

INTERNATIONAL ● REVIEW

# Art in America

**Alexis  
Rockman**

Matthew Ronay

Alberto Burri

Simon Fujiwara

plus

Caravaggiomania



# IN THE STUDIO

## ALEXIS ROCKMAN

### WITH DAN TRANBERG

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.

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.

Alexis Rockman in his studio working on *South*, 2008. Photo Kimi Weart.

All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Rockman Studio.

#### CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Alexis Rockman: A Fable for Tomorrow," at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., through May 8, 2011.

**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 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

**"WHEN ACRYLIC PAINT FIRST CAME OUT, IT QUITE LITERALLY WAS TOXIC. IT KILLED PEOPLE. SO FOR ME, MORRIS LOUIS IS THE TOXIC SUBLIME."**

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.

**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 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.

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

"I WAS VERY ENCOURAGED THAT ROBERT SMITHSON HAD ALLUDED TO THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE DIORAMA FORMAT IN NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUMS IN HIS EARLY WRITINGS."

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 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 some-



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

*The Farm*, 2000, oil on wood, 96 by 120 inches.



**“MARK DION 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.”**

thing 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.



Left, *Wallabee*, 2004, soil, acrylic polymer and wallabee fur on paper, 9 by 12 inches.

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



**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 calligra-

phy, 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 pro-

**"I HAVE ALWAYS SEEN THE BACKGROUND, OR THE SPACE BEHIND WHATEVER I'M PAINTING IN THE FOREGROUND, AS A PIECE OF HISTORY."**

cess. 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.

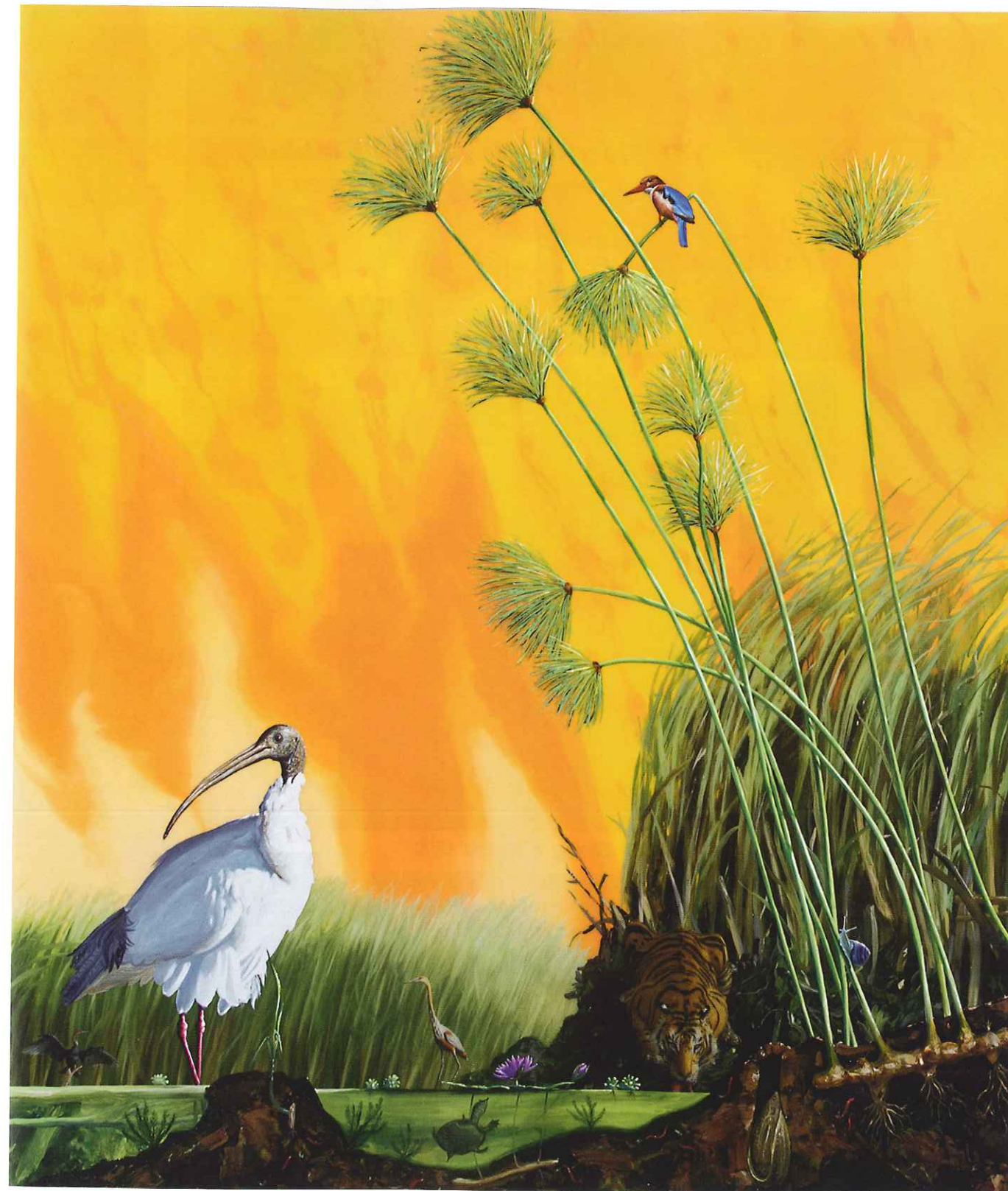
**DT** One of the things that really interests me about your paintings is that they don't function solely in the esoteric social space of the art world.

**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.



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

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