Under Water: Aesthetics and Function in Alexis Rockman's Flooded Landscape

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UNDER WATER: AESTHETICS AND FUNCTION IN ALEXIS ROCKMAN'S FLOODED LANDSCAPE

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in the Art History

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All requirements for graduation with Honors in the Art History have been completed.

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Under Water:
Aesthetics and Function in Alexis Rockman’s Flooded Landscape

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Three thousand years into the future New York City has sunk back into the sea and all human life has disappeared. Humanity has not, however, vanished without a trace. Nor have all familiar creatures disappeared with us. Evidence of the human past remains in collapsing, hollowed skyscrapers, in a suspension bridge broken down in that future but not yet constructed in our present, and in the crumbling Brooklyn Bridge with its iconic towers still standing against the unrelenting erosion of time. In our absence other life forms flourish under water and in the sunset-orange sky. Eels slither through the spare frames of our once-proud structures and seals float alongside anemones and over bridges. Pelicans, gulls, and an array of other water birds soar overhead. A rat swims away from a fish and a cockroach balances on a barrel, proof that humanity’s constant rodent and insect companions have survived the deluge that we could not.\(^1\)

Also outliving the human race in these deep waters are pfiesteria, adenoviruses, SARS, Mad Cow Disease, West Nile Virus, and AIDS. Genetically modified salmon and crustaceans at home in these polluted waters blur the line between human legacy and natural environment while two tiers of sea walls stand uselessly amidst it all. This is the imagery of a monumental work of speculative fiction in oil paints – Alexis Rockman’s 2004 *Manifest Destiny* (Fig. 1) – a twenty-four foot long mural-scale painting commissioned by the Brooklyn Museum depicting a panorama of a flooded New York from the museum at the left to the Brooklyn Bridge at the right. The painting debuted in the museum’s atrium the year of its completion.\(^2\) *Manifest Destiny* is at once beautiful, humorous, and a frightening prophecy of humanity’s self-destruction. It is a

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\(^1\) Writer David Quammen describes Alexis Rockman as “our foremost modern portraitist of the vibrant inevitability of rats” in his essay “Rockman’s Global Visions: The World and the Eye,” in *Alexis Rockman* (The Monacelli Press, 2003), p. 238. Quammen refers at length to Rockman’s highly diagrammatic 1997-1998 painting *Recent History of the World* in which a rat disembarked from a large sailing ship and standing over a bird carcass stares directly at the viewer. As a map of globalization *Recent History* can act as a companion to *Manifest Destiny*, the painting at the center of this text, in which the traumatizing after-effects of our globalized world are heavily implied.

vision of a distant and unknowable future, but the landscape it imagines is rooted in a realistic trajectory, supported in part by contemporary scientific publications.

In order to create a plausible portrayal of a flooded New York in 5004, Alexis Rockman conducted considerable research, consulting with climatologists to construct a general concept of how the planet may look and what changes may occur on the way from the twenty-first century to the sixth millennium CE. Rockman’s inclusion in Manifest Destiny of flood walls labeled Sea Wall I c. 2030 and Sea Wall II c. 2060 (Fig. 2, the artist’s numbered guide to the painting’s components), representatives of failed human efforts at crisis prevention or mitigation, reflect the artist’s understanding of climate reports and his dedication to depiction of the extreme but believable. A 2017 report from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) addressing scholarly literature on rising sea level suggests a global mean sea level (GMSL) increase of 0.3 to 2.5 meters by 2100 – a range with an upper boundary 0.5 meters higher than the majority of earlier predictions. Such a rise in seal level, the product of anthropogenic global warming and melting glaciers hints at the cataclysmic. Scientific debate as to whether sea level rise will occur on a scale detrimental to large areas of human population has ended. Any scholarly debate on the subject is now limited to when these changes will occur and just how significant they will be. A 2016 study suggests that a GMSL rise of 0.9 meters would be sufficient to permanently flood areas of the United States currently inhabited by two million people, and that a rise of 1.8 meters would flood areas inhabited by six million people. Both of these projections are well within the realm of possibility to occur within the next eighty years, if not sooner. The chain of events also suggested by these predictions, the pressure of new and

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3 Brooklyn Museum
4 NOAA Technical Report NOS CO-OPS 083: Global Sea Level Rise Scenarios for the United States (Silver Spring, MD; 2017), p. vi
5 Ibid, p. 1
expanding refugee populations pushing in from global coastlines, the destruction of cultural and economic centers, and the continuing reverberations of such events present a nightmarish scenario not only for the environmentally conscious, but for everyone.

