series of events often happening from left to right and across time. That's where I think the works have staying power," Friis-Hansen said.

Northern Michigan University collaborated with Rockman and GRAM and offers an online course that allows participants access to modules that explore the show's five main pieces through essays, videos, and other content. For more information, go to nmu.edu/greatlakescycle.

Voon, Claire. "Alexis Rockman Paints the Past and Possible Futures of the Great Lakes." *hyperallergic.com (Hyperallergic)*, 12 March 2018.

HYPERALLERGIC

Alexis Rockman, "Forces of Change" (2017) at the Grand Rapids Art Museum (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted)

In an exhibition at the Grand Rapids Art Museum, Rockman portrays the histories and environmental crises of the world's largest freshwater ecosystem.

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. — The task that the painter Alexis Rockman took on for his new series of paintings was a wildly ambitious one — impossible, almost. Beginning in 2013, Rockman set out to depict the Great Lakes region and all its complexities, considering the 14,000-year developments, present ecosystems, and threatened futures of these five bodies of water. It's a study best suited for a scientist (or, rather, a whole team of them), but if attempted by an artist, there are few who can deliver as Rockman can, with precision and flair. Over the last two decades, he has become known for his skilled combination of a journalist's curiosity with a painter's boundless vision, planting fact on canvas to produce highly detailed, often Boschian scenes.

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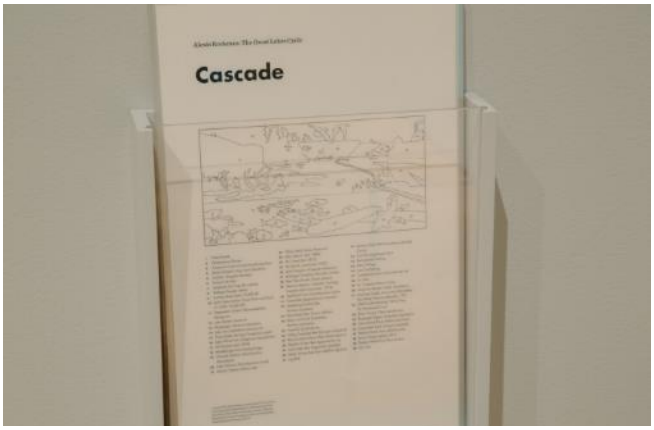
Alexis Rockman, “Chimera” (2017)

The Great Lakes Cycle, the five-painting centerpiece of Rockman’s current exhibition at the Grand Rapids Art Museum, is the result of his most involved project yet. Commissioned by the museum, which sits about 40 miles east of Lake Michigan, it involved Rockman traveling around the Great Lakes region to conduct extensive research. (The exhibition, too, will travel to five other institutions, all in cities around the Great Lakes.) He learned about its ecology from individuals in the recreational fishing industry, ichthyologists, anthropologists, and representatives from the Department of Fisheries. He then returned to his New York studio to paint the many environmental issues that plague the world’s largest freshwater ecosystem, from toxic algae blooms to invasive sea lamprey. Some of his ideas appear in an adjacent gallery of watercolors, a fantastic grouping that the museum has supplemented with Rockman’s ongoing series of field drawings of flora and fauna.

Alexis Rockman, “Cascade” (2015)

Alexis Rockman, detail of “Cascade” (2015)



Key for “Cascade” at the Grand Rapids Art Museum (photo courtesy Grand Rapids Art Museum)

Alexis Rockman, “Spheres of Influence” (2016)

But the vast majority of his research spreads across five canvases, each measuring six by 12 feet. They do not correspond to individual lakes but rather present narratives on broad themes (fleshed out in discussion with Jill Leonard, a fish biologist at Northern Michigan University). The earliest completed one, “Cascade” (2015), centers on how humans have exploited the region for its wealth of resources over time. While one

half shows wildlife, from caribou to a school of cisco, calmly swimming, the other shows a coal burning plant, an iron ore, and the slimy wastes of mines, among other traces of detrimental industries. Look closer, and you'll spot a fur trappers camp in the background, near a commercial Seine fishing boat.

Alexis Rockman, detail of "Spheres of Influence" (2016)

Alexis Rockman, detail of "Spheres of Influence" (2016)

Most dramatic in the series is easily the painting, "Forces of Change" (2017), which centers on the lower Niagara River as it empties into Lake Eerie. Here, Rockman gathers characters that have transformed the Great Lakes region, from microscopic bacteria to the invasive Tree-of-Heaven. The great disruptor, though, is E. coli, personified as a sharp-toothed, shrieking kraken that bursts from the earth's core to grab at fish, its reach swift and deadly.

There are at least 25 specific references, mostly to organisms, that one can identify in each painting ("Watershed," an unsightly glimpse of how cities affect the lakes dating from 2015, has the most, at 50). For those who don't specialize in ecology, Rockman provides keys for each painting that map out and label every standalone subject he includes.

It's a didactic display, but one that doesn't instruct as much as provide scientific context for these paintings. The key only serves to identify subjects, rather than explain every relationship playing out across the canvases, leaving room for your curiosity to grow. Anyhow, I am uncertain if people will spend much time with these diagrams aside from perhaps consulting one or two items that stump them. Rockman's paintings are so saturated with information that it's difficult to stop scanning the scenes; having your eyes dance back-and-forth from canvas to key is an equally demanding exercise.

Better to just revel in the enigmatic, bizarre landscapes, which make tangible the myriad unseen forces that have drastically changed the five lakes and the surrounding lands. I'll admit — as someone who moved to the Midwest just eight months ago — that the image I associate most with the Great Lakes is of five blue shapes, huddled on a map. Rockman, digging deep, reveals complicated networks that are not always seen, and translates statistics into compositions that all at once carry the democratic perspective of a documentary, the drama of a sci-fi thriller, and the grandeur of history painting.

Part of why I consider Rockman's task impossible is that this "Great Lakes region," really, is an abstract, un-mappable area. The issues they face are global ones. Rockman's painting, "Spheres of Influence" (2016), tackles this by examining the impact of migration routes that cross the Great Lakes. The sectioned view of a lake depicts boats and airplanes that have traversed the waters over time, alongside migratory

birds and insects that move along flyways. Not one to neglect detail, Rockman also carefully depicts airborne contaminants. Every newcomer leaves its trace, whether it be pollution or invasive species, transported across oceans in the ballast tanks of cargo ships.

Rockman's paintings are most powerful in how they visualize such relationships, showing how small-scale interactions are linked to major devastation. Reminiscent of dioramas, they present imagined but credible representations of real environments — organisms wouldn't group all at once in real life as they do here, but how they behave is accurate. The links that Rockman highlights can be surprising. For instance, algae blooms are responsible for avian botulism as toxins move through the food chain, consumed by invasive zebra mussels and round gobies.

Much of *The Great Lakes Cycle* deals with past and longstanding plagues. More recent ones, as shaped by the development of our cities, are found in "Watershed." This bucolic scene is tainted by glowing sewer runoff, genetically warped animals, and salmonella — represented by a defecating pig. Is this hyperbolized, grotesque vision of our present really the near future for the Great Lakes? It's a question made more urgent by Trump's repeated calls to cut funding for Great Lakes restoration efforts. Rockman doesn't offer any solutions to enact change, but the scenes we confront are certainly a persuasive call to action.

Alexis Rockman: The Great Lakes Cycle continues at the Grand Rapids Art Museum (101 Monroe Center Street NW, Grand Rapids, Michigan) through April 29.

Alexis Rockman, "Watershed" (2015)

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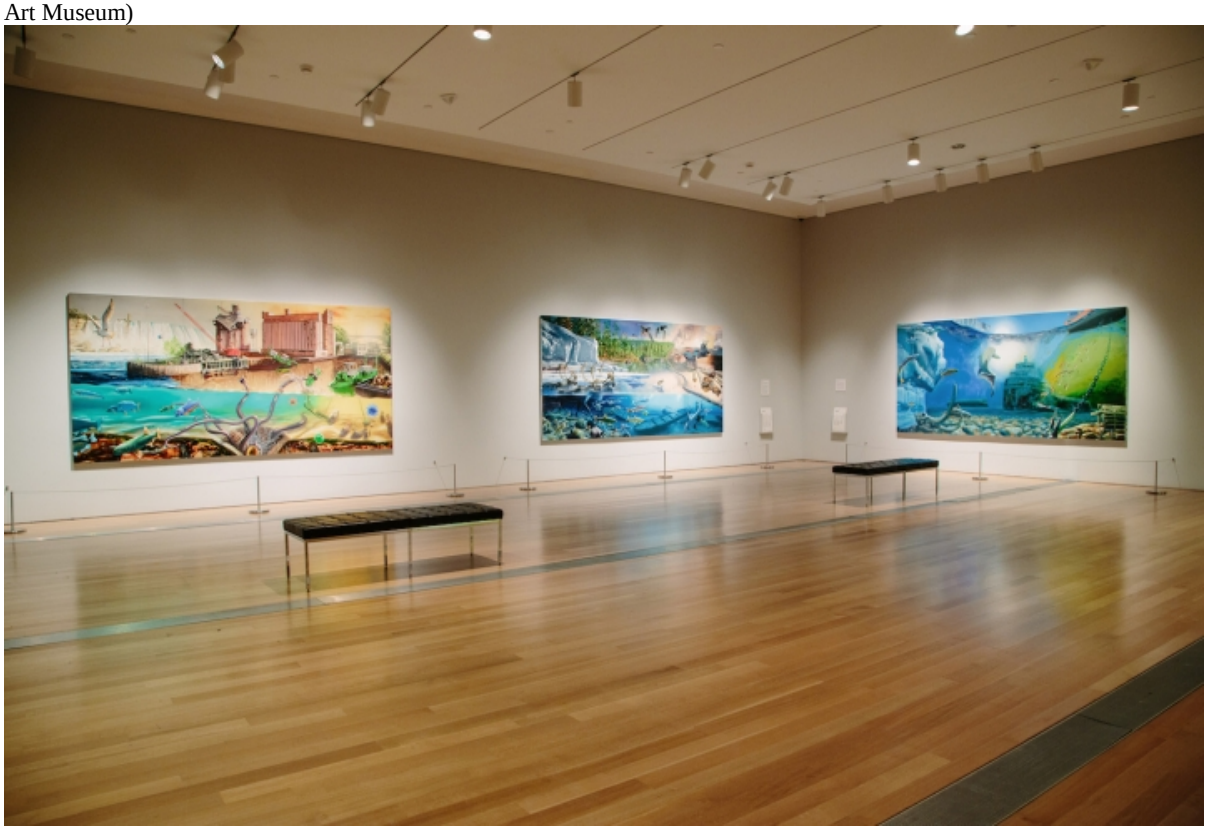
Installation views of *Alexis Rockman: The Great Lakes Cycle* at the Grand Rapids Art Museum (photo courtesy Grand Rapids Art Museum)



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Reimink, Troy. “This art exhibit is all about the Great Lakes.” *www.freep.com (Detroit Free Press)*, 31 January 2018.

Detroit Free Press

“Upper Peninsula,” 2017. Watercolor, ink, and acrylic on paper, 74 x 52 inches. Collection of Jonathan O’Hara Gallery. It’s appearing as part of the “Alexis Rockman: The Great Lakes Cycle” at Grand Rapids Art Museum. (Photo: Alexis Rockman)

Alexis Rockman (Photo: Grand Rapids Art Museum)

“Alexis Rockman: The Great Lakes Cycle” was already four years in the making when President Donald Trump floated a 2018 budget that would have eliminated funding for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, the federal program established to protect the ecosystem containing a fifth of the world’s freshwater.

Overnight, the political context of Rockman’s project — a sweeping collection of large-scale paintings and drawings depicting the history, geology and ecology of the Great Lakes, as well as a variety of dangers to their well-being — changed dramatically.

“These problems would be dire even if the election had gone the other way. Now it’s catastrophic,” Rockman told the Free Press last week at the Grand Rapids Art Museum, where “Great Lakes Cycle” is open through April. “The work didn’t change a bit. My mood did.”

Rockman is a major contemporary painter whose work often confronts human threats to the planet through a lens that is both whimsical, darkly fantastic and scientifically rigorous, sometimes described as “natural-history psychedelia.” His resume includes a prominent retrospective at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and credit for providing filmmaker Ang Lee with visual inspiration for the Oscar-winning movie “Life of Pi.”

The New York-based artist’s new exhibition, which has attracted national media attention, will travel to museums in Great Lakes cities such as Chicago, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Cleveland, Marquette and Flint through 2020. No Detroit exhibition is currently scheduled.

In its ambitious vision, scale and technical execution, “Cycle” makes a persuasive a case for drastic action to preserve the fragile Great Lakes ecosystem. It includes five 6-by-12-foot oil, alkyd and acrylic paintings that vividly illustrate the lakes’ precarious natural beauty, the ravages of civilization and their importance (as well as indifference) to human life. Smaller watercolor paintings and drawings supplement the panoramas with a narrative of Rockman’s research travels throughout the region.

“I understood the complexity of this part of America,” Rockman said. “I wanted to bring something global and international to something that was hyperlocal, and also deal with not only the history of ecology but also the history of the representation of American landscapes and their relationship to the rest of the world.”

"Great Lakes Cycle" was organized by Dana Friis-Hansen, GRAM's director and CEO, who had worked with Rockman decades earlier as a curator. When Friis-Hansen assumed leadership of the museum in 2011, one of his priorities was to mount a large exhibition asserting the museum's commitment to sustainability. (GRAM was the world's first art museum to receive gold certification from the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership and Energy in Environmental Design rating system.)

"Korvis Blue Butterfly," 2017. Sand from Manistee and acrylic polymer on paper, 9 x 12 ½ inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Sperone Westwater, New York. It's appearing as part of the "Alexis Rockman: The Great Lakes Cycle" at Grand Rapids Art Museum. (Photo: Alexis Rockman)

"People have this pride with being from the Great Lakes. We started thinking about commissioning an important artist to take a look and show us what he or she sees," Friis-Hansen said. "I knew (Rockman) thought big. I had an idea in my head of one painting. He sort of opened the door wider."

Rockman's unique view of the Great Lakes, he readily admits, comes from his position as a visitor to the region.

"I'm by no means an expert or authority on the lakes, but I have a perspective on them that I believe in. They're incredibly fascinating and beautiful and globally important," he said, speaking at a public forum at the GRAM on Saturday. "I think being an outsider is helpful sometimes. If you're an outsider, there's a sense of longing to understand and openness."

"Bubbly Creek," 2017. Watercolor, ink, and acrylic on paper, 73 ½ x 52 inches.

"Cope's Tree Frog," 2017. Sand from Sleeping Bear Dunes and acrylic polymer on paper, 12 ½ x 9 inches.

"Coaster Brook Trout," 2017. Soil from Presque Isle Park and acrylic polymer on paper, 12 ½ x 9 inches.

The museum helped Rockman conduct a research project that began in 2013. He spoke with scientists, chartered a fishing expedition, visited historical museums, toured mines and immersed himself in regional culture and historical data. While traveling in the Upper Peninsula, he connected with Jill Leonard, a biology professor at Northern Michigan University in Marquette who specializes in fish migration and became instrumental to the project.

Over coffee, Rockman explained his evolving idea for the exhibition, beginning with a sketch containing the five rectangles that would become the anchoring paintings. By the end of their conversation, Leonard had helped him map out the theme and general contents of each panorama.

"He asked me early on, what's the thing about the Great Lakes?" Leonard said. "I've been teaching this for a long time, and I've realized that it's all about change — natural change, non-natural change, everything."

They remained in contact as Rockman worked on the pieces. He frequently consulted with Leonard about the accuracy of his in-progress paintings, and the official exhibition catalog contains scientific annotations and keys identifying species, geological features and human artifacts that appear.

The first painting, "Cascade," spotlights the recession of Pleistocene glaciers that created the lakes, animal and human migration and the effects of mining and logging. "Pioneers" spotlights the creatures, living and dead, that populate the far depths, along with the unmistakable image of the sunken SS Edmund Fitzgerald. "Forces of Change" features an "E. Coli kraken," with the face of an invasive sea lamprey, in a body of water alongside equally the fearsome beasts of Rust Belt industry.

Friis-Hansen said "Great Lakes Cycle" has the twofold purpose of bringing wider attention to the Great Lakes while encouraging the museum's local audience to appreciate the international significance of the waters that are part of the region's DNA. While national politics may underscore the exhibition's with fresh urgency, the real issues go beyond the results of an election.

"There have been ecological challenges for decades," he said. "Human beings have been making good decisions for the lakes and bad decisions for the lakes since human beings have been here. There's always a relationship. Treading lightly is something we need to learn to do better."

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Geist, Mary Ellen. “Painting the Great Lakes: An Interview with Alexis Rockman.”
www.greatlakesnow.org (Great Lakes Now), 5 January 2018.

If your ideas of Great Lakes paintings are beautiful sunsets, seagulls, sailboats and sand dunes, this exhibition which begins at the Grand Rapids Art Museum in Michigan and then travels to five other cities will be a surprise.

Alexis Rockman: The Great Lakes Cycle is a comprehensive look at the Great Lakes that combines art with science and challenges viewers with paintings that communicate both rigorous scientific knowledge and sublime beauty.

Trillium, 2017. Watercolor, ink, and acrylic on paper, 74 x 52 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Sperone Westwater, New York.

Chimera, 2017. Watercolor, ink, and acrylic on paper, 73 3/8 x 52 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Sperone Westwater, New York.

Bubbly Creek, 2017. Watercolor, ink, and acrylic on paper, 73 ½ x 52 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Sperone Westwater, New York.

Artist Alexis Rockman brings wide ranging content to his work, and his own long-term interests in science, the environment and wildlife consistently inform his projects. In this exhibition, he offers impressions of the Great Lakes that are at times bleak and brutally disturbing, and at other times playfully beautiful, delighting in the pleasures of this visually spectacular ecosystem.

Five new mural-sized paintings anchor the exhibit, and each one explores a threat to the Great Lakes. Thirty field drawings and six large-scale watercolors accompany the paintings.

Rockman’s artwork has been shown at many international solo and group exhibitions, including a major retrospective at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. His work is in public and private art collections around the world, and he has also taught at Columbia University and Harvard. Rockman was also hired to produce visual underwater images for the Academy Award- winning movie “Life of Pi.”

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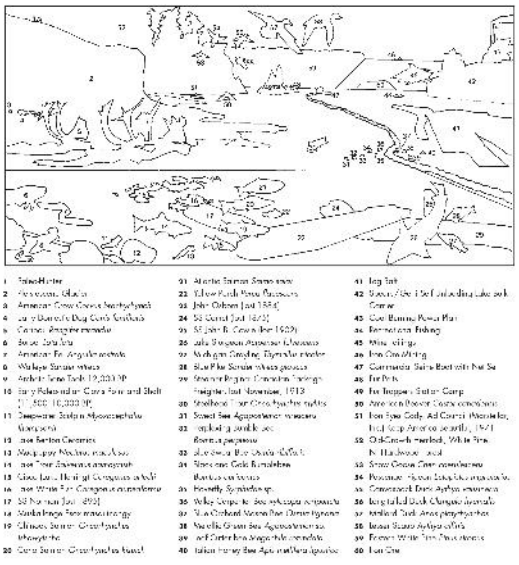
Cascade, 2015. Oil and alkyd on wood panel, 72 x 144 inches. Commissioned by Grand Rapids Art Museum with funds provided by Peter Wege, Jim and Mary Nelson, John and Muriel Halick, Mary B. Loupee, and Karl and Patricia Betz. Grand Rapids Art Museum, 2015.19



Cascade, 2015 (key)

After the show in Grand Rapids from January 27th to April 29th, the exhibit travels to Chicago, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Minneapolis and Flint.

Detroit Public Television's *Great Lakes Bureau* talked with the artist about his research of the Great lakes and what inspired this exhibit.

Here are some excerpts from my interview with artist Alexis Rockman.

GLB: Where were you born and raised?

AR: Manhattan, on the Upper East Side. I loved going to the Bronx Zoo and the Museum of Natural History and I started collecting pets when I was a kid. I loved animals, and my mother and stepfather encouraged that. I became more and more interested in animals and I especially loved reptiles and amphibians. And, of course, I loved dogs and cats. And as I got older, I sort of combined my interest and my love of natural history with movies and production design. I remember painting landscapes on the glass behind habitats I was creating, and even recreating some of my favorite movie scenes on glass from King Kong, and I remember putting a giant tree frog in front of King Kong. It seemed like a natural progression.

GLB: You were involved in movies and set design while also pursuing a career as a painter. The director Ang Lee hired you to do visual design for his move "Life of Pi" where you created what were referred to

as "freaky biological fantasies" living in the water where the story takes place. How did you connect with the Grand Rapids Art Museum director and the curator of the exhibition, Dana Friis-Hansen?

AR: We had worked on several projects in other cities and I've known him for more than 20 years. I worked with him in the late 80's when he was a curator at MIT. I did a project with him in Japan in the early 90's. He sent me an email and told me he was in Grand Rapids and said he wanted to do an ambitious project with me. He asked me if I had any ideas. I looked at the map and I realized Grand Rapids is right on the Grand River which empties into Lake Michigan. And I said, "You know, the Great Lakes is a fascinating regional area that has global implications." I suggested doing something very ambitious. I told him that I wanted to do five very large paintings, six very large works on paper, and some field drawings. But I told him I needed to read a bunch of books and take a series of trips around the Great Lakes to get a better sense of what I was dealing with.

GLB: Where did you travel in the Great Lakes Region?

AR: I asked the museum to develop an itinerary – Julie Conklin especially did a great job. My fantasy was to rent a car, leave Grand Rapids, drive an hour and a half north, meet with historians, get a history on ship wrecks and light houses, meet with fisherman and anybody that was interesting, experts on wildlife, too—and meet with as many people as I could who had relationships with all the Great Lakes.

Large mouth bass

GLB: You had never seen the Great Lakes before you travelled here to do your research. What was your first impression?

AR: It surprised me how much they are like an ocean. But they're in worse shape than I thought.

GLB: Explain.

AR: First of all, they LOOK great on the surface! But there are so many problems beneath the surface. It's such a tragic, almost comically tragic, scenario of what happened to the Great Lakes. Every generation has its own debacle and mistakes. It's very sad, the shape they're in.

GLB: What are some of the problems you first became aware of as you researched the Great Lakes?

AR: Pollution, of course. Microbeads. Plastic. But invasive species are probably one of the most frightening problems right now. Species are going extinct. The Great Lakes have been overfished. The Lakes have been over-exploited by humans. And there are indirect things like run-off from agriculture that are destroying the lakes.

Common loon

GLB: You have an awesome painting of a lamprey in this show. Did you meet one?

E Coli

AR: Yes, I picked one up. It was muscular! It was a small one, but I could feel how powerful it was.

GLB: Tell me about the rest of your paintings in this upcoming show at the Grand Rapids Art Museum.

AR: Each painting deals with an issue that the lakes have had to struggle against. For instance, *Pioneers* is a painting that not only deals with the first wave of immigrants—not unlike the first humans that arrived—but also the opportunistic and relatively recent freeloaders that got sucked up in to ballasts in cargo ships from all over the world. Those drops of water in those ships contain thousands of eggs and larvae, and once they're dumped in the Great Lakes, they take advantage of this virgin landscape: round gobies, bloody-red shrimp, rusty crayfish—the list goes on and on.

GLB: How did you structure your approach to this show?

AR: First, I make a list of what I want to be in the paintings and figure out what they are, and that has to do with words. I sat down with a wonderful professor named Dr. Jill Leonard at Northern Michigan University, who is an ecological generalist. She knows a lot of things about the Great Lakes. I made five boxes, five rectangles, and I said, "Ok, what are the issues?" So, we decided together it would be *Pioneers*, *Cascade*, *Watershed*, *Spheres of Influence* and *Forces of Change*—a lot of issues that the lakes have had to deal with at different times in their life cycles and stages of their lives. Obviously, Lake Erie and Lake Ontario are in far worse shape than any of the other lakes. That's because they're the shallowest and smallest and have the most proximity to the East where the invaders ostensibly come from. But you go west, and Lake Superior has the most water and is the coldest and is in the best shape. But it will still have to deal with these issues sooner or later.

GLB: What is your intent with this show?

AR: My intent is to make a compelling painting or project. I'm fascinated by these ideas. I don't have any illusions about what's possible. The machinery of capitalism is far too powerful to let art get in its way! My life's work has been to immerse myself in what's happening and cope with that through these paintings and drawings.

GLB: This show will be travelling to several museums throughout the Great Lakes. Will each one be different?

AR: I think when the work shows up at each museum, it will have a different footprint. It will reflect each region and each lake in a different way at each of the five venues that have been planned so far.

GLB: Anything else you'd like to say about what you've learned about the Great Lakes in the process of creating this show?

AR: The Great Lakes are a vulnerable ecosystem that is incredibly precious and it will be even more precious than gold in the future as freshwater becomes more and more scarce. And not only should the water be conserved, but the things that are living in it that are left have to be taken care of.

"Alexis Rockman with Tom McGlynn." *brooklynrail.org (The Brooklyn Rail)*, 13 December 2017.

THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Alexis Rockman, *Watershed*, 2015. Oil and alkyd on wood panel, 72 × 144 inches. Collection of Jonathan O'Hara and Sheila Skaff.

Alexis Rockman graciously welcomed me into his Tribeca studio on two occasions this fall to talk about his work, natural (and personal) histories, and the natural world of the 21st century. Hanging in the studio was a series of large-scale watercolors related to a recent project entitled "The Great Lakes Cycle," which looks at the environmental history, degradation and resilience of that particular ecosystem. Rockman's work treats the often capricious and opportunistic human interventions in nature in paradoxical concurrence with abiding flora and fauna adapted to specific climes over centuries. His considerable body of work simultaneously critiques the seemingly inevitable dark outcome of such interventions while acknowledging that human beings are also part of nature itself. Consequently, his is not an easy read of the so-called Anthropocene. As this issue's Guest Critic section focuses on the relationship between art and science, we took this chance to discuss, among other things, how the intertwining of the two might lead from an aesthetic imaginary toward an activist shift in the urgent concerns now facing environmental research and our culture at large.

Tom McGlynn (Rail): When did you become aware that your specific representational style was the one you'd settle on? Did you always favor this style? Did you ever work abstractly?

Alexis Rockman: I think I have an innate attraction to types of figuration, if I think about my childhood, but I also went through a period when I started painting in a so-called "serious" way out of art school, where I was trying to take myself seriously as an artist. I flirted with ideas about abstraction that had to do with color field painting and biomorphic surrealism. I tried to find my way into pictorialism through those, and got to a point where I just put those aside, took back some of the color field painting, and then dove into a type of figuration that I felt was unfamiliar in the contemporary landscape of the early '80s.

Alexis Rockman, *Bubbly Creek*, 2017. Watercolor, ink, and acrylic on paper, 73 ½ x 52 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Sperone Westwater, New York.

Rail: You have incorporated abstract backgrounds into your compositions, but you've also mentioned elsewhere that you consider the backgrounds as "a piece of history."

Rockman: When I think about what is behind many of the subjects in the paintings—and I do think about it as an abstract space—it's not only pictorial, it's also a quotation (not in an ironic way) of things I'm interested in, in terms of their historical context.

Rail: You spoke in our first meeting about being influenced by a range of visual stimuli as a boy, drawing from such popular sources as the dioramas in the American Museum of Natural History and the taxonomic presentation of flora and fauna in the Golden Field Guide series of books and other natural history compendiums. You described this in part as a "post-war cornucopia of abundance." Is there a very specific set of references that encapsulate a generation of artists coming of age in the 1960s and '70s? I'm of a generation that can recall how the 1964/5 World's Fair in New York shaped a certain utopic totality and a mashup of science with pop culture, combining dinosaurs with Dodges, for instance.

Rockman: Oh, absolutely. That World's Fair was an artifact of pre-JFK assassination, planned as it was just prior. I consider that the end-point of post-war utopian America.

Rail: Yes, and to some degree it's kind of the end-point of a "future-land" manic modernism. I was thinking about such publications as the Golden Field Guides and the How and Why Wonder Books of my own experience in terms of how science and the future was presented in a popular way.

Rockman: Yes, when you have an innate suspicion about institutional power, because of Vietnam and Watergate, you're skeptical about the authority of "the man," so to speak. Modernism in a sense had become "the man." So all you're left with is what you care about and love, and you find a way to experience the world through your own subjective worldview, which includes taxonomies. How you construct your body of work is about those sorts of things. When I was starting to figure out that I wanted to be a professional artist, artists like Sigmar Polke and Anselm Kiefer created their own worldviews through German history. Polke looked at American pop culture and filtered his worldview through longing for the West from the East, and Kiefer looked through shame and guilt and grandiosity and ego.

Rail: In the context of this question, Polke is probably more appropriate in terms of filtering it through a Pop idiom. For our generation, there were the inevitable digests and encapsulations of nature in popular media.

Rockman: Well, I watched the "wonderful worlds" of Disney and Cousteau on television like everyone else. But I was also so painfully aware of the darkness that wasn't shown, and the cruelty, not only of natural

selection, but also of social Darwinism, which has justified so many terrible things. Humans are animals, and it's a horrifying world. And that was about denial, and I felt that modernism was about denial also.

Rail: Other artists have worked specifically with the American Museum of Natural History, such as Smithson in his film Spiral Jetty (1970), or Hiroshi Sugimoto in his series of black and white photographs of a selection of dioramas, Dioramas (1974-2012). The dramatic, presentational context becomes a theatrical backdrop for them. This occurs most startlingly in Sugimoto's photo of the Gemsbok diorama, in the Hall of African Mammals. He chose a diorama in which a large group of African antelopes seem to be posing for the camera. Sugimoto realized that these scenarios were in a sense already photographs. Sugimoto's approach to the diorama as a readymade photograph is something you would have internalized, perhaps?

Rockman: My work was recently described as "overstated and theatrical," and that's something I embrace. I really do have those things in mind when I'm making most of my images. Less so with the watercolors, but even then, for example with a group portrait of fish endemic to the Great Lakes that would never be in that situation, it's highly theatrical.

Rail: At the time, Sugimoto's work was received in the context of postmodern re-photographing, as Sherrie Levine was then doing with Walker Evans.

Rockman: I wanted to re-photograph things that never existed, and that were the darker version of the official version.

Rail: Considering the path of your investigations, were you familiar with the work of Christy Rupp in the early 1980s? She became known for stickers of rats in the Times Square show in 1980. She also did a couple of shows at the then newly christened ABC No Rio entitled "Animals Living in Cities" (1980). You've had a similar interest in urban wildlife.

Rockman: I did go to that gallery, and the name rings a bell but I can't put a finger on it. 1980 is right before I started to go look at art. My interest in that kind of thing came about five years later. I was having a conversation at that time with Mark Dion, who I met right after we both graduated from SVA. We knew of each other, but we didn't believe that the other could possibly exist or be interesting because we thought we were so unique. We were mistaken. We talked about the idea that so much of the energy of conservation in the scientific discourse was about animals that were photogenic or charismatic or "worthy" of examination by the human or the scientific gaze. I wanted to invert that, subvert that, and have masterful paintings of things that were disgraced, or things that we hated about our landscape or ourselves. Rats, and these plants that are known as selected species, or weedy, or invasive or whatever—opportunistic—have many things in common, and one of the most important is that they are impossible to eradicate. Something about that was innately attractive to me, something again that undermined the status quo.

Rail: You've collaborated extensively with Mark Dion in the past. His work entails taking on the persona of an 18th or 19th century scientist. He's used the term cryptozoologist.

Rockman: Yet cryptozoology is a much more specific thing: it's the study of animals out of time, place or scale. Dion and I are not cryptozoologists. We have done projects about cryptozoology as a critique of it. The foremost cryptozoology scholar in a serious way is Loren Coleman, and he wrote books about the mythology of animals who are both real and exist—such as the okapi, which is the forest giraffe that was discovered in the Belgian Congo in 1901—and about Bigfoot, which doesn't exist. It's about the

sociological phenomenon of the beliefs and why they believe them. It doesn't include UFOs because that's something else.

Rail: I suppose I misunderstood the term as the definition of a kind of meta-scientific posture that you and Dion share.

Rockman: Not completely. We were in a book called "Cryptozoology," and an exhibition up in Maine together. But Mark would tell you—you keep a very healthy distance from that stuff. Let's just say I'm a "natural history enthusiast" interested in a cosmography of natural history.

Rail: Dion seems to favor a very specific epoch in the 18th century, just prior to the fully- realized Enlightenment sciences (where stricter taxonomic systems get codified) in which the artist correlates his practice with his kind of amateur collector. This amateur discursively explores what might be called a proto-cryptozoologist approach toward science. It doesn't really resemble our modern sciences but plays out more as a private folly. I'm only bringing it up because I think there's actually room for crackpot ideology. Not to say that either you or Dion are crackpots, but there's a certain kind of dialogue that happens in the scientific community that puts limits on a discursive social dialogue about, for instance, your interest in the dark side, or the downside of these things. Modern science has traditionally put empirical investigation into its own type of cabinet of curiosities. Like an idealized empirical aquarium of research purity.

Rockman: Yet Dion has made such cabinets that include plastics retrieved from the North Atlantic. It's using the idea of specimen collection for the most disgraced and degraded byproducts of our culture. And he would put it in an enormous cabinet or display case and organize it according to shapes, function, and material. There's more of an urgency now than ever to be an activist and to have a way of reaching a kind of collective cultural expansiveness. I attended a panel last week at Northern Michigan University discussing the responsibility of the scientists to either keep polemics and politics out of their work or become activists. I have an opinion about that. I think that scientists have feelings, and they've been trained not to express them because it's been very much about delivering data and forming policy. Their job is to deliver information and have other people weighing the data with social and economic challenges that may arise from these dynamics. When you have an administration or a government that refuses, institutionally, to embrace empirical science, then all bets are off and you have to be an activist.

Rail: The state administration of science has been troubled to say the least. That's what I meant in bringing up the discursive freedom of the 18th century amateur scientist. There's an aspect of the amateur which is unbridled, un-administered, and not partitioned by disciplines.

Rockman: Well it's also polymathic, if that's a word. Being more of a generalist. That's one of the reasons I was never attracted to formal academics.

Rail: The advantages of being a crypto– or and amateur scientist or zoologist as opposed to being somebody who might have to satisfy the terms of a research grant…

Rockman: Absolutely. Or dedicated scientists dealing with people who are above them in a power context. And this is actually a good lead-in to something that is very simple, which is one of the greatest things about being an artist: you control your own production to deal with ideas and information that may not have a voice in any other context because it's too dangerous.

Alexis Rockman, *Bald Eagle*, 2017. Sand from Saugatuck and acrylic polymer on paper, 9 × 12 ½ inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Sperone Westwater, New York.

Rail: Who are the writers on nature or science who have inspired you or from which you are painting? Do you consider the biological sciences preeminent in getting close to our actual experience of the everyday world of nature and culture?

Rockman: Stephen Jay Gould was a friend and a true inspiration. Rachel Carson has also been important, as has been Bill McKibben. Bill Bryson I particularly like because he's more of a generalist.

Rail: Your most recent project was a series of five paintings collectively titled The Great Lakes Cycle, and is slated to open at the Grand Rapids Art Museum in Michigan from January 27th to April 29th, 2018. Could you talk about the kind of research that went into this project and where it took you in terms of paintings?

Rockman: Having been asked to do something that was a dream project and a commitment of significant time, I thought "Well, the Great Lakes is a thing that I know enough about to just know that it's interesting, and not much more." So I explained to Dana Friis-Hansen, the organizer of the project, that I would need to spend a couple of months reading about the ecological history of the lakes, and then go on a field trip where I would spend a couple of weeks driving around Lake Michigan, and have her staff set up an itinerary where I could meet with various people from fisherman to historians at the lighthouse museum to ichthyologists at Northern Michigan University. That would be the ideal situation. Then I would come back

to my studio and think about what I wanted to do, and write a proposal about each of the five paintings, and we would take it from there.

Rail: So, a polymathic approach.

Rockman: First it would be casting a net as wide as possible and finding out what might be interesting to include in the work, ideas and issues that need to be addressed, and then make lists,and do some diagrams with arrows.

Rail: I find it interesting that you mention fisherman and not just scientists—you mention people who have a visceral, everyday experience.

Rockman: Yes, I went fishing; I chartered a boat and went out and caught some steelhead and some lake trout. I asked them about how things had changed, and they weren't particularly old—they were fourty-something—but I wanted to know what they knew. And both the fish I caught were stocked, which I didn't know. I talked to them about the history of fishing, just to get a sense of how these lakes interact with the world. I didn't work on a cargo ship for instance, it was just a chance to get on the water and get a sense for what it is.

Rail: You similarly researched your mural-size painting South, which is currently in the rambling show curated by the Rail's publisher, Phong Bui, at Mana Contemporary. Titled "Artists Need to Create at the Same Scale that Society Has the Capacity to Destroy," the show operates on the concept that monumental, ideologically capacious projects by artists might be an appropriately-scaled response to the political upheaval we are currently experiencing in this country and globally. What would you say is your own relation to scale in this sense? Do you see your larger commissions as directly addressing the public in this urgent way? What about your relationship to scale as a means of public address as opposed to some of your more intimate watercolors? There seems a difference in the volume of address in each.

Rockman: I think that's true. I've made public projects and domestic projects. And I'm working on a domestic project now. Sometimes the work needs to be bigger than your body because it's about things that are bigger than your body. I don't believe that bigger is more important, but the idea of the sublime and epic…it's often well served if it's epic and sublime in scale.

Rail: I was thinking of scale in terms of some of the social activism of the Mexican muralists, of Diego Rivera for instance.

Rockman: Sure, coming from the history of fresco painting. Absolutely. That's a tradition I at least like to embrace on some level. And Diego Rivera was very important because he was the Trojan horse, sneaking in these socialist ideas into capitalist, money-funded projects. Like the Rockefeller Center murals that were destroyed. I also just saw the amazing José Orozco project The Epic of American Civilization murals at Dartmouth.

Rail: Your work is highly technical within a certain illustrative tradition yet simultaneously loose and phenomenally active. Can you explain your approach to specific mediums and how they may inflect your subject matter and meaning? I'm looking at this picture [on the studio wall] of a bull moose standing in a lake which melts into a kind of abstraction. How the mediums negotiate the pictorial aspect is an active part of your approach.

Rockman: It's never been a resolved thing. It's just about how to put together a picture—an image—that has this duality of viscera and pictorialism. I think about what might work, based on what I've done, and then it never does what it's supposed to do, so you have to be willing to be surprised.

Rail: At times you seem willing to employ satire that approaches camp, as a critique of the banal, hyperbolic aspect of consumerism and the commercial fetishization of nature. In your painting Sea World, from 2004, a prehistoric fish of the Devonian period, the Dunkleosteus, is substituted for a performing dolphin or killer whale.

Rockman: I'm not really interested in camp. In the Sea World piece I obviously was thinking about performing animals, and I wanted to think about what was the most badass thing that would literally eat the fucking trainer. It becomes doubly ironic, too, because I was making fun of the film Jurassic Park, sort of, and it came to pass that the latest film in that franchise, Jurassic World, came along with a scene pretty much based on my painting. It was particularly satisfying and kind of strange.

Rail: Since this issue of the Rail is dedicated to the interface between science and art, can you explain how you feel about empirical exploration and art as a medium of social activism? You have mentioned that with the role of the didactic in today's political landscape, perhaps, an educational or direct approach to political events might actually be what's needed, rather than a more nuanced approach, given the unhinged, virtual aesthetic being promulgated by the radical right in this country at the moment. You have said, very demonstratively, that faced with this kind of virtual right-wing "tidal wave of bullshit," what is needed is more educational didacticism.

Rockman: I'm not sure what the right answer to that is. Obviously I think education is our only hope, but how do you engage generations that can barely look away from their smartphones for thirty seconds, let alone are interested in something that is a painting and that's didactic? So I think how do you draw people into a pictorial idiom? You have to find ways to be engaging, and I don't know if it's successful or not, but I want to embrace every trick in the book to get there.

CONTRIBUTORS:

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Chaisson, Clara. “Beauty and Despair Collide in These Murals of the Great Lakes.” *www.nrdc.org (Natural Resources Defense Council)*, 5 December 2017.

Pioneers, 2017. Oil and acrylic on wood panel, 72 x 144 inches. Courtesy of Alexis Rockman and Sperone Westwater, New York

Alexis Rockman’s new series creates a vision of the lakes’ past, present, and future that sparks imagination while addressing stark realities.

With loons and trout alongside allegorical monsters, the fantastical murals at the center of artist Alexis Rockman’s new exhibition don’t just look like a dream sequence; they are a dream come true.

“Alexis Rockman: The Great Lakes Cycle” emerged out of a 2013 phone call with Rockman’s longtime friend and collaborator Dana Friis-Hansen, director of the Grand Rapids Art Museum, where the series will make its debut on January 27. “[Dana] asked me if I had any dream projects up my sleeve,” Rockman says. “I looked at the map and thought of the Great Lakes.”

Though he was born and raised in New York City, Rockman says Lakes Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, and Superior appeal to him because they are both natural wonders and human-made disaster zones. These massive freshwater lakes—the world’s largest by surface area—formed from glacial movement and melting during the Pleistocene. They now hold 20 percent of the earth’s freshwater and provide drinking water for 40 million people, but threats ranging from massive algal blooms and industrial pollution to rapidly warming temperatures and voracious invasive species now plague these vital resources. “It’s a perfect cocktail of awe, despair, and melancholy,” Rockman says.

