

ALEXIS ROCKMAN



Born in 1962, New York, NY

Lives and works in Warren, CT

Alexis Rockman is an artist and environmental activist who began making paintings and works on paper to build environmental awareness in the mid-1980s. Embarking on expeditions to distant locations like Antarctica and Madagascar in the company of professional naturalists, his work tells stories of natural histories confronting the challenging future we face of the biodiversity crisis, global warming, and genetic engineering.

Notable solo museum exhibitions include *Alexis Rockman: Manifest Destiny*, at the Brooklyn Museum (2004), which traveled to 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 survey of his paintings and works on paper which toured to The Wexner Center for the Arts. In 2013, 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* (2012). His series of seventy-six New Mexico field drawings was included in *Future Shock* at SITE Santa Fe (2017-18). *Alexis Rockman: The Great Lakes Cycle*, a major exhibition of large-scale paintings, watercolors and field drawings, toured the Midwest in 2018-20, opening at the Grand Rapids Art Museum and traveled to five other institutions in the Great Lakes region. *Alexis Rockman: Shipwrecks*, opened at the Peabody Essex Museum (2021) and traveled to Guild Hall (2021), Ackland Art Museum (2022), and Princeton University Art Museum (2022). In May 2023, The Mystic Seaport Museum presented *Alexis Rockman: Oceanus*, featuring ten large-scale watercolors and an 8-by-24-foot panoramic painting commissioned by the museum for their permanent collection. *Mark Dion and Alexis Rockman: A Journey to Nature's Underworld*, was presented at the Bruce Museum, Greenwich, CT in the summer of 2023 and will travel to the Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art, The Tang Teaching Museum and other institutions through 2025. *Naples: Course of Empire* is Rockman's second solo exhibition with Magenta Plains.

Rockman's work is represented in many museum collections, including the Baltimore Museum of Art; Brooklyn Museum; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art; 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.

Hyperallergic
February 13, 2025

HYPERALLERGIC

Art [Reviews](#)

Alexis Rockman Paints Humanity's Final Season

Taking on Thomas Cole's epic *The Course of Empire*, the New York artist asks if we've all had a good run.



Hrag Vartanian 19 hours ago



Detail of Alexis Rockman's "Plague in the Kingdom of Naples, 1656-1658" (2024) (all photos Hrag Vartanian/*Hyperallergic* unless otherwise noted)

There's something about the tiny image of death as a sickle-wielding skeleton astride a Norwegian rat shitting out a yellow plume over the city of Naples that comically, movingly, and perfectly captures the way a pandemic can lay waste to a place. Alexis Rockman's "Plague in the Kingdom of Naples, 1656-1658" (2024) manifests the personification of death and its rodent steed in a realist manner, while the city of Naples is reduced to abstractions as drips, blobs, and hurriedly painted buildings, conveying how the plague that killed an estimated 1.25 million people, including half of the city, left chaos in its wake.

That gestural urbanscape might feel familiar to those of us who sheltered in cities ravaged by our recent pandemic. Our memories of those seemingly endless days of anxiety and death only a few years ago can be hazy, even abstract, and we might continue to actively push them away. That might explain why we're stuck with the rerun of a Trump presidency, as people have actively forgotten the havoc a coronavirus under the leadership of an anti-science zealot can unleash.



Left to right, "Mt. Vesuvius, Autumn, 79 AD" (2024) and "Plague in the Kingdom of Naples, 1656-1658" (2024)

The clear art historical reference in this exhibition, titled *Naples: Course of Empire*, is Thomas Cole's *The Course of Empire* (1833–36) cycle, which hangs at The New York Historical (formerly New-York Historical Society). Rockman's homage adds two more seasons, ranging into eras Cole's serial never attempted, including the Triassic era of 2 million years ago to a post-human world, bringing the full sweep of paintings to seven.

While Cole's paintings are constructed in proportions that echo the golden ratio, with the fitting exception of "The Consummation of Empire," since it depicts the world gone awry, Rockman prefers a more cinematic panel. The scale of his paintings is very close to but not exactly the 2.39:1 aspect ratio seen as ideal for recent cinema, turning them into big screens while challenging the supremacy of the pixel by showing us what paint can do.

This is an ambitious series, and by choosing Naples, a great city that never quite regained its status as a world capital, the artist also reminds us that time is long, while our memories and reign of power are not. Indeed, each of these paintings suggests that the larger plague is us, and the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, as seen in "Post Human: Palazzo Donn'Anna" (2024), will only arrive when we disappear. That dystopic tone seems fitting as we look ahead — we may be beginning to realize that this version of humanity doesn't deserve to be renewed for another season.



Alexis Rockman, "The Fossil Record: Tethys Sea" (2024) (photo courtesy Magenta Plains gallery)



Alexis Rockman, "Grotte di Pertosa" (2024) (photo courtesy Magenta Plains gallery)

Times Union
October 22, 2024



Nature trumps humans in visceral Tang exhibit

By **William Jaeger**, *Freelance Writer and Photographer*

Oct 22, 2024



An installation view of the Tang's "Journey to Nature's Underworld" show, on display until Jan. 5.

