

ALEXIS ROCKMAN

A FABLE FOR TOMORROW

ALEXIS ROCKMAN (b. 1962) has been depicting the natural world for more than two decades. As a child, Rockman spent countless hours exploring the American Museum of Natural History in his native New York City. There he witnessed the joining of science and art in habitat dioramas and elaborate wall murals depicting the evolution of the natural world. These early encounters inspired him to adopt a similar practice in his own work, bringing together fact and fantasy to raise awareness about the state of our planet.

Rockman's unique artistic approach echoes the strategy employed by environmental advocate Rachel Carson in the prologue to her book *Silent Spring* (1962). Titled "A Fable for Tomorrow," Carson's opening chapter combines mythic narrative and factual reportage to forecast the dangers of chemical pesticides. The confluence of fantasy and erudition found in Carson's "Fable" is also a defining feature of Rockman's art. His vivid, often apocalyptic images create a fictional world anchored in disturbing reality. Using sources as varied as nineteenth-century landscape painting and science fiction film, Rockman has created a stunning body of work that comments on the tension between nature and culture evinced by our increasingly fragile ecosystem.

The artist currently lives in New York with his partner, Dorothy Spears, and her two sons.

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EARLY WORK

Rockman's paintings of the late eighties and early nineties evoke the aesthetic inspiration afforded by his boyhood visits to the American Museum of Natural History. Many of his early pictures borrow directly from museum displays and present a vision of nature as a site of primordial struggle. Images of biological growth and decay abound in paintings such as *The Dynamics of Power*, in which a colony of leaf cutter ants swarms the lifeless body of a Blue Morpho butterfly. The natural chain of animal consumption reaches its apogee in *Object of Desire* as the body of a small mammal is overwhelmed by a mass of green beetles. The dripping paint and disintegration of form create a visceral sense of natural consumption, and introduce two recurring themes in Rockman's early work: the inexorable cycle of life and death, and the inevitable march from proliferation to decay.

Pond's Edge

1986

oil and acrylic on canvas

Pond's Edge is one of Rockman's first paintings inspired by a natural history subject—the *Periophthalmus*, or mudskipper. We are plunged directly into the scene and confronted with the monumental face of a mudskipper resting at the surface of a still pond. His bulging eyes scan for food: skyward toward a dragonfly and downward to a mosquito larva. A precise blue line delineates sky from water, allowing us to see the animal from both above and below the water's edge. This compositional device is a signature of Rockman's work, providing a means to simultaneously represent terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems.

Rubell Family Collection, Miami

The Balance of Terror

1988

oil on canvas

The Balance of Terror is based on an agricultural display from New York's American Museum of Natural History and provides an interior view of a large green apple with a mealworm at its core. The engorged beetle larva burrows through the fruit, leaving behind a trail of feces. Meanwhile, a menacing Venus Flytrap stands to the left, waiting to capture a nearby fly. Rockman's palette contributes to the painting's eerie mood. Richly hued areas of opacity dissolve into transparent veils of glaze, creating a palpable tension between life and death.

James and Abigail Rich

Forest Floor

1989

oil on wood

Forest Floor is the pinnacle of Rockman's early ruminations on growth and decay. The painting presents a vastly magnified image of the teeming life that hides beneath a pile of leaf litter. It is based on a museum display that Rockman visited frequently as a child and young adult. The painting's tripartite compositional format mimics the multitiered structure and omniscient perspective afforded by the original diorama.

Courtesy of the Artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York

Evolution

1992

oil on wood

Evolution is the artist's first monumental landscape painting. The compositional format once again references the planar structure of dioramas, while the imagery reflects Rockman's interests in evolutionary biology, taxonomy, time lines, and widescreen cinema. The painting also alludes to iconic works from the Hudson River school, in particular the dramatic landscapes of Frederic Edwin Church, Thomas Cole, and Thomas Moran. While these painters have had a profound and lasting influence on Rockman's development, *Evolution* is more than an amalgam of nineteenth-century references. The painting is a riveting summation of the artist's early work, an inventory of images and ideas nurtured since childhood and laid out over four vivid panels. Together the panels present an eerie juxtaposition of real and imagined animals from prehistory to the present.