Rockman tells the lakes’ story through five large-scale paintings, each measuring 6 by 12 feet, beginning with the Pleistocene, exploring the present day, and imagining the future (which includes opportunities for recovery and preservation). The exhibit also features six large watercolors and 28 field drawings made from organic materials collected from Great Lakes sites.

The paintings abound with Rockman's unique style, which combines his passion for natural history and landscape painting with a dark, hallucinatory flair. He refers to this particular blend of influences as "natural-history psychedelia." Director Ang Lee was so taken with Rockman's approach that he asked the artist to create visual inspiration for his 2012 film Life of Pi.

For his latest work, using an itinerary developed by the Grand Rapids museum, Rockman set out on a tour of eight U.S. states and Canadian provinces in the Great Lakes region. Along with extensive reading, his studies included fishing trips, a circumnavigation of Lake Michigan, and meetings with museum directors and biologists. Rockman had previously painted the lakes in the 1980s, becoming familiar with many of their woes, such as their infamous zebra mussel infestation. But his latest research introduced him to new horror shows, like tiny spiny water fleas that gunk up fishing gear and botulism outbreaks that paralyze and kill birds. The Great Lakes "are under incredible pressure from so many things, it's just mind-boggling," says Rockman.

Each painting in the series is accompanied by a map key that that identifies the species and references at play. "As I have worked on this project for the past five years, the environmental issues facing the lakes have become even more critical," Rockman says. "My expedition in the region, observations of the area, and conversations with experts have helped me tell a story that is, I hope, a compelling call for action on behalf of this natural treasure."

"Alexis Rockman: The Great Lakes Cycle" will be on view at the Grand Rapids Art Museum from January 27 through April 29, 2018, before traveling to Chicago, Cleveland, and Minneapolis.

Cascade, 2015. Oil and alkyd on wood panel, 72 x 144 inches. Commissioned by Grand Rapids Art Museum with funds provided by Peter Wege, Jim and Mary Nelson, John and Muriel Halick, Mary B. Loupee, and Karl and Patricia Betz. Grand Rapids Art Museum, 2015.19. Alexis Rockman

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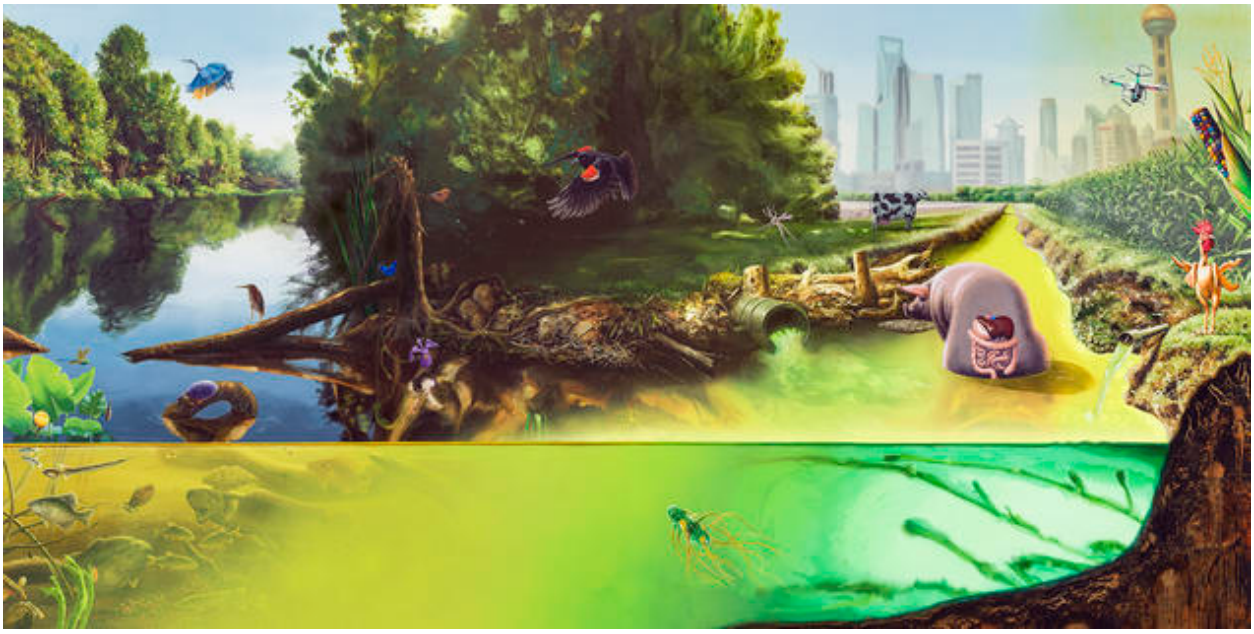
Spheres of Influence, 2016. Oil and alkyd on wood panel, 72 x 144 inches. Collection of Jonathan O'Hara and Sheila Skaff. Alexis Rockman



Watershed, 2015. Oil and alkyd on wood panel, 72 x 144 inches. Collection of Jonathan O'Hara and Sheila Skaff. Alexis Rockman

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Forces of Change, 2017. Oil and acrylic on wood panel, 72 x 144 inches. Collection of Jonathan O'Hara and Sheila Skaff. Alexis Rockman

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Tugend, Alina. "The Great Lakes in Glory and Decline." *The New York Times*, 29 October 2017, p. 28.

The Great Lakes in Glory and Decline

Alexis Rockman's show becomes a call to action.

By ALINA TUGEND

In Alexis Rockman's large mural "Spheres of Influence," it's hard to turn away from the dead waterfowl floating belly up, its head hanging underwater near a depiction of type E botulism, which has poisoned thousands of water birds.

The painting is one of five in his coming show, "Alexis Rockman: The Great Lakes Cycle," starting at the Grand Rapids Art Museum in Michigan from Jan. 27 to April 29 and then traveling to Chicago, Cleveland and Minneapolis.

When Mr. Rockman began the series five years ago, "environmental issues were dire enough for the lakes," he said. But now, President Trump has asked in his 2018 budget to defund the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, which since 2010 has provided millions of dollars in federal funds to clean up and protect the lakes.

And earlier this month, a giant algae bloom covered more than 700 square miles of Lake Erie. Algae blooms, which have long been a problem for Lake Erie and can be toxic, are typically caused by fertilizer use on the region's farmland.

So now his show is "in some ways a call to action," said Dana Friis-Hansen, director of the Grand Rapids museum, who initiated the project with Mr. Rockman.

For Mr. Rockman, the "Great Lakes Cycle" is a natural fit. "I have been making paintings about ecological history and natural history for years," he said. "And I looked at the map, and I thought, the Great Lakes are a fascinating place."

The cycle is made up of five oil, alkyd and acrylic paintings that are 6 feet by 12 feet and follows in the "scientific tradition of naturalism, but there's humor in them and dark fantasy," said Daniel Schulman, the director for visual art for the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events. "Everything is overly detailed. There is almost a magical realism."

The Chicago Cultural Center, where Mr. Schulman oversees exhibitions, will host the show from June to September 2018.

Mr. Rockman, 55, whose mother is an archaeologist, perhaps sums up his work best, calling it "natural-history psychedelia." He is known for bridging the worlds of art and science — his exhibition "A Natural History of Life in New York City," which was shown at Salon 94 in New York last year, consisted of 75 field drawings of animals and plants from the five boroughs, ranging from the prehistoric era to the present.

And when the director Ang Lee was working on the movie "Life of Pi," about a young man trapped at sea on a boat with a tiger, he asked Mr. Rockman to be the "inspirational artist" to define the look of the overall film. Among other things, Mr. Rockman did watercolor drawings of hundreds of pictures of ocean life based on natural history and his imagination.

As is typical of Mr. Rockman, he started the Great Lakes project with research. "His process is to ask a lot of questions, read a lot of books," Mr. Friis-Hansen said. "He synthesizes experiences and conversations with experts to tell a compelling story in paintings. He is a thoroughly contemporary artist. His tools are Photoshop and the internet, and then he leaves it all behind and goes back to oil painting."

His research included an expedition to Lake Michigan and Lake Superior, following an itinerary devised by the Grand Rapids museum. Over two weeks, he talked to experts, traveled to dunes, joined a charter-boat fisherman and visited the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum and an abandoned copper mine. He also made visits to other Great Lakes.

One of his most fruitful experiences, he said, was at Northern Michigan University. "I had two meetings in one day, and both of those people became my go-to fact-checking gurus."

One of those was Jill Leonard, a fish biologist at the university, who sat with Mr. Rockman at a Starbucks for three hours and hashed out the themes of the five paintings.

"I got a phone call out of the blue from the Grand Rapids museum, asking, 'Will you talk to this artist guy about the Great Lakes,'" she said. "By the time he got to me, he was at the point where he just wanted to sit and talk. We had this great conversation, and then every once in a while he continued to contact me. He'd call and say, 'I really want to do something about native pollinators,' or 'What shows the effect of chemicals? Do you have any photos of sick fish?'"

The paintings, Ms. Leonard said, will become a resource on her university's website and will include short essays, videos and illustrations. Mr. Rockman also said he would be available to the museum, local schools and institutions for workshops and lectures.

> The paintings have 'theatricality and overstatement, which is all backed up by how great a painter he is technically.'

His driving force was to capture the geographical, physical and ecological changes of the lakes over the centuries, but not in a linear way.

For example, the invasive species that have radically altered the lakes, often introduced inadvertently, appear in the painting "Pioneers" as ballast water pouring into a lake. In "Forces of Change," he paints an octopuslike monster and several much smaller bright red, green and blue depictions of the invisible bacteria and viruses that, he says, have been an unseen but "tremendous force of change in the lakes."

And there's the unexpected. Underwater in the foreground of "Spheres of Influence" is a DC-4, the Northwest Orient plane that crashed into Lake Ontario in 1950, while on the horizon is the H.M.S. Queen Charlotte from the War of 1812.

Mr. Rockman's paintings have "theatricality and overstatement, which is all backed up by how great a painter he is technically," Mr. Schulman said. The paintings will be shown with keys so viewers can identify the various objects.

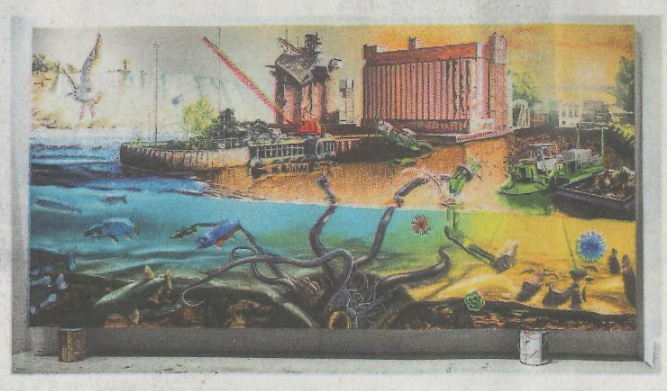
The exhibition will also include six 4-foot-by-6-foot watercolors and 30 field drawings. Mr. Rockman uses materials he picked up during his travels around the lakes to create the drawings, such as coal and sand from dunes.

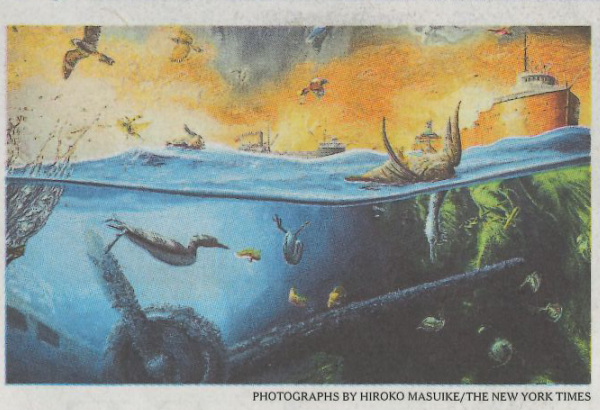
Jill Snyder, executive director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, which will show the paintings from October 2018 to January 2019, said the works "bring you into the past, present and future of a locale," but also addressed compelling global issues.

"There's a cautionary tale, a moral imperative to his work," she said. "His new series celebrates the natural majesty and global importance of the Great Lakes while exploring how they are threatened by factors such as climate change, globalization, invasive species, mass agriculture and urban sprawl."

But is this what people really want to think about when going to an art show? Ms. Snyder said she thought so, especially as the paintings "entertain and illuminate."

"They don't hit you over the head as a pedantic lecture," she said. "There's a visceral quality to his work that's seductive and compelling."





PHOTOGRAPHS BY HIROKO MASUIKE/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Digging Deep

Alexis Rockman with his dog, Padame, in his studio in New York City. From far left, "Forces of Change" and "Spheres of Influence," both from his "Great Lakes Cycle." He said he had been "making paintings about ecological history and natural history for years" and found the Great Lakes fascinating.

Weideman, Paul. “Organic sketching: Alexis Rockman.” *www.santafenewmexican.com (Pasatiempo)*, 6 October 2017.

Pasatiempo

Alexis Rockman: *Cottonwood*, soil from Española, cottonwood leaves and acrylic polymer on paper; courtesy SITE Santa Fe and Sperone Westwater, New York

This summer, Alexis Rockman rented a small house in the south of France to focus on *New Mexico Field Drawings* (2017). Along with two of his very large oil paintings, the 76 drawings are featured in *Future Shock* at SITE Santa Fe. They’re the latest in a series he has done in Tasmania, Madagascar, South Africa, and on Long Island, using local organic materials and acrylic polymer on paper. “As much as I’m the author of all these things, I really want the culture of place and the history of the place to permeate what I’ve been working on,” he said. “There are a lot of traditional materials that I used as vehicles for the drawings for Santa Fe, like red clay and green clay and micaceous clay. I was sort of walked through the traditions and then did my own versions, not necessarily to continue a tradition, because I’m not Native American — I’m not part of that culture — but I think it’s interesting and important to have some knowledge.

“I’m by no means an expert in the ecology of any of these places, but I’ve been in my studio for over 30 years in Manhattan, and it’s a great way to get out of this sort of mad scientist laboratory.”

Unlike his paintings — 2011's *Battle Royale* and 2013's *Bronx Zoo* are in the SITE show — that portray scores of realistically rendered animals and plants in dense, apocalyptic settings, his drawings are sketchlike, even breezy. "It is acrylic polymer, which is just a vehicle. Then there's material that is unwieldy, unpredictable, unworkable, or effortless. It depends on what it is. You never know what's going to happen with these things, because they're so alchemaic. For instance, there are some things I did for Santa Fe, some very strange things with the materials that I'd never seen before and quite liked, but it became a logistical nightmare to get them to Santa Fe. They cracked and did some interesting, unpredictable things that seemed temporary and superficially unstable. They stabilized after they dried, but they went through a strange process."

Alexis Rockman: *Pale Swallowtail*, soil from Jemez Mountains and acrylic polymer on paper; courtesy SITE Santa Fe and Sperone Westwater, New York

SITE arranged for Rockman to meet with an array of people and institutions during a week he spent in New Mexico. One was Eric Blinman, director of the New Mexico Office of Archaeological Studies. "He sort of walked me through the interface between Native American culture and theology. He also said they discovered a subspecies of tiger salamander in the drain of the [Center for New Mexico Archaeology], so I did a drawing of that." Deborah Finch, a program manager and supervisory biologist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service in Albuquerque, sent him a box of materials, including a cottonwood branch that he drew. Santa Clara artist Eliza Naranjo Morse took him to Abiquiú. "We collected red clay together,"

she said. “I gave him green clay from Minnesota and micaceous clay that my mom [Nora Naranjo Morse] gave me.”

Rockman also met with Mark Watson, a terrestrial habitat specialist with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. “He gave me a dream list of what he would like to see me make drawings of,” Rockman said, “and I did the lesser prairie chicken because of him, and a species of leopard frog and the White Sands pupfish.” Entomologist John Formby took him to the Jemez Mountains, home of the threatened Jemez Mountains salamander. Thomas Antonio, a botanist at the Institute of American Indian Arts, gave him some blue corn. “He told me about the cochineal insect, and I made a drawing of one of those beetles using just ground-up insect. Then I went to the [Santa Fe office of the] Institute of Applied Ecology, and I asked questions about what were the most endangered things they were working with and some of the nightmarish things.”

Some of Rockman’s subjects are extinct or threatened, and others have no intention of going that way — for example, the opposum, the kangaroo, and the mosquito. “The implications of that are that the ecology of the present and the future are dynamic, to say the least. Some things will do extremely well and others have no future whatsoever, and some are already gone. It’s really about place and about intimacy,” he said. The basic pessimism from his long immersion in the various plights of nature that result from a human-influenced world has not changed. “I think it’s bleaker. At least it was sort of going in the right direction and was a continuation of the early-’70s ideas about conservation. Now, all bets are off. We’re dealing with a bunch of clowns that don’t know anything, or are just completely corrupt and psychotic.”

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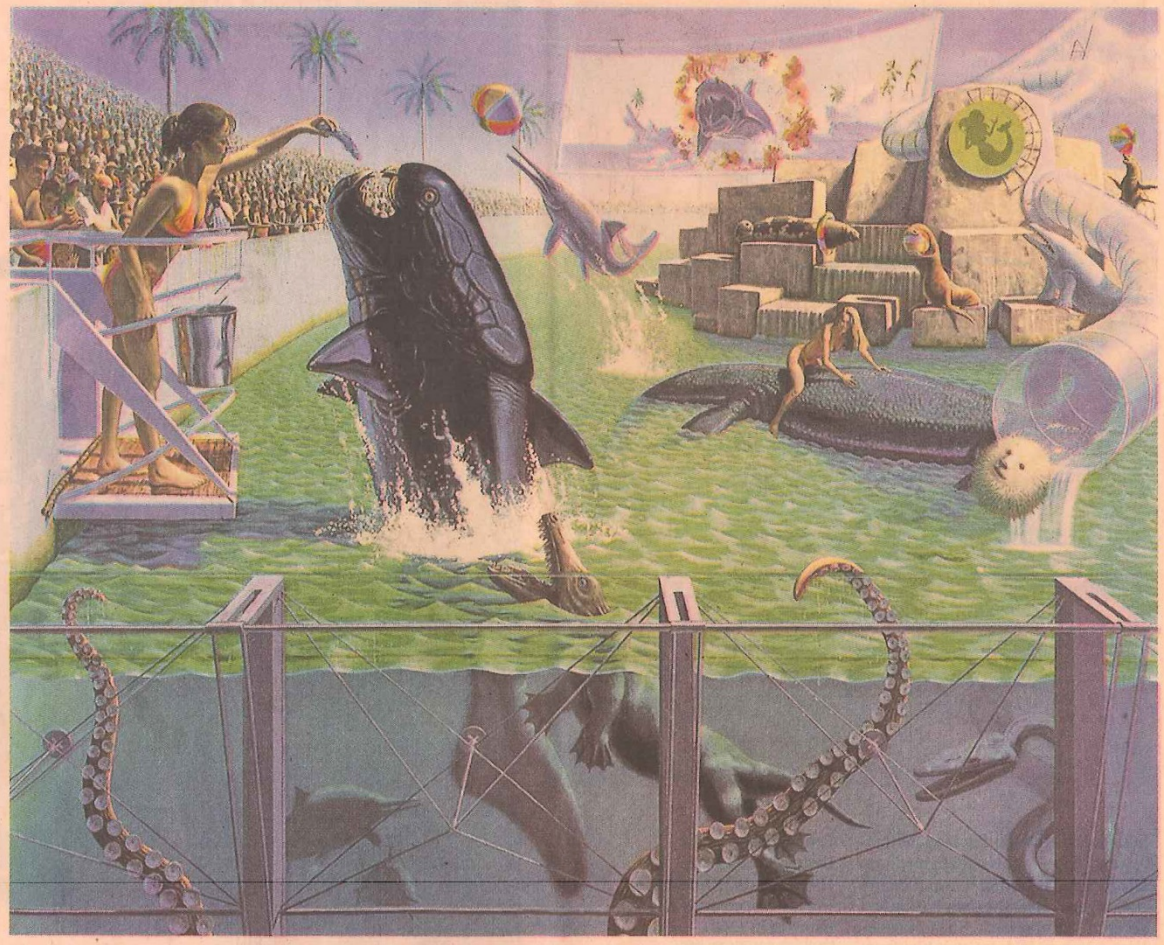
Belcove, Julie. "History's hidden layers." *FT Weekend*, 30 April/1 May 2016, p. 10.

Collecting



History's hidden layers

Profile | Alexis Rockman uses soil and debris from around New York City to depict the lifeforms that have inhabited the area for the past 300 million years. *Julie Belcove* meets him

One sunny day last November, artist Alexis Rockman criss-crossed New York City and New Jersey with a box of Ziploc bags and Carl Mehling, a paleontologist, as his driver and wingman. Mehling would periodically stop the car — at the Harlem River in the Bronx, for instance, or the short-term parking lot at John F. Kennedy International Airport — and Rockman would hop out and scoop a few handfuls of earth into a plastic bag labelled with the location before driving off to the next destination.

Back in his Tribeca studio, Rockman used the soil, sand and leaves, not to mention attendant cigarette butts and broken glass, to make a series of drawings of flora and fauna that have inhabited the area over the past 300 million or so years. From a mastodon that wandered the city in the Ice Age to five species of turtles currently residing in Central Park's turtle pond, he created a historic field guide of 75 drawings, "A Natural History of Life in New York City", now on show at gallery Salon 94.

"What's wonderful about New York is you think of it as having been here forever, and it looks like it's permanent, but of course there's a fossil record," says Rockman, 53, in his studio, which is in the basement of a flower shop.

After studying up, Rockman chose to render both anonymous creatures, such as dinosaurs reimagined from fossils, and contemporary celebrity New York animals, including Hal, a coyote found hiding out in Central Park a decade ago, and Pale Male, a red-tailed hawk with a chic Fifth Avenue roost and a view of the park. Their portraits, silhouetted on white paper, have a haunting, ghostlike quality. Together they offer a meditation on the impermanence of life and an elegy for the abundance of species lost as a result of human development.

Rockman mixed the organic material with water and acrylic polymer, and used an eye dropper to draw. He describes his process as intuitive. "It's almost like alchemy," says Rockman, his rescue dog, Padmé, lying at his feet. "There's a margin of error — I've had to throw out probably a third of them. The more you work it, the more trouble you get into. You know when to get out of the way — hopefully. Some took quite a while — half an hour."

A native New Yorker who sometimes displays his hometown's sharp tongue, Rockman has been fascinated by nature since childhood. He was born to a single mother who went on to become a professor of anthropology. His visits to the Natural History Museum "loomed large in my consciousness", he says. A mediocre student, he loved basketball and drawing, and when he was accepted to the Rhode Island School of Design, he planned to study animation. But he dropped out midway through his second year and began taking illustration classes at the School of Visual Arts in New York. "That's where I discovered the idea of being a fine artist," he says.

It was the early 1980s, and he tried mimicking the Neo-Expressionist paintings he saw on the East Village scene. "I floundered around, made some terrible paintings, but loved making them," he says. He also worked briefly for painter Ross Bleckner, who helped open his eyes to the possibilities of the medium.

Eventually, Rockman realised he could use his love of nature to examine the "collective consciousness of American culture. I thought, if Roy Lichtenstein can do it with comics, why can't I do it with natural history?"

From top: Alexis Rockman's 'Sea World' (2004), 'Sand Tiger, Carcharias taurus' (2015), 'Cervid, Cervacles' (2015); (left) the artist Virginia Museum of Fine Art, courtesy of the artist and Salon 94; Daniel Traub

He is probably best known for monumental paintings depicting the hazards of environmental destruction. Propped against walls of his studio this morning are two 12-foot works in progress for a show at the Grand Rapids Art Museum in 2018. When the museum director first approached him about a project, he wasn't even sure where Grand Rapids was, Rockman says, then adds, "I'm an asshole, but I'm also curious."

'If Roy Lichtenstein can examine American culture with comics, why can't I do it with natural history?'

For the uninitiated, Grand Rapids is in Michigan, a state that borders four of the Great Lakes. Rockman flew to the city, rented a car and drove along the shore of Lake Michigan, stopping to interview fishermen and scientists along the way. In the end he conceived a group of five canvases painted in the sweeping style of classic history paintings, exploring the past and future of the Great Lakes. The works touch on everything from the glacier that formed the lakes to migrating birds, shipwrecks and the proliferation of zebra mussels, an invasive, disruptive species most

likely introduced by European freighters' ballasts. "That's a globalism issue," he says. "You can't predict how these things are going to affect ecosystems."

Rockman's melding of theme and medium dates to 1994, when he first used organic materials in a drawing while camping with fellow nature-loving artist Mark Dion in Guyana. Rockman had used up his pencil. "I'd also stopped drinking, so all my coping mechanisms were gone," he recalls. "Mark said, 'Why don't you make some drawings out of mud?'"

Rockman tried it, rendering a mosquito. Without a binding agent, the drawing fell apart, but he says, "It suddenly hit me there's something there."

Aided by the acrylic polymer, he has gone on to use the process from South Africa to the East End of Long Island, where he and his partner of 15 years, Dorothy Spears, rent a weekend house.

"What I realised is that doing projects about the ecology of a place is really a good excuse to learn about things that live there that I'd normally not be paying that much attention to," he says.

When Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, who owns Salon 94, saw Rockman's East End drawings, which he showed at the Parrish Art Museum last year, she suggested he apply the concept to the city. Rockman decided to explore the full range of life, from the prehistoric to the present, for the first time and asked Mehling if he could recommend an expert to advise him about the fossil record. Mehling, who manages the fossil collection at the American Museum of Natural History, replied, "You're talking to the only person who cares."

Mehling made sure that the stops on their expedition correlated to the specific animals and plants Rockman rendered: the ear moth was drawn with sand from Pelham Bay Park, its only known habitat, and so on. At least theoretically, the animals and plants have been recreated from their own decayed matter. "He liked that I was a nerd about it," Mehling says.

Rockman has also had a passion for movies since his stepfather, who adopted him when he was 11, introduced him to the films of great auteurs like Jean Cocteau, Orson Welles and Josef von Sternberg. Rockman slipped into the film business himself in 2009, when Jean-Christophe Castelli, the son of the late legendary art dealer Leo Castelli, asked if he'd be interested in creating artworks to help director Ang Lee convince 20th Century Fox to make the movie *Life of Pi*.

He initially painted five elaborate watercolours, envisioning the look of the mysterious floating island and some of the sea creatures, at once real and fantastical, which Lee presented to the studio executives. After *Life of Pi* got the go-ahead, he made another round of drawings. The special effects team then translated his art into the film's extraordinary visuals, including an underwater scene with an ark's worth of animals. The Drawing Center in New York exhibited his *Life of Pi* art in 2013. Carolina Nitsch Project Room has a show up until April 30 of the artist's recent colourful sea creatures on black paper.

Rockman was thrilled when *Life of Pi* went into production in Taiwan, but he admits, "I felt completely left out," back in New York. The movie eventually won four Academy Awards in 2012, including best director for Lee and best visual effects, and Rockman went on to make a few conceptual drawings of animals for Darren Aronofsky's film *Noah*.

Next time, he wants to be involved from start to finish and has teamed with Castelli, a screenwriter, to develop a film with an environmental theme. He also has another movie, about the conservation movement in the 1960s, in development at Amazon. "I'm taking control of my destiny," he says.

'A Natural History of Life in New York City', Salon 94, New York, to May 5, salon94.com

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Dreifus, Claudia. "There's a Science to His Art." *The New York Times*, 19 April 2016, p. D3.

A CONVERSATION WITH
ALEXIS ROCKMAN

There's a Science to His Art

A New York painter has made a career of bridging a gulf between two disciplines.

By CLAUDIA DREIFUS

BENJAMIN NORMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

In 1959, the British writer C.P. Snow complained that scientists and artists lived in "two cultures" and that the gulf between them was one of "mutual incomprehension."

The painter Alexis Rockman has built a successful career out of bridging that divide. His paintings and murals on scientific themes — climate change, species extinction, evolutionary theory, geology — have hung at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

We spoke for two hours at the 53-year-old artist's studio in the TriBeCa district of New York. A condensed and edited version of the conversation follows.

Q. Where did you grow up?

A. Here in New York. The Upper East Side. My mother is an urban archaeologist. My father — he died in 1992 — was a jazz musician.

There couldn't have been a lot of nature in your childhood.

Actually, there was a lot of nature, urban nature. Central Park isn't natural, but to a child, it appeared to be. It has man-made ponds full of wildlife — sunfish, largemouth bass, frogs. There must have been five different turtle species in there.

Across the park was the American Museum of Natural History. I spent many hours there entranced by the dioramas of Akeley Hall. I was taken with how at the beginning of the last century, they'd used painting, lighting and taxidermy to create an immersive theatrical experience set in nature. Afterward, I'd go home and paint backgrounds on the tropical fish tanks my mother let me keep.

Did you always want to be a painter?

I wanted to be some kind of artist. As a kid, I was interested in science and science fiction, history, drawing, sketching. None of this came together in a defined way.

In the early 1980s, I enrolled at the Rhode Island School of Design, thinking I might study film. After a year and a half, I took a break to figure out another path. Eventually, I enrolled at the School of Visual Arts here in Manhattan, with vague ambitions to learn scientific illustration. There I encountered a very kind teacher who suggested I consider fine art. For her class, she had me copy an 1853 painting by Gustav Courbet. That was so much fun! I was 22, and I had never made an oil painting before. I immediately switched majors and never looked back.

Once I was onto that path, I got excellent advice from someone who knew the art world. He asked, "What are you bringing that's unique?"

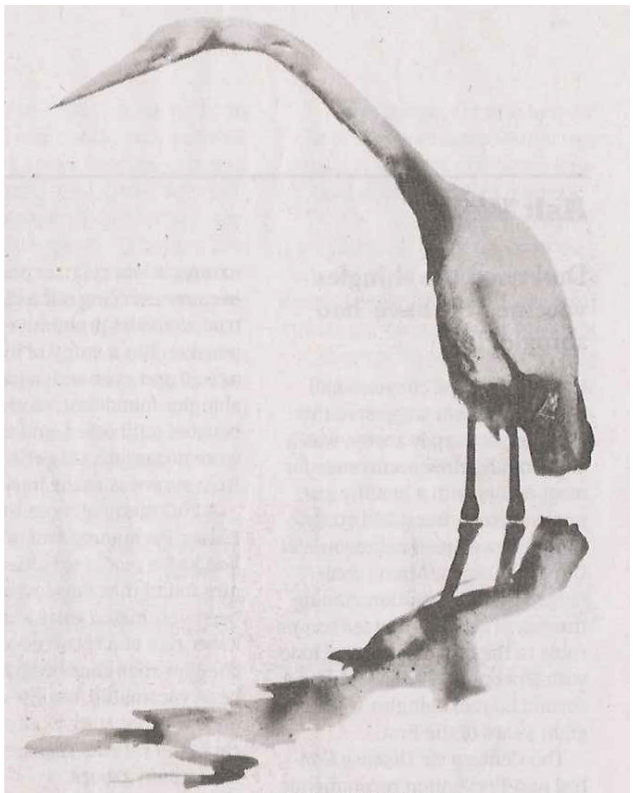
I realized I had all these childhood interests in natural history. It struck me that if I took ideas from conceptual art and pop art and applied them to my childhood interests, I could create a hybrid language. To this day, that's how I frame what I do. I'm a pop artist who uses natural history, and its history, as the basis of my work.

Your paintings are often rooted in scientific issues — climate change, extinction, invasive species. How do you go about researching your projects?

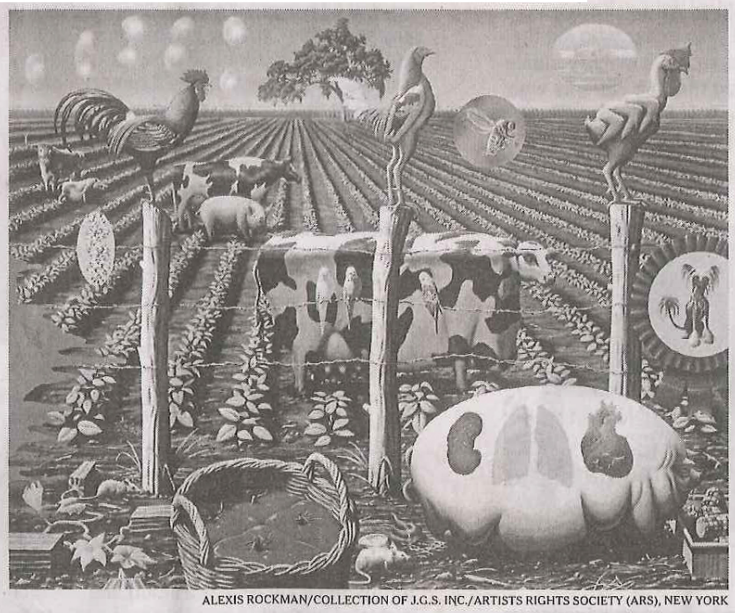
I start like a journalist. I ask questions, and I figure out what is the interesting thing going on. Then I find out who knows about it, and then I try to talk to them. Before I begin, I'll go out to see things firsthand. I never start off with an idea of what I want it to look like.

For instance, right now, I'm working on a series of drawings about the natural history of life in New York City. This is for an exhibit that opens at Salon 94 on April 18. The show will be a kind of unofficial census of the city's flora and fauna. For it, I went on a scouting trip to Coney Island Creek where there's a wreck of a submarine and many abandoned cars. At low tide, you could see an amazing, almost postapocalyptic scene: dozens of wading birds — egrets, herons, ibises — looking for food among abandoned cars and shipwrecks.

On another day, Carl Mehling, a paleontologist at the American Museum of Natural History, gave me a tour of local places where fossils have been discovered. We went around to clay pits in Staten Island and the Palisades in New Jersey. I even found a marine fossil that I gave to my wife, Dorothy! That day, I collected 20 bags of soil



ALEXIS ROCKMAN AND SALON 94/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK



ALEXIS ROCKMAN/COLLECTION OF J.G.S. INC./ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

The artist Alexis Rockman, top left, in his Manhattan studio space. Top right, his "Great Egret" (Turtle Pond, Central Park), 2016. Above, "The Farm," 2000.

and organic material from the different sites we'd visited.

Why did you do that?

I'll use it as pigment in drawings of creatures who once lived in those places. I first started doing that in 1994, when my friend Mark Dion and I took a trip to Guyana. We were traveling in the rain forest. He was collecting specimens, and I was making these meticulous drawings of insects. One day while in this really isolated place, my pencil disappeared! What to do now? I ended up grabbing a bunch of mud and used it to make art. I came back with a whole body of work made of Guyanese mud.

Is the natural world a reliable source for art supplies?

Not always. Once, I was making this series of pieces about the history of the La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles. I asked the director of the museum there to send me a canister of tar. If I could make the tar fluid enough, I thought, I could use it draw the creatures of the Tar Pits.

Well, to do that, I had to find the right solvent. As I experimented, all I got was a congealed mess that ate the paper. Through a lot of trial and error, I discovered that benzene could thin the tar out to an appropriate consistency.

Do you take notes while doing your field research?

I do. I make little thumbnail diagrams with arrows and words. Later, in my studio, I look for pictures on how this subject been shown scientifically in the past. I'll also talk to experts in a given scientific area.

In 1999, in starting this 24-foot-long painting for the 2004 reopening of the Brooklyn Museum, I took on the issue of climate change. The piece, "Manifest Destiny," has since been bought by the Smithsonian Museum of American Art in Washington, where it currently hangs. The idea was to ask, "What will the Brooklyn waterfront look several centuries from now, after the glaciers have melted?"

So I asked myself: Who's one of the most interesting people working on climate change? It's James Hansen. I got an introduction and went up to his office near Columbia. I also talked to Cynthia Rosenzweig. She models the effects of climate change on cities. I constructed the painting by projecting some of what they told me could happen. Brooklyn is in ruins. The relics of humanity are on the bottom of the East River. The Brooklyn Bridge is rusted away. Afterward I thought, "I'm glad I won't be around."

Voon, Claire. “Alexis Rockman Captures Long Island’s Flora and Fauna in Dirty Field Drawings.”
hyperallergic.com (Hyperallergic), 29 December 2015.

HYPERALLERGIC

Alexis Rockman, “Tiger Salamander (Ambystoma tigrinum)” from Vineyard Field Pond (2014) (courtesy the artist)

Alexis Rockman is probably known best for his large-scale, vividly colored paintings that encapsulate the threatened state of the natural world, often integrating futuristic imagery. For two decades, however, he has also created simple, naturalist drawings of individual flora and fauna he observed around the world that capture the diversity of our ecosystems. (The conceptual artist Mark Dion, whom Rockman met in 1988, introduced him to the idea of field research.) From Guyana to Brazil, tar pits in Los Angeles to a fossil field in the Canadian Rockies, the sites Rockman has surveyed have inspired a large number of works he creates using material sourced from those very locations. Last year, the New York City–based artist’s site of choice was close to home: the East End of Long Island. Ninety-three of those works on paper are now on view at the Parrish Art Museum in the exhibition *Alexis Rockman: East End Field Drawings*, revealing not only the island’s incredible richness of wildlife and vegetation, but also an aspect of Rockman’s work that is strikingly different from his grand paintings.

Installation view of '*Alexis Rockman: East End Field Drawings*' at the Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, New York (photo by Daniel Gonzalez, courtesy the Parrish Art Museum)

"The *Field Drawings* are the antithesis of my paintings because they are so immediate," Rockman says in an interview included in the exhibition catalogue. "They function like pictograms, icons, fossils, or shadows. Because I am using soil or sand as the pigment, the outcome is unpredictable. I never know how the drawing is going to come out."

Although he considers them field drawings, the works were actually not completed on site but rather rendered in his studio, drawn as reflections of his trips rather than faithful studies of the moment. Rockman worked like a scientist nonetheless, researching the history and fragile ecosystems of the East End and learning about its wildlife and plants. Over the course of seven day trips he explored 18 pockets of the region, noting the birds, plants, fish, and even small insects he saw while gathering sand and soil in Ziploc bags that he carefully labeled with their sites of origin.

At a glance, each work resembles a delicate ink drawing, with faint streaks seeping into dark stains set against stark backgrounds. But the grittiness of the natural world is evident in the works, tying each organism back to its specific location — which he also includes on the paper in light pencil, like a field note. Further blending art and science, Rockman also researched the Latin names of every specimen and included them in the titles of his drawings, emphasizing them as documents of existing creatures. Many of the drawings show rare or invasive species, highlighting an often invisible tension present in these environments. One can only just make out the ghostly petals of a drawing of the threatened pale fringed orchid, for instance, while the rapid-growing mile-a-minute weed stretches across paper in dark, sharply defined lines.

East End Field Drawings also reminds viewers of the incredible diversity of life present on Long Island: great blue herons at Georgica Pond share their habitat with eastern red foxes, wild turkeys, raccoons, brown bats, and opossums; at Kirck Park Beach, Rockman observed jellyfish, harbor seals, sea turtles, and mako shark. Although straightforward and encyclopedic — in contrast to the dense scenes characteristic of the rest of his oeuvre — the field drawings address the same universal concerns about climate change. They capture the environment of this time, while inviting contemplation about the consequences of human activities on the future states of these species.

Monoyios, Kalliopi. "Long Island's Denizens in Shades of Dirt." *blogs.scientificamerican.com (Scientific American)*, 10 December 2015.

SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN

Tricolored Heron (Egretta tricolor) by Alexis Rockman, with materials from Georgica Pond. Courtesy of the Drawing Room, East Hampton

Compare works of art across time, space, and civilizations - the earliest cave paintings and DaVinci's Mona Lisa, or lavishly painted temples and aboriginal body art. Do these vastly different expressions share anything in common? If they are at least partially painted, they are all composed, loosely speaking, with various shades of dirt.

The relationship between dirt and paint may not be obvious to non-artists, but since humans were first moved to decorate themselves and their world, ground earth pigments have been a central ingredient in artistic expression. Artist Alexis Rockman draws attention to this often overlooked relationship in his latest body of work, a collection of 93 images of plants and animals painted in mud, sand, and clay from various sites in Eastern Long Island, NY.

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Eastern Wild Turkey (Meleagris Gallopavo Silvestris) by Alexis Rockman, 2014; soil from Georgica Pond and acrylic polymer on paper, 12” x 16”, Courtesy of the Drawing Room, East Hampton

Broadleaf Cattail (Typha Latifolia) by Alexis Rockman, 2014; soil from Big Reed Pond and acrylic polymer on paper, 20” x 14”, Courtesy of the artist

Long Island may be best known for its residents’ funny accents and proximity to New York City, but according to the Long Island Nature Organization, it occupies an interesting ecological niche. For many northern species, Long Island is the furthest south they can be found; likewise, for many southern species, it represents the northern extent of their range. This makes the island a unique melting pot, contributing to a vibrant and diverse ecosystem. Sadly, this and countless other locales across the globe tell a story by now as familiar as our own names. Human encroachment on native habitats is decimating species that have nowhere else to turn.

In formulating this project, Rockman met with local experts and chose to highlight locations and species that are threatened by human activity to draw attention to their plight. To underscore the species' vital connection to place, he used mud and dirt collected from their habitats to draw them. His resulting works on paper, East End Field Drawings, are being exhibited through January 18th, 2016 at the Parrish Art Museum on Long Island. All 93 images are also available in a full-color exhibit catalog which can be purchased for $20 from the museum’s gift shop.