William Jaeger/Special to the Times Union

It might be Humans vs. Nature in the two person "Journey to Nature's Underworld" at the Tang museum, but you'll be forgiven for feeling that Nature is totally winning. Between vivid paintings of frantic oversized insects and animals in ghastly exaggerations (by Alexis Rockman) and faux natural history displays with just hints that things are amiss (by Mark Dion) it appears that humans are the ones endangered, or extinct, throughout.

“Throughout,” in this show, means both of the large galleries at the Tang, the expansive space downstairs as an emphatic prelude to more layers of meaning upstairs. A dialog develops between Rockman and Dion, and between humans and the natural world. The more you look, the more you glean.

To be sure, the fanciful paintings by Alexis Rockman would be sufficient on their own. They are very entertaining. Each creates a situation that is partly familiar—you’ll find a house, a hammock, a rowboat—but also inhabited by creatures that are out of control. In “Flight,” a crazed mix of raptors and other birds are rushing at a viewer from an exploding volcano. In “The Hammock,” an unsuspecting person is lounging at night as oversized insects gather.

Rockman’s clever “Departure” could have been the cover art for this show, since it merges a natural wilderness with a human urge to classify it. A lush green background made of a tropical river and green overgrowth is being unveiled by a large bird pulling a red velvet curtain to one side. Closer to us on the shore sits an old-fashioned explorer’s kit: a boat, a rifle, a net, a leather trunk. What’s missing? The explorer.

Dion’s wall of prints in various media form a compendium of pretend (I think) naturalist texts, showing tools, methodologies, and labelled specimens. He also has a large vitrine with what look like photos and travel materials from his journey as an artist. This sits right next to a vitrine by Rockman, containing similar ephemera from that artist’s travels.

It’s this combination of the two artists that compounds things here. If Rockman takes flights of frightening fancy, Dion grounds us in facts that are, at first blush, a matter of material record. For both artists, the world has lost its balance, its inner control, its basic ecology. That word — *ecology* — takes us back to those first decades of what is now called the environmental movement, starting perhaps with post-War ecologist Rachel Carson. But ecology isn’t a passive comment about the tapestry of what exists in Nature (the “environment”) but rather explores the interrelationships within it. Ecology is about effects and dependencies.

It's really Rockman's paintings that animate the *feeling* of the larger collaborative show at hand. The effusions of bugs and birds, overturned ships and underground miasmas of worms, cross-pollinate and become a sugar rush. Dion's complex installations are oddly stiff and staid, relying on the appearance of investigation and discovery — and classification — to bring us in. In this way, the works suggests certainty.

The one directly collaborative work in the back, presented inside a very large plywood packing crate, is "American Landscape," a diorama set on a wooded golf course. Behind the glass, viewers can see, but not touch, a scene of wildlife stopped mid-action in that familiar museum kind of dramatization. A deer, a cat, a goose, and other common suburban animals are staged on a manicured putting green (a yellow flag is in its hole). The glass allows us to see underground, too, to discover a rat in a culvert, as well as piles of garbage in strata below the lawn, no longer hidden.

Rockman and Dion create a true symbiosis in this work, and in the show overall, the way algae with their photosynthetic energy joins forces with earthy fungi to make a third thing called lichen. And to stretch the metaphor, lichens are famously indicators of ecological health, harbingers issuing the clarion call, much like this exhibition, for those who are paying attention.

Fad Magazine
March 31, 2024

FAD

THE TOP 5 ART EXHIBITIONS TO SEE IN LONDON POST-EASTER



Alexis Rockman: Conflagration @ Huxley-Parlour, Swallow Street

The rich greens of the trees mixed with the intense orange of the fires destroying them really captures the sense of what we're seeing in the world around us as wildfires rage across the globe. There's also a great texture to them when you see them up close that adds depth to the paintings. **Until 13 April.**

Creative Boom
March 21, 2024

CREATIVE BOOM

New Alexis Rockman exhibition is an urgent look at the rise of global wildfires

Connecticut-based contemporary artist Alexis Rockman has returned to Huxley-Parlour with *Conflagration*, a solo exhibition of nine new paintings focusing on the increasing occurrence of wildfires worldwide.



What connects Greece, Canada, Spain, Russia, and Portugal? In 2023, they were all ravaged by wildfires, with Canada breaking previous records by a significant margin. These infernos led to emissions of roughly 410 megatonnes of carbon, with many areas experiencing wildfires for the first time.

Artist Alexis Rockman is responding to this monumental ravaging of ecosystems in *Conflagration*, his newest exhibition of paintings at [Huxley Parlour](#). Running until 13 April, the show consists of nine new artworks, including dramatic paintings in which Alexis has chaotically applied paint to reflect the urgency of the situation.

The paintings, developed over 2023, are presented in a critical "moment of no return" regarding the global climate crisis. Putting the behaviour of humans around the world under the microscope, *Conflagration* presents "a pressing vision of the critical environmental state of the planet."