Collection of George R. Stroemple

BIOSPHERE

Based on Douglas Trumbull's eco-thriller, *Silent Running* (1972), the "Biosphere" paintings imagine an apocalyptic vision of the future in which flora and fauna must be jettisoned into space to preserve them from Earth's polluted environment. Similarly, Trumbull's film tells the story of Freeman Lowell, a forest ranger sent into space to care for the planet's last remaining trees, which are stationed aboard a colony of interstellar biodomes. Like a galactic Noah's ark, each "Biosphere" painting depicts an exotic array of plants and animals from geographic locations around the globe. *Biosphere: Tropical Tree Branch*, for instance, shows a daisy chain of creatures—a proboscis monkey, an anteater, an orange-and-black-striped poison dart frog, and a beetle—arranged along a moss-covered tree branch. A distant whirling galaxy is visible through the space-station window. Its twisting form suggests the primordial spiral of organic growth, an image that is repeated in *Biosphere: Hydrographer's Canyon*.

GUYANA

In 1994, Rockman journeyed into the dense South American jungle of Guyana and spent two months documenting the vast array of insect life that inhabits the equatorial rivers, streams, and forests. As in his early work, Rockman alternates viewpoints dramatically, at times pulling back to provide a sweeping overview of the jungle interior and at other moments thrusting the viewer headlong into the ruthless food chain of a poisonous insect. What distinguishes the Guyana pictures from Rockman's previous work is their complete authenticity, the result of a self-imposed restriction to invent nothing and instead paint only the flora and fauna found in the rain forest. Despite their resolute fidelity to nature, Rockman's Guyana works are no less haunting than his imagined scenarios. They delight in the weirdness of what is real, bringing us face-to-face with the incomparable biodiversity of the jungle interior.

Kapok Tree

1995

oil on wood

In *Kapok Tree*, Rockman transports us to the interior jungle of the Guyanese rain forest. We stand beneath the great kapok tree at twilight, gazing up at the dense canopy and the starry sky beyond. The velvet darkness is momentarily broken by a pool of artificial light revealing a nocturnal world in motion on the ample trunk. The words of entomologist Edward O. Wilson seem to reverberate through the enveloping foliage: “The forest at night is an experience in sensory deprivation . . . black and silent as the midnight zone of a cave. Life is out there in expected abundance. The jungle teems, but in a manner mostly beyond the reach of the human senses.”

Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University, Milwaukee,
Gift of Peter Norton

Drainage Ditch: Georgetown

1995

oil on wood

In *Drainage Ditch*, Rockman transports us from the jungle interior to the Guyanese capital of Georgetown. Located on the Atlantic coast, three feet below the high-tide level, the city depends on a network of drainage canals to prevent severe flooding. In many areas, however, human and industrial debris obstruct the vital waterways. Rockman's painting depicts one such scene. The composition is divided into four separate quadrants, providing simultaneous views of a drainage canal during the day and at night. A corrugated fence, rusted from neglect, serves as metaphor for the artificial divide between man and nature.

Morris and Sherry Gracie, Los Angeles, California

URBAN JUNGLE

Between 1992 and 1997, Rockman completed two separate but related bodies of work—the “Concrete Jungle” series and the “Diorama” series. Both projects illustrate the ways that human society has impacted the species with which we cohabit. In *Airport*, for instance, the clash between man and nature becomes viscerally evident as a disoriented gull collides with a jet engine. *Golf Course* offers a similar cautionary tale, reminding us that ecological decay lurks just below the surface of our most controlled environments. These images, part of Rockman’s “Diorama” series, were constructed by adhering objects to a digital photograph and then applying layers of synthetic resin to create an impenetrable block. Each scene includes a range of media, from household trash and scientific models to taxidermy animals.

Ready to Rumble

1997

oil on wood

In *Ready to Rumble*, Rockman lands the viewer directly atop a stinking dump where we are confronted by a pack of caped crusaders dressed in World Wrestling Federation regalia. As in the artist's earlier work, the unsettling mixture of cartoon cuteness and ecological ruin are a reminder of the ridiculous lengths we often take to soften and sanitize the unpleasant aspects of modern society—a collective fantasy that Rockman gleefully parodies in his portrayal of urban decay.