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Virginia Opossum (Didelphis Virginiana) by Alexis Rockman, 2014; soil from Georgica Pond and acrylic polymer on paper, 16” x 12”, Courtesy of the Drawing Room, East Hampton

Fun fact: not all of Rockman’s work is loose or gestural, although he has revisited this style of drawing consistently throughout his career. Many of his paintings are hyperreal in style and/or surreal in subject - an interesting tidbit when you learn that he provided concept sketches and a storyboard for the Academy Award winning film, Life of Pi.

"In Conversation: Alexis Rockman with Greg Lindquist." *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 2015, p. 30.

THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

in conversation

ALEXIS ROCKMAN with Greg Lindquist

For more than two decades, Alexis Rockman has been depicting the natural world with virtuosity and wit. He was one of the first contemporary artists to build his career around exploring environmental issues, from evolutionary biology and genetic engineering to deforestation and climate change. Artist, *Rail* Art Books in Review Editor, and Guest Critic Greg Lindquist spoke with Rockman at his Tribeca studio about his recent paintings depicting ecological issues of the Great Lakes, and the extent to which art and culture can inspire direct action.

GREG LINDQUIST (RAIL): Do you think that your paintings inspire action and change with regards to ecological crises?

ROCKMAN: I would have to confess that I do, but I have a sense of fatigue from hoping that, and there's a level of futility in that it only helps me cope with what I know. I spend a lot of energy learning about things that are disturbing, that I'm ambivalent or upset about, and that helps me cope with them; it's a feedback loop. The project that I'm working on in this room is about the Great Lakes. And it's two of five large paintings about issues that the lakes have faced and will face in the future, ecologically.

RAIL: Can you give some examples of those?

ROCKMAN: Well, the painting that's on the floor is about resources that humans have extracted from the lakes and the watershed from Pleistocene hunters and reindeer, to the fishing industry, to the introduction of salmon into the Great Lakes for recreational fishing, timber mining, and so forth.

RAIL: Are there specific responses or results—either indirect or direct—that your paintings have had that are instructive for you?

ROCKMAN: I learned that people I idolize are human, which gives me confidence in what I'm doing. What I do isn't for everyone, and I don't think anything worth doing is for everyone. But I have a tremendous responsibility as an artist. I see the tradition that I'm coming from as civil rights, not to say that I suffer as much as black people did during the civil rights era, but I'm saying that the environmental movement needs activists, in the tradition of civil rights, feminism, gay rights, and so on. I think that the environmental movement has had a pitiful track record of having charismatic leaders.

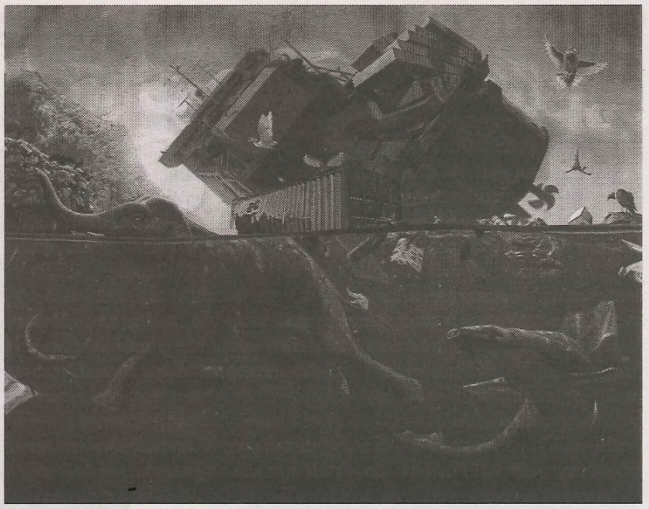
RAIL: Did you ever at any point want to be a leader in that movement?

ROCKMAN: I think to do that you have to be very patient, and since I'm an only child who spends most of my time alone [*Laughs.*] I have enough of a struggle to have my family tolerate me. I don't see myself doing well in long-term public situations out of town.

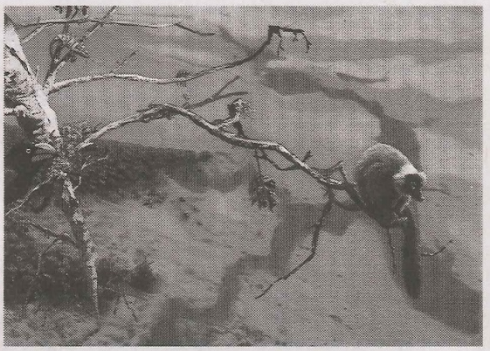
RAIL: Do you think art can successfully influence policy change for climate and environmental issues?

ROCKMAN: I tend to think that art, as we categorize fine art in our culture, cannot. It can—perhaps—on very modest levels. But I think that movies and other popular media can, which is something I've taken upon myself to do. I see myself as not just an artist, but a storyteller. I'm working on a project with a writer with Amazon Studios that was my idea.

I was deeply affected by *The China Syndrome*, which came out in 1978, when I was sixteen. In combination with Three Mile Island Meltdown, a groundswell of negativity was created that the nuclear industry in America never recovered from. I think we need something similar to happen for the climate-change issue—something that is so powerful that it cannot be explained away by clowns. It has to be visceral and powerful, and I think movies and television could be that type of format. If there's any hope, I think it's that. It's obviously unlikely that anything can save the world. So many of our problems are because of our evolutionary history that we can't get out of our own way.



Alexis Rockman, *Ark*, 2014. Oil on wood. 44×56 inches. Courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater Gallery.



Alexis Rockman, *The Raft*, 2010. Oil on wood. 50×70 inches. Courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater Gallery.

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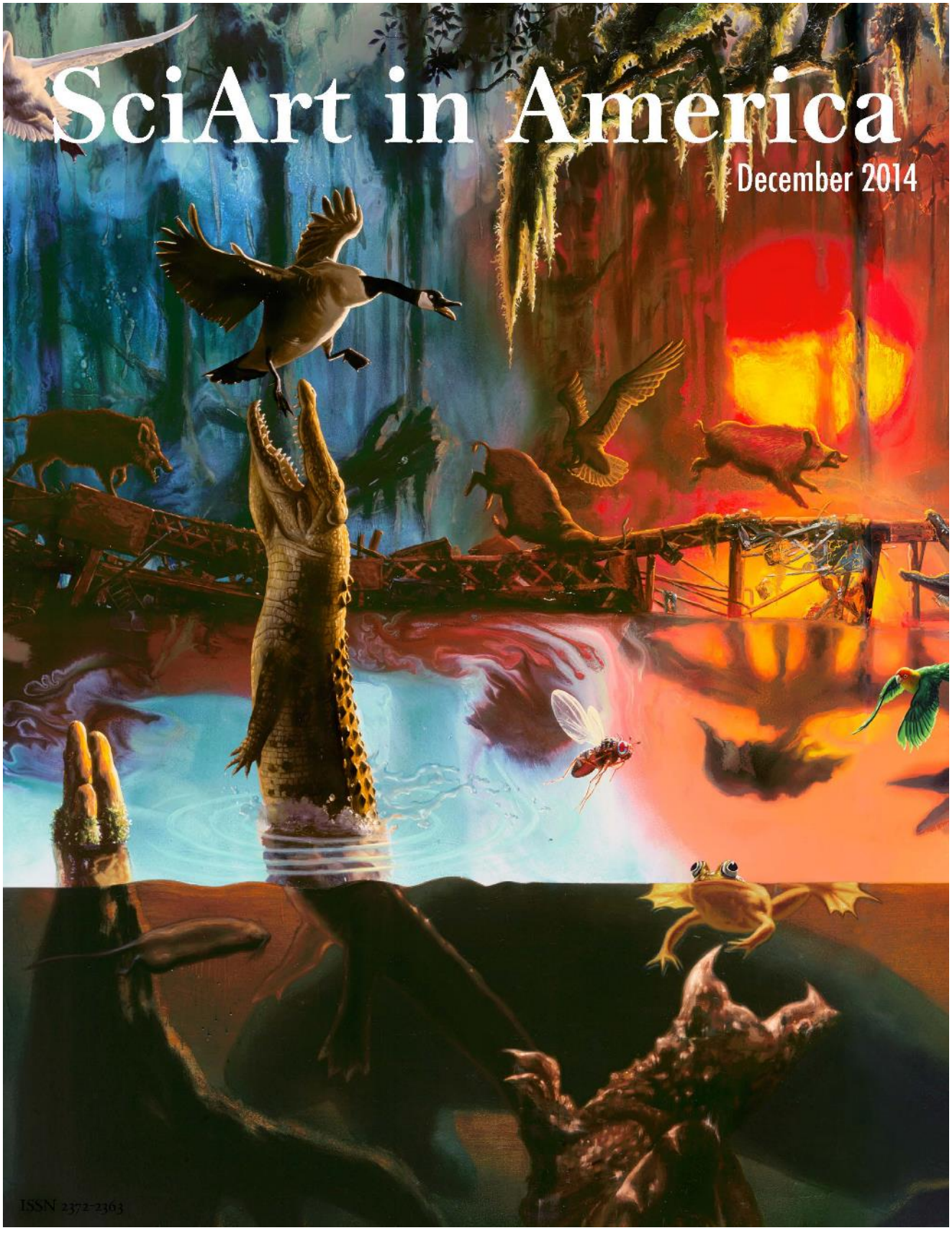
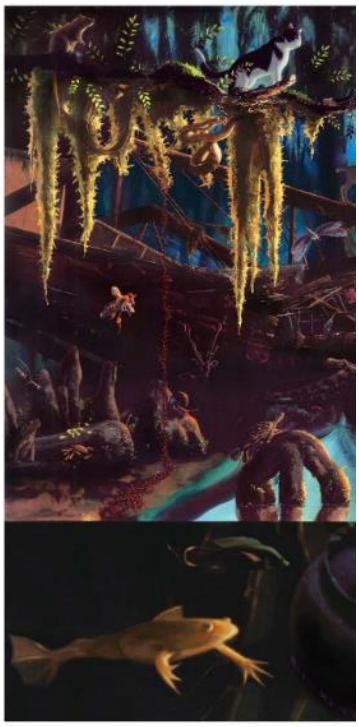
Buntaine, Julia. “Straight Talk with Alexis Rockman.” *SciArt in America*, December 2014, cover, pp. 16-21, back cover.



STRAIGHT TALK
with Alexis Rockman

Photo credit: Dorothy Spears

Alexis Rockman is an artist who works with the issues of climate change, genetic modification of food, pollution, evolution, and the anthropocene, creating large-scale paintings and painting series. Beginning this line of work in the 80s, Rockman has gained international renown for his critique of human activity on our environment. Rockman lives and works in New York City.



By Julia Buntaine
Editor-in-Chief

JB: *Your first series, "Natural History," is reminiscent of the American Museum of Natural History diorama displays that captivate kids and adults alike. Unlike those illustrative dioramas, however, your paintings depict scenes that would not always be found in nature, combining elements that reveal deeper relationships or speak to complex issues. How did you come to create this type of work?*

AR: I always felt there was something missing in the dioramas when I would visit these museums—a darker, more idiosyncratic story. There also seemed to be a tremendous collective consciousness to American post-World War II pop and scientific culture that hadn't been tapped in art. This seemed a good place to start in 1986. At first, I was excited to make paintings and watercolors that were more abut my love of museums. As my ideas developed, I thought it would be interesting to start to include iconography that wasn't found in natural history imagery—pollution, trash, environmental destruction, and invasive species. As I started to travel more to so-called 'wild places' depicted in many of the dioramas, I realized that the landscape that was used for describing ecology no longer or may never have existed. I decided that many of my expectations from institutional dioramas were at odds with what had been going on in the world—these images pretended that humans didn't exist. With this in mind, I decided to show the human and post-industrial revolution impact on these ecosystems. I also felt that this was challenging not only in terms of painting; it was also exciting politically. At that time, I was starting to think about activist thinking, and I felt there were a lot of lessons from the civil rights movement and feminist and gay rights that might be used in the eco-activist movement. This was a time when AIDS crisis was emerging, and I watched not only friends die but also the mobilization of the gay community as a force for positive change.

JB: *For almost 30 years your exhibited work has surrounded the themes of ecology, human and animal relationships, genetic modification, evolution, and domestication, to name a few. From your point*

Battle Royale *(2011). 96" x 216". Oil and alkyd on wood. Image courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater.*

of view, how have these things changed since you first began creating this type of work? Are things better than they used to be or just more complicated?

AR: On the contrary, they are far worse. I'm very concerned. When I first started my career, I was hopeful that we would figure it out. I believed that human science and politics would unite, cast aside whatever idiotic differences, and get its shit together to solve these obvious problems—I was riding the psychology of the somewhat naive, but reasonable, spirit and energy of the 1970s eco movement that I grew up with, which started with Rachel Carson's Silent Spring (1962). In the late 1980s, scientist friends told me about global warming but felt we had time to figure it out and that we would. My feelings about this have changed for the worse, and I'm not only terrified, but I'm angry. It's clear we are in big trouble. The fact that oil and other fossil fuel lobbies have succeeded in stalling and casting doubt on these issues may go down in history as the biggest crimes against the planet. All other issues and environmental challenges are tied to global warming. Science is our only hope, and scientific literacy and our culture's relationship to science has been a big obstacle.

JB: *Your painting* Battle Royale *depicts a chaos of high-contrast commotion, showing the actions of over twenty distinct animals...as one of more narrative works, can you talk a bit more about this piece and what is behind it?*

AR: In 2009, Dan Cameron asked me to make a major work for "Prospect 2," an international group show coming up in New Orleans in 2011. I immediately realized this was a great opportunity to make a major Bayou painting (what else is more fun than that?) but also to take a long look at the history of local regional paintings made about New Orleans swamps over the centuries. After visiting a bunch of sites, museums and meeting with local scientists, I found the perfect painting for reference right in the New Orleans Museum of Art, which is hanging

Gowanus *(2013). 72" x 90". Oil and acrylic on wood. Image courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater.*

right next to my 8' x 18" painting now. New Orleans could be read as an eco-microcosm of other parts of the world, an ecology with a strong local identity that has a battle between local and invasive species. It's a fight that's happening all over the planet but seemed particularly rich and exciting in this antebellum historical context that seems so timeless—cypress trees and Spanish moss in the American South is so distinctive. Besides the swamp, the first thing I decided was that the action needed to take place on the ruin of a nineteenth-century railroad bridge. I decided to set up the image as a battle image, only with ecosystems. On the left side, there are many species of invaders from all over the world that have a stranglehold—reticulated python, red imported fire ant and nutria, to name a few that have put a lot of pressure on the local fauna. On the right side, we have many familiar creatures, like the Louisiana black bear and the American bald eagle and some less familiar ones like the ringed map turtle, Florida panther and black capped vireo.

JB: *In your 1993 series "Biosphere," you've illustrated scenes that are perhaps no longer in the distant future. What are your thoughts on human colonization of other planets like Mars and what it means for Earth-originating species to evolve on other planets?*

AR: The "Biosphere" series from 1992–1994 was inspired by Doug Trumbull's 1972 movie *Silent Running*, which had made a huge impression on me when I saw it as a ten-year-old. In the movie, the earth is so toxic and overpopulated that the remaining intact ecosystems are placed in protective geodesic domes and sent into space for their own good. The crew of the spaceship gets an order to destroy the domes and go back to so-called commercial practice. Most of the crew of the Valley Forge rejoice at the prospect of going home. The only decent comes from botanist Freeman Lowell (Bruce Dern), who loves and tends to the forests. He kills his colleagues, taking the ship deep into space. Alone on the craft, with his only

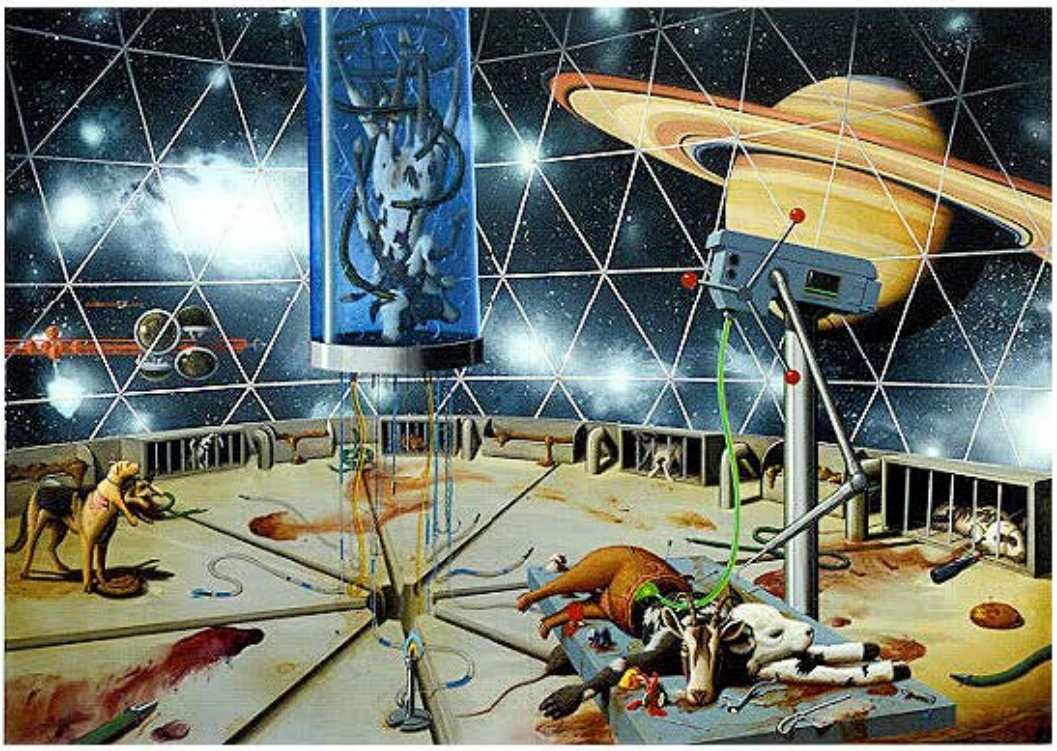
Adelies *(2008). 68" x 80". Oil and acrylic on wood. Image courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater.*

companions being three small robots, he confronts the vastness of space. This story really appealed to me and articulated something I had been aware of for as long as I can remember. We as a civilization were headed towards the point of no return with not only biodiversity but also the idea that the earth was even sustainable for humans at all. In 1992, as I was finishing my first epic painting, *Evolution* (8' × 24"), I decided my next body of work would try to imagine what happened to these domes in the narrative of the movie, assuming that Freeman Lowell would die one day—each image would represent a zoo enclosure of ecosystem on Earth that had run amuck. The animals were acting in bizarre and decidedly un-natural ways. The other challenge was to make the images a type of hybrid-interior, landscape space-scape with a lot of tension coming from the technology and the natural world, with some of the strange opportunities that outer space could offer no horizon.

There's a fun and romantic notion of treating space as another ocean to get past to colonize planets. It's a trope that we see again and again in pop culture, and of course it's attractive. It doesn't take into account just how hostile and challenging doing anything in space is. Not to mention that we would need to bring water, air, food, and also some sort of gravity with us—the cost is just too high at this point. I think we would be far better of conserving what we have on earth.

JB: *Your painting* The Farm *is perhaps your most well-known work. Why do you think this is—is it the case of a painting being made in the right place at the right cultural time or something more?*

AR: It's an image we can all relate to since we need to eat and have some ambivalence about how and where our food comes from. When Creative Time approached me in 1999 to make a painting about the biotech revolution, I thought it was a great opportunity to



Biosphere: Laboratory *(1993). 96" x 120". Oil on wood. Image courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater.*

try to articulate our hopes and fears about the future. Knowing it would be a very public project, I decided it needed to an extremely accessible image that would appeal to those educated about art and science history but would also be decipherable to anyone (it ended up on Broadway and Lafayette Street). My first decision was to make sure it looked like a familiar American mid-twentieth-century landscape painting. I also knew I needed to educate myself about the history of artificial selection and the current biotech revolution and what the important issues were. I had a number of great conversations with Rob DeSalle, the head of Molecular Biology at The American Museum of Natural History. Then, if you look closely, there are some very familiar agricultural characters and scenarios about agriculture that have been tweaked and transformed. It was certainly a huge challenge and a lot of fun.

JB: *I imagine that your work is generally very research heavy—what is your process like in creating a painting or series, and what series has taught you the most or been the most fun?*

AR: It's been a long process, and I love the idea of collecting information for my work. The idea of research started when Mark Dion and I decided to work on "Concrete Jungle," an ongoing collaborative project we started in 1989. We were talking about our interest in invasive species, and he suggested I read a text by the ecologist Norman Myers, which he was very enthusiastic about—I loved it because it created a fascinating framework for what I wanted to paint. Mark and I ended up editing a cross-cultural book about the subject, *Concrete Jungle*, published in 1996. I again realized how much I enjoyed research when I went on a two-month trip to Guyana in 1994 with Mark, and the more I read about the area, the more I could appreciate the experience of being in the field and having first-hand experience. I used this skill in 1997 when I was hired by the Museum of Natural History to go to Manaus, Brazil. I

The Farm *(2000). 96" x 120". Oil & acrylic on wood panel. Image courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater.*

was asked to do a series of images that would describe several experiments on the effects of deforestation. The images were going to be reproduced in their magazine, and I ended up making a very large painting that was reproduced on the cover. This set the table for all sorts of fascinating projects: an enormous painting commission for the Department of Fisheries at the University of Washington, Seattle for their new building in 1998—a book about Tasmania, paintings about the local ecosystems for the US Embassies of both Madagascar and Baghdad—a trip to Antarctica—and the most ambitious of all, a project I have been researching for almost a year about the history and future of Great Lakes. I haven't even started painting yet!

JB: *As an artist who creates work about a variety of scientific topics, how would you describe the value in commencing science via visual art?*

AR: I think science has the most exciting and interesting content, and it's a way to think about and make work about literally anything from history. There are so many fascinating stories to be told, and it's also our story of the history of what it is to be human and our animal ancestry. Science is also our only hope for the future. As we put more and more pressure on our very limited resources, the only way we might be able to make the challenging adjustment of our growing population as it puts more and more pressure on the planet.

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Dion, Mark, and Alexis Rockman. “Two Artists in the Age of Pessimism.” In *The Fifth Season*. Exhibition publication. New York: Linco Printing Inc., 2014, unpg.

TWO ARTISTS IN THE AGE OF PESSIMISM

Mark Dion and Alexis Rockman in conversation

Alexis Rockman
Mark, I want to talk about our outlook on art and how it may have changed in terms of things that we care about in our work and in our lives. Do you feel more or less hopeful about ecology, conservation and biodiversity than you did when we both started our careers in the mid 1980s?

Mark Dion:
I fear the trajectories of our thoughts about wild lands and wildlife conservation have been parallel. It is a long train of ideas that terminates in pessimism and melancholy. If I had to categorize my thoughts and feelings about ecology over my development as an artist, it would form a list like this:

Amazement/Wonder
Curiosity
Outrage/Anger
Hope/Activism
Disillusionment
Pessimism/Melancholy

We were both fascinated by a wonder and love for animals and wild places. This became the motivation for reading about natural history and zoology in particular, which led to our understanding of the challenges of wildlife conservation issues. At one point I became convinced that environmental issues were really information problems. I believed that if people knew the damage their way of life caused to the natural world, they would change. I believed that people would opt for environmental sanity over ecological suicide. My early work tended to be quite informational and didactic since I was literally attempting a kind of sculptural documentary practice.

After a while it became apparent that access to knowledge wasn't the problem. Ecological knowledge was readily available. The main issues were questions of political will, ideology, capitalism and psychology. It is hard to say that people don't know about the crisis in biodiversity because the information is everywhere.

For me it is clear that we will continue our disregard for other living things and the degradation of the environment to suicidal extremes. This leads me to a perspective of pessimism. However, I would love to be proven wrong. Dark conclusions and complex positions that end in ambivalence are difficult to articulate in various forms of culture. You cannot express these sentiments in politics, in activism, perhaps even in journalism. Art is an excellent place to express complexity, paradox, uncertainty, ambivalence and hopelessness. The role of the artist as witness can be as valuable as the artist as catalyst.

Don't you find a great deal of pushback from the environmental community you sometimes work with when it comes to issues of pessimism and doubt?

AR:
Yes, there is a lot of pushback from the scientific and environmental activist community. They might confess privately that they are despairing, but they often feel that if they articulate this in public, people will flee as if from a burning building. Well, it is a building on fire, and it's terrifying. I'm grateful to have art as a way to cope. One of my jobs as an artist is to show how we can't afford to be ambivalent about human activity.

Obviously, it's easy to be confused by what fuels our behavior and motivation. Knowledge just isn't enough. Our behavior has as much to do with the Pleistocene as it does with the 21st Century. What I mean is we are tribal, territorial animals who are afraid of mortality. We really can't imagine what the world will be like one hundred years from now, let alone two years. This is an unfortunate cocktail of paradoxes for everything else alive on this planet. I often try to imagine what the person who cut down the last tree on Easter Island was thinking around 1600 CE.

Like you, I used to believe that knowledge and information would open our eyes to the environmental issues and create radical change in behavior and save the world. I made art to teach a lesson. But I learned the lesson from Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* that people, if they will listen, just don't have the collective will to do much. The engine of capitalism is just too powerful.

How do you think future generations will perceive this period in history, now that our impact on the planet is an undeniable and acknowledged fact?

MD:
I guess we could look at how we feel about those who made selfish, corrupt and unforgivable choices in the past. How do we feel about those who clear cut the entirety of New England? How do we feel about the agriculturalists who killed the last Carolina Parakeet, or the market hunters who raided the last passenger pigeon nest site? How to we feel about those who administrated the Trail of Tears and other schemes of genocide? How do we judge those who brought buffalo and wolves to the very border of extinction? How do we judge the chemical magnates who attacked Rachel Carson, employing the notion that a woman could not produce good science?

If it is true that we are the last generation that can significantly change the course of environmental degradation and we end up doing little or nothing, then I imagine our place in history, as the enablers of shaping the planet as a crummier place, will not be terribly noble.

I am not sitting on the moral high ground and wagging my finger. I am very much implicated in the problem. I am far from a paragon of environmental sainthood. While we need some leadership and models of a positive culture of nature, it seems to me very much a question of values under capitalism.

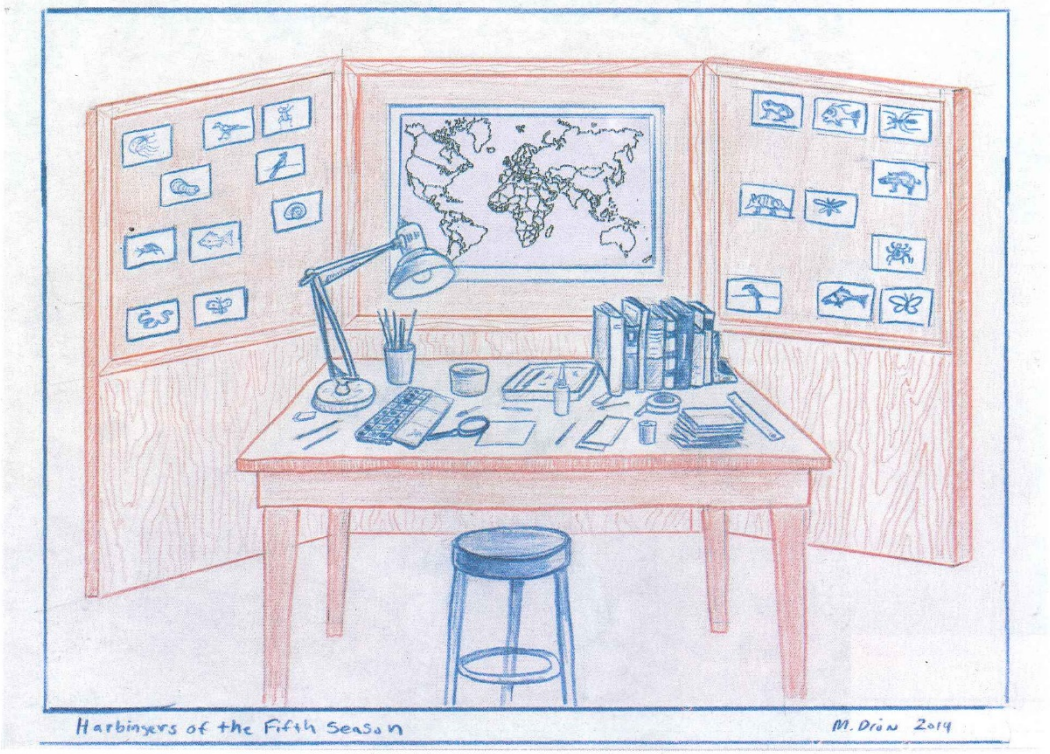


Fig. 4

Fig. 5

Where does art fit into this?

AR:

Art is one of the few places where one can have a singular voice that challenges corporate globalism. However, there can be surprises too.

It is possible to find oneself in bizarre professional paradoxes. Over the years art and arts organization that we love have taken financial support from companies or sponsors that would be at direct odds with our conscience and political positions of our work. People like the Koch brothers are very involved in philanthropic activities around the country. The American Museum of Natural History will enjoy a new Dinosaur Wing thanks to David Koch's 20 million dollar donation. They even had their name on the building where I just had surgery.

What does one do when the potential benefactor is at least a symbol of the very problem?

MD:

To paraphrase Vladimir Ilyich Lenin: the Capitalist will sell us the rope with which to hang them. Of course, Lenin never had to deal with the sophisticated greenwashing tactics of multinational corporations—paper companies that portray themselves as defenders of the forest, or oil corporations who sell an image of pioneering alternative energy campaigns.

We live in a world of contradictions and compromises and artists are certainly not immune to the everyday-life conflicts of anyone living under Capitalism. It is hard to participate in the global art world and not have a significant carbon footprint, for example. Some of the staunchest environmentalists I know board a lot of jets.

I guess one has to assess actions on a case-by-case basis. Every opportunity provides fresh challenges and opportunities, but they are each also a gamble, meaning sometimes you win and sometimes you lose. In general, I think environmental groups overestimate the importance of individual contributions to problems, making it seem like one's choice of light bulbs or household recycling are real solutions. This tends to let the policy wonks, elected leaders, corporations and other masters of the culture of consumption off the hook.

As long as your sponsor does not control your content and you have no intention of changing your work, I say take the money. I don't really know of any clean money in the world. You must be careful and cautions of how you are being used, and be certain that your content cannot be co-opted to contradict your convictions. No greenwashing.

You depict a good deal of trash in your work. What does it mean to you? How does it function in your iconography?

AR:

Trash. It works for me in a number of exciting ways. When I first started to paint natural history landscape paintings in the 1980s, trash was a big thrill. It was something that hadn't really been included in the history of painting and seemed like a taboo. There was something perverse about painting it in a loving and careful way. Trash was also a way to stake out my own territory. I was aware that one can't make a painting about ecology in the 20th or 21st Century and not include it. It's everywhere, whether visible on a beach or on a microscopic level, and it's the reality of the state of the planet.

One of my earliest memories was being in Lima, Peru and seeing what looked like mountains of trash clogging the river. To add insult to injury, it seemed as if the trash was covered in vultures. It terrified me particularly because at home I lived near the East River in New York City and I was afraid that might happen there too.

You have traveled to as many "dream" destinations as anyone I know. Is there a place you have yet to go that is at the top of your list?

MD:

I have been to some remarkable places—both remote and natural, and highly populated and cultured—but what makes traveling fulfilling is the company I've shared. Traveling with people who share my passion for wild places and commitment to conservation but who came with such different sensibilities and strategies was amazing.

Artists and scientists are obvious allies when it comes to environmental justice and wildlife issues, but they speak different languages and employ entirely separate toolboxes in their approach. The GYRE expedition to the trash-strewn beaches of Alaska was a real model of the kind of travel I would like to do more of. The team was relaxed, yet highly committed and remarkably intelligent and thoughtful. I had not imagined that the expedition would be so productive and that we would all get along so well, but of course it makes sense given we all share them same concerns.

Needless to say, there is always a sense of urgency in nature travel today since so many wild places are under pressure. It is easy to get caught up in "the last chance to see" mentality. Places you and I traveled to in the 1990s have become drastically degraded. Many of the forests you visited in Madagascar are gone forever. For me, the importance of travel is that it affirms my connection with wild places and makes me give a damn. It is easy to lose a sense of what we're fighting for, so I find visiting wild places essential to keeping my focus. The idea I mentioned earlier about the artist as a witness is also an important dimension of conservation travel. Artists were important to the process of documenting new animals as they were first identified to science. Now they are equally important in documenting their disappearance.

Fig. 4: **Mark Dion**, *Harbingers of the Fifth Season*, 2014. Courtesy of Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.

Mark Dion's installations often question methods of museological categorization and blur the lines between natural history, art and science. *Harbingers of the Fifth Season* is an unnamed artist's watercolor studio, a sculptural portrait of a life and practice, which includes representations of animals that are expanding their range due to climate change and other anthropocentric perturbations.

Fig. 5: **Alexis Rockman**, *Ark*, 2014. Courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York.

Alexis Rockman's paintings imagine a surreal and apocalyptic vision of the complicated relationship between man and nature. In *Ark*, a container ship is capsizing in trash-infested flood waters, with displaced animals struggling to survive.

"Two Artists in the Age of Pessimism" is adapted from *Gyre: The Plastic Ocean* (Booth Clibborn Editions, 2014), a catalogue for the 2014 exhibition of the same name at the Anchorage Museum.

Aronofsky, Darren. “The Thing About Noah and the Ark.” *T Magazine*, 23 March 2014, pp. 78, 80.

“El Diluvio,” by the artist Armando Romero, one of more than 50 artworks now on display at 462 West Broadway in SoHo, New York, commissioned by Aronofsky to coincide with his upcoming film, “Noah.”

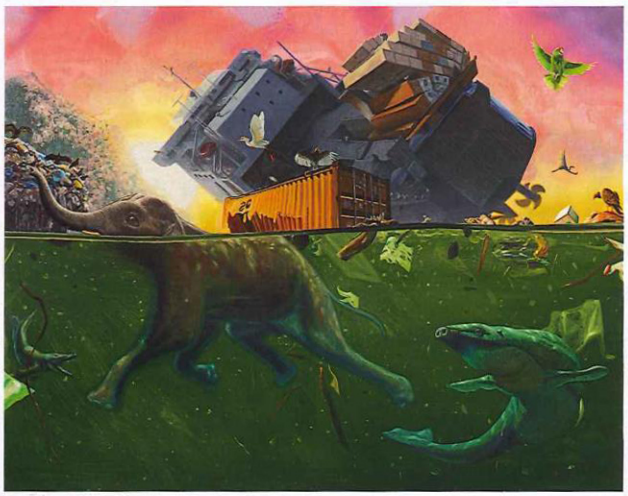
PHOTOGRAPH: CARMEN ARVIZU.

Art Matters

The Thing About Noah and the Ark

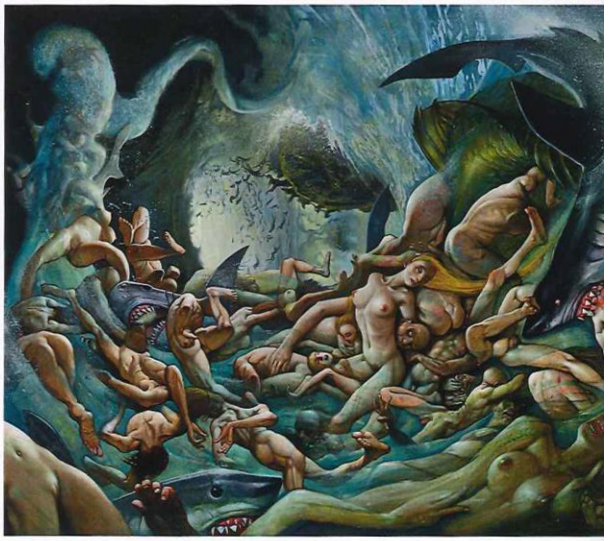
Darren Aronofsky explains why he decided to take on the fantastical Bible story in his new film and curate an art show about it.

WHEN I ASKED RUSSELL CROWE to star in “Noah,” I promised him one thing: I would never shoot him standing on the bow of a houseboat with two giraffes sticking up behind him. That’s the image most people have of Noah and the ark and I didn’t want to give audiences what they were expecting. I wanted to break the clichéd preconceptions we have from children’s toys, adverts, 1950s biblical epics and even much of the religious art of the last two millennia: the old man in a robe and sandals with a long white beard preaching in some Judean desert. I wanted Noah’s story to feel fresh, immediate and real. So when my team and I started to



"Ark," by Alexis Rockman.

"Animal Planet," by Matt Furie.



"The Deluge," by Simon Bisley.

imagine how to bring the prediluvian era to life, we threw away all the tropes and returned to the Bible.

In Genesis we found many hints of a world very different from what is commonly portrayed. For instance, giant fallen angels called the Nephilim walked the planet. How would we bring them to life? There were no rainbows before the floodwaters drained, so how do we know the sky was even blue? Men could live so long that Methusaleh was 369 years old when his grandson Noah was born but didn't die until hundreds of years after Noah's birth. Later in the Bible, mighty beasts, leviathans and behemoths ranged over land and sea. This didn't sound like ancient Judea. It sounded like something much grander and less familiar. Here was a mythological world potentially as distinct as Middle Earth: a biblical, fantastical world.

We realized that if we listened to the original text we would find a blueprint for a Noah story that was unique and unexpected. For instance, returning to the ark: When you look in Genesis, you find exact measurements for a big rectangular box, a giant coffin. It makes perfect sense. The ark didn't need a curved hull of planed wood with a pointed bow and stern. The world was entirely covered with water and there was no need to steer and nowhere to go. So we created the rectangular-shaped ark for the film, biblically accurate down to the last cubit.

Next we had to answer, what did the first rainbow look like? How do you truly represent the cornucopia of the animal kingdom? And how do you unleash the "fountains of the deep"? These visual challenges inspired us to dream big for the silver screen.

I was curious what other minds would come up with if they tried to represent the original story. So I decided to reach out to my favorite artists and ask each of them to return to Genesis and create something in his or her own medium. The response was overwhelming. It was interesting how most turned their backs on the comedic, folk-tale-like rendition of Noah and found the darkness in the story. I guess that is because, after all, it is the first apocalypse story. Even though it is a story of hope, family and second chances, it is also a story filled with great destruction and misery: For every pair that survived, there were countless other creatures on the planet that drowned during the deluge, innocent and wicked alike.

PHOTOGRAPHS, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: ADAM REICH; AYANA UDESEN; JOHN BERENS.

Wei, Lily. "Alexis Rockman." *ARTnews*, December 2013, p. 96.

Alexis Rockman

Drawing Center and Sperone Westwater

Alexis Rockman's brilliantly painted, richly imagined, encyclopedic projects have the panoramic qualities of dioramas and cycloramas, which is not surprising given that the artist spent much of his youth at the American Museum of Natural History and the Bronx Zoo.

His interpretations, however, are much more surreal than the models that inspired them—and can be cheekily toxic. They might be thought of as Hudson River School on acid. Apocalyptic visions of biology gone wild, the works offer up a kind of lurid, aberrant sublime, steeped in imagery from science fiction and horror films. And Rockman's subjects—thoroughly, fanatically researched—are chimerical nightmares, the fallout from industrial holocausts. They are also extravagant fantasias in which the artist cheerfully, enthusiastically imagines the worst.

In the exhibition at Sperone Westwater of recent work—including a lyrical tondo that suggests a porthole view—the focal point was two immense paintings, *Bronx Zoo* (2012–13) and *Gowanus* (2013). The former includes an irradiated landscape of destroyed buildings, a miscellany of predators, eviscerated prey, prehistoric birds, and more, above water—as in a geological cross section—teeming with primitive life-forms. The latter painting is a more direct environmental critique with chemical effluents and waste pouring into Brooklyn's murky Gowanus Canal from pipes and open sewers, as a disproportionately large cat perches on a rock, eyeing the monstrosities in the water as potential snacks. On one of the pipes, two squirrels are copulating—a signature motif. Life, evidently, goes on.

At the Drawing Center was Rockman's vividly imagined rendition of aquatic life. It included a selection of the hundreds of drawings of real and invented species he had created for the 2012 film *Life of Pi*. From initial sketches to the watercolors that were used for animated sequences, they were a large part of what made the film so visually spectacular—and a superb achievement of digital cinema.

—Lilly Wei

Alexis Rockman, *Bronx Zoo*, 2012–13, oil on wood, 84" x 168". Sperone Westwater.