It also represents the latest step in Alexis's 40-year journey of developing a distinct visual language, described as "natural history psychedelia". Featuring radiant, scorching colours and an iconography which draws on everything from natural history illustrations to dioramas in the American Museum of Natural History, this eclectic style is perfectly suited to making a statement about the ongoing climate crisis.

This approach is not just art for art's sake, either. "His methodology is further anchored within rigorous scientific research, often conducted in collaboration with scientific experts and historians, and extensive first-hand field study," the gallery adds.

However, as well as tying into his interests as an artist, *Conflagration* also represents something of a departure. Here, Alexis brings his attention to the present moment and foregoes the post-apocalyptic dystopias that are to be found in his previous work. The end of the world isn't way off in the future; in fact, it's happening right now.

"This series, too, returns to a gestural, impasto style used in earlier works," adds Huxley-Parlour. "Using a combination of oil paint and cold wax on wood to create visceral marks enlivened with a sense of urgency, his gestural brushstrokes reference canonical landscape paintings by Turner, Courbet, and Peder Balke while calling to mind the heavily applied, textural surfaces of Clyfford Still."



Alexis contrasts this painterly language, which traditionally venerates the sublime beauty of nature, with a hallucinatory depiction of the world in ecological collapse. The two contrasting elements come together powerfully to create paintings that are at once spectacular and horrifying.

"Their monumentality is underscored by the inclusion of small-scale foreground elements such as traditional fishing vessels, recreational kayaks, wildlife and livestock," the gallery concludes. "This fundamental tension between beauty and catastrophe defines the world of Conflagration, making Rockman's demands for environmental action more compelling than ever."



Hyper Allergic
July 4, 2023

HYPERALLERGIC

Alexis Rockman Depicts the Ominous Beauty of Glaciers and Shipwrecks

Rockman renders crashing ships invisible behind clouds of snow.



Alexis Rockman, "The Wreck of the Ancon" (2023), oil and cold wax on wood, 48 x 80 x 2 inches (all images courtesy Sperone Westwater)

Dramatic glacier cliffs, painted in craggy daubs of blue and white, tower above the sea throughout Alexis Rockman's portentous exhibition, *Melancholia* at Sperone Westwater. Each painting, in oil and cold wax on wood, depicts one of two scenes: a historical arctic shipwreck, such as the freight and passenger ship Ancon's 1889 crash near Alaska, or an ablating glacier. Both types of scene fixate on a moment of loss, portraying the ship's impact with the ice or the glacier's runoff as kinetic bursts of paint. The surprising visual resemblance between these two different subjects underscores maritime exploration's historical role in contemporary ecological decline, while also romanticizing that decline.

Rockman has painted a sublime arctic landscape before — the gargantuan “South” (2008), which spans almost 30 feet in length across seven pieces of gessoed paper — but the artist typically works in a surreal, almost comic register. The majority of his acclaimed landscapes imagine fantastical eco-dystopian futures, with cross-sectional above-and-below-water compositions that resemble certain natural history museum dioramas, in which exotic animals teem amid the ruins of human civilization. *Melancholia*’s glacier paintings, in contrast, offer no glimpses of what lies beneath the water’s surface and are almost devoid of human or animal presence, with even the crashing ships rendered invisible behind clouds of kicked up snow. A small lone kayak occasionally dots the paintings’ foreground waters, the kind of detail sometimes present in Hudson River School paintings to convey the grandeur of nature’s scale.



Alexis Rockman, “Chattermarks” (2023), oil and cold wax on wood, 48 x 40 x 2 inches

That Hudson River School influence finds its most telling expression in Rockman's "The Wreck of the Ancon" (2023), which alludes to Albert Bierstadt's late-career painting, "Wreck of the 'Ancon' in Loring Bay, Alaska" (1889). Bierstadt was actually a passenger aboard the Ancon when it crashed into an iceless harbor reef; after being rescued, he spent the next week drawing studies of the wreck from a nearby beach. His painting of the scene is uncharacteristically prosaic: beneath a drab sky, the Ancon lists, sleepily, near the shore. Rockman's version is not only more theatrical, with a large spray of snow depicting the crash itself, but also fictionalized, reimagining the crash as occurring against an imposing glacier. This creative liberty encapsulates *Melancholia*'s stylized sadness, the way its arctic paintings portray loss as sudden and spectacular. Such ominous beauty makes it hard to perceive the many gradual, ordinary steps on the path to collapse.



Alexis, Rockman, "Exfoliation" (2023), oil and cold wax on wood, 48 x 40 x 2 inches

The Art Newspaper
June 19, 2023

THE ART NEWSPAPER

A maritime museum shifts its focus to ocean health

The Mystic Seaport Museum in Connecticut is foregrounding ocean ecology in its first contemporary art exhibition, with new commissions by American painter Alexis Rockman



For the first time in its nearly 100-year history, the [Mystic Seaport Museum](#) in Connecticut is addressing the impact of maritime industries on the ocean ecosystems. This new initiative is launching in tandem with [Oceanus](#) (until spring 2024), an exhibition of commissioned paintings by the New York-based artist Alexis Rockman.

