

Alexis Rockman: *Naples: Course of Empire***January 16–March 1, 2025****Level One**

Magenta Plains presents *Naples: Course of Empire*, a series of seven new paintings by Alexis Rockman. Rendered in Rockman's signature style of history painting, these oil on panel works each display a stage in the life cycle of Naples, Italy and its relationship to the natural environment from the Cretaceous Period to a likely future post-climate disaster. Taking one of Europe's greatest coastal cities as a site for the first time, Rockman provides an example for other shore-side towns at risk due to higher global temperatures. The exhibition will travel to Fondazione Morra Greco in Naples, Italy, to be on view in Spring 2025.

Alexis Rockman's work addresses the sustainability of human consumption and our imperative to protect the natural world from pollution, introduced species, genetically-modified organisms, climate change and other man-made disruptions. In *Naples: Course of Empire*, Rockman mixes his signature realism with more abstract brushstrokes and visibly painted surfaces, evoking the chaos and tumult of Naples' past and history foretold. Referencing Thomas Cole's seminal cycle *The Course of Empire* (1833-36), this cycle of paintings seeks to locate the ecological footprint of human settlement of Naples and its impact on the local flora and fauna. It does so with an eye toward a dystopic future which seems ever more likely as the international community postpones a genuine, coordinated effort to fight climate change.

An Ichthyosaur, a dinosaur, and flowering plants endemic to the area around Naples 200 million years ago are washed up on the beach under a cycad tree in *The Fossil Record: Tethys Sea*. In *Grotte di Pertosa*, human beings enter this tale, as he represents a romance between a neanderthal and a modern human in a natural cave destined to become one of Naples' notable tourist attractions. Rockman's painting *Mt. Vesuvius, Autumn, 79 AD* represents perhaps the most famous natural disaster in history: the volcanic eruption which buried the ancient Roman towns Pompeii and Herculaneum—seen from the perspective of the local fauna. In *Plague in the Kingdom of Naples, 1656-1658* inhabitants of the city suffer at the hands of the Bubonic plague, spread by an airborne avatar of Death. In *The Departed*, Rockman visualizes the epidemic of overfishing in the Mediterranean, with species that have suffered below the waterline and a historical progression of fishing vessels above. This work is inspired by the structure of a trophic web or food chain, depicting how nutrients move across ecosystems in the forms of plants and animals. In *Acquario di Napoli - Stazione Zoologica Anton Dohrn*, Rockman illustrates the Neopolitan city aquarium in ruin underneath 70 meters of sea water, the very possible result of climate change. The Gulf of Naples as we know it will not survive catastrophic sea level rise, and in this painting we see its uncertain future: submerged and inhabited by invasive species such as lionfish, reticulated leather jacket, and big-fin reef squid. Finally, in *Post Human: Palazzo Donn'Anna* Rockman shows a whale breaching and overjoyed, celebrating the extinction of humanity in front of the ruins of one of the most recognizable buildings on the Neopolitan coast.

In the past, Rockman has addressed the impact of introduced plant and animal species on wetland ecosystems in Louisiana, presented a vision of the Brooklyn waterfront submerged beneath the sea due to the effects of global warming, imagined drinking water from the Gowanus Canal—one of the most polluted bodies of water in the world, envisioned a farm filled with genetically-modified

organisms to ask what role should ethics play in research and experiments, examined the intertwined natural and human histories of the Great Lakes, and depicted a collection of extinct species, including the iconic dodo. In tandem with these paintings, Rockman has also executed a series of *Field Drawings*, which represent the various native animals and plants to Campania and the area around the city, made from stones and earth collected from the slopes of Mount Vesuvius. Contrary to the narrative structure of the painting cycle, these drawings serve as a small sampling of the wilderness inherent to the land on which Naples is situated. Collectively, the paintings and drawings which comprise *Naples: Course of Empire* demonstrate the ways in which nature responds to our interventions, and how they impact the other species with which we share the world.

Born in New York City in 1962, 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 76 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 Summer 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. He lives and works in Warren, Connecticut.