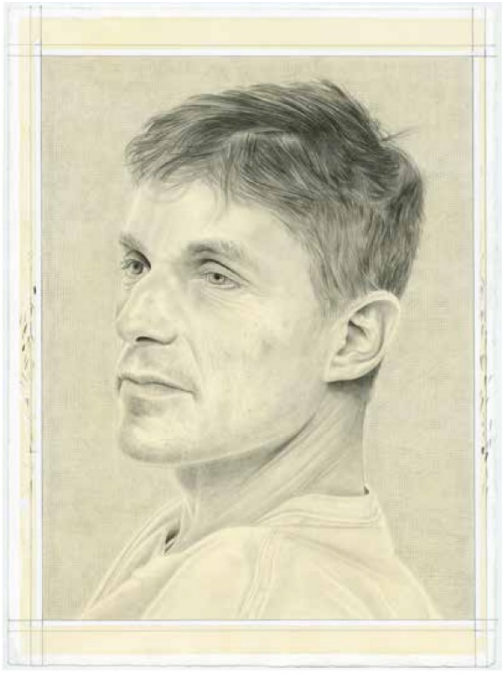
Neil, Jonathan T.D. "In Conversation: Alexis Rockman with Jonathan T.D. Neil." *The Brooklyn Rail*, October 2013, pp. 16-19.

in conversation

Alexis Rockman

WITH JONATHAN T. D. NEIL

"Atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide (CO_2), methane, and nitrous oxide have increased to levels unprecedented in at least the last 800,000 years. Carbon dioxide concentrations have increased by 40 percent since pre-industrial times, primarily from fossil fuel emissions and secondarily from net land-use change emissions. The ocean has absorbed about 30 percent of the emitted anthropogenic carbon dioxide, causing ocean acidification." This is just one of a number of dire summaries from the most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (I.P.C.C.) Fifth Assessment Report, "Climate Change 2013: The Physical Science Basis," released on September 27. The report goes on to note that as the 21st century progresses, an "increased incidence and/or magnitude of extreme high sea level[s]" is "very likely." For all the residents of the tri-state region who were affected by Hurricane Sandy, and really for anyone concerned about the environment and who can lay claim to having either a shred of rationality or at least one foot planted in reality (the tragedy being that so many, particularly in Congress, do not), it is terrible news. It will come as no surprise for Alexis Rockman, who has been attentive to these transformations over the course of the last 25 years and has rendered them in paint with an uncompromising and unparalleled eye. He has two exhibitions of new work open this month in New York: *Rubicon* at Sperone Westwater, where a number of large oil paintings and watercolors, most executed before Sandy hit, imagine both the catastrophe and beauty of a flooded New York; and *Drawings from Life of Pi*, at The Drawing Center, which collects Rockman's creative work for Ang Lee's critically acclaimed adaptation of Yann Martel's novel. Jonathan T. D. Neil spoke with Rockman about these shows and about the catastrophic sensibility that informs his sublime allegories of our future.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Alexis Rockman, "Gowanus," 2013. Oil on wood, 72 × 90". Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York.

RAIL: Where did the title for the Sperone Westwater show come from?
ROCKMAN: It came from one of those moments when I had to come up with something and I started to poke around on the Internet and look into the history of points of no return, and "Rubicon" just seemed like a great word that was just familiar enough and just mysterious enough—it didn't have too much baggage.

RAIL: There's a politics to the crossing of the Rubicon; was that in your mind?
ROCKMAN: Absolutely.

RAIL: What's the point of no return in your mind?
ROCKMAN: It's the amount of cooked CO_2 in the atmosphere. But there're so many ways to create that. How many points of no return are there?

RAIL: But for you, the spike in CO_2 over the last 150 years—
ROCKMAN: Absolutely, the Industrial Revolution. Bill McKibben's 350.org was something I had in mind, the 350 parts per million of CO_2 in the atmosphere, which is widely accepted as the safe upper limit.

RAIL: How does this apply directly to what we're seeing in the new work? Let's start with the major piece, "Bronx Zoo."
ROCKMAN: I think that it's the biodiversity crisis, which has been underway since humans left Africa. Wherever we go there's a wake of extinctions. And a zoo is such a mysterious and complicated place to me because it has a sense of wonder, it's a library, it's an ark—it's all these things, and it's also very sad when you think that many of these creatures have no place to go other than a zoo.

RAIL: And so this is their last possible refuge.
ROCKMAN: I have a tremendous amount of ambivalence myself about going to zoos. Zoos are our last hope, and it's pathetic that they're our last hope.

RAIL: But is there a sense that, though the zoo itself seems like it's a little bit of a tired concept, the management and the care of other animal species, which the zoo represents, holds out at least a little bit of a model for the kind of responsibility that humans have to the world that they inhabit.
ROCKMAN: Absolutely, and it's no coincidence that the role of the zoo has changed over the years. There's been a political and conceptual shift.

Alexis Rockman, "Bronx Zoo," 2012-2013. Oil on wood, 84 × 168". Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York.

RAIL: So no longer something that is about the domination of nature and the bringing of it under one—

ROCKMAN: Colonialist rule.

RAIL: Exactly—for human entertainment. And now, it's much more a sense of stewardship and care.

ROCKMAN: And I'm skeptical about that, but it's our only hope. It's a very tough position.

RAIL: Right. In the painting, the one species that seems to be absent or only suggested—there are many that are missing, but the one that is significantly missing—is humans.

ROCKMAN: Are they? It's a completely human environment, so they're not literally there, but what could humans be doing? That would be someone else's project, what the humans are doing. They're somewhere. I don't know where they are, but they're around.

RAIL: So what we're seeing is what happens when humanity retreats from its responsibilities?

ROCKMAN: Or decides to be less than interested, shall we say.

RAIL: Neglectful.

ROCKMAN: Really, what are the forces at work in terms of the battle for conservation areas? It's capitalism. And that's an indifference.

RAIL: When you say capitalism is an "indifference," what do you mean?

ROCKMAN: I think capitalism is indifferent to many of the things that need to be cared for, that won't in the short term generate income. Now obviously ecotourism is a big hope, and it has been successful in many parts of the world.

RAIL: But it's sad to think that that's the model we have to live with in order to care for and to see these environments conserved in the future.

ROCKMAN: The big problem, if you go to places like the Osa Peninsula in Costa Rica—that has been a success story, in terms of conservation—is climate. Climate is the problem, and there's no amount of protection that can change that, because of this chemistry experiment—the horse is out of the barn.

RAIL: I was recently reading a review of a new book that's just been published by Lisa-ann Gershwin called *Stung!: On Jellyfish Blooms and the Future of the Ocean*—

ROCKMAN: I don't know it, but it sounds good.

RAIL: It was a review by Tim Flannery in the *New York Review*, and in it there are some beautiful pictures of different kinds of jellyfish. I take it as an indication that you're either ahead of the curve, or certainly a part of this current, that jellyfish play such a prominent role in a few of the works in this show. Tell me a little bit about the role that jellyfish play in this bizarre or perverse ecosystem.

ROCKMAN: They have the brightest future, along with a handful of other marine organisms. They will be the universal ecology. And how can you not love the way a jellyfish looks? It's magical; it's mysterious. You don't know whether it's one animal or a colony of different animals that make this mysterious mass. They couldn't be more "other" to me, and also more beautiful. They're also irresistible on so many levels in terms of painting opportunities.

RAIL: Do they stand in as—not a redemptive figure—but as harbingers of our return to some Precambrian period, before humans could even survive on the planet?

ROCKMAN: I don't think that's the way I think about things; it's more like a future when all bets are off. Back in time is not what I'm thinking about at all. You couldn't make up how strange the future is going to be. I'm just trying to be a documentarian, frankly. The weirder things may get, the more I may be on to something.

RAIL: So, in a millennium, when someone or something uncovers this work and realizes that it depicts something that actually happened—

ROCKMAN: Or maybe the mystery will be that there was this biodiversity in the first place. That could be the strangest part.

RAIL: The notion that all bets are off, and the forward trajectory, since all of this is done in painting—I can't help thinking it has to have something to say, self-reflexively, about the practice of painting, and about the conditions of possibility that are available to art. I'm curious to hear your thoughts about how you see this catastrophic sensibility liberating what it is that you're able to do as a painter.

ROCKMAN: There are so many things to consider. Sitting in my studio I ask myself, "What can I do that matters? What can I do that really takes advantage of the resources I have for the next six months and to do something that matters to me and will be memorable?" My family has a big presence too. I always run my ideas by my partner Dorothy [Spears], and I think about what my stepsons' futures will be like and it makes me mad. Ferran, who is 17, also suggested ideas for the big paintings. So I tend to get a checklist, and I go down it, and I start to think about the issues that I want to deal with. And then I always have in mind how lucky I am as an artist. I don't have corporate sponsorship looking over my shoulder. It's always about this idea that you can really have an internal voice and talk about things that no one else may be willing to talk about, at least on a visual scale that has a platform. And then I think, "Alright, what can I do that I'm going to make by hand, by myself, that can—I wouldn't say compete with the rest of culture and even pop culture, like movies—but what can I do that has a relationship to that culture and that has as much credibility in terms of persuasive language? And also has a shared language with art history." You know, I love art. I love the tradition of painting. There's a lot of great postwar American painting that I think is fabulous and that I try to reference—some color field painting, obviously the scale of postwar painting, things like that. I just feel so lucky to be able to have these opportunities.

RAIL: I know I wouldn't say it's a return because you've been working at this epic scale and in this kind of epic sweep for a long time, but it seems that there's also a real engagement with the question of history painting.

ROCKMAN: Yes, it's true. We know that history painting is always telling the story of triumphs, of the winners, and I've always been attracted to the things that haven't necessarily been that successful. Or things that make me feel ambivalent. If I'm going to make a history painting, I do not want to make it about the past, but maybe about the future. That's one thing. So you're embracing it and you're challenging traditions. And then I want to make—I don't want to say *stories*, because I don't know what the story is—but I want to make compelling images that have a sense of triumphalism. But what are the implications of triumph? The "Bronx Zoo" painting is about the triumph of jellyfish? Well that's just sad. So, yes, it's from the point of view of the jellyfish if you want to think about it from the traditional perspective of history paintings. But I want to set up these conflicted and conflicting feelings that lead to this sense of ambivalence.

RAIL: And as a viewer you cannot help but be confronted with its immensity—it's almost sublime.

ROCKMAN: Yes! Absolutely. I want all those things, and then I want you to walk away with a sense of something else.

RAIL: I'm interested in this question of history painting because a history painting of or for the future needs to imagine a moment after the catastrophe, and this points to a problem with time, or with temporality. And initially we can say, "It's because we're running out of it, and so we feel this horizon impinging upon us." But I think that's always the false way of thinking about it. The last moment that history painting underwent a kind of crisis was from the late 18th century into the middle of the 19th century, from Benjamin West's "The Death of General Wolfe" through Géricault's "Raft of the Medusa" up to Courbet and—

ROCKMAN: "A Burial at Ornans."

RAIL: Exactly, "A Burial at Ornans," where it's epic in scope, but it's a funeral.

ROCKMAN: Or negligence. And racism. I haven't really thought about those paintings in a long time, but they had a big impact on me, as did Goya's "The Third of May, 1808." It's the idea of the ambivalent triumphs. Or failure.

RAIL: And also the fact that painting is trying to capture this. I think that there's this sense—the mistaken sense, for many people—that photography is the thing that ushered in this feeling of instantaneity into the world of image-making. But long before photography emerges as a technology, there's the desire for this up-to-date-ness. There's a desire for immediacy, whether it's Goya's war etchings or Géricault working from tragic stories in the newspaper and trying to conjure an image out of that—there's this notion that time has caught up with itself. You know that it has caught up with you and now you're trying to figure out how to represent that.

Alexis Rockman, "Untitled (Chimera)," 2013. Watercolor on paper, 25⅞ × 20". Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York.

ROCKMAN: There's also the other idea that when I started making paintings that dealt with these issues, there was something so wrong about it. Painting a still life was just so disgraced. That is such a challenge. What can you do that's not just a complete embarrassment? If you want to be taken seriously as a young artist, if you can pull that off, then you're really on to something.

RAIL: So that represents the risk? It's the embrace of the embarrassment that then actually requires a commitment.

ROCKMAN: I was watching the Blu-ray of *Bride of Frankenstein* last night, which has always been one of my favorite movies because it's so beautifully stylish and fantastic in every way, but there's such a sense of complete, earnest heartbreak and loneliness combined with this over-the-top sense of humor. Having these two contradictory impulses together, it's just magical—there's so much electricity that comes out of it.

RAIL: It's the marriage of the sincere and the perverse.

ROCKMAN: Exactly. And the whole subtext of the politics, of the gender and sexuality, of the religious—it's just so brilliant.

RAIL: It's not going to escape viewers that of course the Bronx Zoo is flooded. Were you working on, or did you have the idea for this painting before Sandy struck last year?

ROCKMAN: I think the painting was close to being done. And I was afraid when Sandy hit that my painting would literally be flooded up to the point where the water is in the picture, and that there would be jellyfish swimming around in my studio. I was unhappy when it happened, for the obvious reasons, but I also thought that what I was coming up with was something that was over-the-top—and then I kept seeing images of Wall Street, and it looked like the painting.

RAIL: In more ways than one there's the sense that Sandy came and rewrote what the painting is about. It made it much more local, whereas I think that the scope of the work, given the species represented, is attempting a global implication. But all of a sudden it became very local because it is the Bronx Zoo and it is underwater.

Study for Tiger Vision (Cosmography 4 9/20/11), 2011. Gouache on black paper 8¼ × 11½". Courtesy of the artist and 20th Century Fox.

ROCKMAN: I don't know what I think of it. There are some good things about it, and then there are some things I'm not crazy about.

RAIL: You live downtown, your studio's downtown: How did Sandy affect you personally, in your day-to-day?

ROCKMAN: I probably didn't take it as seriously as I should have, like most people. I was in my studio the day it hit, until, maybe, four o'clock, and then I thought I should go home and buy some groceries. Then it was like *Dawn of the Dead*, because so many groceries were gone already. We battened down the hatches. It was terrifying. We got off easy. All we lost was electricity. Dorothy and my stepson and I hung around the city a couple of days. I came to my studio and it was fine; there was no water damage. I was grateful, and I felt so lucky. But there were a lot of shady-looking characters lurking around. We didn't get the feeling it brought out the best in humanity. It brought out the best in some humanity. But there was someone lurking around in our backyard. I slept with a knife under my pillow. We went into survival mode and then left town after we ran out of power. And when we left, we were very aware of the socioeconomic implications of what's going to happen, and what's happening. It was like a little rehearsal.

RAIL: It feels like a rehearsal, but then it is simply going to be a rehearsal until the main production comes, and none of it will have prepared you for that. In some sense, that's the interesting problem—the rehearsal is trying to represent what the future will bring, always adapting to current circumstances and trying to expand on those variables to prepare. But then there's just simply no way to do it because the crisis arrives and it catches everybody off guard.

ROCKMAN: I couldn't agree more.

RAIL: There are a number of new, large watercolors in the show—

ROCKMAN: Yes, and I had to reinvent my watercolor language due to the scale of them, and I had some technical issues I wanted to deal with. I had to go back to the drawing board with materials and reinvent what I was doing. I spent a couple of months—not last summer but the summer before—doing a body of work that I knew wasn't necessarily going to work, but I had to figure out how to use this stuff.

RAIL: They have a very different sensibility from the two major oil paintings in the show.

ROCKMAN: Yes.

RAIL: There's a real beauty to these.

ROCKMAN: That is what I was hoping for.

RAIL: Were you hoping for something beyond this aesthetic impact?

ROCKMAN: Well I don't want everything I do to be a bummer. [*Laughter.*] You know, if you can make a beautiful watercolor of jellyfish, that's just a wonderful thing. But the works also deal with problems of point of view that engage with film and photography. I tried to push it a little bit, but it's not that crazy.

RAIL: But it certainly presents a series of works where you're much closer to it as a viewer.

ROCKMAN: I wanted a sense of vertigo or immersion.

RAIL: It achieves that immersion differently because, with the scale of the "Bronx Zoo" painting or the scale of the "Gowanus" painting, you're outside of them, even though they encompass your vision. Whereas with these, you're up close, and they situate you as viewer—you're underneath the tree, you are in the water to a certain extent, you are hanging above this drainage ditch—

ROCKMAN: It's the mosquito perspective. P-O-V of the mosquito.

RAIL: You've just done this work on the movie *Life of Pi* and, as we know from the exhibition that's up at The Drawing Center, there's a real attempt to embody the vision of another species, in that case specifically the tiger.

ROCKMAN: Right, and that was something that Ang [Lee] had put on the table at the very first meeting that I had with him in 2009. He said a number of things and then he said, "I want to discuss how we can describe Tiger Vision." And I said, "What?" And he said, "We'll get to that later." [*Laughs.*] He

Study for Tiger Vision (Angler Fish/Vampire Squid Composite 8/23/11), 2011. Gouache on black paper 8¼ × 11½". Courtesy of the artist and 20th Century Fox.

Alexis Rockman, "Untitled (Cherry Blossoms)," 2013. Watercolor, ink and gouache on paper. 75⅞ × 55⅛ × 2¼". Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York.

had some ideas that were fascinating, but a perhaps a little bit too much about art history. We went through a series of images from Futurism, from Cubism—this idea of different perspectives, and we ended up putting it on the shelf, on the back burner for a couple of years, because the movie had to be made, and this was a discrete moment. When the opportunity came around again and Ang asked if I had ideas about what Tiger Vision might be, I started to think about it. Obviously you can't guess what an animal thinks or sees—well, you can of course, so let me rephrase that: it's a fool's errand to *really* think you know what an animal sees, but it's a lot of fun to imagine it. So I thought, "Well, if I were a starving tiger on a boat, the first thing I'd want to see is food," so I started to think about what a tiger would see and I started to look on the Internet for ideas about transparent fish and about looking into fish and I came across these beautiful models from sushi restaurants in Japan that were transparent, almost anatomical models of fish. You could see into them and all the different cuts of sushi. That's where I started off in the beginning of the sequence, and then it went into more psychedelic stuff from there, but that was the bridge from the rational surface of the water to the extreme psychedelic levels of the depths.

RAIL: Has that given you a sense when you're working on paintings—these or other ones or new projects—of saying, "Alright, one of the ways of approaching the problem of what I want to make here is trying to think of it through the lens of what another animal might see"?

ROCKMAN: That's something I've done for years. I'm thinking about a painting I made over 20 years ago of frogs at the base of a tree looking up, and it's from the perspective of a person with a flashlight so the bottom of the tree is illuminated in a circle. The idea came from spending time in the rainforest and going out at night looking for frogs and other nocturnal wildlife. That painting is set up from the perspective of a human, but it might as well be from the perspective of a frog. Those are things I've thought about a lot over the years, but of course I learned a lot from working on the movie, in terms of storytelling and being disciplined about saying something once, saying it clearly and cleanly, and believing in it and moving on.

RAIL: There's a smaller set of watercolors in the Sperone Westwater show where there is a composite of what looks like a bird, a rat, and a small alligator.

ROCKMAN: It's a vulture, an alligator, and a possum, and a reticulated python for a tail.

RAIL: And in the large painting of the Gowanus Canal there's another composite animal. Did this also come from the work on *Life of Pi*?

ROCKMAN: The watercolor is a chimera, and that's something that I've done for years. I take this mythological creature and plug it in with animals that have a bright future, that would be able to exist in and around human activity: the python is now a big presence in Florida; everyone knows what a possum is; alligators, they're doing really well too; and of course every body of water needs an alligator somewhere; and then the vultures, as reviled as they are, I think are doing fairly well since DDT was outlawed. But the idea of taking a mythological creature and turning it into a joke about not only monsters, but—

RAIL: The ideal organism of the future.

ROCKMAN: Exactly. The character or image in the bottom of the "Gowanus Canal" is absolutely—I wouldn't say inspired—about the things I did on *Life of Pi* with the squid, and the whale, and the composite animals that they are based on: the squid being based on ocean life that was Pi and Richard Parker the tiger's present reality, or their ordeal, or their life in the ocean, or some of the life in the ocean; and the whale being representative of many of the animals that perished in the shipwreck, that died when they were shipwrecked and orphaned, literally, from the ship, the *Tsimtsum*. It was a metaphor about the land and the sea. After reading that this dolphin had wandered into the Gowanus Canal, I started to think about what else had wandered in there and died. I started to think about what used to live on Long Island and in Brooklyn, and I created a character that I thought would look—if you squinted at it—like a catfish, but it would also be made out of these many species of animals that have lost their lives for various reasons in and around that body of water. Then Tom Baione, the Director of Library Services at the Museum of Natural History, after I sent the image to him, told me, "Alexis, that's a wonderful painting, but did you ever hear about the baby sperm whale that died in there?" I thought, *What?* I wish I'd known.

RAIL: I'm intrigued by the sense that there's always this allegory of painting itself, and in the "Gowanus" picture you have a drainpipe leaking pure blue and pure red streams of what can only be paint.

ROCKMAN: It could be! It could be antifreeze. The purer the color, the less likely it is that it's helpful for what's living in there.

RAIL: Does this in some ways implicate painting itself as part of the problem?

ROCKMAN: I don't want to lead the viewer in any of these issues; it's too much fun to have a lot of people have their own ideas about it. I have some ideas, but there are many ways to read it, and that's the wonderful thing about metaphor. [*Laughs.*]

RAIL: That it lets you off the hook?

ROCKMAN: Well, it lets you off the hook, or you're as guilty as you can imagine!

RAIL: Yet there's a sense that art itself is a harbinger of excess, an index of accumulation.

ROCKMAN: It needs care just like everything else, right?

RAIL: Right, and that's the more sanguine view of it, that artists and culture need care and feeding as much as the natural world does. But doesn't this again put human beings in the position of the ultimate caretakers? Is this great responsibility and this sense of stewardship just a short prism shift away from the original desire to dominate nature?

ROCKMAN: Absolutely, and we all know what the history of stewardship is—it's not good.

RAIL: Is it ever possible to overcome the history with which these ideas began? Going back to the idea of the zoo and the idea of stewardship, the responsibility that human beings have to protect and to manage their environment, both out of a pure self-interest, but also out of an idea of the kind of values that are embodied in this projection of oneself outside of that pure self-interest: Is there always that cynical nod that says, "you can never overcome this tainted history, you can never get away from the fact that a zoo is always this place that was built for human pleasure and represents this expansionist tendency and colonial ethos"?

ROCKMAN: I'm forever hopeful, but I don't see much indication of human behavior or policy changing.

RAIL: Even with the endless array of philanthropic works and the immense numbers of well-meaning people that are out there writing about this, representing it, trying to do something about it?

ROCKMAN: I think it's so awesome and positive, but let me put it to you this way: if the climate change issue doesn't have an effect—it's such a devastating and enormous problem—I just don't see how anything is going to change. I think it's just going to be like a moth-eaten blanket that keeps getting eaten by silkworm larvae.

RAIL: Again this projects a horizon where we can't be in control of our own futures. We're basically just doing what we're doing until the next catastrophe hits.

ROCKMAN: Yeah.

RAIL: That's a bummer!

ROCKMAN: It sucks! [*Laughs.*] I don't know what else to tell you.

RAIL: *Life of Pi*, as a storyline, is interesting in that respect because it really is a story about allegory.

ROCKMAN: Right, and how stories can save you.

RAIL: And about how the fabrication of an alternative world or an alternative universe—an alternative way of looking at things—can have a redemptive quality, even when it's an incredible story of loss and absence and deprivation. But at the same time, succumbing to that despair is the thing that will kill you.

ROCKMAN: Exactly.

RAIL: So perhaps that explains something about the epic paintings, about how there's a pulling back: as much as they can be sublimely beautiful, at the same time they can be horrific—there's something that pulls back from the despair. It doesn't kill you that badly.

ROCKMAN: You have to find ways to make it work. Making paintings like these sometimes take a year! And how do you cope with that? It's a negotiation.

RAIL: Has this body of work—the "Gowanus" painting, the "Bronx Zoo" painting, or even the new watercolors—opened up a new way of thinking about constructing paintings? I know you talked about the watercolors as having a set of technical things you had to figure out, and I imagine there will be more work in that medium, but what's the next turn of the screw?

ROCKMAN: I have some ideas, and I really feel positively seeing the work up. It made me happy. You work on things in bits and pieces and you plan it out, but when you see it up sometimes it can be fantastic. It had just the right balance of despair and elation.

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Lala, Kisa. “Alexis Rockman: Rubicon — The Point of No Return.” *www.huffingtonpost.com (The Huffington Post)*, 9 October 2013.

THE HUFFINGTON POST

Alexis Rockman, *Bronx Zoo*, 2012-2013, Oil on wood; triptych, 84 x 168 x 2 inches Courtesy of Sperone Westwater Gallery

Alexis Rockman’s panoramic paintings explore the seamless interdependencies of aquatic, avian and subterranean life. Their omniscient world-views reveal our own terrestrial spectrum to be only a narrow slice.

Rockman’s inspirations range from museum dioramas to the pestilent sewers and toxic waste dumps that form the city’s circulatory system. In his recent show of paintings, he explores the virulent swamps of the Gowanus Canal, (the scene of a recent dolphin’s demise), and the Bronx Zoo — two venues where the urban collides with the wild.

Rockman’s creatures share a city-centric view, a corruption of past romantic idylls of natural habitats. The depictions of post-human worlds with their decaying civilizations and architectural ruins are not necessarily apocalyptic from the viewpoint of the animals that thrive in this future.

Though Rockman acknowledges the influence of natural history field drawings and the *vanitas* of Dutch paintings, his creatures depart from traditional depictions of *nature morte*, describing quirky cross-species sexual deviancies more akin to Boschian monstrous entanglements. These hybrid creatures are the dead-ends of the *arbor vitae*, the warped branches of the evolutionary tree of life ending in genetic doom, or else these freakish, rutting animals imply a fabulous resolution in a future hermaphroditic union.

The watercolors the artist made in preparation for the ‘Richard Parker’ dream interlude in Ang Lee’s film, *Life of Pi*, celebrate the less mundane, otherworldly aspect of nature.

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Alexis Rockman, *Gowanus*, 2013, Oil on wood, 72 x 90 inches Courtesy of Sperone Westwater Gallery

This video, in collaboration with the team Ministry of Culture, contains sequences from the film *Life of Pi* for which Rockman created psychotropic visions involving the tiger and the magical island they become marooned in.

Rockman's work embraces the beautiful and the deformed, and if not condemning human intervention, it seems to point at the inevitability of extinction: the planet's species are locked in struggle for survival as our desires dictate our evolution, and we head inexorably towards cosmic entropy.

View the video: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kisa-lala/alexis-rockman_b_4032146.html

Video by David Art Wales, Ministry of Culture

Alexis Rockman: Rubicon is at Sperone Westwater Gallery, September 17 - November 2, 2013

Drawings from Life of Pi, is an exhibition curated by Brett Littman and Nova Benway at New York's The Drawing Center. September 27, 2013 - November 03, 2013

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Alexis Rockman, *Life of Pi* Drawings, Courtesy of Drawing Center

Indrisek, Scott. “Studio Check: Alexis Rockman.” *Modern Painters*, September 2013, pp. 44-45.

Alexis Rockman

TEXT BY SCOTT INDRISEK | PHOTOGRAPHS BY KRISTINE LARSEN

IN A SPACIOUS BASEMENT-LEVEL Tribeca studio that he’s occupied for nearly three decades, Alexis Rockman is dreaming of the environmental disaster that is Brooklyn’s Gowanus Canal. This fabulously polluted locale inspired *Gowanus*, a large-scale oil painting featuring red and blue toxic sludge spewing into a waterway clotted with fantastic marine life, mostly dead or dying. This work, along with a 14-foot-wide painting depicting the Bronx Zoo as “a ruin” in what the artist terms “an allegory of neglect and despair,” will form the centerpiece of “Rubicon,” opening September 17 at Sperone Westwater Gallery in New York. Rockman also has a show of works on paper opening September 27 at the Drawing Center, focusing on the artistic work he did for sequences in Ang Lee’s film *Life of Pi*. The artist, who grew up in New York and began traveling to the Amazon as a child with his archaeologist mother, is chiefly interested in “how plants and animals have managed to make a living in spite of our best efforts.” It’s not all gloom and doom—one massive watercolor destined for the Sperone Westwater show is about bee-colony collapse, yet it’s still undeniably beautiful. “I make paintings,” Rockman explains, “to reconcile my terror and my hope.” MP

BOOK COLLECTION
"A good portion of my books are things I've used as inspiration or reference. I'm fascinated and obsessed with the way nature is represented, not only in documentary movies, but also illustrations and photography—the constructs that create stories about how we understand zoos, natural history, and so on."

POLITICAL WATERCOLOR
"This is my 'Halliburton hydra,' for an activist poster I did years ago. There's Donald Rumsfeld, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, and Dick Cheney. The great political cartoonists from Hogarth to Goya were a huge influence on me. I guess Powell wouldn't be in it now if I had to do it again; he ended up being a voice of reason. Cheney would be the whole monster."

REFERENCE SCULPTURE
"This sculpture was a model I used as reference for a 2007 painting titled *Romantic Attachments*. It was an encounter with a modern human woman and a male human ancestor based on Bernini's sculpture *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. I hired a paleo sculptor who worked on the Hall of Human Origins at the Museum of Natural History in New York to make an accurate paleo reconstruction of *Homo Georgicus* in the pose of Bernini's angel."

GIFTS FROM FRIENDS
"The mongoose is from Huma Bhabha and Jason Fox, when they came back from Pakistan—they used to be my studio mates here. There's a lamprey and some mud puppies from Carolina Biological Supply house, a catfish I caught in the Amazon, some Mark Dion projects that he's given me, a sea horse...."

TWO PAINTINGS
"The one on the left is something Ross Bleckner made when I worked for him in 1983. The other one I made around the same time—I think the same day. They're made out of wax and oil paint. I was sort of copying what he was doing but having my own creatures flying out of the thing. I think he was doing a chandelier. I was like, 'I'm making a fountain.'"

FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH
"Me and my grandmother, July 1969 in New Jersey—I'm holding a turtle and getting a pat on the head. That sort of says it all. I went to camp. I always had this idea that I'd go out into nature and get inspired, come back and draw a frog. Things haven't changed much. My grandmother had a huge influence on me. She was a Sunday painter, literally."

ONLINE EXTRA: For a video interview with Alexis Rockman, go to blouinartinfo.com/rockman.

Binlot, Ann. "Alexis Rockman on 'Rubicon' and 'Life of Pi.'" *www.whitewall.art (Whitewall)*, 30 September 2013.

whitewall
CONTEMPORARY ART AND LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

Bronx Zoo, 2012-13

Alexis Rockman's haunting eco-dystopian paintings transport viewers to a dire future. Toxic brightly hued liquids ooze out of sewer pipes, animals fornicate with other species, the Bronx Zoo becomes a post-apocalyptic nightmare, and creatures fuse together into entirely new beings, forecasting what might become of the planet if it continues to deteriorate. His fascinating naturescapes even caught the eye of director Ang Lee, who commissioned the artist to create the wondrous creatures depicted in the film *Life of Pi*. This fall, the New York artist has two shows, "Alexis Rockman: Rubicon," which opened September 17 at Sperone Westwater, and "Drawings From Life of Pi," which opened September 27 at The Drawing Center. *Whitewall* met up with the artist a few weeks before his Sperone Westwater show to chat about what it was like to see his creatures come to life on film, his two exhibitions and how we can help save the environment.

WHITEWALL: How did your interest in nature start?

ALEXIS ROCKMAN: I always loved nature and ecology and animals and stuff like that since I was a kid. I noticed that there were stories or parts of natural history that weren't really focused on, and as I got older, I realized that culture tends to not want to look at certain things that have to deal with mortality and extinction, and some of the darker stories of ecology. So I guess I became attracted to some of the darker parts of that equation.

WW: Why did you decide to become an artist, instead of a conservationist or scientist?

AR: I don't know if I could take being around some of the tougher things that conservationists have to deal with.

WW: Why did you want to become an artist?

AR: I loved movies and I loved the art that went into making movies before they were made. I also loved art, but I didn't know you could have images in the genre that I was interested in until I got to into art school and I realized you could make paintings about some of these things that I thought could only exist in the movies.

WW: Can you tell me about your show at Sperone Westwater?

AR: My show here is a meditation on some of the issues that I've been interested in for many years, if not decades. Focusing mostly on New York, about New York, except for the four watercolors right in front of us — even though I could argue that this could be the Hudson Harbor and this could be Central Park — about New York and focusing my intention on New York as a geographic site, the Bronx Zoo, and then the Gowanus Canal.

WW: Why did you select the Bronx Zoo as one of your subjects?

AR: The Bronx Zoo is a place that I went as a kid and as a precious library or arc — I have such mixed feelings — because there will be no place in the world for these creatures and I find that heartbreaking every time I look at it, so I wanted to make a painting about that type of recognition.

WW: Was it that *New York Times* article about the dolphin dying that made you want to create the scene Gowanus?

AR: I was in my studio and I heard on NPR that the dolphin wandered into the Gowanus Canal and I ran to the computer to see, and sure enough, there were pictures of it gasping for breath as it stuck its nose out, and I thought that is just the most depressing thing in the world. I wonder what else died in there, and that's sort of what that composite character is about.

WW: Tell me about the composite character.

AR: There's a long tradition in Indian art of composite characters — tigers that make up an elephant, or Indian miniatures, and I looked at lot of those types of images when I was working on the *Life of Pi*. I thought it would be the perfect thing to do for the painting, to do not the exotic, but just the most mundane, typical animals that used to live in this area and make a catfish out of them.

WW: Can you explain your process when creating the scenes for *Life of Pi*? Did you read the book, and then do drawings?

AR: I read the book first before I even met with Ang, and then I read the script. I would do black drawings in my studio with white or light colored gouache, and I'd do thumbnails. I'd go up to the office on 27th Street and we'd put them on the floor, and I'd tell them what I thought should happen. He would say, "I like this, I'm not so interested in this, why don't you develop this one." And I'd go back to my studio and get very excited, make like too much work, and come back with three versions, and then he'd say, "I didn't think of this, or let's talk about this."

WW: How do you envision the future?

AR: I think *Elysium* is a lot what it's going to be like, just a giant slum with people scrounging for resources. There will be animals here and there, but it will basically be all the shit you see in the subway.

WW: Why do you think it's important to pay attention to these issues?

AR: One of the great things about being an artist is that you can deal with stuff without having to get approval from corporate America. I'm interested in the underdog, the things that aren't going to get attention and those things, they make some people nervous. They make people nervous. Pollution. Extinction — all that stuff.

WW: What do you suggest the public at large do?

AR: We live in a world where you vote with your pocketbook about what you want to be supportive to, so do some homework and try to understand who you patronize and what you're supporting when you buy something.

Buhmann, Stephanie. “Buhmann on Art.” *Chelsea Now*, 25 September – 8 October 2013, p. 12.

CHELSEA: ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Buhmann on Art

Surreal Bronx, Staten Island nostalgia, street culture & unfamiliar states

Image courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York

Alexis Rockman's "Bronx Zoo" (2012-2013, oil on wood). 84 x 168 inches (213,4 x 427 cm) overall. On view at Sperone Westwater, through Nov. 2.

BY STEPHANIE BUHMANN

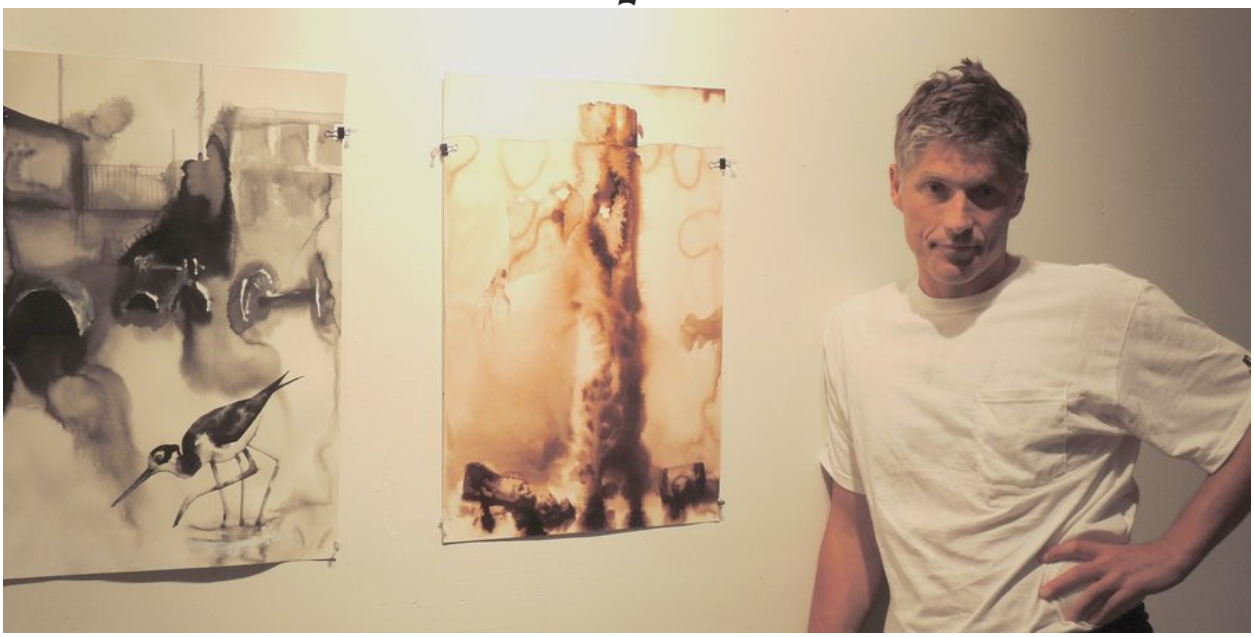
ALEXIS ROCKMAN: RUBICON

For almost three decades, Rockman has depicted a darkly surreal vision of the collision between civilization and nature. His new paintings and watercolors continue to draw on apocalyptic scenarios while remaining rich in meticulous scientific detail. The exhibition features two epic paintings thematically focused on New York City, where the artist was born in 1962 and has lived ever since. One of these works depicts an anarchistic scene amid the imagined ruins of the Bronx Zoo, which was founded in 1899.

Through Nov. 2, at Sperone Westwater (257 Bowery, btw. Stanton & Houston Sts.). Hours: Tues.-Sat., 10am-6pm. Call 212-999-7337 or visit speronewestwater.com.

Corbett, Rachel. "Painter Alexis Rockman on His Dire Eco-Dystopian Visions." *www.artspace.com (Artspace)*, 10 September 2013.

Artspace



Alexis Rockman with new drawings for his upcoming show at Sperone Westwater

Alexis Rockman is a painter of eco-dystopias, no-man's lands, and other wild vistas that have been beaten down and broken open. Employing an amalgam of traditional Color Field and Hudson River School painting techniques, Rockman tenderly renders—and simultaneously ravages—lush landscapes with the markings of mankind's destructive footprint, including occasional appearances by deformed fish, genetically-modified crops, and rat infestations.

On September 17, Rockman will debut "Rubicon" at Sperone Westwater, a new series of watercolors and two monumental paintings, one of a radioactive cesspool modeled after Brooklyn's Gowanus Canal, and one a bloody tableau of animal anarchy at the Bronx Zoo. Later this month, another Rockman exhibition will open at The Drawing Center, on September 27, to showcase the watercolors that director Ang Lee used as the visual inspiration for his 2012 film *Life of Pi*.

Knowing that you're a native New Yorker with a long-standing interest in environmental conservation, I'm almost surprised it took you this long to take on the Gowanus Canal, which, given its Superfund status as a toxic waste zone, seems like a natural subject for you.

Well, sometimes you have to go far and wide to come home. I love the idea that the places that are right on your doorstep often don't get that much attention. I don't think people really consider the Gowanus Canal, that it's a place of wonder, a place of interest. I've always been attracted to the things that are doing less-than-well, and the Gowanus is the benchmark of how low you can go. It's ground zero for its notoriousness. You can say "Gowanus" and that means Superfund—even the word sounds toxic.

Rockman's painting, "Gowanus," 2013, about to go on view at Sperone Westwater

Why did you choose to pair these two sites—the Gowanus Canal and the Bronx Zoo—in the Sperone Westwater show?

These two places were really resonant to me as a kid. They are places of abject negligence and intense care. I have mixed feelings about the zoo. I would go there with a sense of wonder, but I was also so worried about what would happen to the animals in the future because I knew that humans were a terrible force. I grew up thinking about scenarios like *Soylent Green* and *Planet of the Apes*.

There's a very worrisome beast lurking at the bottom of the canal in the Gowanus painting.

It's a composite creature made out of animals that used to live in the canal. It's sort of the ghost of the Gowanus Canal in the shape of a catfish. When I worked on *Life of Pi* I became obsessed with composite creatures and this whole tradition in Indian miniature paintings of a big creature made out of little creatures. Here the animal is comprised of a diamondback terrapin, a black bear, a manatee, an American turkey, a red fox, a harbor seal, and so on. The painting was really inspired by that dolphin that swam into the canal last year and proceeded to die. I was sad, and then thought, "How many things have died there over the years?"

You often consult with biologists, climatologists, and other scientists in order to accurately represent realistic ecological scenarios. What has their response to your work been like?

What do they get out of it? They're very generous and I'm thrilled that they give me the time of day. I can't answer for them, but my guess is that they get a lot of pleasure out of seeing someone they have an affinity to—me—tell a story about what they love and care about that can be blunt and not necessarily be in the language of scientific text. They have to use the language of science; I can use the language of metaphor and I can be very blunt and subjective and say something like, "the future of conservation is bleak and fucked up." There's no scientist who studies conservation who doesn't feel that way, but they can't say so for many reasons. So I can say things that they can't really get away with in public.

Studies for the Gowanus painting

Did you speak with any scientists for this new series?

John Waldman, a professor who wrote a wonderful book called *Heartbeats in the Muck*, which is kind of my bible, and Chris Bowser, who works at Cornell. These guys are so generous and fun and they said, "All roads lead to the Gowanus."