Known for his captivating depictions of pressing climate issues, Rockman's work for the museum focuses on the activities happening underneath the water's surface, specifically the connection between seafaring and the introduction of invasive species. The exhibition marks a significant moment in the museum's history as its first show dedicated to contemporary art.

"Museums should use their platform to inspire positive social change through awareness and conversation," says Christina Connett Brophy, the museum's senior vice-president. "We have been taking a critical look at the impact of maritime activities on the world's oceans, beginning with our own Mystic River, which is now teeming with introduced species brought here in the ballast of ships and attached to their hulls."

Seafaring history and its impact



Alexis Rockman, *Rafting the Humboldt Current*, 2022
 Courtesy the artist, Mystic Seaport Museum, Mystic, Connecticut

Rockman's exhibition takes this research as a launching point. The 11 new works include a monumental oil painting that lends its name to the exhibition. At nearly 24ft long, *Oceanus* (2022) offers a remarkably detailed look at seafaring history and the underwater worlds it impacts. Along the top of the work are precise representations of 22 vessels, 16 of which are based on models in the museum's collection. Arranged chronologically, the watercrafts begin with examples from Indigenous communities, including a Pequot muhshoon (dugout canoe), and end with a packed cargo ship, refugee raft and illegal fishing vessel. Interspersed is evidence of human impact on the ocean, such as fishing, whaling, fossil fuel extraction and transportation, as well as the many species living in the ocean. The work features more than 50 meticulously rendered examples of sea life—from whales and sharks to turtles and sea anemones—identified in a legend that accompanies each piece in the show.

"My challenge was taking many historical models of sea-going vessels and creating a compelling painting with these objects and corresponding resources that were exploited by them," Rockman says. "Hopefully this will create an almost encyclopaedic image with many of the global issues that the oceans have and will continue to face from human activity."

In addition to *Oceanus*, the museum commissioned Rockman to create ten large-scale watercolours, which are equally rich in scientific detail. *Transient Passage* (2022), for instance, is based on research by Carlton, Linsey Haram and Greg Ruiz examining how coastal animals are surviving hundreds of miles from shore by colonising plastic pollution. Giving a visual form to this research, Rockman's work depicts various sea organisms thriving on a discarded plastic bottle.



Rockman's *Transient Passage* (2022), a large-scale watercolour based on research into plastic pollution
Courtesy the artist and Mystic Seaport Museum

Many of the watercolours are layered with art historical references, including *Rafting the Humboldt Current* (2022), an image of plants and animals using a raft to colonise new habitats that recalls Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851). In *Melancholia* [↗](#), Rockman's concurrent exhibition at Sperone Westwater in New York (until 28 July), he offers further poetic images of climate change in scenes of calving icebergs and melting glaciers that weave in references to art historical figures such as [Clyfford Still](#).

“Painting can do several things that can’t be achieved in other parts of our culture,” Rockman says. “Painting is visceral, intimate and bigger than our own scale. I hope the exhibition can [convey] some of the issues and challenges that the ocean faces in an impactful way.”

To accompany the exhibition, the museum is highlighting efforts in the so-called “blue economy”—a move to use oceanic resources sustainably—with an installation of such products, including items made of sea kelp, algae and lionfish pelt, as well as technologies to study the ocean.

“All museums seek to remain relevant to visitors, broaden our audiences and inspire meaningful dialogue,” Brophy says. “For maritime museums, this means thinking about what stories are going to be important in the future and how we can be an authentic resource for discussion. I hope our partner institutions join this conversation, as we all have something to bring to the table.” **Annabel Keenan**

The Brooklyn Rail
June 19, 2023

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

Alexis Rockman: *Melancholia* **ArtSeen**

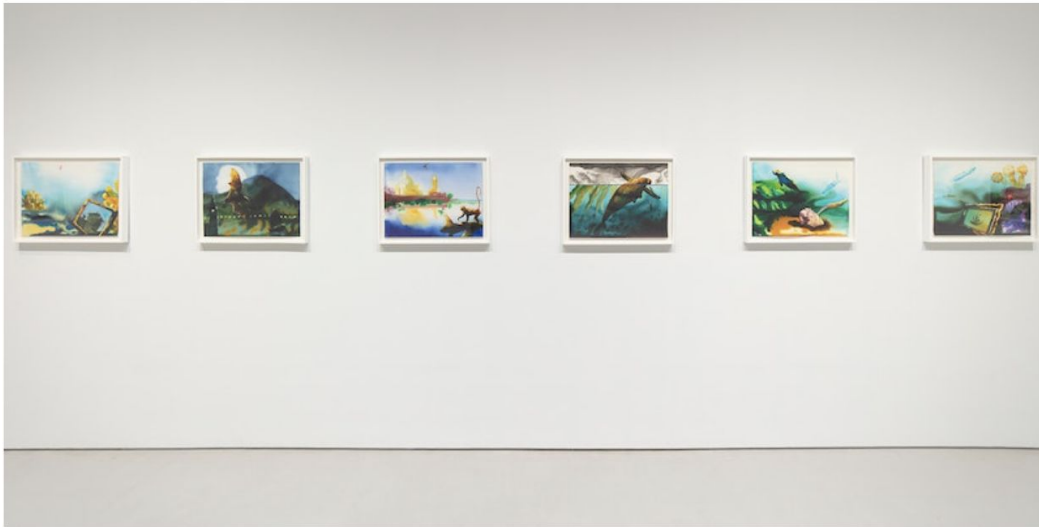
By **Jonathan Goodman**



Alexis Rockman, *Chattermarks*, 2023. Oil and cold wax on wood, 48 x 60 inches. Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York.

