

## An Illustrative Career Depicting Dystopias

By SIDNEY LAWRENCE



'Evolution' (1992), by Alexis Rockman. *GEORGE R. STROEMPLE COLLECTION/ALEXIS ROCKMAN*

### *Columbus, Ohio*

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

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

magazine or look at a photograph, say the detractors. Chill out and open up to the artistry of depiction, say the revisionists.

## ALEXIS ROCKMAN: A FABLE FOR TOMORROW WEXNER CENTER FOR THE ARTS

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

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

The earliest paintings on wood (Mr. Rockman's preference to canvas) look great in the hyperdramatic, elongated galleries of the Wexner. "Amphibian Evolution" (1986), based on a textbook diagram, features branches, roots and Botero-fat frogs and crocodiles above and below a waterline in a bold, free-form composition of controlled chaos that feels very art-world

contemporary.

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

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

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

plus a pathetically overbred Chinese Crested dog, presented on an oval insert like a blue-ribbon prize.

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

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

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

Mr. Rockman's most recent large-scale opus, "South" (2008), seems dull by comparison. Recounting his sojourn to the Antarctic, the work pays homage to a Church painting of 1861 and marks a departure for the artist, who moves into a more experimental, improvisational mode. Mammoth icebergs are

rendered with a palette knife, the polar weather is in gray washes, and drips and drops may—or may not—indicate ice-cap melting. But the 30-foot-wide, seven-paneled work on paper is too big, chopped up, and thematically vague to stir the soul.

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

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