Private Collection, New York City

EXPEDITION

In 1998, Rockman returned to the rain forest of Guyana with the intention of documenting his trip with the same meticulous attention to detail that he applied four years earlier. But the artist's original earnestness about field observation was quickly replaced by a fascination with pop-culture representations of ecotourism and the exotic allure of adventure travel. In the resulting series, titled "Expedition," the verdant jungle becomes the backdrop for a human drama starring Rockman and his friends as they camp, fish, and commune on the Essequibo River. Each painting presents a fictional narrative about the potential hazards of traveling in an unfamiliar environment and the foolish naïveté of the typical eco-traveler.

The Hammock

2000

oil on wood

In *The Hammock* an unsuspecting tourist sleeps under the stars, oblivious to the perils that surround him. The warm glow of a lantern underscores the traveler's romanticized notion of "getting back to nature." A shotgun leans just within arm's reach, but will do little to defend against the swarm of angry mosquitoes about to wreak havoc on the traveler's exposed flesh.

Collection of Ninah and Michael Lynne

The Conversation

2001

oil and acrylic on wood

The *Conversation* presents an imagined encounter between the artist and our extinct human ancestor, *Australopithecus*. As such, this self-portrait references both the pioneering theories of Charles Darwin and the studies of American zoologist Dian Fossey, who lived and worked with mountain gorillas in Africa for nearly eighteen years. Fossey's widely disseminated story continues to be a source of both inspiration and intrigue for aspiring naturalists. But Rockman is quick to remind us (through the potent image of a hunting rifle) that the idealized conception of field-work is a tenuous illusion at best.

Collection of Richard Edwards, Aspen, Colorado

ARTIFICIAL SELECTIONS

Rockman has long been fascinated with the role that culture plays in determining the course and general conception of natural history. The paintings in this section of the exhibition focus on the role that humankind has played on the manipulation of species through real and imagined means. The improbable and even impossible situations presented in these works are the result of various forms of artificial selection, from cross-species breeding and genetic engineering to the comparatively low-tech practice of literary invention. Rockman's interest in these subjects first appeared in the early 1990s with scenes of animal copulation and bizarre mutations. Over the last fifteen years, as advances in biotechnology and genetics have literally transformed our landscape, Rockman has become increasingly concerned with how our future may look.

Still Life

1991

oil on wood

Still Life exemplifies Rockman's early artistic experiments with animal mutation. The painting depicts a *Wolpertinger*, a creature from Bavarian mythology fabled to inhabit Germany's alpine forests. Its body is an amalgam of anatomical traits from a rabbit, chicken, bird, and deer. The image is reminiscent of Dutch game pictures from the seventeenth century, in which spoils from the hunt are presented as symbols of both prosperity and privilege. Rockman's parody of the genre serves as a devilish reminder that nature is seldom as harmonious as it appears in the painted world.

Collection of Samuel and Ronnie Heyman, New York

The Farm

2001

oil and acrylic on wood

The Farm depicts the transformation of agricultural farming through the introduction of genetic engineering. The wide-angle view of a soybean field recalls the perfectly aligned crop rows found in many Regionalist paintings of the 1930s and suggests the importance of soy cultivation to Depression-era farmers. More recently, the soy plant has earned the dubious distinction as the most common genetically modified crop in the United States. Rockman comments on this aspect of the biotech revolution as well as current attempts to bioengineer livestock. Progressing diagonally from upper left to lower right, *The Farm* illustrates three familiar farm animals that have been gradually altered through genetic modification.

Joy of Giving Something, Inc.

Sea World

2004

oil and acrylic on wood

Sea World portrays a futuristic aquatic theme park where extinct and imagined marine animals perform for a throng of onlookers. In the background, a seal with heads at each end of its body basks on the terraced fountain while a bikini-clad woman rides a Jurassic-age reptile. And in the foreground, a polar bear shaped like a sea urchin bounces out from a water slide while two giant tentacles creep along the tank's glass enclosure. Despite the spectacle, the audience appears unfazed by the genetic mutations on display.

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Gift of
Pamela K. and William A. Royall, Jr.

Manifest Destiny

2003-4

oil and acrylic on wood

While Rockman has always dealt with the fracture between nature and culture, *Manifest Destiny* was the first work to confront the climate crisis and its human toll. As such, it is a fulcrum in the artist's career, a pivotal summation of past work and a sign of things to come. The painting depicts the Brooklyn waterfront several hundred years in the future after global warming has ravaged the landscape. The composition is framed by two degrading bridges. On the far left panel a futuristic suspension bridge lies beneath the elevated waters of the East River. The historic Brooklyn Bridge stands in ruinous decay on the far right panel of the painting, a victim of its own aging infrastructure. Despite the ominous tenor of this post-apocalyptic scene, *Manifest Destiny* does not herald the end of all life. On the contrary, the picture is teeming with organic growth. The presence of local flora and fauna confirm the adaptive power of nature and the promise that life will persist even if humanity does not.