Melancholia, Alexis Rockman's fifth show at Sperone Westwater, concerns a series of iceberg paintings on the first floor. On the second floor is a selection of slightly earlier work, concentrating on brilliantly detailed, surreal images of flora and fauna. Rockman has long been recognized for the attention he pays to nature, finding in it not only visual tropes of the most remarkable kind, but a cautionary tale emphasizing our ever-increasing vulnerability to damages brought about by climate change. The blue-white paintings of icebergs, glaciers, and Arctic waters provide us with a visionary understanding of the beauty of the North. But we know now that this landscape is permanently changing, resulting in a destruction we can do little or nothing about.

ON VIEW
Sperone
Westwater
Melancholia
May 11–July 28,
2023
New York



Installation view: *Alexis Rockman: Melancolia*, Sperone Westwater, New York, 2023.
Courtesy Sperone Westwater.

Arete (2023), which is a geological term defined as a “sharp-crested ridge,” accurately describes the display of masses of ice in a dramatic—a nearly melodramatic—composition. A view of staggering verticals is offered, with rounded tops that nearly reach the highest point of the painting. Their visionary blue darkens as the ice descends. Strangely, the icy verticals look like ghostly figures overtaking the rest of the view, which includes, in the middle register a few boulder-shaped forms, with a bright white taking over the right, as much a wave frozen in motion as the top of a mass of ice. Beneath is a lunar landscape of frozen water, with small extensions of ice set on the flat plane.

Another work presents more color than the cold blues and icy whites I have described. In *Chattermarks* (2023), a huge curl of white ice, starting at the lower right and moving upward to bend over what looks like a large cavern of dark green and brown and black, demonstrates the sheer otherness of the Arctic landscape. A thin white sheet of ice drops down from within the cavern, suggesting a suspended waterfall. This work is not so deliberately elegant as the first described; it is more massive than apocalyptic in its suggestions. Rockman is concentrating on the superabundant effects of a world in which people and culture don't mean that much; the self-sustaining atmosphere of a world in which the temperatures are far below zero becomes an example of extreme beauty—but also a clear warning, both visuals and remonstrance being otherworldly.



Installation view: Alexis Rockman: *Melancolia*, Sperone Westwater, New York, 2023. Courtesy Sperone Westwater.

The earlier works on the second floor are highly particularized studies of nature, in slightly bizarre circumstances. *Junk* (2019) portrays a boat with an orange, translucent sail, its ribs extending the length of the cloth. It sails into a gray body of water, with brown birds flying low over the bay or sea. Above, Rockman has included two fuzzy, amorphous rounded figures; they are truly strange in this relatively conventional study of nature. What can the dark blue and slate blue furry heads mean? They are set on the right, just above the gliding birds. A luminous yellow fills the sky backing the heads and to the left. At the top of the composition, we come across a thin bar of orange, as though the sunset was starting to take place. Rockman's mixture of eccentricity, cultural hybridity, and detail make this both a funny and a disturbing painting.

I preferred the northern studies downstairs; Rockman here has a fine sense of the genuine drama attendant to loss of habitat resulting from climate change. His moral stringency is clear. But he confronts issues that are dangerous and meaningful in ways that do not refuse beauty. The iceberg paintings signal the end of the world as we know it; our only remaining chance is to make changes to reverse the troubles, even as we admire Rockman's treatment of this situation. "Melancholia" is the perfect title for this show.

That Hudson River School influence finds its most telling expression in Rockman's "The Wreck of the Ancon" (2023), which alludes to Albert Bierstadt's late-career painting, "Wreck of the 'Ancon' in Loring Bay, Alaska" (1889). Bierstadt was actually a passenger aboard the Ancon when it crashed into an iceless harbor reef; after being rescued, he spent the next week drawing studies of the wreck from a nearby beach. His painting of the scene is uncharacteristically prosaic: beneath a drab sky, the Ancon lists, sleepily, near the shore. Rockman's version is not only more theatrical, with a large spray of snow depicting the crash itself, but also fictionalized, reimagining the crash as occurring against an imposing glacier. This creative liberty encapsulates *Melancholia*'s stylized sadness, the way its arctic paintings portray loss as sudden and spectacular. Such ominous beauty makes it hard to perceive the many gradual, ordinary steps on the path to collapse.



Alexis, Rockman, "Exfoliation" (2023), oil and cold wax on wood, 48 x 40 x 2 inches

Dan's Papers
June 24, 2021

Dan's Papers

Dan's Papers Cover Artist Alexis Rockman on 'The Whale Strikes Back'

This week's cover art was created by lauded New York-based artist Alexis Rockman, who has a long history of visualizing the often apocalyptic collision between human civilization and nature.