Do you consider yourself an activist?

Absolutely. But it's an interesting challenge to be alone in a room and be an activist. But I'd like to see things change and I'd like to make paintings that have some sort of momentum. I try.

It seems like human beings have been disappearing from your work. Have you noticed this?

People are so pervasive and these are such human-induced landscapes that it seemed redundant. What would humans be doing that would make it interesting?

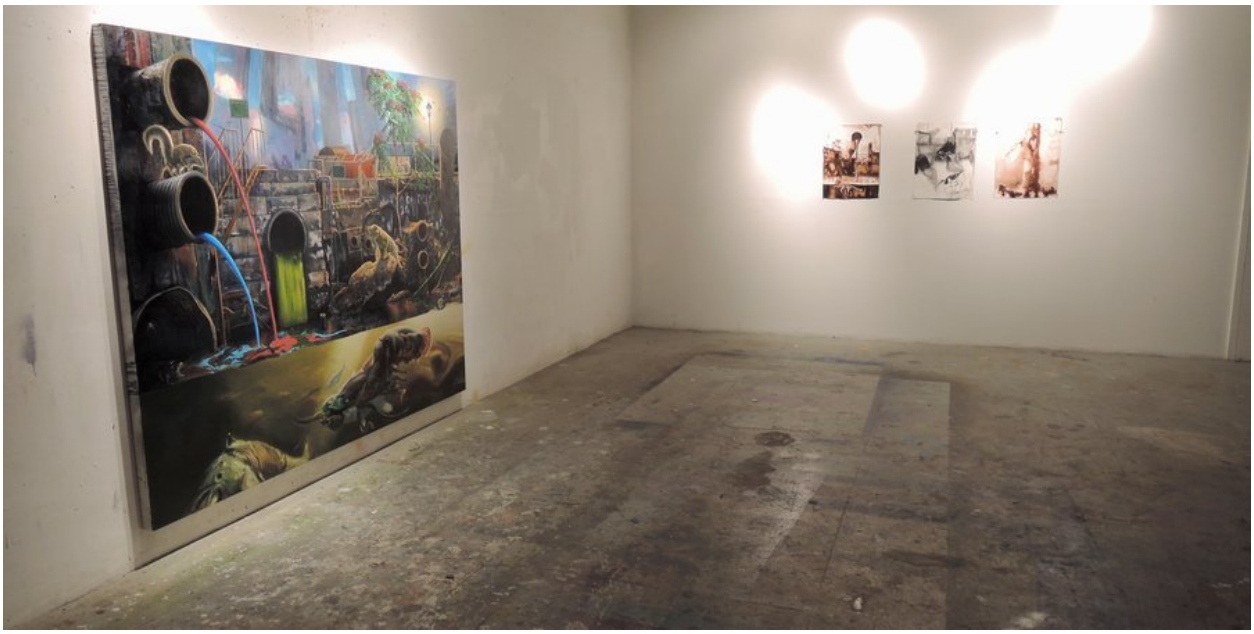
Did you have an interest in animation or digital design before you began working on *Life of Pi*? Is that something you would pursue again?

When I was a kid I wanted to do animation. But being a painter is such an fantastic job. If you know the world of dealing with corporate money, it's so traumatizing. There's huge payoff with a project like this, but the struggle to make it is so enormous. I don't want the headache or responsibility of being the director. I'm so thrilled to be in a room alone every day.

Some might see traces of Dalí or Bosch in your work. Who do you consider your influences?

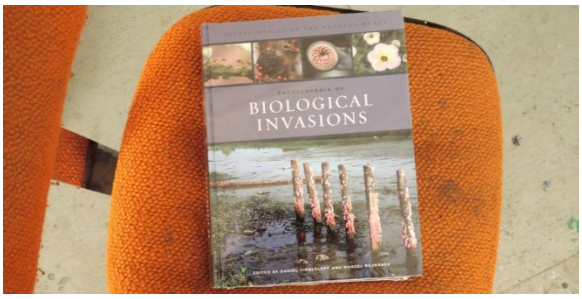
Everything. I mean, Goya, Mark Dion, who has been one of my best friends for years. Bosch and Dalí are both artists I love, but they have profoundly different takes on the world than I do, other than that the work is pretty psychedelic looking. Bosch had this idea about religion, and so his paintings are cautionary tales

of medievalist ideas of the future and the afterlife. And the world is a weird and frightening place in my work and Dalí's, but mine is based on ideas of science. It doesn't just privilege the subjective. It uses subjectivity informed by history to create this hybrid language. I want it to be almost impossible to look at and impossible not to look at.



A view of Rockman's Tribeca studio

But artists like Dalí have faced heightened criticism in the decades since abstraction took hold. Do you feel any of that anti-realist pressure on your work?



Rockman's latest reading

I think Dalí suffered from a Warholian thing, from selling himself short as a celebrity late in life. He made a lot of terrible, uneven work over the years and acted silly. I guess that catches up with him, but I think Dalí is as great a painter as any artist. I mean, Renoir and Chagall? What the hell have they done compared to Dalí? Chagall is a bum as far as I'm concerned. As far as as the Clement Greenberg idea of modernism goes, I dealt with that hangover in the 1980s. I think the idea for me to be radical was to paint the damn thing and make it look like a Dutch still life. That was a radical move when I was in school. That was a point of shame for most artists, and I was like, "Fuck you, I'm going to make every glistening highlight on that dragonfly's wing kick ass.' I want that mosquito to give you the creeps, viscerally.

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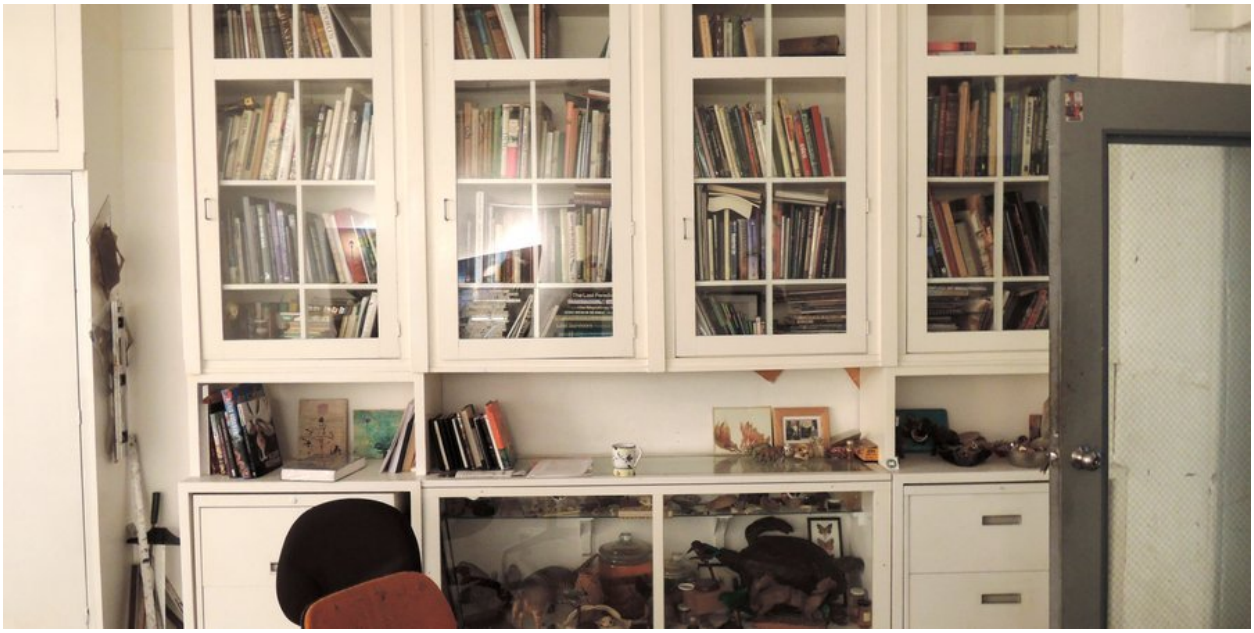
Some of the creatures living in the studio



The studio bookshelf

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Rockman with his painting “Bronx Zoo,” 2013, at Sperone Westwater

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Tan, Dion, and Scott Indrisek. “Video: Alexis Rockman Paints a Rubicon of Nature.”
www.blouinartinfo.com (Blouin Artinfo), 19 August 2013.

BLOUIN ARTINFO

As a child growing up In New York City, Alexis Rockman was fascinated with nature. His frequent trips to the American Museum of Natural History with his mother Diana Wall, an anthropology professor, further spurred his curiosity for the natural sciences. While nature is Rockman’s muse, it’s the labyrinth of civilization and impacts of climate change that galvanize the left-handed artist to conceive his lush apocalyptic paintings.

“I come from a tradition of activism,” said Rockman. “And the idea that art can make a difference in terms of political change.”

Rockman invited Blouin ARTINFO into his TriBeCa Studio to give a preview of new paintings in his upcoming exhibition “Rubicon” and other works inspired by his collaboration with director Ang Lee in “Life of Pi.”

“Rubicon” opens September 17th at Sperone Westwater. Concurrently with the exhibition, The Drawing Center New York will show “Drawings from Life of Pi” from September 23rd.

You can read more about Rockman in Studio Checks from our September issue of Modern Painters. Watch the video interview here: http://www.blouinartinfo.com/rockman

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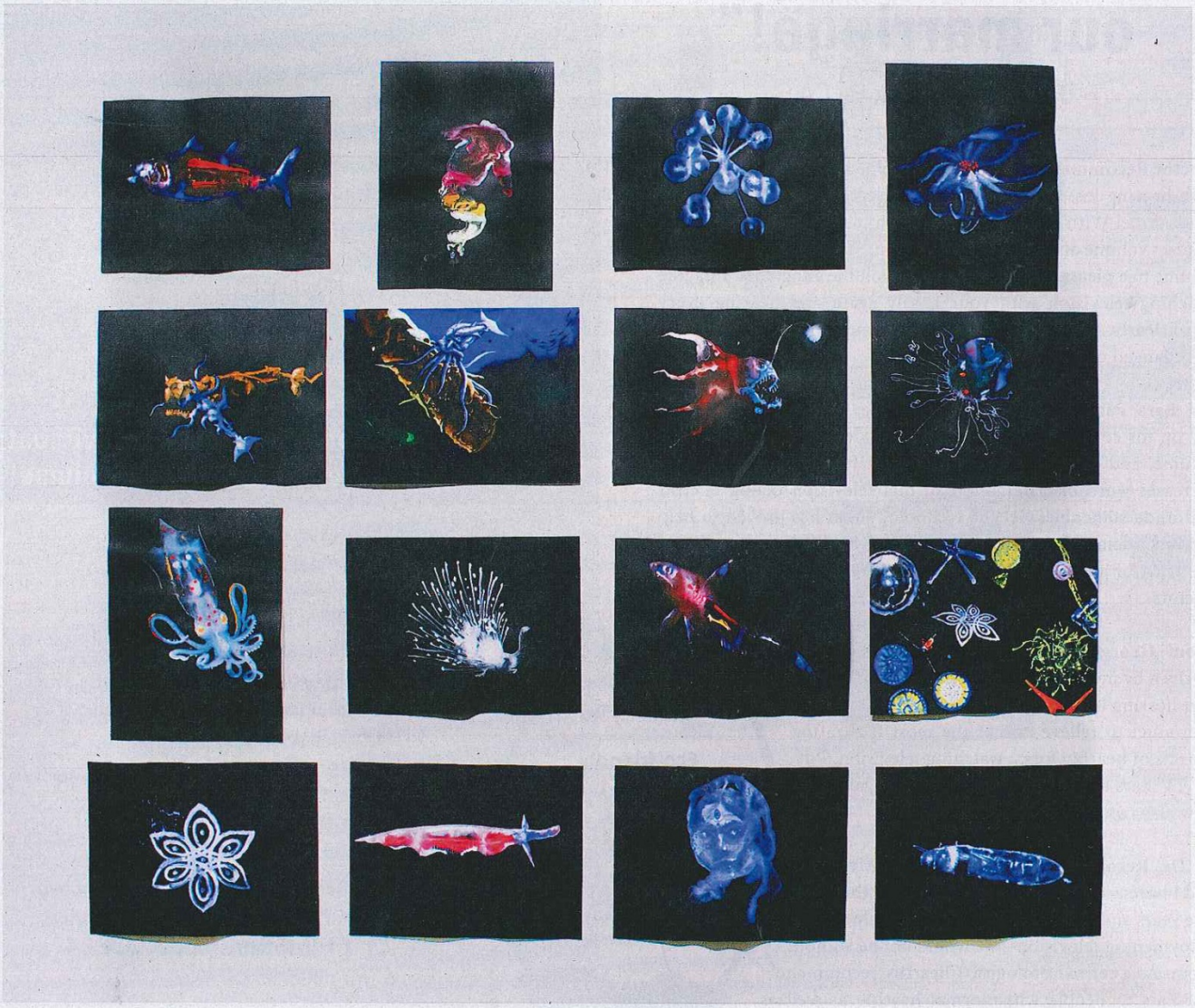

Zoo Station

An artist's mind-bending work inspires dreamlike imagery in 'Life of Pi.'

For nearly three decades, Alexis Rockman has been painting what he calls "natural-history psychedelia" — dinosaurlike descendants of rabbits and roosters; a chimera of an alligator, a pigeon and a rat thrashing in a sewer (or depending on how you look at it, a flooded subway tunnel). In 2009, the director Ang Lee asked Rockman to produce visual inspiration for his movie "Life of Pi" (released Nov. 21), based on Yann Martel's novel about a boy's spiritual journey adrift at sea in a boat with a tiger. Knowing that the film would rely heavily on digital imaging, the filmmakers wanted a human hand to help visualize some of the "freaky biological fantasies" living in the water where the story takes place.

Rockman's artwork for the film, the product of hundreds of sketches, can be seen above in the form of real and imagined aquatic species. He used gouache on black paper, which he had never done before. The art inspired a scene in the movie called "Tiger Vision," a nonverbal, hallucinatory trip that serves as an apparent mind meld between the protagonist, Pi, and the tiger. (Rockman says it's akin to "what 'Star Gate' was to '2001.'")

Rockman, whose art has appeared at the Brooklyn Museum and the Smithsonian, draws on his childhood fascination with the American Museum of Natural History, where his mother worked. Much of his artwork for "Life of Pi" will be on display at the Drawing Center in SoHo in September 2013. MAYA LAU

PHOTOGRAPH BY GABRIELLE PLUCKNETTE

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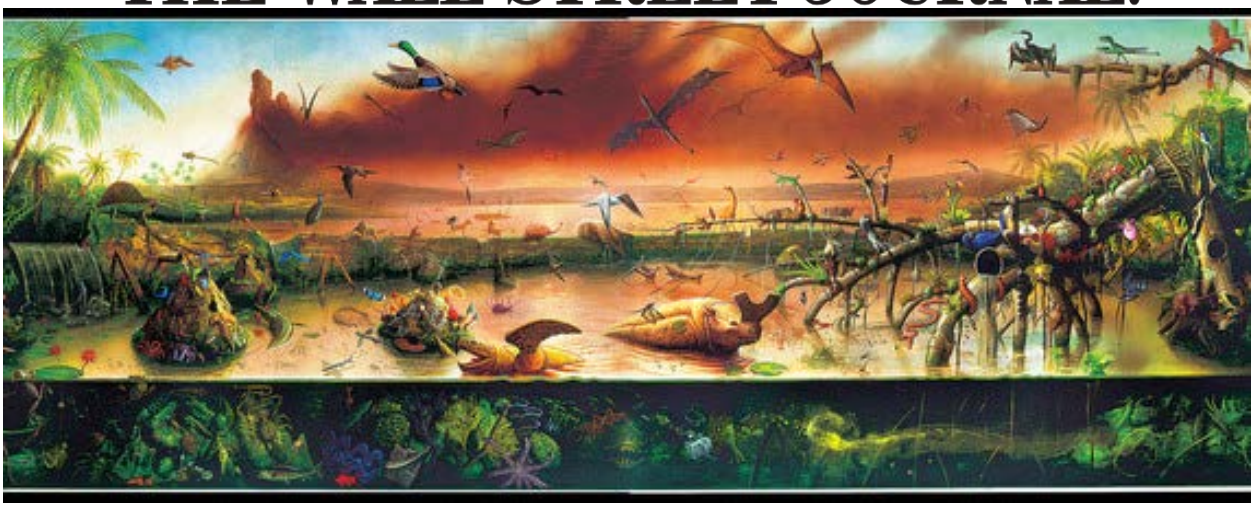

'Evolution' (1992), by Alexis Rockman. George R. Stroemple Collection/Alexis Rockman

The art of illustration is a respected genre arising most famously from fiction—Sir John Tenniel's "Alice in Wonderland," for instance—and science, as in John James Audubon's "Birds of North America."

Art that is illustrative is another matter. Purists distrust it because, they say, even the most realistic, topical or narrative artwork must be grounded in aesthetics, not facts, which can deaden the transcendence at the core of great art. This schism keeps the work of Norman Rockwell, Maxfield Parrish and even Salvador Dalí in art-world limbo. You might as well pick up a magazine or look at a photograph, say the detractors. Chill out and open up to the artistry of depiction, say the revisionists.

The work of Manhattan-based painter Alexis Rockman, 49, hovers somewhere between these extremes. In the mid-1980s, Mr. Rockman made his gallery debut with quirky, washy paintings of creature life that some mistook for Conceptual Art but, more accurately, reflected the art world's embrace of image-based painting and storytelling. Astutely aware of nature displays, with which he grew up visiting New York's American Museum of Natural History, Mr. Rockman also turned to 19th-century landscapes, sci-fi movies and vernacular culture for inspiration while honing his skills in the studio. His best-known works are sweeping narratives in tune with the ecological movement.

A major Rockman retrospective at the Wexner Center for the Arts features nearly 40 paintings and works on paper that the artist has created since 1986. "Alexis Rockman: A Fable for Tomorrow" was organized and first presented last fall by the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington. Slightly condensed for the Columbus showing, it brings into even sharper focus Mr. Rockman's strengths, and weaknesses, as an artist whose ambition is to be illustrational, personally expressive and didactic at the same time—a tall order.

The earliest paintings on wood (Mr. Rockman's preference to canvas) look great in the hyperdramatic, elongated galleries of the Wexner. "Amphibian Evolution" (1986), based on a textbook diagram, features

branches, roots and Botero-fat frogs and crocodiles above and below a waterline in a bold, free-form composition of controlled chaos that feels very art-world contemporary.

On the other hand, Mr. Rockman's large-scale "Evolution" (1992) is as old-fashioned looking as the museum-dinosaur murals that inspired it. It's also crazy fun. This luminously rendered, 8-foot-by-24-foot tropical panorama is jam-packed with meticulously rendered details and fanciful touches. For starters, the smoking volcano in the background is a near-perfect replication of "Cotopaxi," an expedition-based Latin American painting completed in 1862 by Hudson River master Frederic Edwin Church. The species depicted number 214—among them a Mallard duck and Holstein cow, plus a "Rat-Bat Spider" and three-eyed "Garbage Freak," hybrids as bizarre as Hieronymus Bosch's medieval inventions. A bulbous-brained, almond-eyed sci-fi humanoid with male and female attributes surveys the teeming scene. Is this where humanity is headed?

In 1994, Mr. Rockman spent several months in Guyana, vowing to paint only what he saw. "Drainage Ditch: Georgetown" (1995) is a cross-section of that city's eccentric ecology, including a filthy-looking underwater habitat full of discarded tires and dog-faced fish, one with newborns—gross but poignant. His smaller insect studies, while witty, have a wince-inducing technical quality. But "Bromeliad: Kaieteur Falls" (1994), a cutaway view of the red and green plant (plus curious frogs and worms) with an idyllic rain forest behind, is gloriously poetic.

Humans are largely unrepresented in this exhibition, but our species becomes an irrefutable presence in "The Farm" (2001), a large painting so vivid and satirical you can't help but love it. This not-so-subtle slam at the dangers of genetic engineering depicts a Grant-Wood-Iowa country-fair display of square tomatoes, a multiteated cow and other oddities in an unmodified soybean field, plus a pathetically overbred Chinese Crested dog, presented on an oval insert like a blue-ribbon prize.

Even more compelling is the cutaway, 3-D miniature diorama "Golf Course" (1997). Under several layers of resin, an actual putter blade taps a golf ball into a cup. Artificial turf and a painted fairway and country club complete the illusion, but below, instead of dirt, is actual trash (cans, bones, plastic bottles, wrappers, etc.) from which emerges a yellow-eyed cartoon monster eating someone's finger. Yikes!

"Manifest Destiny" (2003-4) is a grandiose shocker, a mural-scaled depiction of Brooklyn in ruins, under water, several centuries hence. This well-researched, humid-seeming, yellowish tableau of crumbling architecture, broken systems and surviving organisms deliberately invokes the final, ravaged landscape of Thomas Cole's "Course of Empire" (1836). The Brooklyn Bridge is as picturesque as any Romantic ruin but also right out of a postapocalyptic sci-fi film. One also thinks of National Geographic illustrations of lost cultures, the Titanic videos, and global-warming flood maps. It's pretty eerie.

But is this painting all gloom-and-doom? Not at all. It is an aquarium of catfish, sharks, seals, a giant jellyfish and a notorious northern snakehead (which nibbles on a swimming rat), an aviary for pelicans and gulls, and a garden sprouting healthy vegetation above and below water. It's all very theatrical and actually rather soothing. In its own way, this is edgy art.

Mr. Rockman's most recent large-scale opus, "South" (2008), seems dull by comparison. Recounting his sojourn to the Antarctic, the work pays homage to a Church painting of 1861 and marks a departure for the artist, who moves into a more experimental, improvisational mode. Mammoth icebergs are rendered with a palette knife, the polar weather is in gray washes, and drips and drops may—or may not—indicate ice-

cap melting. But the 30-foot-wide, seven-paneled work on paper is too big, chopped up, and thematically vague to stir the soul.

Wherever he is headed artistically, Mr. Rockman will remain a passionate illustrator of nature. He interprets current dangers to the natural world and refuses to let us look the other way, prodding us—sometimes gently, sometimes not—to pay attention to their perils. Some people might find this exhibition depressing, but if you like bravado, over-the-top fantasy and God's cosmos, you'll come out smiling. It's a fable, after all. Who cares whether it's art or illustration?

Correction: An earlier version of this story said that Alexis Rockman was based in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Mr. Lawrence is an artist and writer in Washington.

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King, Elaine A. “Critic, Elaine King, Reviews Exhibition by Contemporary Painter at Smithsonian American Art Museum.” *www.artesmagazine.com (Artes Magazine)*, 16 March 2011.

ARTES MAGAZINE

Alexis Rockman, *Airport* (1997). Envirotex, digitized photograph, vacuum-filled Styrofoam with aluminum finish, Plasticene, oil paint and Laughing Gull specimen on wood. Collection Rachel and Jean Pierre Lehmann. All images pictured in this article ©Alexis Rockman. Photos courtesy of the artist.

The artist in front of ‘South’ (2008) at the Smithsonian exhibit; oil on gessoed paper. Collection: Pappas family, Boston.

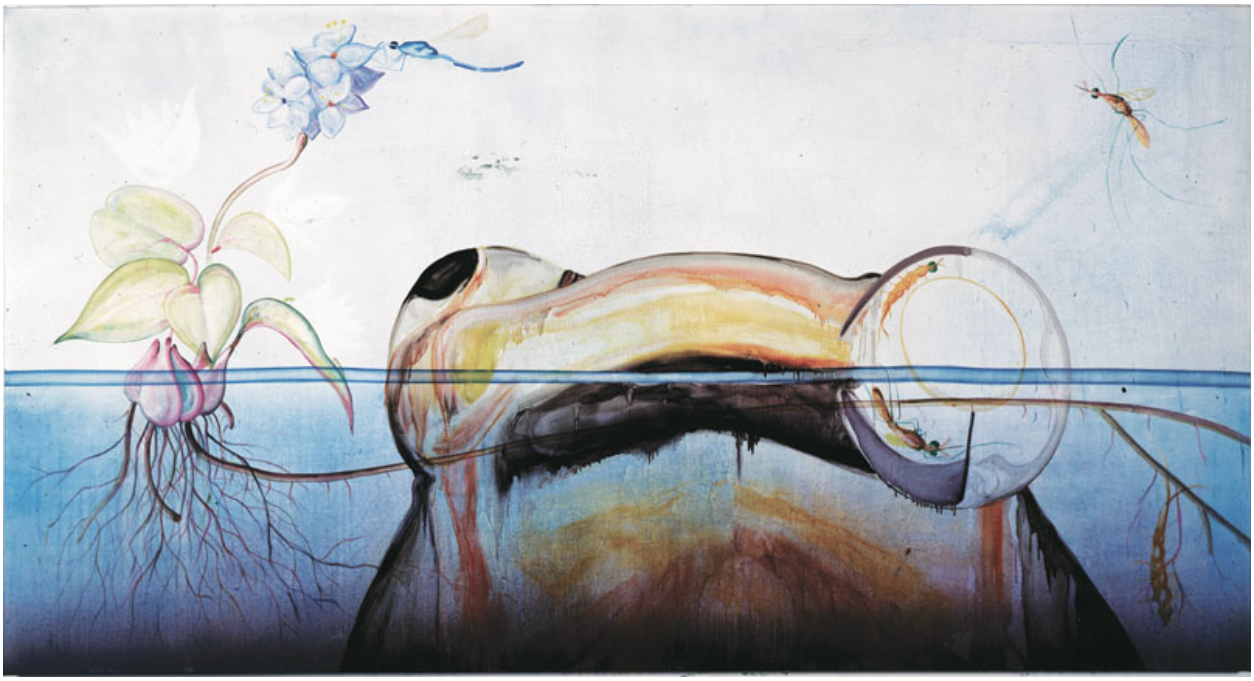
In our complex era of sophisticated technology, immediate gratification and the virtual experience of nature on the Internet or television, it is not easy to establish what ‘nature’ is anymore. Today artists in England, Germany, Central Europe and the United States, are increasingly responding to a natural world plagued with environmental problems. Key issues in their work, since the close of the 20th century, include their responses to news about climatic disaster, the extinction of threatened species, the depletion of natural resources and unrestrained squander.

For nearly twenty-five years Alexis Rockman has been an artistic leader in scrutinizing the natural world through his symbolic paintings that represent wary moments in human and natural history, from the Industrial Revolution to this digital age of climate change. His first one-man retrospective titled, *Alexis Rockman: A Fable for Tomorrow* at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. until May, testifies to his exacting, spectacular representation, illuminating this artist’s love of nature, science-fiction and popular culture. Dr. Elizabeth Broun, the Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, has expressed that “Alexis Rockman’s cross-disciplinary approach is well suited to the Smithsonian’s long tradition of embracing science and art as complementary ways of understanding our world.”

Joanna Marsh, The James Dicke Curator of Contemporary Art at SAAM is organizer of this extensive survey and its fully- illustrated catalogue. [1] Throughout she demonstrates her acute grasp of Rockman’s work by the selection of his multifaceted work in this show and her writing. The opening chapter from Rachel Carson’s noteworthy book, *Silent Spring*, 1962, in which the author joins two unsuited literary genres—mythic narrative and factual reportage, inspired the title of the exhibition…

Rockman’s artistic evolution unfolds from his early works in the mid-1980s to the present in the progression of the exhibit’s 47 paintings and works on paper. Viewers are brought nose to nose with a future that is at once surreal and yet disconcertingly familiar. Painted exquisitely in lush colors are snails, insects, rodents,

phantasmagorical creatures, mutant animals, flooded urban sites and alternative environments, either sterilized by science or perpetually altered due to pollution that are metaphorically objectified by their pictorial placement in bizarre, yet sensuous, environments. Marsh expressed that Rockman's work "hovers between the extremes of creation and destruction." At times all of this makes for some uncomfortable viewing, notwithstanding the appeal of this weird and wonderful imagery. According to Rockman, "In collaboration with members of the scientific community, I focus on the geological future after the effects of global warming. In so doing, I am taking the impossibly abstract notion of global climate change and applying it to familiar territory, to convey the profound effect that humans are having on the environment."



Pond's Edge (1986), oil and acrylic on canvas. Rubell Family Collection, Miami.

To create his forward-looking landscapes, Alexis Rockman consults with biologists, zoologists, and paleontologists having done field work in locations as remote as the rainforests in Guyana. He is a former columnist and illustrator for *Natural History* magazine, and draws upon extensive scientific research, including consultations with NASA climatologists, to create his theatrically arresting work. He has also worked directly with architect Diane Lewis, who produced comprehensive architectural renderings of sections of Brooklyn. Collectively, these all inform his work, as do art historical references from Thomas Cole to Robert Smithson.

This survey affords viewers not only the strength of Rockman's oeuvre and his absorption with extraordinary detail, but also his observations of the negative consequences of industrial and technological progress, fuelled by products of multinational conglomerates and their lack of compassion for the environment. Rockman explains, "My position is one of ambivalence, as the horse is already out of the barn so to speak; it is not biotechnology that is the problem, but corporate America, globalism, or colonialism. The implications of using technology are far more devastating because of the unknowable effects. This is something that is very disturbing and visually compelling to me."

Simultaneously, the results of Rockman's meticulous work invokes a type of critical poetry as well as provocation. Though he has traveled to Guyana, Tasmania, Brazil, Madagascar and Antarctica to conduct research, he nonetheless generates the paintings in his studio based on his photographs– some altered with computer software– as well as images harvested from the Internet. A strange, kindred relationship can be

drawn between Rockman and the painter Henri Rousseau, whose inspiration came from illustrated books and the botanical gardens of Paris, as well as tableaux of taxidermied wild animals.

Rockman's art is equally striking and alarming—it expresses deep concerns about our world's delicate ecosystems and the conflict between nature and culture. The visitor must slow down so as to absorb and reflect on the content of each compelling, fantastic composition. Even so, the exhibition's thematic arrangement enhances the progression of the artist's ongoing examination of nature. The show's layout coincides with the artist's method of working—his compositions and subjects evolve within each particular series, such as Artificial Selections, Biosphere, Guyana and American Icons. Additionally, the scale of the exhibit's galleries is inviting, affording visitors a chance to assimilate at their own pace the otherworldly juxtapositions of animal and plant life within the relics of human construction and devastation. The appeal of this journey increases with brief and intelligent wall cards, disclosing succinct information about each section of the exhibition.

One enters the exhibition through a gallery filled with early works from the 1980s. *Pond's Edge* (1986) and *Balance of Terror* (1988) depict the artist's initial exploration into the realm of natural history and alerts the viewer to the imminence of an unusual visual voyage. The latter is a seminal piece in Rockman's artistic evolution–a mixture of fantasy and scientific fact and a blend of abstraction and realism. All fuse in this yellow-green, glowing, uncanny, enigmatic image in which the interior of a translucent apple reveals a worm and is placed in a mysterious spatial environment.

Several other notable pieces surface in the Biosphere series, based on Douglas Trumbull's eco-thriller, *Silent Running*. Especially remarkable is, *Biosphere Hydrographer's Canyon* (1994), depicting a colorful, complex constellation filled by an infinite array of aquatic organisms, co-existing and freely floating in a luminous galaxy. *Golf-Course* (1997) is perhaps the most bizarre work, comprised of envirotex, digitized photographs, and scavenged objects on wood. In the upper portion we see a manicured golf course and 'perfect' landscape; below this lush surface however, exists not only a secret landfill of lost golf balls, cigarette butts and pizza, but also a monster lurking below with half- eaten human body parts littering its lair. A quirky balance between humor and moderation is achieved throughout this absurd composition.

Balance of Terror (1988), o/c. Coll: James and Abigail Rich.

Hollywood at Night (2006), oil/wood. Courtesy Mr. & Mrs. Henry P. Davis.

Hieronymus Bosch (detail), *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1480-90 or 1503-04) Coll: Museo del Prado, Madrid

Evolution (1992), o/wood. Coll: George R. Stroemple.

Hollywood at Night (2006), an exceptional image, is one of the show's darker paintings not only in its moody blue-black night tone, but also in its content. Here again, Rockman defers to film in depicting this iconic location, where bling and celebrity fall victim to environmental collapse. He reduces the eminent California hillside landmark to a vanished civilization where Los Angeles is barely distinguishable in the distance and a decaying 'Hollywood' sign appears against a spectacular sunset. The city's lights and power are extinguished and only a crescent moon and fireflies sparkle against deteriorating silhouetted structures.

Three densely-painted, large murals anchor this exhibition, mapping out Rockman's creative path, marking pivotal turning points in his artistic journey. Each helps define the painter's trajectory and evoke Bosch's noteworthy triptychs, among his most famous, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Rockman's huge, theatrical, apocalyptic images address issues of global warming, genetic manipulation and environmental destruction in a way that is simultaneously beautiful, disturbing and inexplicably humorous.

Evolution (1992) is Rockman's first mural-sized painting, and is as rooted in pop cinematic methods, as it is in actual prehistory. In this startling panorama, the world is adrift in primordial ooze, threatened by a volcano, populated by half man/half woman creatures cavorting, killing, flying and dying, with more than 200 other real or imagined species of plants, animals, and insects. It features the iconic pop culture images of the face-hugging monster from the film, Alien, among others.

Manifest Destiny (2003-2004), oil and acrylic on wood. Courtesy the artist and Waqas Wajahat, NY.

Originally commissioned by the Brooklyn Museum, *Manifest Destiny* (2004), is a wondrous 8 x 24-foot portrayal of an apocalyptic vision of that borough mostly engulfed by water. In this phantasmagorical mural, one observes that New York metropolis reduced to a vast floodplain, from the Brooklyn Bridge to the Brooklyn Museum, following a sea-level rise because of dramatic global warming. Familiar landmarks are flooded, creating a new geology sustaining a variety of marine plants and animals. Rockman maintains, "Manifest Destiny is concerned with the projected domino effect of the industrial revolution 3000 years into the future. It is as scientifically accurate as possible as I wanted to confront the

Old Dirt Road (2007), oil on gessoed paper. Michael Polsky.

Host and Vector (1996), o/wood. Whitney Museum of American Art, NY; gift of Nye Family.

public with a visual display of the repercussions of current trends." He claims that the painting, "came from desperation that people refused to see the reality of climate change."

Two equally stunning, yet disturbing, paintings also created in 2005, are Gateway Arch, in which the famous St. Louis Arch stands as a haunting architectural ruin, and Mount Rushmore, in which former terrain is ocean and the presidential busts of Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt, and Lincoln barely clear the water.

A technique employed in several of his 'weather drawings', including *Old Dirt Road* (2007) and *Cambridgeshire* (2008), becomes central to the huge mural titled, *South* (2008). It is more fluid and lighter than his densely detailed paintings. This change signals a formidable shift — perhaps a return to a simpler abstracted approach, as evident in *Pond's Edge* (1986). Implemented on intensely gessoed sheets of paper, the painted surface is saturated in vividly exploding stains, spills and drips. In these images, as well as in those evolving later, Rockman clearly moves away from his formerly meticulous, detailed method.

South (2008), a seven-panel piece on paper and over 30 feet long, documents the artist's 12-day sea voyage from the tip of South America to the Antarctic Peninsula. Placed in the final gallery of the show, the terrain of this perilous scene is inhospitable and any evidence of life in the Antarctic clings to the edges of the ice and coast. South reveals Rockman's long-term interest in scientific pictorialism—in an interplay between art and science—and alludes to human intervention, providing simultaneous views above and below the water, allowing for his representation of the impossible. Despite the significance of the subject matter, this is the least successful of the three murals—perhaps because of its overt didacticism and clash of abstraction with his earlier styles—yielding a visual distraction.

The viewer must retrace their steps through this disquieting apocalyptic 'Tale of Tomorrow' in order to exit the exhibition. A compelling mix of intensely colored realism, scientific components and environmental apprehension coexist in Rockman's paintings—nothing is genuine except their reference to an impending crisis. None of these images represent actual landscape paintings—instead they act as types of extensions of 19th century dioramas—inanimate still life's that beckon us to inspect their urgent ecological messages. The artist's nightmarish visions appear to inhabit a zone somewhere between art and activism, echoing Al Gore's noted work, *An Inconvenient Truth*. This art privileges imagination over accuracy, portraying what has never been seen, or at least not yet! Ultimately Alexis Rockman's art neither praises or demeans humankind; it merely invites thought, dialogue and reflection.

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McGuigan, Cathleen. "Painter Alexis Rockman Pictures Tomorrow." *www.smithsonianmag.com (Smithsonian Magazine)*, December 2010.

Smithsonian.com

Many works by Alexis Rockman are "a portent of events to come," says curator Joanna Marsh. The artist's 2006 *Hurricane and Sun* suggests menacing weather. (Courtesy Baldwin Gallery, Aspen)

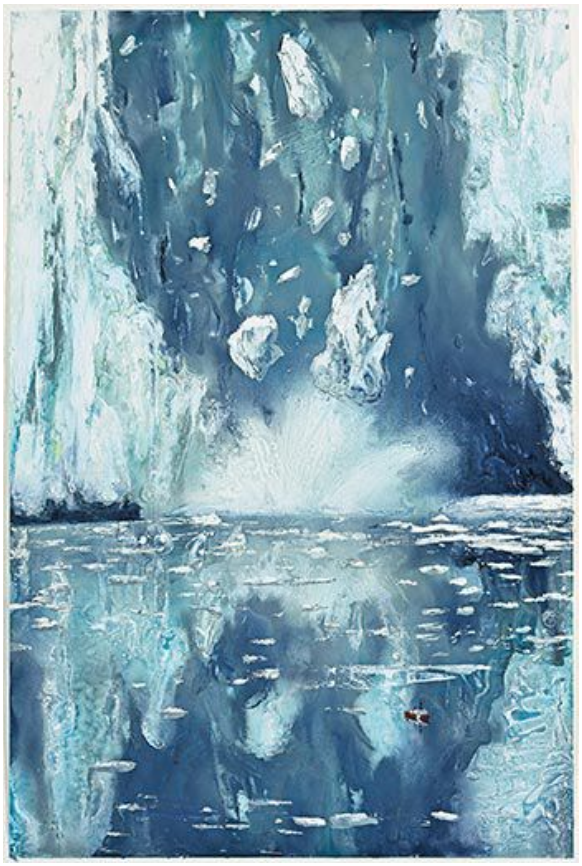
There's trouble ahead in the artist's eerie yet riveting paintings, now the subject of a major exhibition

"I try not to collect things," Alexis Rockman says, standing in front of a glass-front cupboard in his white-walled studio in Lower Manhattan. The cabinet holds dead animals given to him by friends: a mongoose devouring a cobra, stuffed birds, a bat with outstretched wings, an armadillo. There's also a photograph of the artist at age 7, wearing a toothy smile as he holds up an Eastern box turtle. The passions of that little boy, who grew up in New York City haunting the American Museum of Natural History, are deeply embedded in his extravagantly beautiful, disquieting paintings of a post-apocalyptic natural world, for which the artist, now 48, is increasingly well known. If Rockman's early love of flora, fauna and museum dioramas has informed his grown-up work, so, too, has a boyish delight in monsters, sci-fi movies and popular culture.

Artist Alexis Rockman in his New York City studio with his dog Padme. (Landon Nordeman)

Despite its displays of surrealistic wit, his art has long been freighted with a serious message about environmental degradation. "Rockman has been among the very few [artists] trying to understand the deep, mysterious, and crucial cleavage between the human and natural worlds," the environmentalist Bill McKibben wrote.

A Manhattan landmark is partly submerged by rising seas in *Washington Square*, 2004. (Courtesy Alexis Rockman)



Calving Glacier, 2006, evokes the immensity of the world's ice caps and the threat of their melting. (Courtesy Baldwin Gallery, Aspen)

Now the artist is the subject of a major retrospective at the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM). The catalog includes an essay by his friend Thomas Lovejoy, the scientist who first used the term "biological diversity." "His vision is based on a real understanding of what's going on," Lovejoy says of Rockman's paintings. "It's a surrealism that is seriously anchored in reality." The two met in 1998 after Rockman made several paintings to accompany an article on the Amazon basin that Lovejoy wrote for *Natural History* magazine.

"Alexis is an exceptional painter," says Joanna Marsh, the museum's curator of contemporary art, "and his interest in the environment, in natural history and in 19th-century landscape painting resonates with our museum collection and the Smithsonian-wide emphasis on natural science and biodiversity."

Rockman, who is tall and square-jawed, describes his childhood as one devoted less to studying than drawing and basketball, which he still plays. But a concern for the larger world was part of his upbringing by "hippie parents," as he calls them. His mother is an urban archaeologist; his late father was a jazz musician. After a stint at the Rhode Island School of Design, Rockman earned a B.F.A. at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. When he began his career as a painter, in the 1980s, the idea of realism was so far out of fashion he thought of his offbeat landscapes as conceptual art.

Three epic murals that help define the painter's trajectory anchor the SAAM show of 47 artworks. *Evolution* (1992), a bright and riotous primeval landscape, with a nasty swamp and a spewing volcano, is alive with mutant and prehistoric creatures. *Manifest Destiny* (2004) is a strangely gorgeous depiction of Brooklyn, New York, far in the future, when global warming has reduced it to a toxic wetland. And *South* (2008), inspired by a trip to Antarctica, is what the artist calls "a group portrait of ice"; painted with oil on paper, it is looser and lighter than his earlier, densely detailed paintings. He used a similar technique in two of his "weather drawings" in 2006, the eerie *Hurricane and Sun*, with its sickly yellow disk dimming beneath a spiraling gray tempest, and *Calving Glacier*.