Courtesy of the Artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York

AMERICAN ICONS

Rockman continues his meditation on the impact of global warming in the “American Icons” series, where national landmarks and bastions of power are reduced to architectural ruins. These futuristic paintings imagine how the natural and built environment would look after the complete demise of the human population. The modern landmarks bear a striking resemblance to ancient civilizations that have been conquered by time and nature. The U.S. Capitol is engulfed by a thick mound of vegetation, Disney World is shrouded in chilling gray fog, and Rockman’s own childhood home on East 82nd Street has disappeared beneath a jungle of kudzu.

Mount Rushmore

2005

oil on wood

In *Mount Rushmore*, Rockman transforms the beloved national monument into a swamped ruin. The monument was originally conceived as a tribute to presidents George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln for their efforts to protect the American landscape. In an ironic twist, however, Rockman depicts the leaders nearly submerged beneath crystalline waters. Once a monument to environmental progress, Mount Rushmore now appears all but drowned by the regressive effects of climate change.

Jeffrey Seller and Joshua Lehrer

Hollywood at Night

2006

oil on wood

In *Hollywood at Night* the famous California hillside has devolved into a primitive landscape. The towering letters of the landmark Hollywood sign are illegible against the night sky. The city of Los Angeles is still visible in the distance, but its power has long been extinguished. The only remaining light emanates from the crescent moon and the twinkling bioluminescence of fireflies that have migrated westward to the City of Angels.

Mr. and Mrs. Henry P. Davis

South

2008

oil on gessoed paper

In November 2007, Rockman traveled to the Antarctic Peninsula on a small expedition ship called *The Endeavor*. Accompanied by a team of guides and his partner, Dorothy Spears, he spent twelve days exploring and documenting the “White Continent.” The resulting painting, *South*, is an epic panorama of the artist’s voyage and the luminous polar landscape.

The Pappas Family, Boston

BIG WEATHER

The relative calm of Rockman's *South* finds a counterpoint in his concurrent series of "Big Weather" drawings. Colossal cloud formations, tornadoes, dust storms, and hurricanes overwhelm the landscape (and the viewer), while man-made creations—oil derricks, rail tracks, and wind turbines—are rendered in miniscule detail along pencil-thin horizons. These extreme environmental events emphasize the unpredictability of nature. Rockman's expressionistic paintings surge with unbridled energy, as if channeling the turbulence of his subject matter. Executed on heavily gessoed sheets of thick paper, the painted surface is awash in vivid stains, pours, pools, and drips.

Cataclysm

2003

oil and acrylic on wood

In *Cataclysm*, Rockman shows the effect that a natural disaster has on even the smallest creatures. Rockman plays with notions of scale as a swarm of insects appears on par with the apocalyptic destruction that it flees. Coming toward us, the insects consume our vision and block our view of the erupting volcano behind. Yet even our view of the things closest to us is obscured. The intense realism of bodies and limbs cropped by the frame questions our ability to see and understand unpredictable natural forces.

Collection of Melva Bucksbaum and Raymond Learsy

The Reef

2009

oil and resin on wood panel

In *The Reef*, Rockman depicts a radiant beam of sunlight penetrating the shallow sea to a coral reef below. The painting is a subtle commentary on the abundance of marine life supported by a single reef and the vulnerability of these complex ecosystems. Ozone depletion, ocean warming, and pollution are just a few of the threats facing coral reef colonies and the hundreds of species that reside within them.

Pamela K. and William A. Royall, Jr., Richmond, Virginia

Only You

2008

oil on wood

In *Only You*, Rockman uses the popular catchphrase of Smokey the Bear, “Only you can prevent forest fires,” to comment on the destruction caused by wildfires.

The painting depicts a massive conflagration inspired by the final scenes from the 1942 Disney movie, *Bambi*. Rather than focus on an adorable protagonist, however, Rockman illustrates the fate of the insects that inhabit the forest. “I’m always fascinated by the things that are the least considered,” he explains. “The things that are uncared for, unattractive, unlovable.”

Courtesy of Tim Nye