His work has been shown at the Brooklyn Museum, the Peabody Essex Museum and the Smithsonian American Art Museum. In 2013, The Drawing Center showcased the watercolor concept paintings that Rockman famously created for director Ang Lee, who had commissioned the paintings to serve as inspiration for his 2012 theatrical adaptation of *Life of Pi*.



Artist Alexis Rockman and Guild Hall Executive Director Andrea Grover. Credit: Barry Gordin

Rockman's work is currently on view at Guild Hall in East Hampton in an exciting exhibition curated by Executive Director Andrea Grover titled *Alexis Rockman: Shipwrecks*. The show is a collection of new paintings and works on papers—including this week's cover art "The Whale Strikes Back"—that view Earth's waterways as a network by which language, culture, history, art, cuisine, religion, disease, warfare has spread across the globe. With intense, dreamy illustrations of shipwrecks and cargo lost overboard, Rockman addresses the impact of migration, colonization and trade on the planet. The exhibition is on view Sunday, Monday, Thursday, Friday from noon to 5 p.m. and Saturday from noon to 8 p.m. through July 26.

Tell us about “The Whale Strikes Back” and the inspiration behind both this action-packed piece.

Any project about the history of shipwrecks must have a whaling image. “The Whale Strikes Back” is from the point of view of the whale and is a key work in my exhibition *Alexis Rockman: Shipwrecks*. This work was inspired by a fantastic 19th century maritime painting by Charles S. Raleigh—I did my own version.



“Hawaii” by Alexis Rockman. Credit: Kira Buckel

What makes this piece such an ideal fit for a *Dan’s Papers* cover?

“The Whale Strikes Back” is the perfect cover for *Dan’s Papers* because it can remind us of the rich history of the East End of Long Island. Whales and whaling were a way of life for centuries, especially in Sag Harbor, where my wife and I have spent many wonderful years. Now, hopefully, we just want to watch and enjoy the whales alive.

Is there anything else you’d like to add?

I’m thrilled to be able to show *Alexis Rockman: Shipwrecks* exhibition at Guild Hall. Curator Andrea Grover and her staff were great to work with. It is a dream come true.

 By David Taylor

SVA NYC: Features
May 27, 2021



‘What’s More Exciting Than a Disgraced Genre?’: Artist and SVA Alumnus Alexis Rockman on His ‘Shipwrecks’ Exhibition

For more than 35 years, artist **Alexis Rockman** (BFA 1985 **Fine Arts**) has built an acclaimed body of work inspired by humanity’s more ill-fated interventions in the natural world. Growing up on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, Rockman gravitated not toward the Metropolitan Museum of Art but the **American Museum of Natural History**, and he counts nature and adventure films among his most formative visual influences. His past works include the **“Great Lakes” cycle**, a series about that vast and increasingly fragile ecosystem, and ***Battle Royale***, which imagines a war between native and invasive species in the Louisiana wilderness; his future projects include *Oceanus*, an epicly scaled painting inspired by maritime history for the **Mystic Seaport Museum** in Mystic, Connecticut.

Rockman’s current exhibition, “Shipwrecks,” is on view at the **Peabody Essex Museum**, in Salem, Massachusetts, through the end of the month, and at **Guild Hall**, in East Hampton, New York, from Saturday, June 12, through Monday, July 26. True to its billing, it offers dramatic scenes of waterborne disasters from throughout history, presenting the sea as a treacherous, unknowable place. Each painting, he says, is ultimately about a mystery.

“Until the 20th century and more mobile photography, so much of our ideas about these events are really through the lens of highly subjective so-called witnesses. Accounts are hearsay, rumor, exaggeration. So in a lot of ways they’re a lot like a fishing tale. Who knows what really happened?”

Rockman recently spoke with us via Zoom about the ideas behind “Shipwrecks,” his path to becoming an artist and his time at SVA.

How did “Shipwrecks” come about?

I had just finished the “Great Lakes” cycle, and I was making **a body of work** about Alfred Russel Wallace, the great Victorian naturalist. He had the misfortune of suffering a traumatic shipwreck early in his career, when he was coming back from Brazil after four years of collecting specimens to sell because he needed to make money, as he wasn’t wealthy. His boat caught fire and he lost everything except for a notebook. I made a painting of that, from the perspective of some of the animals that he had with him, that were either specimens or pets.

The morning after the opening of **the show**, at the Baldwin Gallery in Aspen, I was having breakfast with my dealer, Richard Edwards, and my wife, Dorothy Spears, and they both said, “You should do a body of work about shipwrecks next.” And I was, like, “Hell no, you can’t tell me what to do.” But then I thought, “That’s actually a good idea.”

The shipwrecks genre is pretty loaded. What’s more exciting than a disgraced genre? It felt exciting and risky and there’s obviously so much room to go right and wrong. And the history of human activity is tied up in ships: They’ve been the primary delivery system of humans, diseases, agricultural items, stowaways, invaders, animals, and so on and so forth. So that all sounded right up my alley. And that was in 2017.