A world-class eco-tourist, Rockman has also trekked to Guyana, Tasmania and Madagascar to research his work. But he creates the actual paintings in his studio, based on his photographs, sometimes manipulated with Photoshop software, and images he culls from the Internet. He has consulted scientists and architects, too, who suggest what a horrifically degraded future might look like for paintings such as *Washington Square*.

Rockman's painterly *Loam*, 2008, seems to blend natural history and Abstract Expressionism. (Courtesy Nyehaus)

Recently he finished a big painting called *Mesopotamia* for the new U.S. embassy in Baghdad. It depicts the Tigris-Euphrates ecosystem before civilization. And he is fulfilling his boyhood passion for movies and animation by collaborating on sequences for director Ang Lee's film version of *Life of Pi*. The more distant future seems less certain. "I have no idea what I'm going to be doing, let alone anyone else," he says. "But I hope there's enough energy and time to make art, if civilization still exists."

Manifest Destiny, 2003-2004. (Courtesy Alexis Rockman)

The Hammock, 2000. (Courtesy Alexis Rockman)

The Balance of Terror, 1988. (Courtesy Alexis Rockman)

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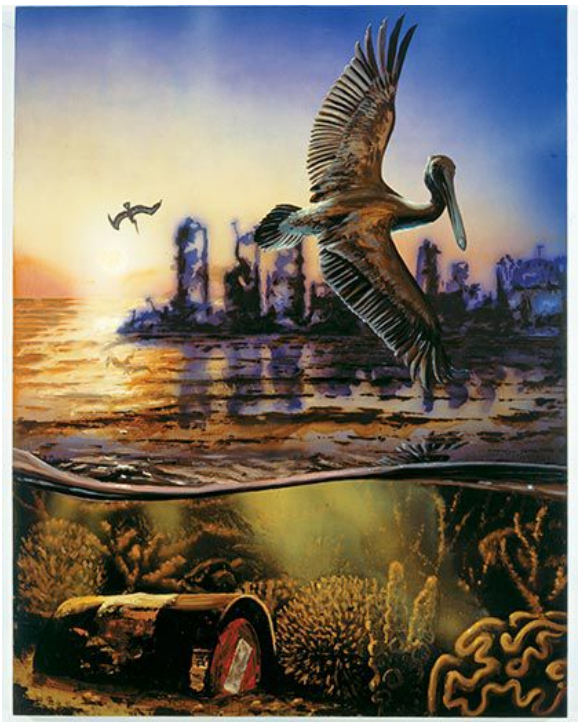
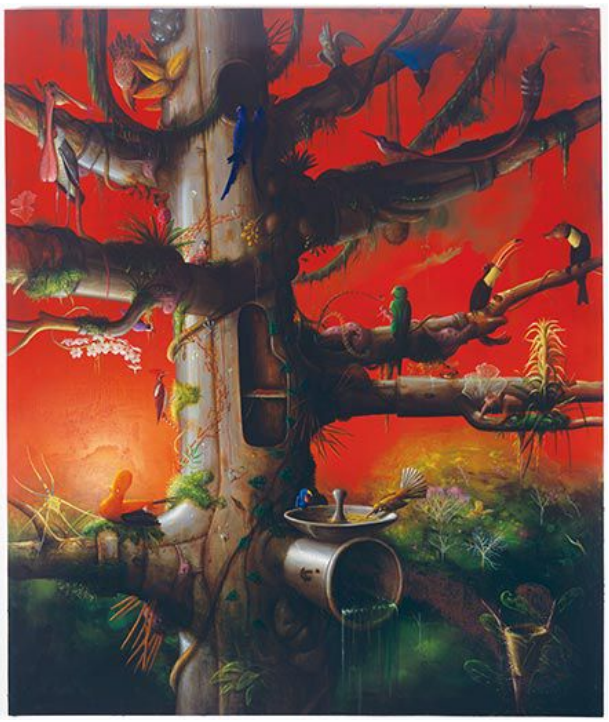
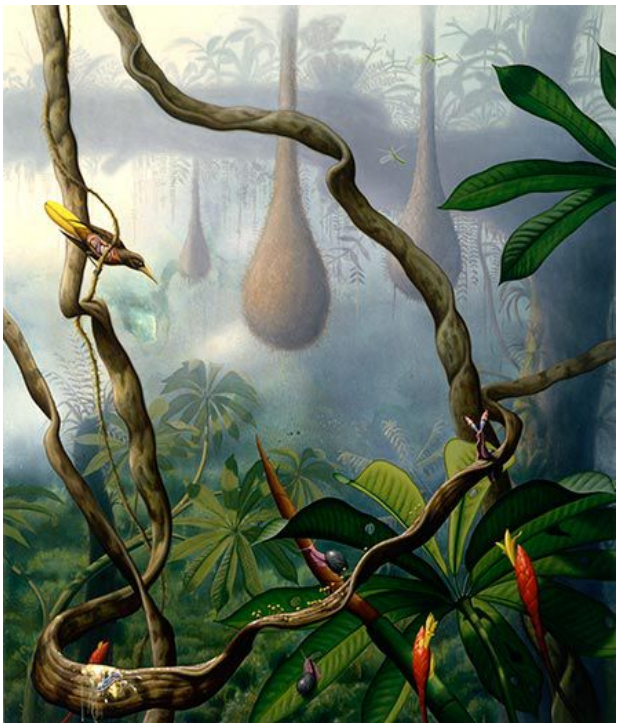


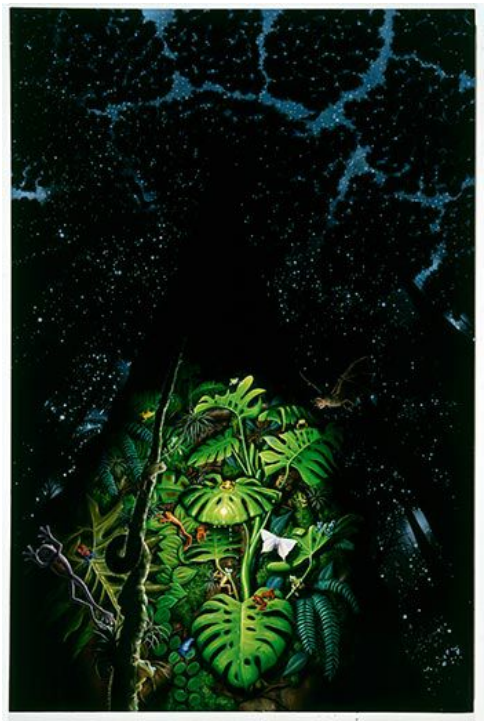
The Pelican, 2006. (Courtesy Alexis Rockman)



Aviary, 1992. (Courtesy Alexis Rockman)



Host and Vector, 1996. (Courtesy Alexis Rockman)



Kapok Tree, 1995. (Courtesy Alexis Rockman)

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Supergrid, 2007. (Courtesy Alexis Rockman)

Hollywood at Night, 2006. (Courtesy Alexis Rockman)

Tranberg, Dan. “In the Studio: Alexis Rockman.” *www.artinamericamagazine.com (Art in America)*, 23 November 2010.

Art in America

Alexis Rockman in his studio working on South, 2008. Photo Kimi Weart. All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Rockman Studio.

For more than 25 years, Alexis Rockman has been making lush figurative paintings depicting dubious moments in human and natural history, from the Industrial Revolution through today’s unfolding eco-disasters. Informed by his entwined passions for art history, activism and the natural sciences, the work reflects a persistent questioning of painting’s possibilities, both as a historically charged narrative medium and as a vehicle for raising social and political awareness.

“Alexis Rockman: A Fable for Tomorrow,” the first major survey to trace Rockman’s career from the mid-1980s to the present, opened last month at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. Among the exhibition’s 47 works are Rockman’s first mural-size painting, *Evolution* (1992), and his most recent, *Manifest Destiny* (2004), commissioned by the Brooklyn Museum of Art, which depicts that New York borough projected 3,000 years into the future, submerged as a consequence of global warming.

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Forest for the Trees, 2008, oil and acrylic on wood, 54 by 96 inches. Courtesy Nyehaus, New York.

Born and raised in Manhattan, Rockman attended the Rhode Island School of Design (1980-82), earned a BFA from New York's School of Visual Arts in 1985 and has since presented over 50 solo exhibitions worldwide. An early career turning point was the 1985 group exhibition "From Organism to Architecture" at the New York Studio School, organized by Ross Bleckner, in which Rockman's work was displayed alongside paintings by Max Beckmann and Cy Twombly.

During his childhood, his mother, Diana diZerega Wall, an anthropology professor at the City College of New York, worked at the American Museum of Natural History. The museum, with its dramatic dioramas and dark, labyrinthine halls, became Rockman's playground. He credits his stepfather—the late Russell Rockman, an Australian-born jazz enthusiast—with teaching him the value of being a specialist, of cultivating one's own territory and of practicing. He also introduced the young Rockman to science-fiction movies.

As a teenager, Rockman considered channeling his interests into a career in the film industry, possibly creating stop-motion animations. He eventually concluded that being a painter would better suit his temperament, but recently an opportunity arose to revisit his childhood aspirations. Rockman received a call from filmmaker Ang Lee, who asked him to create a series of inspirational drawings—watercolors to help visualize the appearance and atmosphere of various scenes—for Lee's film adaptation, currently in production, of Yann Martel's best-selling novel *The Life of Pi*, a fantastical story about the adventures of an Indian zookeeper's precocious son.

I first met Rockman on a visit to his Tribeca studio in March. We talked at length again in late June, as he intermittently worked on a new painting.

DAN TRANBERG: Almost everything written about you mentions your mother and your experience growing up running around the American Museum of Natural History, as that connects to the subject of

East 82nd Street, 2007, oil on wood, 80 by 68 inches.

Mt. Rushmore, 2005, oil on wood, 40 by 32 inches.

your work and its populist flavor. I wonder if you can tell me about your stepfather and his influence on you as an artist.

ALEXIS ROCKMAN: My stepfather was often in his own world, "doing his thing," practicing and listening to the music he loved, which was a very specific kind of bebop. He taught me that it mattered to have your own interests. There was the idea of one's subjectivity, but also the idea that there is such a thing as greatness, and that it's a combination of intellectual rigor and feeling. You have to be in the moment, but you also have to be prepared for the moment. So, repetition is a big part of learning to be a jazz musician, and that was an important lesson for me as an artist. On the other hand, I rebelled against jazz in general because I really didn't relate to it as music. It wasn't that accessible. But I admired his love of it.

DT: The dioramas you saw at the natural history museum have plainly informed your work, providing a model for creating a dramatic and engaging way to communicate to a broad audience. How else did the diorama format inspire you early on in your career?

AR: One of the things about the diorama that always seemed like fertile ground to me, in terms of being an artist, was that it influenced how I saw the world. I also noticed that not many artists regarded the diorama format as an opportunity. Because I felt so close to it, I was really overjoyed to feel that I could stake out that territory as my own in the early '80s.

DT: Because no one else was using the diorama?

AR: No one else was using it for painting. I was very encouraged that Robert Smithson had alluded to the implications of the format in natural history museums in his early writings. He talked specifically about looking at dioramas at the Museum of Natural History, and then going to Central Park and seeing garbage in the pond and imagining that as a primordial landscape. So, I felt an affinity with him even though my work wasn't anything like his.

DT: Were you interested primarily in the subject of natural history, or did you also feel that the diorama offered formal opportunities as a model for your paintings?

AR: It was both. I felt that using it as a format for painting had so much potential—for being about a specific place, but also being a very theatrical type of space that has a foreground, a middle ground and a background, and often a miraculous vision of above and below.

DT: That kind of theatrical space is very apparent in your early work, but in your most recent series of paintings, "Half-Life," the background has gone from a scenic image to a Color Field painting. Tell me about that.

Multi-Waterspout, 2006, oil on gessoed paper, 51 by 74¾ inches. Courtesy Baldwin Gallery, Aspen.

AR: I have always seen the background, or the space behind whatever I'm painting in the foreground, as a piece of history. You could see it as a diorama background or just the wall behind the object, but I've never really believed it as space. It's always a placeholder. That's why the background in my paintings can appear to be a Hudson River School painting, a Color Field painting or a even a photographic blur.

DT: In your early work, there seems to be a more direct connection between the imagery you're presenting and what we typically see in dioramas. For example, the distant background will often clearly appear to be the sky beyond a scenic terrain. When you put a Color Field painting in the background, doesn't the implication change for the audience, or for the kind of conversation you're encouraging?

AR: No, it's just that the background is a placeholder for a different history, a different place or a different geography. Color Field painting is a post-WWII American idea. Looking back even further, it's a type of space that became possible only after the Industrial Revolution. From my perspective, it's about toxic by-products, and things like the development of acrylic paint, which first became commercially available in the 1950s but arose from wartime technology. When acrylic paint first came out, it quite literally was toxic. It killed people. So for me, Morris Louis is the toxic sublime. Color Field painting represents technology as opposed to retinal vision. I never really thought of the scenic backgrounds as space—they're always history.

DT: What happens when the viewer has absolutely no idea who Morris Louis is?

AR: I think, whether you know who Morris Louis is or not, you can still get the sense that it's a trippy, psychedelic, hallucinatory space. I'm interested in the idea that children and the non-art-going public will be able to understand that regardless of their education. When you're having a show at a place like the Smithsonian, you understand that at least part of the audience is outside of the art world. I think, because of my reaction to my stepfather's elitism, and because I couldn't relate to jazz, I've always felt that I don't want to do that to, or be that for, other people. So if you don't know anything about Color Field painting, that's fine. You can see those backgrounds as toxic spills.

DT: A lot of writers tend to regard your work as illustrating an environmental position. How do you feel about that?

AR: It's a mixed blessing. There are times when I feel it's a ghetto, but it's part of the baggage that comes with being direct. That's the history of activism. You have to be blunt.

DT: When things like the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico are happening in the world, it's hard not to make a connection with your images.

AR: That's just one piece of the puzzle. There are versions of that happening in dozens of places all over the world right now, and there's such a long history of this stuff. It's human history. It's been the story ever since humans crawled up and jogged out of central Africa.

DT: Still, almost all of your paintings clearly are saying "take a look at this," whether it's genetic modification, as in your painting The Farm [2000], or global warming, as in Manifest Destiny. So, by spotlighting those issues, your paintings do, in a sense, serve the cause of alerting the public.

AR: Right, and I accept that to a certain extent, but it also gets tiresome. I care about the issues, obviously, but I have mixed feelings about being viewed exclusively that way. When I first started out, to have something like environmentalism in mind as a painter was considered so wrong that I felt it was radical. I was very aware that Clement Greenberg would not approve, and lots of people would be shaking their heads, saying, "you can't do that." But that was exciting to me.

DT: It seems very lucky to me that you were able to establish a platform so early in your career that has served you for so long.

AR: It's lucky, but it also has taken discipline. As an artist, to know what you want is 90 percent of the psychological battle. But I didn't just arrive at it. It was a struggle. I had to come around to it. And in order to take myself seriously, I had to reject my childhood at first, and then I had to go back and embrace it. That's when I think my work really started, when I embraced my own history.

DT: Looking back at New York in the 1980s, there were all kinds of things happening in art that were not even close to what you were doing as a figurative painter. You were not part of Neo-Expressionism, or Neo-Geo, or the East Village scene. I'm wondering how you situated yourself amid everything that was going on.

AR: I really wanted to be on my own. I was happy to be one of the very few painters at my gallery, Jay Gorney, when he first opened in 1985. He was interested in post-conceptual work, very smart, and very eclectic, which I really liked. And I considered myself to be a conceptual painter. But I also wanted to be a

Mesopotamia, 2010, oil and resin on wood, 84 by 72 inches. Courtesy Waqas Wajahat.

real painter. I looked to people like Polke, Taaffe, Bleckner and even Kiefer for the idea of making highly subjective history. I looked at their works carefully to have a sense of how to make something feel credible. I thought that there was a way to have it both ways.

Then I met Mark Dion, who I had heard about. We'd been at the School of the Visual Arts at the same time, but we met later, in '88, I think, and I was surprised that there was another artist who was interested in many of the same things, like ecology, biology and conservation. He came to it from a very different place, and even though our work looked quite different, it was nice to not be completely alone. And it was great that what he was doing wasn't painting. We'd go on trips and expeditions. He introduced me to the idea that you could actually travel somewhere and do something in the tradition of the 19th- or early 20th-century adventurer/researcher, and that was exciting, because it was a way to get out of the studio.

DT: Can you tell me about some of the places you visited with Dion, and some of the work you did during those trips?

AR: We went to Belize in 1990, but the biggest trip was in '94, when we went camping for six weeks along the Essequibo River system in Guyana. That was where Charles Darwin and [American naturalist, explorer and author] William Beebe [1877-1962] had been—two people from the worlds of ecology and biology whom Mark and I both admired tremendously. The idea for me was to go to a place and create work based solely on empiricism—on what I could see with my own eyes. That's where I started making the "Field Drawings," which were done from observation. I had run out of materials, and Mark had pulled some mud from the riverbank. We just were kidding around and started making drawings with it. So many of my best ideas come from joking around.

DT: I'm curious about who and what else has inspired you.

AR: In the mid-'80s, I was looking at people like Kenny Scharf, and that would be inspiring because his work was so crazy, and he was so unabashedly enthusiastic about what he was into. And I think there's a transgressive, childlike element that is really what some parts of the 20th century were all about. On a certain level, I felt encouraged by that to do things with my work, like showing a pig fucking a duck. One side of it, though, is very serious, because it's about the frustration of artificial selection.

DT: That's an interesting example, because many images in your work are horrific to me, but then there's a suggestion of humor.

AR: Oh, there's a lot of humor. At least I hope there is. I mean, I was laughing so hard. For me, humor is a way to give yourself permission to say things that you wouldn't say if you were being serious. You would censor yourself.

DT: Tell me more about the "Field Drawings," which depict isolated motifs—animals, insects, plants—on stark white grounds with an abbreviated vocabulary of marks. They're very beautiful.

AR: Yeah, they're almost like calligraphy, like pictograms or fossils. When I started them in the mid-1990s, I was taking a cue from the Earth artists, in terms of using materials that are about the specificity of place. So, instead of paint, the "Field Drawings" are made from things like wombat poop, pulverized fossils and garbage juice. And I'm combining that with a type of pictorialism that feels uniquely American, which is the idea of the field guide.

DT: I'm intrigued by these shifts in your process, from the "Field Drawings" to a mural-size visionary painting like Manifest Destiny to your "Weather Drawings," which feel quite spontaneous in their depictions of tornadoes, toxic emissions and landslides.

AR: A painting like Manifest Destiny was a real challenge because there was so much architecture, and it was so much about articulating intellectual space. Making that was very much a forward-looking, goal-oriented process. The "Weather Drawings" are a direct response to the tedium of that process—the desire to make something very quickly and very directly. I wanted alchemy.

DT: Manifest Destiny is very clearly a history painting in that it depicts an epic historical event, albeit an imagined one, which is the destruction of Brooklyn as a result of global warming. You've talked before about the idea of official and unofficial versions of history. Can you elaborate on that?

AR: It's not an original idea, but history is written by the winners. History is manipulated by those who have the power. It's like the Public Enemy song—to quote Chuck D, "most of my heroes don't appear on no stamps." That's why I try to make history paintings that are about failure and disappointment.

DT: What is history painting today? How do you think it functions now?

AR: My thinking about history painting is that you can paint something that's in the past or something that's in the future. I just finished one called Mesopotamia for the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, a commission through the Art in Embassies Program. It's a painting of what used to exist in and around the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers, the ecosystem that was dependent on the water, which is all gone now. So, you see a Caspian tiger, for example. Saddam had drained the whole ecosystem before America put a nail in the coffin. Now, the whole area is just dead.

DT: I'm wondering what it means to you to be placing all of this in the form of a painting versus, say, a film or video.

AR: I think that one of the great privileges of being a painter is that it's so intimate. It's so visceral. I think about Dutch still-life painting and the idea of illusionistic space, of lovingly describing surface. It's about intimacy, and it's about painting something that's transient—a memento mori. So, much of my thinking about these paintings has to do with something that will be lost. That's why certain elements in my paintings, like the loving description of feathers or rat hairs, feel so wrong in the shadow of modernism, because modernism is really about denying biology.

DT: You use photographs as sources for your paintings, but in many cases you're painting something that doesn't truly exist. For example, The Farm includes a cow shaped like a box and tomatoes shaped like slices of pie.

AR: I'm interested in that tension between what's possible and what's not possible. Sometimes you have to give yourself a basis of credibility in one area in order to suspend disbelief in another area. And I like

the idea of painting the un-photographable, painting time travel. That's why something like science-fiction illustration is interesting to me. It's about looking for ways that painting can matter.

DT: One of the things that really interests me about your paintings is that they don't function solely in the esoteric social space of the art world.

AR: Right, but who knows whether or not that's going to seem interesting in 50 years, or if that's going to make any sense. But from my perspective, those seemingly irreconcilable impulses are what create my body of work. If my paintings were all so tasteful and safe and predictable then they wouldn't be challenging. And I was brought up in a context where you have to challenge. You have to be skeptical. On the other hand, many of my heroes have been relegated to the dustbin of history, and I don't know what that means.

"Alexis Rockman: A Fable for Tomorrow" is at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. [Nov. 19, 2010-May 8, 2011], and will travel to the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio [Sept. 24, 2011-Jan. 1, 2012].

Dan Tranberg is an artist and critic who teaches at the Cleveland Institute of Art.

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McKibben, Bill. "The Present Future." *orionmag.org (Orion Magazine)*, January/February 2006.

ORION MAGAZINE

None of us were prepared for the sight of the Louisiana Superdome lapped by floodwaters and with strips of its roof peeled back by the winds of Hurricane Katrina. In that image we glimpsed the predicament of our moment, a human world newly and suddenly vulnerable to the forces of a changed planet.

But if we'd been looking at the paintings made over the last two decades by Alexis Rockman, we'd at least have had some practice in how to see it. In an era when artists have obsessed mostly about the fractures within human society — class, gender, race — Rockman has been among the very few trying to understand the deep, mysterious, and crucial cleavage between the human and natural worlds. He is, in fact, one of the few philosophers working this critical terrain.

It's not an easy fracture to get at, of course, this line between man and . . . everything else. One of the pieties of environmentalists is that we're all part of nature, and indeed this is true. When we imagine ourselves somehow disconnected from the larger, "lower" world, we brutalize it and ourselves. On the other hand, we know that there is something different about us too, in part because we can describe what it is we're doing to the world around us. Some of the finest description can be found in Rockman's images. In The Farm, for instance, he manages to situate genetic engineering in the long lineage of human-manipulated breeding but also to evoke the particular nausea of a future when we will have stripped all but self-serving function away, when chickens will have been transformed into featherless meat machines.

Yet Rockman — a journeyer into the wild — has seen enough of the planet, especially its humid, jungly corners, to realize that the fantasy of total human control is simply that: a fantasy. His Biosphere series echoes in mordant tones the ridiculous failed experiment in the Arizona desert, where at the cost of hundreds of millions of dollars researchers attempted to create a contained planet of their own. All decays, all transforms; the forces at work in Rockman's world (and our own), operating in their long evolutionary time, mock the seeming triumph of our technology. (One of his creepiest images, for just that reason, shows what's happening behind a rec room wall. Not only are rodents breeding, but they're doing it in a pile of cash — our ultimate medium of control. And the money is shredded. That's disgusting!)

The great danger, however, of a clear-eyed view of the puniness of man is that it can lead one to an apolitical acceptance of what we do in the natural world. No need to worry about genetic engineers creating designer babies because in the long run our tinkering will be overwhelmed by the sheer massiveness of evolution. No need to worry about the extinction of species because in the long run almost everything has gone extinct. No need to worry about global warming because climate has shifted over the eons and in the long run the sun is going to swell up and wipe us out anyhow. I have heard variations on each of these themes a hundred times. And since they are all indeed true, to one degree or another, you can find them in Rockman's work as well — he is an artist of the long run, of the timeline, of the pre- and post-human. He has said, at various times, that he is "value-neutral" about topics like genetic engineering; there can be a remoteness to his view of the world — his unnatural chimeras, for instance, are depicted with loving care.

Which is why, in a sense, his newest works are among his most exciting and important. His series of American Icons — Mt. Rushmore nearly submerged in a rising sea, the St. Louis Arch strangled in kudzu — and of Big Weather — shantytowns destroyed by hurricanes, rampaging floods, and dust storms — are less cool, more angry. They are images for a post-Katrina America, one where we are only just starting to

come to terms with our own unleashed power. They complement the new satellite photos showing, for instance, that the North Pole has 20 percent less ice than it did when Apollo sent back those loving shots of our island Earth and we all pretended that we cared. They are visual accompaniment for MIT scientist Kerry Emanuel's study demonstrating that global warming has helped increase the duration of hurricanes by 50 percent in the last few decades — that we have managed to fundamentally change the planet on which we live, in ways that will damage our own civilizations (and most profoundly, of course, its poorest and blackest people).

This damage is not permanent, of course. Eventually some huge asteroid will hit the planet and start our biology cycling in some new direction; eventually the sun really will sterilize our Earth. But it's permanent enough. And what's more, changes like global warming are not the same as asteroids crashing, not the same as any of the other older evolutions Rockman chronicles in such tender detail. Not the same because — thanks to artists and writers and scientists — we know that we're causing them. Not the same because we can decide not to. Here's what I mean: much that Rockman has painted — putrefaction, evolution, predation, the endless taut-thighed rutting — has no moral dimension. If a deer shits in the forest, no one looks at the pile of droppings and thinks bad deer. But if you come across a pile of beer bottles in the forest, you think asshole. Because he could have carried them out. Carried them to the damn recycling center. That shantytown overwhelmed by wind, that sea-sunk Dakota landscape — those are the products of choices. For twenty years now we've understood the physics and chemistry of climate change and yet we've kept right on burning coal and gas and oil, more and more with each passing year. That makes us, and our leaders, morally and politically culpable, as if we had passed a law decreeing that the hovel should fall or the sea rise. The same faculty that makes art possible makes choice possible; the capacity for restraint is precisely what separates us from the rest of nature.

But that capacity is hard to summon, especially in a society deeply devoted to the notion that we should do what we want to do. Too many artists have for a century bought into the idea that self-restraint of any kind is anathema and that smashing taboo is a heroic act, without realizing the extent to which that stance now echoes the larger ethos of a consumer age. That is why, I think, so little real art has been made about the environmental challenges of our time, because art that took on those challenges would also take on our sense of perfect individualist freedom. Hyperindividualism is what, in the end, drives global warming: the sense that we each should have a big car and a big house and a big life, that it is an imposition in any way to share with others (share our mobility with others in a bus, for instance). Hyperindividualism is also what drives so much of our social evil. It was impossible to see those refugees in New Orleans, the roof on their obscured lives peeled back as brutally as the ceiling on the Superdome, and not think: there is something very wrong with our society. But too much art has for too long celebrated that same hyperindividualism; it's far less different than it supposes from the advertising it claims to despise.

Alexis Rockman's work neither exalts nor degrades the human; it's only sometimes even about the human. Instead he wonders about forces larger than us, and smaller than us. Those are very good dimensions in which to start thinking.

Bill McKibben is an author and environmentalist who in 2014 was awarded the Right Livelihood Prize, sometimes called the 'alternative Nobel.' His 1989 book The End of Nature is regarded as the first book for a general audience about climate change, and has appeared in 24 languages; he's gone on to write a dozen more books. He is a founder of 350.org, the first planet-wide, grassroots climate change movement, which has organized twenty thousand rallies around the world in every country save North Korea, spearheaded the resistance to the Keystone Pipeline, and launched the fast-growing fossil fuel divestment movement.

Gardner, Paul. "Flora, Fauna & Fossils in the Drawings of Alexis Rockman." *Art on Paper*, November-December 2001, pp. 58-63.

flora, fauna & fossils

in the drawings of Alexis Rockman

by Paul Gardner

Alexis Rockman, *Mammoth*, tar on paper (12x9 in.), 1999. All images courtesy Gorney Bravin + Lee, New York.

(Opposite page) Alexis Rockman, *North American Lion*, tar on paper (12x9 in.), 2000.

When Alexis Rockman travels, he sometimes goes to places that nobody in his right mind would want to visit—insect-infested hinterlands and jungle towns with open sewers. This serious artist-adventurer has examined the remains of extinct animals in the Badlands of Canada as well as in our very own midtown Los Angeles. No, he wasn't mulling the bones of prehistoric movie moguls, but rather the fossils of lumbering beasts who, parched for water, staggered kerplash into the odorous muddy ooze of the La Brea Tar Pits at least 10,000 years ago, long before the arrival of today's snarling, gas-guzzling bugs on freeways—our automotive Jurassic Park. I was born in L.A. so, when forced to buckle up there, I long to smash into as many of these specimens as possible. But that's all right. Everyone marches to a different tune, as the idiosyncratic novelist Ronald Firbank once wrote, paddling amid exotic creatures from the Land of Dates.

A quirky fella who definitely moves to *his* tune, Rockman has searched out places that suggest Eden after the Fall (hence L.A.). I think particularly of his trek, trek, trek along the Orange River in South Africa's Karoo Desert in 1999 or through the Amazon Basin in Guyana, where he spent two months in 1994 in the rain forest, honoring the tradition of naturalists like Charles Darwin and Charles William Beebe. "The ground glistened here and there with a film of black water which revealed the swamp," recorded Beebe in 1920. "Everywhere the mold and leaves of a hundred years lay scattered, the last fallen still green. The jungle was bright, but it was a sinister brightness—a poisonous, threatening flesh of pigment."

Jungle. The word comes from the Sanskrit *jungala*, meaning scrubland and, later, any wild place. It carries an overburden of mystery and presents the challenge: survival of the fittest. Is the primeval forest a hospitable place for man? It has worked extremely well for Rockman, especially in his mud, clay, and pencil drawings of maddening reptiles and pesky hordes of insects. He mocks a popular movie, *Out of Africa*, in which there wasn't a single wayward itty-bitty ant to mar the manicured landscape or to splotch the creamy complexion of Meryl Streep. "It just made a lot of silly people go on safari," comments Rockman. In *his* jungle, he smacked scorpions, swarms of ants, spiders, beetles, and bees, all of which stimulated him to draw. Despite vaccinations against yellow fever and typhoid, he returned to New York with some parasites that kept his doctor drooling. "Nothing ever *lingered*," he stresses, with a god-we-hope-so grin. The upside? Forest people generally do not suffer from cancer or heart disease.

Rockman's mother is an archaeologist, and, as a child, he spent hours at the Museum of Natural History in New York. He then started drawing and painting animals he collected, like turtles and frogs, cramming himself with scientific knowledge. Even today, he consults with biologists and paleontolo-

Alexis Rockman, *Untitled*, ink and watercolor on paper (18x24 in.), 2001.

gists. So his dreams or nightmares freely mix science with nature-based fiction. Rockman's paintings, on the other hand, present another side, a double life, of Rockman. Theirs is an exaggerated, vividly neon-hued kingdom that is a fantastical take on nature's realities. Surreal and figurative, the paintings sometimes depict Rockman in Tarzanic danger. For example, you can see him trapped by a man-eating crypto-plant, which—if it actually exists—hungers for human flesh. This demented jungle is a darkly ironic hallucination from *Boys' Life*.

The paintings are Rockman's form of Pop art, although his images aren't from advertising. He seeks his themes in other kinds of popular venues—in natural-history documentaries and magazines, as well as on location—and he finds satirical allegories amusing. The paintings represent the "public" side of his aesthetic sensibility. But wait—here's the fascinating turnabout: Rockman's "private" self is readily accessible in his watercolors, where he blends the tones of sea and sky into a soft iridescence, or in his drawings, where he strikes a meticulous accuracy with pencil or with quick gestures wielding clay, sewage, mud, and glop. The paintings offer raw, sometimes lurid, visions from a soldier of fortune; the works on paper, on the other hand, delve into the intimacy of travel, geography, and the hidden Alexis. The quiet man.

The works on paper delve into the intimacy of travel, geography, and the hidden Alexis. The quiet man.

The drawings, Rockman explains, legitimize his experiences in the field. Paintings are bound to the studio; drawings can be done on site, without a smidgen of self-parody or soul-stirring peril. How does he reconcile the two? He doesn't even try. "It's just another pictorial language," he says, with nonchalant candor. "I like the fact that they don't connect at all." The public/private Rockmans could be conceived as two different artists. They probably *are* two-in-one. Yes, it is schizophrenic, he allows, without any concern, "but I feel schizophrenic from all sorts of things."

With his works on paper, Rockman achieves a spontaneity that isn't possible with his more delib-

(Top to bottom) Alexis Rockman, *Untitled*, mixed media on paper (12x9 in.), 1995; *Water plants*, *Swallows*, and *Bananas*, mixed media on paper (4-1/8x5-3/4 or 5-3/4x4-1/8 in.), 1994.

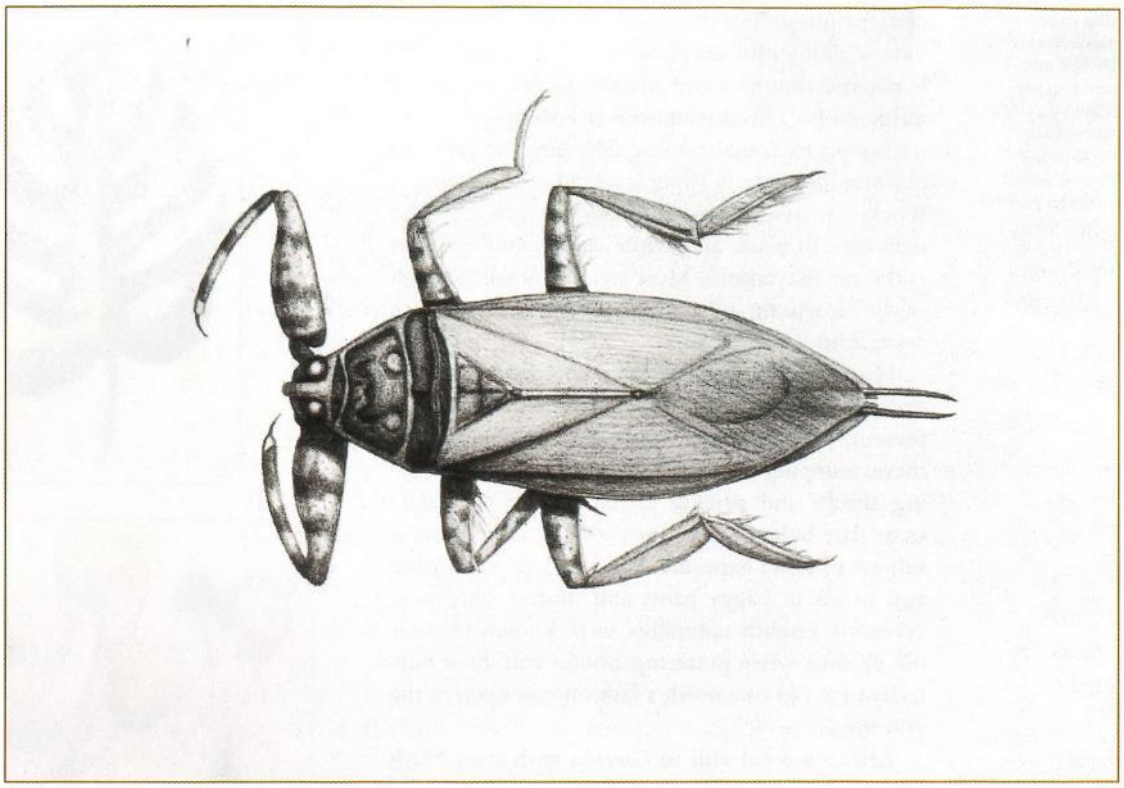
erate paintings. His drawings and watercolors provide a thoughtful antidote to what he calls "the hyper-real monsters and gnarling plants" conceived in his studio. This directness is refreshing. He doesn't bother to concoct some fake fable of yawning philosophical intent. Paper is a kind of *skin* for him, Rockman says, so how intimate can you get? The drawings, in black and white, eerily muddy or in color, are like tattoos. Most are very small (though easily blown up to startling effect) postcards, of sorts, from a lost Atlantis.

His drawings emanate from the distant past or from the excessively heated, scrambling, swatting present. The jungle is oppressively hot, and, while there, tramping through a pagan tangle of quivering shrubs and prickly brush, beneath obstinate trees that hide the sky in a canopy, Rockman is subject to cruel exposure. He cooks rice and pasta and roams in baggy pants and shorts—but, then, eccentric English naturalists were known to wear silk pajamas when puttering around with their butterfly nets. No one needs a fashion statement in the rain forest.

After a second visit to Guyana with artist Mark Dion and photographer Bob Braine, Rockman did a watercolor of the three friends, himself in the foreground, fishing—with an air of solemnity—in a blurry pool. Cunningly cinematic, the work is seen from a fish's point of view, ravenously calm but thick with the taste of time. The viewer is implicated in Rockman's efforts to net the fish (Rockman understands Hitchcock). Another watercolor is a contemplative landscape, a silent moment of palms, fronds, and towering trees that become a gothic cathedral under the roof of a pink-azure sky. The scene is clearly the dream of an awakened man.

Rockman learned as the friends traveled, making four camps, moving by boat through rivers and tributaries, and sleeping wrapped in mosquito netting, that "everything seems to be after you: fungus, humidity, insects." Under the net at night he heard vampire bats scuttling about, frogs croaking, and monkeys leaping overhead. Hoots, howls, wails. Spinning a flashlight, he saw yellow and red eyes. On the prowl during the day, he scooped up leaves resting on the jungle floor or floating aimlessly in tea-colored streams tinged yellow by rotting foliage. Each leaf was a different shape and size and had a different nerve pattern. With his paint-box of muddy clay and sewage, held in a Ziploc bag, and with crude brushes, he'd quickly draw one of the leaves, which might assume the stark contours of a human ribcage as caught by an X-ray machine.

On these trips, Rockman took much-needed time out from the jungle. Having pursued insects—



Alexis Rockman, from the series *Untitled (Guyana)*, pencil on paper (7x10-1/4 in.), 1994.

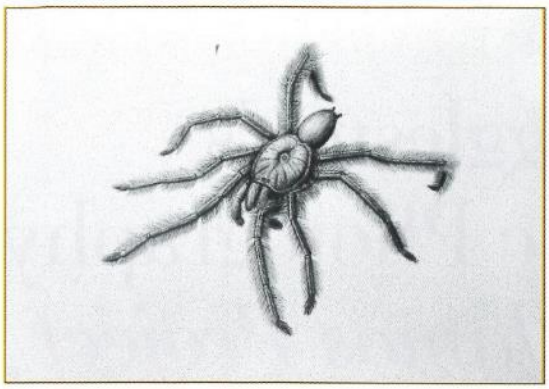
beetles and bees, water bugs and mosquitoes—he had at hand a diary of nature in his mite specimens. In a hotel room in a small town, away from swamps, decaying vegetation, and the rowdy gaudiness of outdoor survival, he would take each deceased insect, pin it to a sheet of paper, and, using a magnifying glass, record his visual investigation with exactness and often disquieting results. Two mating dragonflies later became the image on his wedding announcement. What couldn't be caught was photographed: for example, a flock of sparrows exuding a buoyant expressiveness, flapping their wings above an unseen giant tree. The birds were created quickly with the muddy mixture in the Ziploc bag. Away from the jungle, these "down-time periods," as he describes them, gave him vital hours when he could do his intense drawings. But it is the trips that feed his imagination with incidents and accidents of information.

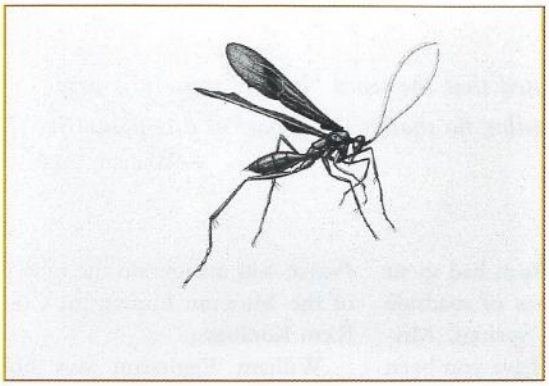
Los Angeles is another story. Without earthquakes, mudslides, brush fires, smog alerts, and riots, it's a spreading pancake of suburban theme parks with electrically gated homes, and just as crazily diverse a population as can be found in the caves of Guyana. From childhood I recall Forest Lawn Cemetery in Glendale and the La Brea Tar Pits as must-see tourist attractions for our singular visitors from the East Coast. I still prefer Forest Lawn for its bosh art "masterpieces" and mummified guides. The famous tar pits, on the other hand, really *are* authentic. They're almost rude intrusions into this otherwise sublime artificiality. And yet, it works.