Many read Rockman’s paintings as works of artistic activism, advocating for the prevention of a catastrophic future, and that is in part the artist’s intention. However, Rockman himself has expressed conflicted feelings about his dual role as artist and activist, suggesting that he may not be the right person to bring an environmental message to a broader audience and acknowledging that as an artist his primary goal is to create something visually interesting. This raises questions about art’s role in an age of environmental crisis. A work may on the surface present a message, but if we are attracted to images of that which should frighten us – destruction of earth’s climate and destruction of ourselves – does such an image really succeed in conveying its message, the function suggested by its surface information, or does it exploit the hidden beauty in disaster? Does the aestheticization of an issue ultimately discourage action toward a solution? Can a researched, didactic work of art like Manifest Destiny effect change? Using that painting as a case study, this text addresses these questions, and in doing so considers Rockman’s title, medium, and painting style as well as comparisons of his work to film, museum displays, literature, and the history of painting.

The phrase Manifest Destiny conjures the memory of the United States’ persistent westward expansion in the nineteenth century and its enormous toll both in human life and in regards to the natural environment. Manifest Destiny, the idea that it was ordained by God that the United States as a nation spread from coast to coast across the North American continent, is a

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term credited to the journalist John L. O’Sullivan. For O’Sullivan, a member of one branch of the nineteenth century Democratic Party, and likeminded individuals, Manifest Destiny and the spread of American-style democracy was a divine right intimately tied to particular Christian interpretations of Biblical creation. The Book of Genesis presents two narratives for the creation story, one in which man is to be steward of the earth, and one in which he is to rule in dominion over it. However, in the American narrative of Manifest Destiny the dominion of man is localized to the specifically white male United States. For O’Sullivan and others the country was defined not by its physical borders but by the dominant culture, allowing for the subjugation of all other groups under westward expansion, the spread of democracy, one form of Christianity, and the idea of American exceptionalism. This colonizing philosophy and its extension into eras and regions before and after the nineteenth century settlement of the American West, from European imperialism and mid-Atlantic trade through contemporary globalized capitalism, is responsible for significant environmental destruction in the past and present. As Rockman’s painting suggests, it will likely continue to be destructive in the future.

A 2001 episode of The Simpsons entitled “Tall Tales” and divided into three segments inspired by United States’ folklore, features a version of the famous animated family as settlers of the American West. Obviously the historical elements of this narrative are modified, simplified, and exaggerated for comedic effect. However, it contains elements of truth that function as an illustration of Manifest Destiny’s outcomes. In the segment “Connie Appleseed” the Simpsons and others in their wagon train begin slaughtering bison left and right.

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8 From Genesis 1:26 NSRV “Then God said, ‘Let us make human-kind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’” In contrast to Genesis 2:15 NSRV in which “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.”
9 The Simpsons, Season 12, episode 21, “Tall Tales,” directed by Bob Anderson, aired May 20, 2001, on Fox.
caravan becomes full of meat and hides, but they do not stop hunting when their needs are met. Instead, they continue to kill the animals indiscriminately, leaving the landscape strewn with the carcasses they do not need. Only young Lisa, who in this alternate universe story becomes Connie Appleseed, a character meant to parallel the legendary Johnny, protests this waste and brutality. Naturally she proposes they eat apples instead, but her pleas fall on deaf ears and her family continues hunting, going so far as to change their last name to “Buffalkill.” The Buffalkills and their companions in the wagon train drive bison to the brink of extinction. The final hope for the species eventually rests with a lone pair which Homer eventually shoots from on board a train. Only when the settlers face desperation, realize they have drained their resources, and begin to go hungry do they consider moderation and Lisa’s apples.

Following the Civil War, slaughter and forced migration of Native Americans and the parallel and related slaughter of bison were already a part of America and the vision of a homogenized agrarian nation in which native groups would be replaced by white settlers and roaming bison with herds of cattle. With the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869 this all became easier. An illustration from *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* in June 1871 (Fig. 3) depicts a train slowing down to the pace of a bison herd so that passengers may shoot the animals for sport from the locomotive. This kind of hunting was not a wholly uncommon sight in the West at the time it became traversable by train. Photographic documentation of piles of bison skulls (Fig. 4) make clear how these exceedingly reckless hunting practices, not unlike those depicted in *The Simpsons*, severely diminished bison populations.