I met [Guild Hall Executive Director] Andrea Grover a couple of months later, who asked “What’s your next project?” I was thrilled when she suggested that she curate the show and we have it at Guild Hall. Then she brought on the Peabody Essex Museum.



Alexis Rockman (BFA 1985 Fine Arts), *The Things They Carried*, 2020, oil on wood.
CREDIT: ALEXIS ROCKMAN AND SPERONE WESTWATER, NEW YORK

Of all the works in the exhibition, *The Things They Carried* seems the most topical, with its depiction of several animals that have been known to pass diseases on to humans. Can you talk a bit about it?

The painting is a sort of an amalgam. The whole upper part is based on *Star of Bethlehem* by Elihu Vedder, a very eccentric, interesting 19th-century painter. The figures are from Andreas Vesalius, an anatomist from the 16th century, who drew these neoclassical figures who'd been flayed to show their muscular and skeletal anatomy. Early on when I was thinking about this project my wife had mentioned Vesalius—he was in a shipwreck and ended up dying on an island near Crete.

So I had painted Vesalius' figures in the clouds, and I was going to have Vesalius at the bottom as a figure in the waves with one of his books. Then COVID hit and I thought, "Let's do something about the history of pandemics and animals that have, through no fault of their own, brought specific diseases to humans throughout history." It made sense to revisit the idea of the Tree of Life, so I overturned that and made it a piece of driftwood on the open ocean. The animals clinging to the driftwood, from left, are Shamel's horseshoe bat (*Rhinolophus shamble*), the black rat (*Rattus rattus*), the masked palm civet (*Paguma larvata*), the Javan pangolin (*Manis javanica*) and the black-faced langur (*Presbytis entellus*).

I've read that your work is influenced by your love of movies. There's obviously a narrative or cinematic quality to the "Shipwrecks" paintings, but has film influenced your work in any other way?

I'm so hardwired by media. It very much set my sensibility, the way I frame or see images.

I grew up in Manhattan and wasn't particularly interested in art history or the art world—or certainly not contemporary art in the '70s, which I felt was a big snooze. But I would watch a ton of movies and documentaries—stuff like National Geographic or Mutual of Omaha or Jacques Cousteau—and I always thought I'd work in the film industry somehow, making images. Very much like William Cameron Menzies or later Syd Mead, Ralph McQuarrie, Rob Cobb ... people like that. Ray Harryhausen was a big influence. And *King Kong*, of course. But, you know, to tie it all together, *King Kong* is really about a trip by boat to an exotic other world, a lost world.

Did you spend a lot of time outdoors when you were growing up?

No. I mean, I went to camp and stuff. My stepfather was Australian so I would go there and be outdoors there once or twice a year, diving or something.

But I was very conscious of plants and animals, through spending time at the Museum of Natural History or looking at books. I was obsessed. I collected animals when I was a kid. I always loved, especially, reptiles and amphibians, their behavior and history. There was a moment when I thought it would be a herpetologist, but I don't have the chops to do the math, so to speak. I really just want to draw them. But no, I didn't spend much time outdoors.

Is it true that you initially considered a career in animation?

Yeah.

How, or why, did you make the switch to art?

When I started at SVA I was in illustration, and I was a fan of **Marshall Arisman**. I thought he was making interesting images in the early '80s, and when I met him, he was very generous and kind to me. Then [BFA Fine Arts Chair] **Jeanne Siegel** called me into her office and said, "You know, you really should be in fine art. You're too rebellious and restless to listen to other people's ideas."

And I did switch, and I started painting because one of my teachers, before I switched, taught a class where we copied Old Master paintings. I can't remember her name. But I had copied this [Gustave] Courbet portrait. I had never made a painting before, and I enjoyed it enough to think, "Well, maybe painting is it."

I was sort of intuitively aware that painting was happening around the East Village and stuff like that. And of course the SVA celebrities at that point were **Keith Haring** and **Kenny Scharf**. If they can get their shit together and make a living, then why not me?

Were there any other faculty who had an impact on your work or how you thought about it?

Lorraine O'Grady showed me that there was a way of framing art history through this intellectual lens that appealed to me. My mom was an archaeologist and academic, and I wanted the support of ideas behind what I was doing. I don't know if it's justified, but there's a lot of baggage with painting, like it's only done by idiots or narcissists. I wanted my work to be, like, "social activist" and smart. The other teacher I had who was very influential was the late **Lisa Liebmann**.

They would introduce me to the post-structuralists and the Frankfurt School and Roland Barthes and people like that, who were very fashionable with some of the younger artists in the East Village, and I sort of ended up migrating down to Nature Morte and International with Monument and galleries like that.

How did your career start?

I first showed at a gallery called Patrick Fox in 1985 and sold most of those paintings. Then I was friendly with Jay Gorney, who was the director of another gallery. Several other artists encouraged him to open his own gallery, which would be showing so-called "smart" paintings and post-conceptual objects. I was in the opening group show there in 1986 and that was the beginning. I was 24.