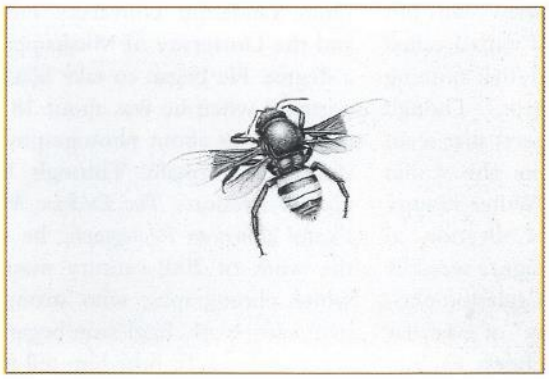
You become a forensic pathologist, he explains, and make a guess at what the beasts looked like.

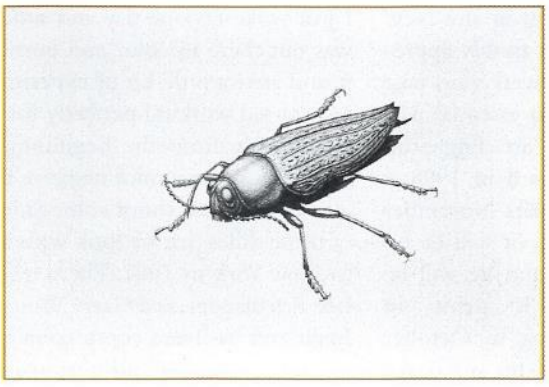
Happily, the tar pits attracted Rockman's peregrinations. The observant Rockman discovered swiftly that L.A. can be about both artifice and profound natural and geological history. At L.A.'s George C. Page Museum, which displays reconstructed mammoths and the like, Rockman studied extraordinary animals—many large furry things like bears and elephants and lions, as well as hippopotami—that literally got stuck in L.A. thousands of years ago. Some look like people I've met, so I'm assured of the truth of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. For his part, Rockman concedes drolly that the head of a male lion, found at the Page Museum and then drawn, reminds him of Orson Welles.

Alexis Rockman, from the series *Untitled (Guyana)*, pencil on paper (7x10-1/4 in. each), 1994.









Besides examining the museum's reconstructed beasts, he photographed some, delved into reference books, and, finally, when he got down to paper last year, did some "creative" alterations of his own. This was no scientific illustration. He wanted evocative portraits of long-extinct mammals that once wandered around North America, which were told by some instinct to Go West. Rockman concentrated on the heads because he liked their scale—and, for identification, the head is always key. His task, he explains, is to make drawings of evidence *out of evidence*. On a recent journey to the Badlands, Rockman, with a group of paleontologists, discovered fossil fragments from dinosaurs, which he reconstructed in drawings. You become a forensic pathologist, he explains, and make a guess at what the beasts looked like. That's where the fantasy comes in.

But Rockman likes very real materials as much as his fantasies. For his La Brea series, Rockman's paint was tar, generously supplied in canisters by the Page Museum. The tar was mixed with polyurethane and the drawings were then made with brushes and sticks. Obviously, they aren't the color of the animals. He liked, however, using a site-specific compound. The whole project related, most importantly, to animals that once actually lived in L.A., just as his Guyana materials related to still-living creatures in Guyana.

In his Tribeca studio, Rockman continues to make vast paintings with scenes that are now more futuristic than naturalistic, including a sea world in which performing piscine oddities—which may be cloned—suggest a watery entertainment. But the artist's double life, like that of someone in a hypnotic trance, will resume as soon as he unpacks his hammock again. Will it be Kolombangara in the Solomon Islands where he'll find *platycerium*, the Stag's Horn fern, or Borneo, where there's the Malay tapir? Actually, he has already drawn a reconstructed tapir found at the tar pits. It's related to a lineage of cows and looks very much like a member of the Royal Family. I'm told his next trip is to Tasmania, from which he'll no doubt return with similarly elegant drawings.

And he's inspired me to push off for a substantial look at the tar pits on saliva-bright Wilshire Boulevard.

Paul Gardner *a is producer of art documentaries, and last wrote in* Art On Paper *on the photography of David Deutsch.*

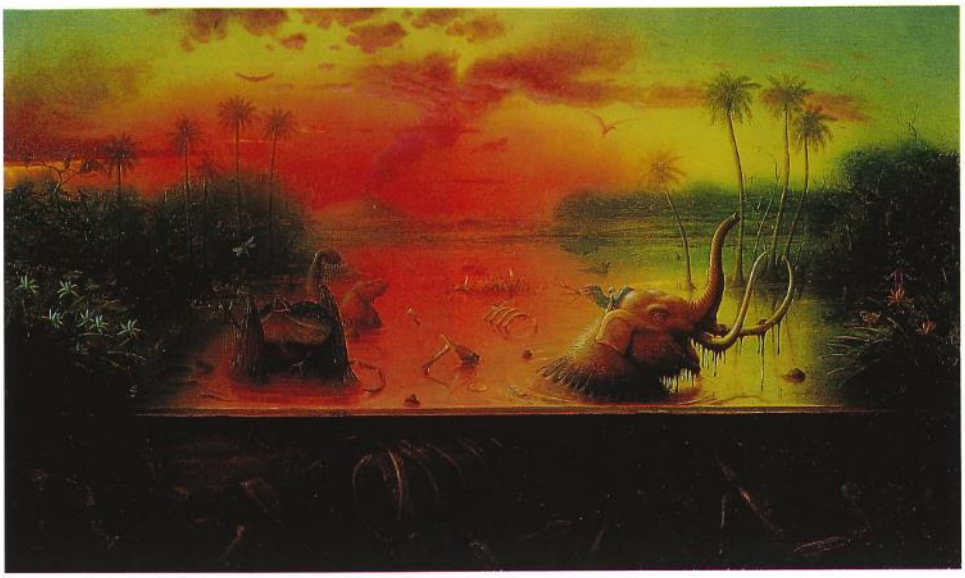
Dion, Mark. “The Origin of Species: Alexis Rockman on the Prowl.” *Flash Art*, October 1993, pp. 114-115.

THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES

ALEXIS ROCKMAN ON THE PROWL

MARK DION

ALEXIS ROCKMAN, AVIARY, 1992. OIL ON WOOD, 80 X 68". COURTESY JAY GORNEY, NEW YORK.



OMISSION: THE FOSSIL RECORD, 1991. OIL ON WOOD, 50 X 84".

As animals recede further and further from the everyday life of most people in urban and suburban society, the more they surround us. I am not referring to animals in flesh and blood, but rather to a vast collection of surrogate beasts made of plastic, fiber, celluloid, and electronic pulses. Young children who may never experience physical contact with living animals sleep amongst packs of teddy bears, Ninja Turtles, and assorted fluffies. Television is saturated with frogs conducting grammar lessons and flight or fight scenarios from the African savannah. All day long animals entertain us, sell us long distance phone plans, and represent the innocent bystanders in the ecological disaster of the month. At the heart of this pervasiveness are the deeply contradictory relations between us and the other living beings who inhabit the globe.

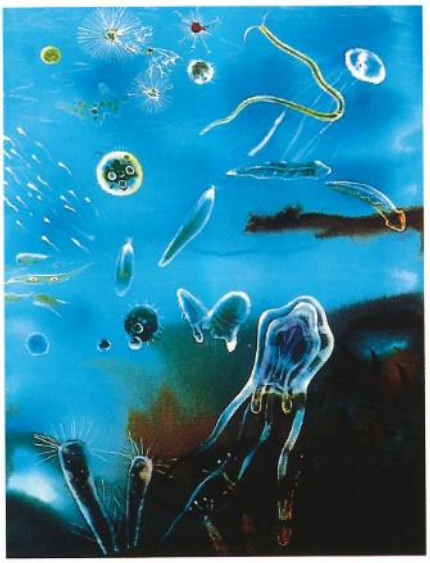
Amidst this wild image world of animals prowls Alexis Rockman. His ecology is not the study of the relations between organisms and their physical environment but rather an examination of how humans envision the biosphere. It is a population study of representations, taken from a diverse pool of reference: from 17th century Dutch still-life painting, to biology textbook illustration, to the contemporary Hollywood filmscape. Douglas Blau has accurately addressed this point in his exhaustive index of Rockman's work. What is compelling about the cosmos in these paintings is not merely what populates them, but how they are arranged.

Western science is constructed out of an obsessive search for fundamental units with which organisms can be broken down and reassembled into a hierarchy from which abstract laws and principles can be derived. The process of naming and grouping — classification or taxonomy — is far from a simplistic cataloguing of organisms. Rather it embodies theoretical principles, articulating the causes of relationships and similarities of the diversity of life. Rockman's work echoes the theoretical structures which biologists, artists, and museums have employed to organize the world we live in. These arrangements may be by orthodox classifications, by cladistics, or by ecological, zoogeographical, and chronological (in life cycles) orderings. However, while scientific systems of classification more or less work because of the rarity of hybrids and anomalies, Rockman's universe is abound with mutants, monsters, and interspecies hybrids. It is here that one finds the cul-ture of nature in which animals are constantly made and remade, invented and discovered, extinguished and dreamed. As ancient, fabulous beasts are overthrown, so there is a genesis of new ones. We invent dinosaurs while we eliminate dragons. For every centaur lost there is a trans-genetic pig found in the newspaper science section.

The organisms in Rockman's work are often arranged in a pre-Linnaean taxonomy, analogy rather than homology: things that fly, things that crawl, things that swim, things that have slime. Rockman may populate the air with creatures from a horror film, recent paleontological findings, birds escaped from a Franz Snyders painting, a bumper sticker or his own fantastical bio-collage. There are assemblages from the diverse anthrosphere, not the biosphere. Rockman's paintings have little to tell us about the variability and variety of life on earth, but rather collide our complex negotiation between nature's construction of us, and our construction of it.

■

Mark Dion is an artist based in New York.



UNTITLED, 1992. INK AND WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 24 X 18". COURTESY SPERONE WESTWATER, NEW YORK.

Alexis Rockman was born in 1962 in New York, NY, where he lives and works.

Selected solo shows: 1985: Patrick Fox, New York; 1986: Jay Gorney, New York; Michael Kohn, Los Angeles; 1987: McNeil, Philadelphia; 1988: ICA, Boston; 1989: Fawbush, New York (with Ed Albers); 1990: Jay Gorney, New York; 1991: John Post Lee, New York: Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg; 1992: Tom Solomon's Garage, Los Angeles; Sperone Westwater, New York; The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; 1993: Jay Gorney, New York .

Selected group shows: 1985: "Selections 29," Drawing Center, New York; "Real Surreal," Lorence Monk, New York; 1986: Group show, Jay Gorney, New York; 1987: "Atelier Conversations," John Good, New York; 1988: "Mutations," Annina Nosei, New York; "Untitled (Slime)," Simon Watson, New York; 1989: "The Silent Baroque," Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg; 1990: "Persistence of Vision," Tibor de Nagy, New York; "The (Un)Making of Nature," Whitney Downtown, New York; "Body and Soil," Fernando Alcolea, Barcelona; 1992: "Tattoo Collection," Air de Paris, Nice (traveled); 1993: "Teddy and Other Stories," In Arco, Turin; Venice Biennale: Aperto '93; "Drawing the Line Against AIDS," Guggenheim Museum, Venice.

Schwalb, Harry. "Unnatural History." *Pittsburgh*, March 1993, pp. 20-21.

UNNATURAL HISTORY

A NEW CARNEGIE CURATOR STAGES A SHOW OF DAZZLING RELEVANCE

COURTESY OF THE CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF ART

IN ALEXIS ROCKMAN'S *EVOLUTION*, A PRIMEVAL LANDSCAPE TURNS POST-APOCALYPTIC.

As The Carnegie heads for a countdown to its centennial year of 1995, the Museum of Art's new curator of contemporary art, recently transplanted New Yorker Richard Armstrong, has brought the venerable edifice on Forbes Avenue a remarkable—and a remarkably, peculiarly "Carnegie"—exhibition. In the paintings of 30-year-old *wunderkind* Alexis Rockman, Armstrong shows how natural history can go beyond coexisting with high art under Andrew Carnegie's multidisciplinary roof—how, in fact, science can help make art accessible to ever wider audiences, of every level of sophistication.

I'd hate to speak for the late Mr. Carnegie—and certainly some of my billionaire acquaintances are as parsimonious as the next guy—but I'd willingly bet that if our founding industrialist had seen Rockman's four-panel leviathan of a painting, *Evolution*, he'd have written a check on the spot. If anything could become a signature piece for The Carnegie, it is this. (And at about $450 a square foot for each of its 192 stunning square feet, the canny Scotsman would have recognized a bargain.)

There are ten pieces in Rockman's recent greening of the Museum of Art's Forum Gallery. The 24-foot-wide *Evolution* and four related works—oil on wood panel or watercolor on paper—were completed in 1992. Four more—*Jungle Fever, Harvest, The Fossil Record* and *Mutated Poison Dart Frogs* (for which he mixed poison dart frog toxins with his oils!)—date to 1991; the mural-size *Phylum II* dates to 1990. No slouch, he.

The masterwork, *Evolution*, is a kind of personal summing up, as Rockman has said. It has everything he'd been thinking about for years: extinction, mutation, the way information gets organized in the rigid "time lines"—from microorganisms to *Homo sapiens*—beloved by scientists. (Rockman's mother is an archaeologist, who often worked at Manhattan's Museum of Natural History. She'd take the kid along.) In *Evolution,* an all-star cast of creatures—extant, extinct, imaginary—floats, stalks, slithers, feeds, woos, mates, grows and flies in a golden, swollen, languorous landscape. In the background is a fiery volcano ("Every primeval landscape has to have a volcano!" exclaims Rockman) that is based on Frederick Edwin Church's spectacular painting of South America's Cotopaxi.

Rockman uses the meticulous, almost superreal techniques of 17th-century Netherlandish still-life painting, a descriptive language that once captured the robust bounties of field and orchard and garden, to record an herbicidal, pesticidal, suicidal age. Before our eyes, the lush ripeness turns sour, then frenzied, crazed. This is a world where a praying mantis will mount a mammal; a ring-tailed lemur has sex with a startled macaw. Even the plants are frightening. (Is that dew on those petals, or pus?) A fallen tree trunk fossilizes into metal, becoming a drain from which wastewater drips into a sinister pool.

John Muir called nature a "fountain of life"—here, instead, you gaze at runoffs and rivulets and even a woodland waterfall that are fountains of death. Feeding in this latter-day Garden of Eden, Rockman's sole human—the culmination of *Evolution*'s "time line"—is shrunken, misshapen, hermaphroditic.

Yet, and yet, the paintings leave you strangely elated. Good art

BY HARRY SCHWALB

does. The unerring drawing, the sublime fluidity of the brushwork, are exhilarating. So is the intellectual stimulation of such questions as our priorities in conservation (usually, Rockman suggests, they favor the sweet and fuzzy and seductively colored—not the uglies). The point is made by a bumper-stickerishly cute mallard, a discordant Pop image that snaps Rockman's old-fashioned diorama into the here and now. This is no New Age granola-cookie sensibility, but a clean, crisp, postmodern intelligence.

There is, for example, the shrewd devilishness with which Rockman intermixes misinformation with his science, poking fun at the sometimes overly literal categorizations of natural history. (This was also, you may remember, a theme for much of the last Carnegie International, though often executed with a heaviness as oppressive as the science being parodied.) In the midst of Rockman's near-photographic plants and animals—there are upwards of 200 of them in *Evolution*!—you come across a "purple crab sphincter typewriter" from William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, *Dragonslayer*'s flying dragon, even a "chestburster" from *Alien*.

Elevation, education, entertainment—this exhibition provides all three. And beyond these, a kind of affirmation.

With *Evolution*, curator and artist affirm that the act of painting is still dazzlingly relevant, able to say new things in new ways with resonance and authority. This belief may well be several light years ahead of that of current practitioners who are busy reducing art to the arranging of painted cardboard rectangles on the floors of lofts or installing tiled passageways in airports and malls.

A word on the curator: Richard Armstrong would have preferred to keep out of this article. "It's the artist's show," he told me on the telephone. As director Phillip Johnston has said of his new curator, he is not only a highly articulate advocate of contemporary art "but a friend of artists."

Born and educated in Kansas City, Mo., as solid a base as any for facing today's world, Armstrong studied abroad. He was curator at the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art (where I saw his estimable "The Modern Chair: Its Origin and Evolution" some years back) and served on the artists committee that planned the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. In 1981 he joined the Whitney Museum of American Art, where he co-curated four Biennials, an institution critics pride themselves on bashing, but wouldn't dream of missing.

Despite a plethora of activities—and publications—Armstrong's resume is one page, a blessed modest single page long.

Hard not to admire a man like that. ❑

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Levin, Kim. “Alexis Rockman.” *The Village Voice*, 10 November 1992, p. 75.

ALEXIS ROCKMAN: *Evolution* is a single 8 x 24–foot primordial swamp painting that teems with Rockman's real and invented pre- and posthistoric life forms. Its repulsions have a certain conceptual allure: the high technique is like a depraved form of high tech; the relentless creativity mimics a long tradition of artistic creationism; and the whole parasitic fantasia is spooked by rusted buttresses. Actual leafy things (and at least one hapless insect) stick to the surface. He worked on it for a year. Through November 28, Sperone Westwater Gallery, 121 Greene Street, 460-5497. (Levin)

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Newhall, Edith. "It's a Jungle Out There." *New York*, 12 October 1992, p. 23.

ART BEAT

It's a Jungle Out There

AS LUCK WOULD HAVE IT, Alexis Rockman had his epiphany early, in 1985, right after he finished at the School of Visual Arts. Only 23 and about to participate in a prestigious East Village group show, Rockman got halfway through a painting and froze.

"It was sort of abstract, but it was clearly a jar," he says. "I sat around for a month, looking at it and wondering what I was going to put in it. One night, I went out with a bunch of friends and we got smashed, and I took them back to my studio. One of them asked me what I was going to put in the jar, and before I could censor myself, I said, 'A frog.' It took me a couple of days, and then I realized, This is fine; you're allowed to put frogs in your work. What are you waiting for? Do it."

Since that time, Rockman has been putting frogs and every other imaginable (and imagined) species into his paintings, creepy-crawly works that bring to mind natural-history murals and the grotesqueries of Hieronymus Bosch, with a smattering of sci-fi. Rockman's latest—and largest—painting, *Evolution,* can be seen at Sperone Westwater gallery (121 Greene Street).

Measuring 96 by 288 inches and composed of four wood panels, *Evolution* has an obvious time-line configuration, beginning with microorganisms and moving up the ladder to more sophisticated creatures, but that's about the only predictable element in Rockman's humorous and gory panorama. In the foreground, there's an "arthropod island," home to shrimp, insects, arachnids, and crabs; in the sky, pterodactyls soar alongside a mallard duck. Movie buffs will recognize the "bat-rat spider" from *The Angry Red Planet*. "That thing in the corner, pulling the intestines out of the tapir, is from an H. R. Giger character design for *Alien*," says Rockman, a surprisingly well adjusted lifelong New Yorker.

Naughty by nature: Alexis Rockman.

Befitting its title, *Evolution* also marks a turning point for Rockman. Since completing the painting on September 7, two days after his thirtieth birthday, Rockman has been working on a new series: paintings of outer space. "I'm so sick of atmosphere," he says—he spent six months on *Evolution,* rarely leaving his studio during the day for the last month. "Outer space is nice because it's simpler."

EDITH NEWHALL

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Zaya, Octavio. "As the worm turns: The painting of Alexis Rockman." *Balcon* (Madrid), Winter 1991.

As the worm turns:
The painting of Alexis Rockman

Excerpts from a reading-interchange with

OCTAVIO ZAYA

O Rose, thou art sick!
The invisible worm
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,

Has found out the bed
Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy

William Blake

Rockman's scenarios are, rather than the images themselves, their transformation, displacement and neutral interstices. They are precise. But Rockman is not interested in an unmediated experience of nature –he does not generally paint directly from the landscape. Instead his sources are a strange combination of the mythologized images of nature found in children's books or old pictures; and the apparently rationalized ones that appear in natural history books. They are also anthropomorphized and envision a nature whose violence and sensuality allegorically reflects a human condition. The artist himself has commented that the paintings have the metaphorical smell of -formaldehyde and perfume-.

We order the world according to categories that we take for granted simply because they are given. They occupy an epistemological space that is prior to thought, and so they have extraordinary staying power. When confronted with an alien way of organizing experience, however, we sense the frailty of our own categories, and everything threatens to come undone. Things hold together only because they can be slotted into classificatory scheme that remains unquestioned.

In Rockman's paintings, in the midst of decay there is extraordinary life. For every carcass there are a thousand creatures which live around it and consume it. The sheer multitude and omnipresence of unfamiliar forms disturb, and here Rockman's imagination, eye for detail, and patience serve him well. Everything feeds on surplus. In some of the works there are huge numbers and varieties of spiders, beetles, snakes, ants, and worms, some of them apparently wholly fantastic, and a few with nearly human faces, which adds to our repulsion. This is a side of nature we rarely see, a world very distant and different from our own, though it is as close as our backyards.

> *Consider, for example, a totally different kind of learned book, the Chinese Encyclopedia imagined by Jorge Luis Borges and discussed by Michel Foucault in* The Order of Things *(Las Palabras y las Cosas). It divided animals into: «(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l)* etcetera, *(m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies». This classification system is significant, Foucault argues, because of the sheer impossibility of thinking it. By bringing us up short against an inconceivable set of categories, it exposes the arbitrariness of the way we sort things out. And, «precisely because it puts them into categories of their own, Foucault continues, the Chinese encyclopedia localizes their powers of contagion; it distinguishes carefully between the very real animals and those that reside solely in the realm of the imagination. The possibility of dangerous mixtures has been exorcized, heraldry and fable have been relegated to their own exalted peaks». The quality of monstrosity here does not affect anymore any real body.*

In Rockman's paintings the rational battles the irrational on many fronts: his work might be seen in terms of the larger cultural debate surrounding the relationship between nature and culture. For if, as many believe, there no longer is a nature, but only its multiple representations, Rockman locates the natural in the mind: envisions it as a pseudo-scientific myth of repression and release.

> *It has doubtless been essential to Western culture to link, as it has done, its perception of madness to the iconographic forms of the relation of man to beast. From the start, Western culture has not considered it evident that animals participate in the plenitude of nature, in its wisdom and its order: this idea was a late one and long remained on the surface of culture; perhaps it has not yet penetrated very deeply into the subterranean regions of the imagination. But unlike the one popular in the Middle Ages, which illustrated, in so many symbolic visages, the metamorphoses of evil, the notion of madness in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was an abstract bestiary; here evil no longer assumed its fantastic body; here we apprehend only its most extreme form, the truth of the beast which is a truth without content. Evil is freed from all that its wealth of iconographic fauna could do, to preserve only a general power of intimidation: the secret danger of an animality that lies in wait and, all at once, undoes reason in violence and truth in the madman's frenzy.*

While Rockman hands us up the face of evil as manifested in nature and man on a silver plater, he also offers the clear vision needed for emotional and cerebral cleansing as a side dish.

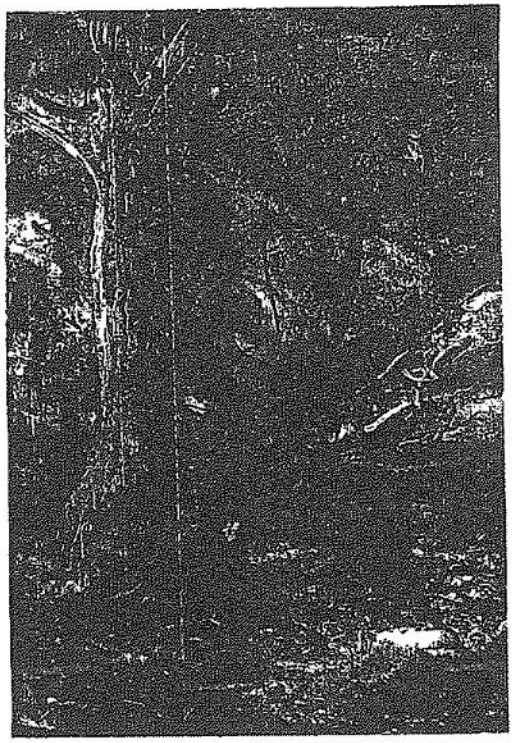
> *All animal life fits into the grid of an unconscious ontology. Monsters like «the elephant man» and the «wolf boy» horrify and fascinate us because they violate our conceptual boundaries, and certain creatures make our skin crawl because they slip in between categories: «slimy» reptiles that swim in the sea and creep on the land, «nasty» rodents that live in houses yet remain outside the bounds of domestication. We insult someone by calling him a rat rather than a squirrel. Yet squirrels are rodents, as dangerous and disease-ridden as rats. They seem less threatening because they belong unambiguously to the out-of-doors. It is the in-between animals, they neither-fish-nor fowl, that have special powers and therefore ritual value: thus the cassowaries in the mystery cults of New Guinea and the tomcats in the witches' brews of the West. Hair, fingernails parings, and feces also go into*

magic potions because thy represent the ambiguous border areas of the body, where the organism spills over into the surrounding material world. All borders and dangerous. If left unguarded, they could break down, our categories could collapse and our world dissolve in chaos.

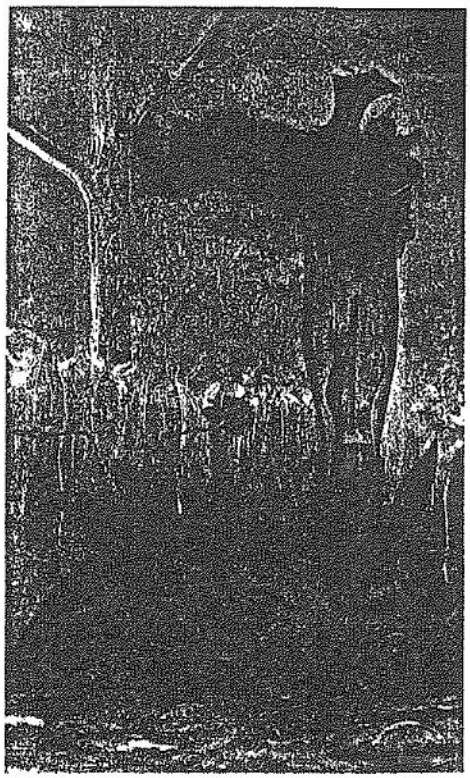
In the man's ability to recognize the failings of the universe, Alexis Rockman gives us also an opportunity to take the road away from negativity and base self-satisfaction; a scenario not alien to the search for truth, as some may suggest, but one that exposes us finally to the perils of that search and its ambiguous relations with the multiple configurations of power.

Setting up categories and policing them is therefore a serious business. A philosopher who attempted to redraw the boundaries of the world of knowledge would be tampering with the taboo. Even if the steered clear of sacred subjects, he could no avoid danger; for knowledge is inherently ambiguous. Like reptiles and rats, it can slip from one category to another.

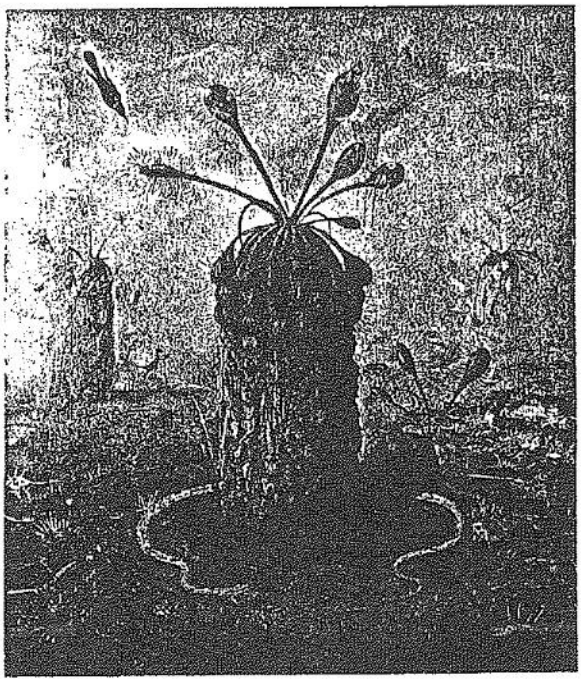
With the perversion of innocence, Rockman invites the other which is in us to look at itself in the «dark secret love» that inhabit all creatures. Our responssability is not to use it as antimidation and a tool for subordination and submission; but as a way to know who we are and, going beyond the grid of denominations, to reveal the realm of differences.



Alexis Rockman. In Dead of Night, 1989.
Oil on canvas.



Alexis Rockman. Dangerous Liaisons, 1989.
Oil on canvas. 100 × 60".



Alexis Rockman. Sundew, 1989.
Oil on wood. 84 × 72".

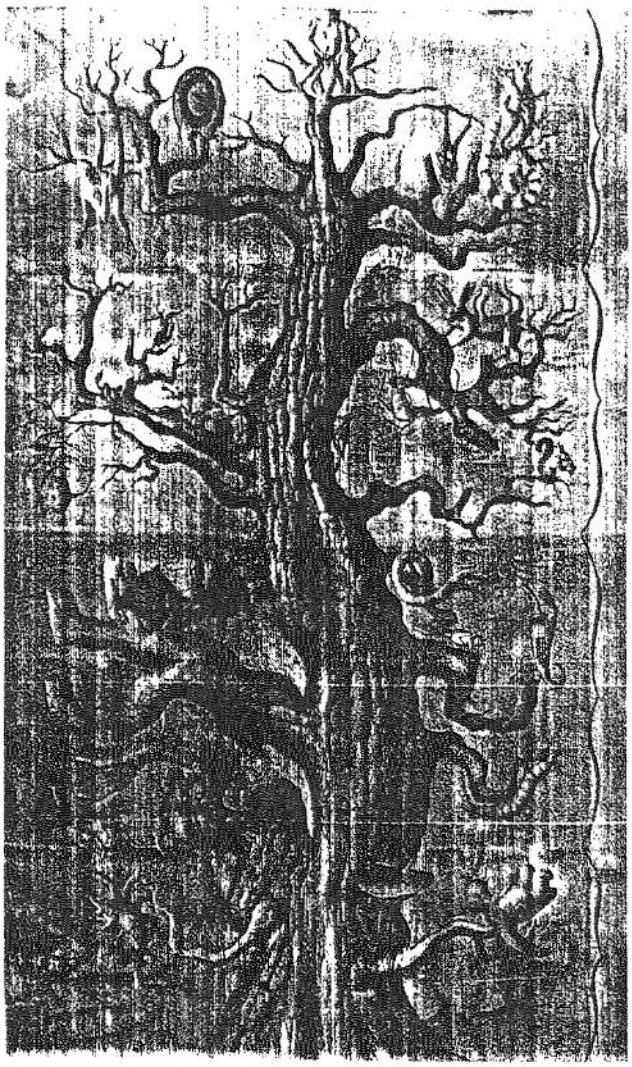
Saltz, Jerry. "A Thorn Tree in the Garden: Alexis Rockman's Phylum." *Arts Magazine*, September 1989.

NOTES ON A PAINTING

Jerry Saltz

A Thorn Tree in the Garden

Alexis Rockman's *Phylum*



Alexis Rockman, *Phylum*, 1989, Oil on canvas, 112" × 66". Courtesy Jay Gorney Modern Art.

Alexis Rockman's paintings are tissue thin, see-through images that look into a natural world of unnatural terror. For several years Rockman has employed transparent applications of jewel-like color's—topazes—emeralds—and aquamarines—to depict ever more gruesome and impossible scenes of death and decay. It all began innocently enough. His early paintings appeared to be glosses on conventional illustrations for biology textbooks or subtle calligraphic renderings of atmospheric effects. But in paintings seen this past season at Jay Gorney Modern Art and in various group shows, the worm began to turn. Rockman's glowing animal forms began to teem with creepy, crawly hoards of insects and larvae and intimations of rotting flesh.

Rockman's paintings resemble giant glistening watercolors. They accumulate loose, often dripping gestures, mark upon mark, layer upon layer, in a way that owes something to the work of Terry Winters. Their forming procedures are often evident. However, Rockman's work has remained overtly literal; more interested in depiction than abstraction or painting techniques. With *Phylum*, one of his most recent and largest pictures, the paint has thickened somewhat, just as the artist's vision has darkened to its most distorted and apocalyptic. *Phylum* is a compendium of creatures and monsters which have appeared in Rockman's previous paintings. It is a family tree of non-living life, failures—images of the living dead.

Imagining and imaging the world and our place in it is something of an obsession with the human race. Some periods more than others have attempted to answer the fundamental ontological questions "What am I?",/ and "Where do I come from?" Schematizers and synthesizers from every age and every place have tried to compress all the knowledge in the world into orderly, compact systems explaining everything. The weight of the world seems to turn on such questions. Framing an answer, finding our place, is tantamount to staving off a primary fear of life.

All animal life fits into the grid of an unconscious ontology [emphasis mine].

NOTES ON A PAINTING

Jerry Saltz

Monsters like the Elephant Man and the Wolf Boy horrify and fascinate us because they violate our conceptual boundaries. "Slimy" reptiles that swim in the sea and creep on the land, "nasty" rodents that live in houses yet remain outside bounds of domestication . . . is the in-between animals, the neither-fish-no-fowl, that have special powers and therefore ritual value . . . Hair, fingernail parings and feces go into magic potions because they represent the ambiguous border areas of the body, where the organism spills over into the surrounding material world. All borders are dangerous. If left unguarded, they could collapse, and our world dissolve in chaos. Setting up categories and policing them is therefore serious business. A philosopher who attempted to redraw the boundaries of the world of knowledge would be tampering with taboo.

—Robert Darnton[1]

By creating a system of life, a tree, on which monsters and abominations form, Rockman has gone ahead and tampered with this taboo. Further, he investigates what Darnton calls "the relationship between information and ideology, the connection between knowledge and power."

The word *phylum* means an organization of higher animals to lower animals. The painting is grouped into four distinct layers or strata of being—roughly corresponding to the four basic elements,which are (from top to bottom): AIR

FIRE

WATER

EARTH

They are marked off on the one hand by four hazy, murky, gloppy horizontal bands of color and look a bit like a Rothko with cholera or a Navaho blanket with malaria—and on the other hand, by four parentheses or brackets painted on the extreme right side of the picture. Rockman places his creatures according to the group they belong to. In so doing he begins to unmask an ancient system of classification, revealing that hierarchy and intelligence are not necessarily related. All the creatures on this tree are equally bizarre; all ultimately unclassifiable.

In the early 1970s, *National Lampoon* featured an illustration of just such a family tree of man. In it man is portrayed at the top of the tree having descended from—the toaster. A light-hearted example, it reveals a lurking and horrifying flaw in all such ventures. Hitler and the Nazis formed their ideas on race according to various German and Austrian texts which "proved" that certain races were "naturally" inferior to others. These texts were of course misinterpretations of Darwin and the evolutionists. Nevertheless this was all the proof needed to justify the annihilation of the Jews.[2]

Rockman's classifing tool is the tree. The tree has provided a skeleton or framework on which to organize knowledge for an enormous variety of thinkers and philosophies: Giordano Bruno, Ramon Llull, Robert Flood, Athanasius Kircher, the Kabbala, Rosacrucianism, Bacon, Leibnitz, Diderot, d'Alembert and Darwin, to name but a few. In *Phylum* however, the tree is twisted, stunted, amputated, thrust to the front of the picture, and seems living and dead at the same time. It is charged with a kind of sick bifurcated malevolent force and looks like something out of a horror movie, or that might have scared Hansel and Gretel. It has no leaves yet it seems eternaly unyielding and indomitable. It represents the never-ending cycle of living and dying, the constantly changing forms of life, the successes and failures of every species. It stands alone in a stark, empty, claustrophobic space—half-way between no place and every place. Nothing above, nothing below; it is a space reserved for what is feared and hated, dreamt of and desired. A space filled with broken promises, unfertilized hope, dementia, and hallucinations.

On this tree, Rockman has placed not the established creatures of the imagination or myth, like the minotaur, mermaids, the sphinx, centaurs, or the unicorn—but an array of unholy monsters who could never have entered into a conventional iconography. In the case of *Phylum* to describe the painting is to to explain it.

In the lowest stratum (Earth—the digestive system, the physical body subject to the laws of the mineral world) Rockman paints a stomach-like thing, disrupted, distended, and removed from a body, bloated and hanging on a branch a shelf fungus, a gland-thing with no function to perform save to survive. All are examples of disassociation and fragmentation and represent a kind of unknowable biological consciousness.

The next layer up is Water (the circulatory system, the body of animal desire and feeling). There is an octopus with two eyes out of the water, a vicious-looking worm with legs and sharp pincers, a carnivorous pitcher plant (its digestive system splayed open and portrayed in cutaway view) waiting to eat the animals which may fall from above (though it would surely choke on them), a demonic-looking winged creature, and a two-headed snake devouring a frog.

Next is Fire (the respiratory system, or the ethereal, growing, thinking body). We see an eight-legged rabbit, a pathetic bulgy-eyed butterfly-without-wings, a parasitic plant dangling from a twig, a two-headed bird, and an innocent-looking squirrel with odd ears staring off into the distance. In the middle of this area is a woodpecker. It appears "normal" and may have flown by accident onto this excremental tree. The woodpecker represents the risks and uncertainties of life, and how in an instant any one of us could find ourselves up such a tree.

Finally, at the top is Air (the nervous system and the world of pure spirit). There is a five-limbed mandrill staring out at us in complete confusion, a two-headed lemur, a bat with a blood-red heart, and a fetus growing, exposed, veins extending down the branch, drawing fetid nourishment in order to mutate into who knows what as yet unnamed abomination. The crowning creation on this infernal tree is the shrunken, distorted form of the hermaphrodite, four legs, four arms, a penis, two breasts, and only one head, smashed and merged into one indistinguishable corpulent image of horror and impossibility.

It all adds up to a pretty terrible vision of the world. But there is something oddly compelling about each of the life forms depicted. Although being born from a tree is in itself "unnatural," it should be remembered that Adonis was born from a tree and was loved by no less than Aphrodite (who herself was born of the seafoam issuing from the castrated genitals of her father Uranus). Rockman has portrayed not only a catalogue of his previous imagery but an encyclopedia which embraces the unembraceable—and shows compassion for the miscast, curious, forbidding, and repulsive. Rockman invites that which is living in us to care for that which is living in all creatures, even the damned.

1. Robert Darnton *"Philosphers Trim The Tree Of Knowledge" The Great Cat Massacre New York:* Vintage Books, 1985), 193.

2. This is not to say that all such groupings are inherently false—only that they must be subjected to scrutiny by a wide variety of opinion. Subjective inconsistencies are an a priori condition of all systems of knowledge. Placing absolute faith, therefore, in any particular order of logic is necessarily bound to create conflict and led to false conclusions.

Jerry Saltz has edited several books on contemporary art. His column, which concentrates on a single work, appears monthly in Arts.

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ALEXIS ROCKMAN
Biography

1962	Born New York City. Lives and works in New York.

Education

1978-79	Art Student's League, New York, NY
1980-82	Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI
1983-85	School of Visual Arts, New York, NY (BFA)

Solo Exhibitions

1985	Patrick Fox Gallery, New York
1986	Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles
	Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York
1987	Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York
	McNeil Gallery, Philadelphia
1988	The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston
	Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles
1989	Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York
	Fawbush Gallery, New York (with Ed Albers)
1990	Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York
1991	Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg
	John Post Lee Gallery, New York
1992	Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York
	Tom Solomon's Garage, Los Angeles
	"Evolution," Sperone Westwater, New York (catalogue)
1992-93	"Forum: Alexis Rockman," The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh
1993	"Biosphere," Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York, (catalogue)
1994	"Biosphere: The Ocean," Gian Enzo Sperone, Rome
	"Guyana Paintings," Studio Guenzani, Milan
	"Works on Paper: Guyana," Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York
	"Guyana Paintings," Tom Solomon's Garage, Los Angeles
1994-96	"Alexis Rockman: Second Nature," curated by Barry Blinderman, Illinois State University Galleries, Illinois State University, Normal; Portland Art Museum, Portland; Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, 1996; Tweed Museum of Art, Duluth, 1996; Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati, 1996 (catalogue)
1995	"Neblina," Koyanagi Gallery, Tokyo
	"Alexis Rockman: Zoology A-Z," Wildlife Interpretive Gallery, The Detroit Zoo, Detroit (watercolors)
1996	"Dioramas," London Projects, London
1997	"Dioramas," Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York
	"Dioramas," Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston (catalogue)
1998	"Alexis Rockman: A Recent History of the World," The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, 21 March – 23 May
2000	"The Farm," Creative Time, DNAid Billboard, Lafayette & Houston St., New York
	"Expedition," Gorney Bravin + Lee, New York
2001	"Future Evolution," Henry Art Gallery at University of Washington, Seattle

	"The Great Outdoors," Baldwin Gallery, Aspen
2002	"New Watercolors," Baldwin Gallery, Aspen
	"Recent Paintings," Gorney Bravin + Lee, New York
2004	"Wonderful World," Camden Arts Centre, London (catalogue)
	"Alexis Rockman: Beginnings," Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco
2004-05	"Manifest Destiny," Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, 17 April – 12 September 2004; Grand Arts, Kansas City, 14 January – 26 February 2005; Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, 12 March – 5 June 2005; Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, 17 June – October 2005; Mural version, Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus (catalogue)
2005	"Fresh Kills," Gary Tatintsian Gallery, Moscow (catalogue)
2006	"American Icons," Leo Koenig Inc., New York (catalogue)
	"Big Weather," Baldwin Gallery, Aspen (catalogue)
2007	"Barometric Pressure," Galerie Sabine Knust, Munich
	"Baroque Biology: Tony Matelli and Alexis Rockman (Romantic Attachments)," Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati (catalogue)
2008	"Aqua Vitae," Baldwin Gallery, Aspen
	"The Weight of Air: Works on Paper," Rose Museum at Brandeis University, Waltham (catalogue)
	"South," Leo Koenig Inc., New York
	"Everything vs. Nothing," Franklin Parrasch Gallery, New York (catalogue)
2009	"Half-Life," NyeHaus, New York
	"Motion Parallax, Jason Fox and Alexis Rockman," Franklin Parrasch Gallery, New York
2010	"Thunderdome: Selected Works by Alexis Rockman," Salomon Contemporary, New York
2010-11	"Alexis Rockman: A Fable for Tomorrow," Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., 18 November 2010 – 8 May 2011; Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, 29 September – 31 December 2011 (catalogue)
2011	"The Hudson and Other Works," Baldwin Gallery, Aspen
2013	"Rubicon," Sperone Westwater, New York, 17 September – 2 November (catalogue)
	"Alexis Rockman: Chemical Trespass," Baldwin Gallery, Aspen, 29 November – 20 December
2013-14	"Alexis Rockman: Drawings from the Life of Pi," The Drawing Center, New York, 27 September – 3 November 2013; New Orleans Museum of Art, 4 July – 12 October 2014
2015-16	"Alexis Rockman: East End Field Drawings," Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY, 25 October 2015 – 18 January 2016 (catalogue)
2016	"Bioluminescence," Carolina Nitsch Project Room, New York, 1 April – 1 May (catalogue)
	"A Natural History of New York City," Salon 94, New York, 18 April – 13 May (catalogue)
	"Alexis Rockman," Robilant + Voena, St. Moritz, 7 August – 10 September
2017	"Artlab: Alexis Rockman," DeVos Art Museum at Northern Michigan University, Marquette, MI, 25 September – 12 November
2018	"Alexis Rockman: Wallace's Line," Baldwin Gallery, Aspen, 16 March – 15 April (catalogue)
	"Alexis Rockman: New Mexico Field Drawings, Sperone Westwater, New York, 21 June – 3 August
2018-20	"Great Lakes Cycle," Grand Rapids Art Museum, 27 January – 29 April 2018; Chicago Cultural Center, 2 June – 1 October 2018; Museum of Contemporary Art, Cleveland, 19 October 2018 – 27 January 2019; Haggerty Museum of Art at Marquette University, Milwaukee, 8 February – 19 May 2019; Weisman Art Museum at University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 5 October 2019 – 5 January 2020; Flint Institute of Arts, Flint, 9 May – 16 August 2020 (catalogue)
2021	"Alexis Rockman: Shipwrecks," Guild Hall, East Hampton, NY, June – July

Selected Group Exhibitions

1985	"Godda," A&P Gallery, New York
	Patrick Fox Gallery, New York
	"Selections 29," The Drawing Center, New York
	"From Organism to Architecture," curated by Ross Bleckner, New York Studio School, New York
	"Real Surreal," Lorence Monk Gallery, New York
	"Innovative Still Life," Holly Solomon Gallery, New York
	"New York's Finest," Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles
	Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York
	"Drawings," Barbara Toll Fine Arts, New York
	"Pictures from the Inner Mind," curated by Dan Cameron, Palladium, New York
1986	"Myths," Greathouse, New York
	Dart Gallery, Chicago
	Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York
1987	"The Great Drawing Show," Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles
	"Atelier Conversations," John Good Gallery, New York
	"Mixed Media," Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles
	"Haunted House - Dead Things by Live Artists," Bond Gallery, New York
1988	Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York
	"The Flower Show," Betsy Rosenfield Gallery, Chicago
	"Mutations," Annina Nosei Gallery, New York
	"Untitled (Slime)," Simon Watson, New York
	"Benefit 88," White Columns, New York
1989	"300 Years of Still Life," Michael Kohn Gallery, New York
	"The Nature of the Beast," curated by Barbara Bloemink,The Hudson River Museum, Yonkers
	"Roarrr! The Prehistoric in Contemporary Art," curated by Sydney Walle, New York State Museum, Albany
	"The Silent Baroque," curated by Christian Leigh, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg (catalogue)
	"Ulteriors," Elizabeth McDonald Gallery, New York
	"The Wooster Group Benefit," Brooke Alexander Editions, New York
1990	"Persistance of Vision," Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York
	"About Nature: A Romantic Impulse," organized by Tony Lombardo, Barbara Toll Fine Arts, New York
	"Botanica: The Secret Life of Plants," Lehman College Art Gallery, Bronx
	"Alexis Rockman: Works on Paper," Howard Yezerski Gallery, Boston
	"Spellbound," curated by Christian Leigh, Marc Richards Gallery, Los Angeles
	"The (Un)Making of Nature," Whitney Museum of American Art, Federal Reserve Plaza, New York (catalogue)
	"Drawings," Althea Viafora Gallery, New York
	"Total Metal," curated by Richard Phillips, Simon Watson Gallery, New York (catalogue)
	"The Unique Print: 70's into 80's," Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
	"Body and Soil," Galeria Fernando Alcolea, Barcelona (catalogue)
	"Not So Simple Pleasures: Content and Contentment in Contemporary Art," curated by Dana Friis-Hansen, M.I.T. List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge (catalogue)
1991	"New Generations: New York," Carnegie Mellon Art Gallery, Pittsburgh (catalogue)
	"Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?," curated by Dan Cameron, The Hyde Collection, Glenn Falls (catalogue)
	"Jonathan Hammer: Artist's Books," Shea & Bornstein Gallery, Santa Monica
	"Ornament: (Ho Hum All Ye Faithful)," John Post Lee Gallery, New York
1992	"How It Is," curated by Jonathan Seliger, Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York

	Carl Solway Gallery, Cincinnati
	"Slow Art: Painting in New York Now," curated by Alanna Heiss, P.S.1 Museum, Long Island City
	"Ellen Berkenblit, Albert Oehlen, Alexis Rockman, Philip Taaffe, Christopher Wool," Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York
	"Drawings," Stuart Regen Gallery, Los Angeles
	"Perverse/Nature," Mincher/Wilcox Gallery, San Francisco
	"Mssr. B's Curio Shop," curated by Saul Ostrow, The Thread Waxing Space, New York
	"Changing Group Exhibition: Gallery Artists," Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York
	"Fear of Painting," Arthur Rogers Gallery, New York, 8 September – 3 October
	"The Nature of Science," Pratt Manhattan Gallery, New York; The Schafler Gallery at Pratt Institute, Brooklyn
	"American Drawings Since 1960," Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles
	"Ballots or Bullets: You Choose," curated by G. Roger Denson, Sally Hawkins Gallery, New York
	"Tattoo Collection," Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York
	"Magical Mystical Landscapes," Renee Fotouhi Gallery, East Hampton, New York
	"Transgressions in the White Cube: Territorial Mappings," curated by Joshua Decter, Usdan Gallery at Bennington College, Bennington
1993	"Daylight Savings," John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco
	"Gregory Crewdson, Alexis Rockman, Vincent Shine, Terri Zupanc," Feigen Incorporated, Chicago, 20 February – 27 March
	"Teddy and Other Stories," curated by Luca Beatrice and Cristiana Perrella, Galleria In Arco, Claudio Bottello Arte, Torino, 19 January – 27 February (catalogue)
	"The Spirit of Drawing," Sperone Westwater, New York, 1 May – 12 June
	"Aperto 1993: Emergency," curated by Achille Bonito Oliva, XLV Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy
	"Drawing the Line Against AIDS," curated by John Cheim, Diego Cortez, Carmen Gimenez, Klaus Kertess, Biennale de Venezia and AmFar International, Venice, 8 – 13 June (catalogue)
1993-94	"Timely and Timeless," Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art," Ridgfield, CT, 10 October 1993 – 9 January 1994 (catalogue)
	"A Holiday Show," Savage Fine Art, Portland, 3 December 1993 – 31 January 1994
1994	"don't look now," curated by Joshua Decter, Thread Waxing Space, New York, 22 January – 26 February
	"On the Human Condition: Hope and Despair at the End of This Century," Spiral/Wacoal Art Center, Tokyo, 1 – 20 February
	"Animal Farm," James Corcoran Gallery, Santa Monica, 15 January – 26 February
	"Concrete Jungle," curated by Klaus Ottman, Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery at Wesleyan University (catalogue)
1994-95	"Some Went Mad, Some Ran Away", curated by Damien Hirst, Serpentine Gallery, London, 4 May – 12 June 1994; Nordic Arts Centre, Helsinki, 6 August – 11 September 1994; Kunstverein Hannover, 24 September – 6 November 1994; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago 14 January – 12 March 1995 (catalogue)
1995	"American Art Today: Night Paintings," The Art Museum at Florida International University, Miami, 13 January – 18 February (catalogue)
	Galerie Vidal - Saint Phalle, Paris, 23 September – 16 November
1996	"Screen," organized by Joshua Decter, Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York
1997	"Gothic: Transmutations of Horror in Late Twentieth Century Art," curated by Christoph Grunenberg, The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 24 April – 6 July 1997; Portland Art Museum, Portland, OR (catalogue)
1999	"Get Together, Kunst als Teamwork," curated by Marion Piffer Damiani, Kunsthalle Wien,

Vienna (catalogue)

2000 "Desert & Transit," Schleswig-Holsteinischer Kunstverein, Kunsthalle zu Kiel, Kiel; Museum der bildenden Künste, Leipzig (catalogue)
"Drawings 2000," Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York, NY
"Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art," curated by Toby Kamps, Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA (catalogue)

2001-02 "Paradise Now," curated by Marvin Heiferman & Carole Kismaric, The Museum of Art at The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; Exit Art, New York; The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, 15 September 2001 – 6 January 2002 (catalogue)

2002 "The Empire Strikes Back," The ATM Gallery, New York

2003 "Pulp Art: Vamps, Villains, and Victors from the Robert Lesser Collection," Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn

2005 "Future Noir," Gorney Bravin + Lee, New York

2006 "Into Me / Out of Me," curated by Klaus Biesenbach, P.S. 1 MoMA, New York; KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, Germany; MACRO Museo d'Arte Contemoranea Roma, Rome, Italy (catalogue)
"Dark Places", curated by Josh Decter, Santa Monica Museeum of Art,

2007 "Green Horizons," Bates College Museum of Art
College of Wooster Art Museum at Grinnell College, Grinnell
"Landscape: Form and Thought," Ingrao Gallery, New York
"Failure," Landes Galerie Linz, Linz (catalogue)
"Surrealism, Dada and Their Legacies in Contemporary Art," Israel Museum, Jerusalem
"Savage Ancient Seas," Berkshire Museum

2007-08 "Molecules That Matter," The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs; Chemical Heritage Foundation, Philadelphia

2008 "The Disappearance," curated by Frederic Montornes, Galeria Llucia Homs, Barcelona
"The Apocalypse," Bonelli Arte Contemporanea, Canneto sull'Oglio
"Feeling the Heat, Art, Science and Climate Change," Deutsche Bank Gallery, New York
"Future Tense: Reshaping the Landscape," Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase

2008-09 "Badlands: New Horizons in Landscape," curated by Denise Markonish, Mass MoCA, North Adams, Massachusetts

2010 "Hunt and Chase," curated by Beth DeWoody, Salomon Contemporary, East Hampton
"Plank Road," Salomon Contemporary, New York

2011 "Prospect. 2, New Orleans," curated by Dan Cameron, New Orleans (catalogue)
"The Garden," curated by James Salomon and Beverly Allan, Allan/Nederpelt Gallery, Brooklyn
"Masters of Reality," curated by Julie Bills, Gering /Lopez Gallery, New York
"Oceanomania: Souvenirs of Mysterious Seas-from Expedition to Aquarium," conceived by Mark Dion, co-curated by Sarina Basta and Cristiano Raimondi, Nouveau Musée National de Monaco, Monaco (catalogue)
"The Smithson Effect," curated by Jill Dawsey, Utah Museum of Fine Art at Utah State University, Salt Lake City
"Voyage on Uncanny Seas," curated by Mark Dion, Gallery Diet, Miami
"The Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Art," Maier Museum of Art at Randolph College, Lynchburg

2011-12 "Exit Art: Printed Histories, 15 Years of Exit Art Print Portfolios 1995-2011," Exit Art, New York, 16 December 2011 – 31 January 2012

2012 "Watercolors," curated by Kristin Sancken, Phillips de Pury & Company, New York
"Bad For You," curated by Beth Rudin DeWoody, Shizaru Gallery, London
"Shark," curated by Richard Ellis, Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale
"San Antonio Collects: Contemporary," curated by David S. Rubin, San Antonio Museum of Art,

San Antonio
"Portraits / Self-Portraits from the 16th to the 21st Century," curated by Gian Enzo Sperone and Marco Voena, Sperone Westwater, New York, 12 January – 25 February (catalogue)

2012-13 "Untitled (Giotto's O)," Sperone Westwater, Lugano, 30 November 2012 – 15 February 2013

2012-15 "Vanishing Ice: Alpine and Polar Landscapes in Art, 1775-2012," curated by Barbara Matilsky, Whatcom Museum, Bellingham, 2012; El Paso Museum of Art, El Paso, 1 June – 24 August 2014; Glenbow Museum, Calgary, 27 September 2014 – 4 January 2015; McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Toronto, 31 January – 26 April 2015 (catalogue)

2013 "Come Together: Surviving Sandy, Year 1," organized by the Dedalus Foundation, *The Brooklyn Rail*, Jamestown Charitable Foundation, and Industry City Associates, Industry City, Brooklyn, 20 October – 16 December (catalogue)

2014 "Beyond Earth Art," curated by Andrea Inselmann, Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University, Ithaca, 25 January – 8 June

"Fountains of the Deep: Visions of Noah and the Flood," curated by Darren Aronofsky in collaboration with Dominic Teja Sidhu, 462 West Broadway, New York, 7 – 29 March (catalogue)

"Open Season: Michael Combs and Alexis Rockman," A.D. Gallery, University of North Carolina at Pembroke, 21 April – 20 June

"Back to Eden: Contemporary Artists Wander the Garden," curated by Jennifer Scanlan, Museum of Biblical Art, New York, 27 June – 28 September (catalogue)

"The Fifth Season," curated by Jessica Lynn Cox, James Cohan Gallery, New York, 24 June – 8 August (catalogue)

"On The Blue Shores of Silence," Tracy Williams Ltd., New York, Summer

"Second Nature," Barbara Archer Gallery and The Goat Farms Arts Center, New York, 26 April – 17 May

"Contemporary Art from the Permanent Collection," Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

2014-16 "Gyre: The Plastic Ocean," The Anchorage Museum, Anchorage, 7 February – 6 September 2014; David J. Sencer CDC Museum, Atlanta, 26 January – 19 June 2015; Fischer Museum of Art at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, 2 September – 21 November 2015; Natalie & James Thompson Art Gallery at San Jose State University, 28 January – 1 April 2016 (catalogue)

2015 "The Omnivore's Dilemma: Visualized," Contemporary Art Galleries, School of Fine Arts, University of Connecticut, 4 February – 25 April

"Seven Deadly Sins: Wrath – Force of Nature," Glyndor Gallery, Wave Hill, Bronx, NY, 7 June – 7 September

"DUMP! Multispecies Making and Unmaking," Kunsthal Aarhus, Aarhus, Denmark, 26 June – 20 September

"The Nature of Things: John Alexander, Michael Combs, Alexis Rockman," Salomon Contemporary, New York, 5 November – 20 December

2015-16 "The Value of Food: Sustaining a Green Planet," The Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine, New York, 6 October 2015 – 12 April 2016

"Social Ecologies," curated by Greg Lindquist, Rail Curatorial Projects, Gallery at Industry City, Brooklyn, 4 December 2015 – 21 February 2016 (catalogue)

2016 "Artists in the Field: Irene Kopelman, Pat Pickett, Alexis Rockman," The Drawing Room, East Hampton, 13 May – 20 June

"Water|Bodies," curated by Eric Fischl and David Kratz, New York Academy of Art, Southampton Arts Center, Southampton, NY, 24 June – 31 July (catalogue)

"Transitions: States of Being," Zuckerman Museum of Art at Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA, 10 September – 4 December

"Earth SOS," curated by Marcia Annenberg and Eleanor Flomenhaft, Flomenhaft Gallery, New York, 15 September – 29 October

2017 "Naturalia," curated by Danny Moynihan, Paul Kasmin Gallery and Sotheby's, New York, 19 January – 4 March (brochure and e-catalogue)
"The Coverly Set," Sargent's Daughters, New York, 24 May – 30 June
"Art on the Front Lines," Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, 24 May – 19 August
"The Secret Life of Plants," Freight + Volume, New York, 8 July – 3 September
"Love Among the Ruins," presented by Some Serious Business and Howl! Happening, 56 Bleecker Gallery, New York, 10 September – 7 October
"Occupy Mana: Artists Need to Create on the Same Scale That Society Has the Capacity to Destroy (Year 1)," curated by Phong Bui & Rail Curatorial Projects, Glass Gallery, Mana Contemporary, Jersey City, NJ, 15 October – 15 December

2017-18 "Future Shock," curated by Irene Hofmann, SITE Santa Fe, Santa Fe, 7 October 2017 – 20 May 2018 (catalogue)

2018 "The Hot House," curated by Marilla Palmer, Kathryn Markel Fine Arts, New York, 4 January – 10 February
"The Solace of Amnesia," curated by Alexis Rockman and Katherine Gass Stowe, Hall Art Foundation, Reading, VT, 12 May – 25 November (brochure)
"Intimate Views: Small Painting," Baldwin Gallery, Aspen, 23 November – 17 December

2018-19 "Wunderkammer 1: liquid form," Esbjerg Art Museum, Esbjerg, Denmark, 6 October 2018 – 17 March 2019
"Nature's Nation: American Art and Environment," curated by Karl Kusserow and Alan C. Braddock, Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, NJ, 13 October 2018 – 6 January 2019; Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA, 2 February – 5 May 2019; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR, 25 May – 9 September 2019 (catalogue)
"2018 Exhibition," The Bunker Artspace: Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody, West Palm Beach, 2 December 2018 – August 2019

2019-20 "Occupy Colby: Artists Need to Create on the Same Scale that Society has the Capacity to Destroy, Year 2," Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, ME, 20 July 2019 – 5 January 2020
"Starting Something New: Recent Contemporary Art Acquisitions and Gifts," Mead Art Museum at Amherst College, Amherst, MA, 10 September – 26 July 2020

<u>Monographs and Solo Exhibition Catalogues</u>

1988 *Currents: Alexis Rockman*. Exhibition brochure. Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art, 1988. Joselit, David. ed.
Alexis Rockman: Swim in the Void. Huntington: Aegina Press, 1988. Text by Gary Horn.

1991 *Alexis Rockman*. Exhibition catalogue. New York: John Post Lee Gallery, 1991. Text by Joshua Decter.

1992 *Alexis Rockman*. Exhibition catalogue. New York: Jay Gorney Modern Art; Los Angeles: Tom Solomon's Garage, 1992.
Blau, Douglas, *Index* (see also: updated "Index" published in *Alexis Rockman: Second Nature*)
Alexis Rockman: Evolution. Exhibition catalogue. New York: Sperone Westwater, 1992.

1994 *Alexis Rockman: Second Nature*. Exhibition catalogue. Normal: University Galleries at Illinois State University, 1994. Texts by Douglas Blau, Barry Blinderman, Stephen Jay Gould, Prudence Roberts, and Peter Douglas Ward.
Alexis Rockman: Biosphere. Collection of eight postcards in glassine envelope. New York: Jay Gorney Modern Art, 1994.

Alexis Rockman. Exhibition brochure, folded poster format. Pittsburgh: The Carnegie Museum of Art, 1994. Text by Richard Armstrong (interview with the artist).

1995 *Alexis Rockman: Frame-Work*. Portfolio, Guyana pencil drawings. Los Angeles: Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies, vol. 7, issue 3, 1995.

1996 *Alexis Rockman: Guyana*. Monograph. Santa Fe: Twin Palms / Twelvetrees Press, 1996. Texts by William Beebe and Katherine Dunn.

1997 Haraway, Donna, and Marc Dion, Alexis Rockman, et al. *Concrete Jungle: A Pop Media Investigation of Death and Survival in Urban Ecosystems*. New York: Juno Books, 1997.

Alexis Rockman: Dioramas. Exhibition brochure. Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 1997. Text by Alexandra Irvine.

1999 *Alexis Rockman: A Recent History of the World*. Exhibition brochure. Ridgefield: The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999.

Quammen, David. *Rockman's Global Vision: The World and the Eye.* 1999.

2002 *Future Evolution*. New York: Henry Holt, 2002. Text by Peter Douglas Ward.

2003 *Alexis Rockman*. Artist's monograph. New York: Monacelli Press, 2003. Text: Jonathan Crary, Stephen Jay Gould, David Quammen. Interview by Dorothy Spears.

2004 *Alexis Rockman, Wonderful World*. London: Camden Arts Centre, 2004. Foreword by Jenny Lomax. Texts by Frances Ashcroft, Dan Cameron and Francis Fukiyama.

Alexis Rockman: Manifest Destiny. Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2004. Texts by Maurice Berger and Robert F. Kennedy.

2005 *Alexis Rockman: Fresh Kills*. Exhibition catalogue. Moscow: Gary Tatinsian, 2005. Text by Dorothy Spears.

2006 *Alexis Rockman: Big Weather/American Icons*. New York: Leo Koenig Inc. and Baldwin Gallery, 2006. Introduction by Dorothy Spears. Text by Robert Rosenblum and Bill McKibben.

2007 *Alexis Rockman: Romantic Attachments*. Cincinatti: Leo Koenig Inc. and Contemporary Arts Center, 2007. Text by Matt Distel.

2008 *Alexis Rockman: The Weight of Air*. Waltham: Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University, 2008. Text by Michael Rush, Helen Molesworth and Brett Littman.

2010 Marsh, Joanna, Kevin J. Avery, and Thomas Lovejoy. *Alexis Rockman: A Fable for Tomorrow*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian American Art Museum in association with D. Giles Limited, London, 2010.

2011 Horrigan, Bill. *Alexis Rockman: A Fable for Tomorrow*. Columbus: Wexner Center Publications, 2011.

2013 *Alexis Rockman: Rubicon.* Exhibition catalogue. New York: Sperone Westwater, 2013.

2014 *Alexis Rockman: Drawings from Life of Pi*. Monograph. New York: The Drawing Center, 2014. Interview with Jean-Christophe Castelli.

2015 *Alexis Rockman: East End Field Drawings*. Exhibition catalogue. Water Mill, NY: Parrish Art Museum, 2015. Interview by Terrie Sultan.

2016 *Bioluminescence*. Exhibition catalogue. New York: Carolina Nitsch Project Room, 2016.

A Natural History of New York City. Exhibition catalogue. New York: Salon 94, 2016. Essay by Jonathan Lethem.

2018 Friis-Hansen, Dana. *Alexis Rockman: The Great Lakes Cycle*. Exhibition catalogue. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2018.

Alexis Rockman: New Mexico Field Drawings. Exhibition catalogue with essay by Lucy R. Lippard. Santa Fe: SITE Santa Fe, 2018.

Alexis Rockman: Wallace's Line. Exhibition catalogue with essay by Jean-Christophe Castelli. Aspen: Baldwin Gallery, 2018.

2021 *Alexis Rockman: Works on Paper*. Bologna: Damiani, 2021. (forthcoming)

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1989 Leigh, Christian. *The Silent Baroque*. Exhibition catalogue. Salzburg: Galerie Thaddeus Ropac, 1989.
1990 Friis-Hansen, Dana. *Not So Simple Pleasures: Content and Contentment in Contemporary Art*. Exhibition catalogue. Cambridge: M.I.T. List Visual Arts Center, 1990.
Body and Soil. Exhibition catalogue. Barcelona: Galeria Fernando Alcolea, 1990.
Phillips, Richard. *Total Metal*. Ehibition catalogue. New York: Simon Watson Gallery, 1990.
The Unique Print: 70's into 80's. Exhibition catalogue. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1990.
The (Un)Making of Nature. Exhibition catalogue. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, Downtown at Federal Reserve Plaza, 1990.
1991 Cameron, Dan. *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* Exhibition catalogue. Glen Falls: The Hyde Collection, 1991.
New Generation: New York. Exhibition catalogue. Pittsburg: Carnegie Mellon Art Gallery, 1991.
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1992 *A Private View: Artists' Photographs*. Exhibition catalogue. New York: BlumHelman Gallery, 1992.
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1993 Maxwell, Douglas. *Timely and Timeless*. Exhibition catalogue. Ridgefield: The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993.
The Return of the Cadavre Exquis. Exhibition catalogue. New York: The Drawing Center, 1993.
Drawing the Line Against AIDS. Exhibition catalogue. Venice: The Guggenheim Museum, 1993.
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Up Close: Chemistry Imagined Photogenics. Exhibition catalogue. Ithaca: The Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University, 1993.
Teddy and other stories. Exhibition catalogue. Torino: Galleria in Arco, 1993.
1994 *Concrete Jungle and Books and articles on R-selected Species Concrete Jungle*. Exhibition catalogue. Middletown: Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery at Wesleyan University, 1994. Texts by Klaus Ottman and Bob Braine.
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Friis-Hansen, Dana, and Fumio Nanjo. *On the Human Condition: Hope and Despair at the End of This Century*. Exhibition catalogue. Tokyo: Spiral/Wacoal Art Center; Ashiya: Ashiya City Museum, 1994.
1995 Coppola, Regina. *Nature Studies I*. Exhibition catalogue. Amherst: University Gallery at Fine Arts Center of The University of Massachusetts, 1995.
Pasternak, Anne R., and Ellen F. Salpeter. *Garbage!* Exhibition catalogue. New York: Thread Waxing Space, 1995.

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1996 Kane, Mitchell. *Tahiti: Contemporary Art in an Age of Uncertainty*. Northbrook: The Hirsch Farm Project, 1996.
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2009 Sterling, Bruce. "The Sleep of Reason." Essay for the exhibition "Half-Life" at Nyehaus.
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2010 Keim, Brandon. "Gallery: 10 Visions of the Postnatural World." *wired.com (Wired Science Blog)*, 2 December 2010.
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2011 Lawrence, Sidney. "An Illustrative Career Depicting Dystopias." *The Wall Street Journal*, October 2011.
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2012 Lau, Maya. "Zoo Station: Alexis Rockman's Visual Inspiration for 'Life of Pi.'" *The New York Times Magazine*, 25 November 2012.

2013 Corbett, Rachel. "Nalani Malani, Alexis Rockman, & Other Artists on the Rise." *artspace.com,* 25 July 2013.
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2015

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Kane, Kelly. "A Deep Dive Into the Great Lakes." *americanwatercolor.net (American Watercolor Weekly)*, 27 January 2018.
"Great Lakes Art Exhibition Debuts at Grand Rapids Museum." *www.usnews.com (U.S. News and World Report)*, 27 January 2018.
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"Art exhibit highlights importance of Great Lakes." *www.grandhaventribune.com (Grand Haven Tribune)*, 28 January 2018.
Ellison, Garret. "Great Lakes mural exhibition is journalism with a paintbrush." *www.mlive.com (Grand Rapids News)*, 28 January 2018.
"Alexis Rockman at the GRAM." *Woodtv.com (Eight West)*, 29 January 2018.
Reimink, Troy. "This art exhibit is all about the Great Lakes." *www.freep.com (Detroit Free Press)*, 31 January 2018.
Orttenburger, Marie. "'Alexis Rockman: The Great Lakes Cycle' debuts in Grand Rapids." *greatlakesecho.org (Great Lakes Echo)*, 31 January 2018.
Hunter, Sheri. "Great Lakes murals take center stage at Grand Rapids Art Museum." *www.macombdaily.com (Macomb Daily)*, 31 January 2018.
Dybis, Karen. "Art Museums Blend Community, Culture, Commerce." *www.corpmagazine.com (Corp Bagazine)*, 1 February 2018.
Bleck, Christie. "When science meets art: NMU working with The Great Lakes Cycle exhibit." *www.miningjournal.net (The Mining Journal)*, 23 February 2018.
H., April. "My Daughters Will Never Forget The Great Lakes Cycle at the Grand Rapids Art Museum." *grkids.com (Grand Rapids Kids)*, 4 February 2018.
West, Tanner. "Looking 'Future Shock' in the Face, An Exhibition Gathers Works That Picture a Society Unsettled by Technology." *news.artnet.com (Artnet News)*, 8 February 2018.
Wagner, Krystle. "Local students' art to be featured at GRAM." *www.grandhaventribune.com (Grand Haven Tribune)*, 15 February 2018.
Orttenburger, Marie. "Artist's exhibition offers new take on time, space in the Great Lakes." *www.petoskeynews.com (Charlesvoix Courier)*, 16 February 2018.
Weathers, Chelsea. "Reviews: 'Future Shock.'" *Artforum*, March 2018, 236.

Voon, Claire. "Alexis Rockman Paints the Past and Possible Futures of the Great Lakes." *hyperallergic.com (Hyperallergic)*, 12 March 2018.
Gedert, Roberta. "Artist's work explores the evolution of the Great Lakes." *www.toledoblade.com (The Blade)*, 17 March 2018.
Hudson, Cindy. "'Alexis Rockman: The Great Lakes Cycle' is a must-see art exhibit for Great Lakes lovers." *msue.anr.msu.edu (Michigan State University Extension)*, 11 April 2018.
Stoilas, Helen. "Artists deliver climate-change message that time is running out." *www.theartnewspaper.com (The Art Newspaper)*, 28 May 2018.
Zidek, Gary. "Exhibition Dives Into the Beauty ... and Concerns Surrounding the Great Lakes." *theartssection.org (The Arts Section - WDCB)*, 25 June 2018.
O'Hern, John. "The Great Lakes Cycle." *American Art Collector*, July 2018, 62+.
Scott, Andrea K. "Alexis Rockman." *The New Yorker*, 9 July 2018, p. 10.
Jung, James. "Profile: Alexis Rockman." *Watch Journal*, vol. 20, no. 10, July/August 2018, pp. 28-35.
Saltz, Jerry. "To Do: 1. Alexis Rockman." *nymag.com (New York)*, 22 July 2018.
Waxman, Lori. "Alexis Rockman's large-scale works bring an essential show to the Cultural Center." *www.chicagotribune.com (Chicago Tribune)*, 24 July 2018.
Spears, Dorothy, and Alexis Rockman. "The Art of Travel: Alexis Rockman Interviewed by Dorothy Spears." *bombmagazine.org (BOMB)*, 30 July 2018.
Lescaze, Zoë. "12 Artists On: Climate Change." *www.nytimes.com (T – The New York Times Style Magazine)*, 22 August 2018.
"Water World: Paintings by Alexis Rockman." *Orion Magazine*, Summer 2018, 56+.
Zetouni, Sigalit. "Vast Waters." *Chicago Life Magazine*, Fall 2018, 12.
Magaw, Tim. "Fall Culture Guide: Art and cultural institutions." *www.crainscleveland.com (Crain's Cleveland Business)*, 21 September 2018.
Paddison, Laura. "8 Artists Taking On The Big Global Challenge: Climate Change." *www.huffingtonpost.com (Huff Post)*, 23 September 2018.
Cruz, Catherine. "The Conversation: Wednesday, October 24th, 2018." *www.hawaiipublicradio.org (Hawaii Public Radio)*, 24 October 2018.
Hoke, Lantana. "Alexis Rockman talks about the intersection of art, science, and human impact." *mauitime.com (Maui Time)*, 27 October 2018.
Litt, Steven. "Great Lakes portrayed vividly in Alexis Rockman's MOCA Cleveland show." *www.cleveland.com*, 28 October 2018.
Hennessy, Nicole. "Inside MOCA's compelling new Alexis Rockman: The Great Lakes Cycle exhibition." *www.freshwatercleveland.com (Fresh Water)*, 30 October 2018.
Knowles, Dennis. "Exploring the Past, Present and Future of the Great Lakes Through Art." *www.ideastream.org (idea stream)*, 14 November 2018.

2019

"2019 Milwaukee Spring Arts Preview." *www.milwaukeemag.com (Milwaukee Magazine)*, 25 January 2019.
Jozwik, Catherine. "The Not So Great Lakes." *urbanmilwaukee.com (Urban Milwaukee)*, 26 February 2019.
Bence, Susan. "Environmentally-Focused Paintings About Great Lakes On Display At Marquette University." *www.wuwm.com (WUWM)*, 27 February 2019.
"A Beautiful Art Exhibit Exploring the Great Lakes." *news.yahoo.com (Yahoo! News)*, 24 April 2019.
Michael-Stump. "Notable Michigan Books." *www.record-eagle.com (Traverse City Record Eagle)*, 10 May 2019.
Stoilas, Helen, and Gabriella Angeleti. "United Nations sounds the alarm on species loss – and artists respond." *www.theartnewspaper.com (The Art Newspaper)*, 29 May 2019.
Murphy, Jocelyn. "New Bentonville Exhibit Connects Environment to Art." *www.usnews.com (U.S. News & World Report)*, 17 June 2019.

"Yesterday's tomorrow today: what we can learn from past urban visions." *www.theguardian.com (The Guardian)*, 11 July 2019.

Feature Film

2009-12 "Life of Pi" (2012) directed by Ang Lee "Inspirational Artist and Tiger Vision Art"
2013 The Art of Alexis Rockman, a gallery of work on the DVD Life of Pi, Ang Lee's 2012 Oscar-winning film (this work directly inspired visuals for the film)
2014 "Noah" (2014) directed by Darren Aronofsky "Concept Artist"

Collaborative Exhibition Projects

1992 "Concrete Jungle," (collaboration with Bob Braine and Mark Dion), Galerie Tanja Grunert, Cologne, Germany; travelling to Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT
"The World We Live In," Real Art Wave, Hartford, CT (collaboration with Bob Braine)
Tanja Grunert, Cologne, Germany; Concrete Jungle (collaboration with Bob Braine and Mark Dion)
1993 Zilkha Gallery, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT; "Concrete Jungle" (catalogue)
1994 Marc Jancou Gallery, London, England; "Concrete Jungle"
1997 American Fine Arts, Co., NYC; "Concrete Jungle: Bob Braine, Mark Dion, Alexis Rockman"
1998 The New Museum, New York, NY; The Good the Bad and the Beastly (slide show and talk with the artists and the authors of Wild New York and Concrete Jungle, 30 September)
2001 New York, NY; Riverkeeper poster campaign against General Electric (riverkeeper.org)
2004 Kidrobot, New York, NY at Visionaire Gallery, New York, NY; Dunny toy benefiting the Hetrick Martin Institute

Book Covers and Illustration Projects

1996 Book cover, Dobson, Andrew P. *Conservation and Biodiversity*. New York: Scientific American Library, W. Freeman & Co.
Book cover, *Ecological Assembly Rules: Perspectives, advances, retreats*, edited by Evan Weiher and Paul Keddy, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK
Book cover, *The Diversity of Life*, by Edward O. Wilson, W. W. Norton & Co., New York & London
Book cover, *Green Space, Green Time: The Way of Science*, by Connie Barlow, Copernicus, New York
1997 Book cover, *The Call of Distant Mammoths*, by Peter Douglas Ward, Copernicus, New York
Advertising campaign, Chivas Regal, through Chiat Day, New York
2000 Book cover, *Mysterious America* (revised edition), by Loren Coleman, Paraview Press, New York
2001 Journal cover, *Edentata: The Newsletter of the IUCN Edentate Specialist Group*
2009 Book cover, *Alien Ocean, Anthropological Voyages in Microbial Seas*, by Stefan Helmreich, University of California Press, CA

Teaching

Fall 1998 Columbia University, New York, NY; Drawing

Spring 2000	Columbia University, New York, NY; Graduate Seminar, *Landscape*
Spring 2001	Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
Spring 2003	Anderson Ranch, Aspen, CO; *Plein Air Watercolor*
Fall 2011	Atlantic Center for the Arts, New Smyrna Beach, FL

Internet Projects

1996	Barrusso, Sarah, *Hotwired*, The Nature of Nature, feature/profile (hotwired.com/gallery)
	Rockman, Alexis, *Hotwired*, Work by Alexis Rockman, portfolio (hotwired.com/gallery)
	Braine, Bob, Marc Dion, Alexis Rockman; Guyana, Word, produced by Marisa Bowe, August (*word.com*)
2005	Llanos, Miguel, Fast Forward, the Future of Evolution, King Rat and the Brilliant Squibbon, Experts imagine a Future without Humans, slide show accompanying article (*msnbc.com*)

Lectures, Panels, etc.

1987	Cooper Union
1988	Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston
1991	Cooper Union
1993	Carnegie Museum
1994	Portland Museum (Oregon)
1995	Illinois State University, Tweed Museum, Cranbrook Academy, Cincinnati Art Museum
1996	Detroit Zoo, Montana State University
1997	Contemporary Art Center, Houston
1998	School of Visual Arts, University of Washington
1999	RISD, University of Texas (Austin)
2001	Henry Art Gallery
2002	Guggenheim Museum, Orlando Museum
2003	Royal College Surgeons, American Museum of Natural History
2004	United Nations Paris, Poptech, Wexner Center for the Arts, School of Visual Art, Brooklyn Museum, Getty Research Institute
2005	Harvard Club, Addison Museum, Rhode Island School of Design Museum, School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, National Academy Museum & School of Fine Arts
2006	Bates Museum
2007	Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati
2008	NYU Fine Art Department, MassMoCa, Rose Museum, Deutsche Bank Gallery, New York, NY
2009	Utah State, Smithsonian American Art Museum, School of the Art Institute of Chicago
2010	Explorers Club, Wexner Center for the Arts
2011	Museum of Science, Boston, Wexner Center for the Arts, Smithsonian American Art Museum
2012	Yale University, University of Michigan School of Art and Design, the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts in Grand Rapids, College of the Holy Cross
2013	Purchase College, State University of New York
	State University of New York at New Paltz
	New York Academy of Art, New York, NY
2014	"Slide Slam: From Archive to Art," American Museum of Natural History, 28 April
	Maryland Institute for Contemporary Art (MICA)
2015	Colgate University
	Myers School of Art, University of Akron
	"The Artist's View: Alexis Rockman in conversation with Terrie Sultan," Parrish Art Museum

2017	"Water—A (Re) Source of Inspiration," Panel discussion, Parrish Art Museum, 22 September
	Artist's Talk, DeVos Art Museum at Northern Michigan University, 19 October
	Panel Discussion, DeVos Art Museum at Northern Michigan University, 20 October
	Nurture Nature Center, Easton, PA, 9 November
2018	Whitney Museum of American Art, 6 April
	EarthFest, American Museum of Natural History, New York, 22 April
	SITE Santa Fe, 2 May
	Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE), Chicago Cultural Center, 10 June
	"The Solace of Amnesia," Hall Art Foundation, Reading, VT, 22 September
	"Future Shock," A Conversation with Andrea Grover, Amagansett Public Library, 29 September
	"The Great Lakes Cycle," Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, October
	Honolulu Museum of Art, 25 October
	Maui Arts and Culture Center, 27 October
	"Balancing Act: Food, Water, Energy, Climate," Keynote Speaker, Environmental Science and Policy Program, Michigan State University, 1 November
	"Nature's Nation: American Art and Environment," Princeton University Art Museum, 29 November
2019	Haggerty Museum, Milwaukee, WI, 8 February and 26 April
	Ringling College of Art and Design, Sarasota, FL, 27 March
	"The Seminar on Climate Change," College of the Atlantic, Bar Harbor, ME, 24 May
	Pratt Visiting Artist Lecture, 24 September
	"Alexis Rockman: The Great Lakes Cycle," Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis, 6 November
	"Can Art Drive Change on Climate Change? An Evening with Alexis Rockman," Bruce Museum Presents: Thought Leaders in Art and Science, Bruce Museum, Greenwich, CT, 5 December
	"Confronting Climate Change Denial," Conversations, Art Basel Miami Beach, 7 December

Public Commissions

1997	*A Recent History of the* World, Mural commissioned by the Washington State Arts Commission Washington (now housed in the Fisheries Building, Seattle, WA)
2000	*The Farm,* Creative Time, Billboard Project, New York, NY
2010	Art in Embassies, Baghdad, Iraq and Antananarivo, Madagascar

Public Collections

Art, Design and Architecture Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara
Baltimore Museum of Art
Brooklyn Museum
Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA
Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin
Cincinnati Art Museum
The Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College
Grand Rapids Art Museum, MI
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
Hammer Museum, University of California, Los Angeles
The Israel Museum, Jerusalem
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Amherst, MA
Moscow Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Museum of Sex, New York
The Newark Museum
New Orleans Museum of Art
New York Public Library
Olbricht Collection, Essen, Germany
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts
Picker Art Gallery, Colgate University
Richmond Center for Visual Arts, Western Michigan University
RISD Museum of Art
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
Tang Museum
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive
Queens Museum
University Museum of Contemporary Art, University of Massachusetts, Amherst
United Sates of America Art in Embassies Program, Baghdad, Iraq and Antananarivo, Madagascar
University of Washington, Fisheries Building, Seattle
Vera List Center, New School
Whitney Museum of American Art
Williams College Museum of Art
Wurth Museum, Germany
Yale University Art Gallery
Zimmerli Museum, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ

Awards

1987	Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation
2008	Ruth Ann and Nathan Perlmutter Artist-in-Residence Award