I've been very lucky that people were interested in what I was interested in. Like two months after I started painting, someone wanted me to make a painting for them. Then I was [former SVA faculty member] **Ross Bleckner**'s assistant, and got to see how a professional studio worked. Then before I knew it, I was sort of around people like Julian Schnabel and Barbara Kruger and Troy Brauntuch and David Salle. All these people were sort of in the air, and [the art world] didn't seem like this far-off place. It seemed like just a matter of time before I was going to be in the same position.

Is there anything that you want to tell current students?

The thing about being in the city is that it's so great to be in school and doing whatever you're doing, and then literally you can walk down the street and see a place where you want to end up, professionally. I think so much of being or doing anything in life is really about having the imagination and belief that it's possible.

Art Forum
November 2020

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS NEW YORK

Alexis Rockman

Sperone Westwater
257 Bowery
November 20, 2020 - January 16, 2021

By Robert Becker ☞



Alexis Rockman, *The Rime*, 2020, watercolor and acrylic on paper, 18 x 24".

The ghosts of humankind haunt Alexis Rockman's new marine tableaux, executed in watercolor and acrylic on paper, at Sperone Westwater. In *The Rime*, 2020, a seagull glides before a foundering ship. Nearby, a billowing cloud of ocher and purple—the colors of forest-fire smoke and putrefied flesh—forms the visage of Death itself. Elsewhere, the empty wooden skiff in *Lifeboat HMS Terror*, 2020, floats unmoored on a gelid, blue-gray ocean, encircled by murky ice floes and polar bears. "Lost Cargo," the title of Rockman's exhibition, suggests the befuddlement of our own doomed species, and its extinction in the face of climate disaster. Wild fauna flourishes, while domesticated animals—a horse, some dogs—are adrift in the artist's fabulous, post-apocalyptic settings, without a clue as to how to survive. Grand man-made edifices, such as the Taj Mahal and the Hagia Sophia, make their appearances as decaying memories.

Rockman has been making imagined versions of the natural world and its gradual degradation for more than thirty-five years. Unlike the works in this show, his paintings are often sharply detailed and epic in scale and frequently merge the dark comedy of Hieronymus Bosch with the exquisite tenderness of a John James Audubon rendering. The artist's water-based media react with one another and the paper to create blooming, otherworldly compositions cloaked in luminous mists and liquid shadows—each picture seemingly touched by acid rain. And even though his fable-like cautionary tales, strewn with symbolism and humor, are executed more loosely here, they remain, as usual, monstrously potent. Indeed, we're unable to avert our eyes from Rockman's nightmares, as he makes our creeping ruination so terribly entrancing.

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THE ART NEWSPAPER

‘It's the end of civilisation’: Alexis Rockman on his new watercolour series created during lockdown

The paintings depict animals shipwrecked by the networks of capitalism grinding ecosystems to a nub, the artist says



Alexis Rockman, Liberty Island (2020)

The artist Alexis Rockman has been thinking a lot about historical plagues since he moved from New York to Connecticut due to the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. He sees connections not only between the current emergency and past health crises like the Bubonic Plague that swept across medieval Europe, but with ecological disasters caused by human exploitation, such as the introduction of invasive species. “It's interesting to contextualise what's happening in our lives, within the historical lens of the many times this has happened before,” Rockman says, “and there's such an interconnectedness to habitat, biodiversity crisis and habitat loss.”

While in lockdown, Rockman has been working on a new series of watercolours depicting animals in apocalyptic scenes, under the title *The Things They Carried*. The paintings include images of bats and rats, two suspected carriers of devastating diseases that were passed on to humans, as well as animals displaced from their natural habitats or transported by humans for food or companionship, such monkeys, chickens, a pig and a pangolin.

The series came out of another he was working on for a forthcoming show about shipwrecks and the history of shipping that is due to open next summer at the Guild Hall in East Hampton, New York and travel to the Peabody Essex Museum in Massachusetts. “It was one of those projects that I love doing, that’s a long-term deep-dive into the history of archaeology, invasive species and all the stuff that goes along with that,” Rockman says. “And then the genre traditions are so fascinating too. There’s a lot of great history paintings about shipwrecks. There’s also a lot of terrible ones that have a lot of value, if they’re reconsidered in the right way.”

That research got Rockman thinking about animals that “have been sort of shipwrecked from their habitat by human trafficking and it’s the same networks of capitalism grinding ecosystems to a nub”. And so a pangolin is shown drifting against the background of Liberty Island surrounded by the cranes used to move shipping containers, a pig, fox and chicken sail along a swelling wave towards the Hawaiian islands, and a rat floats atop a hat towards the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. “These animals are making their way to these moments of discovery, and then they just obviously have no context, they’re nowhere,” Rockman says. But the humans who brought them into these locations also brought diseases as well as continuing systemic problems that are the legacy of colonialism. “These dynamics have formed civilisation,” Rockman says. Which makes the current crisis perhaps inevitable. “It’s the end of every world because it’s the end of civilisation, as these things become dislodged. We have no way of dealing with it.”