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John Gast’s 1872 painting *American Progress* (Fig. 5) is likely the most iconic portrayal of the nineteenth century Manifest Destiny ideal. In fact, it is often used literally as a textbook image for the concept. The primary figure in the work is a glowing white female allegory for Columbia – a symbol for the Americas as a whole in this case symbolizing the United States specifically – in flowing ivory garments floating over the American landscape. Below her we see westward migrants as colonizing bringers of light as the national landscape within the painting becomes brighter from the sunny and orderly East to the dark and shadowy West following in the settlers’ paths. The Transcontinental Railroad continues its progression, and the train and settlers drive before them Native Americans – men on horseback, women, and children – and herds of bison. Columbia herself carries the telegraph cable that will, like the railroad, also connect Americans across the continent. It is uncomfortable now to look at Native peoples and the natural environment being driven forcibly into oblivion, but in the context of Gast’s painting this imagery was meant positively as an idealization and affirmation of a job well done for the sake of God and country. Though the scenes in *American Progress* are simplified allegorical vignettes supporting an ideology, they ultimately do not fall far from the reality of Manifest Destiny’s outcomes.

In *Manifest Destiny* the mural we see several possible referents to its namesake ideology. There are trains represented by New York subway tunnels, a derivative of the very technology once used to penetrate the West and to cut gruesome and gory swathes through bison herds. Now it is the train tunnels and tracks that are cracked and hollowed in Rockman’s cutaway while dolphins, fish, and eels pass through their seemingly eternal metal skeletons. We see as well the remnants of a wooden ship, a Dutch merchant wreck uselessly encased in concrete at the center of the work. Also painted in a cutaway style revealing its interior of cannons, sacks, and barrels
the ship acts as a marker for the global trade that transported invasive species of plant and animal life to the North American continent. At the far left of the scene a more recent oil tanker lists on its side half buried in sand and representative of continued globalization and its associated environmental implications. Towering human structures built where ancient trees once stood appear in varied stages of collapse. Rockman has spared us the visualization of our immediate destruction in his painting, leaving the mechanisms of this disappearance open to the viewer’s imagination. In the partial narrative constructed by the artist we could have boarded spaceships and simply abandoned a home planet no longer hospitable to us, but the environmental narrative and Rockman’s oeuvre suggest a more gruesome end. We can imagine human bodies littering the landscape like those of bison in the nineteenth century American West. Rockman provides us with a smaller scale image of humanity’s self-destruction in his darkly humorous self-portrait, Ecotourist, (Fig. 6) in which the artist is shown dead on a foreign forest floor being picked apart by scavenging native fauna while his corpse is also slowly overgrown by the local flora. If one is willing to continue in this morbid direction we can imagine such a scene transplanted to the future, centuries before the dawn of the formerly urban environment of New York City as it is depicted in Alexis Rockman’s Manifest Destiny and centuries from the present, a chronological middle point where similar scenes would be multiplied by millions.

Rockman’s painting sees the unchecked continuation of a trajectory of American Manifest Destiny to its natural, logical end – environmental collapse and the extinction of humanity. In his mural nature is coming back to wreak its vengeance. This appears possible because through some miracle we have extinguished our own species in this future world without

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12 An Earth abandoned by humans who have fled into space is a popular science fiction narrative, notably employed in the 2008 Disney animated film Wall-E which imagines a more desolate landscape than Rockman’s Manifest Destiny and an exceedingly optimistic return to the home planet.
leaving a barren and lifeless planet for all others. This kind of narrative may be wishful thinking for Rockman who as a child seeing the science fiction film *Silent Running* (1971) in theaters “felt it articulated a horrible future that I felt was in store for me – a world destroyed by humans, with no nature.”\(^\text{13}\) The inclusion of so much non-human life in his painting is then a hopeful tribute to life’s resiliency, even when faced with an invasive species on the scale of *Homo sapiens*. A cluster of floating mangrove trees even dares to grow in the flooded landscape, suggesting that plant life will come back, alongside the animal, to flourish against all odds.

Rockman is by no means the first to use New York City as a backdrop for dramatic environmental change. New York is a point of entry, both literally for immigrants, travelers, and trade goods, and symbolically as an icon of American culture. This makes it an appealing setting for artists, filmmakers, authors and scholars. In *The Welikia Project* (*Welikia* means “my good home” in the Native American language Lenape) an interactive map allows the viewer to uncover the pre-Manifest Destiny environmental outcomes of European arrival on the East coast.\(^\text{14}\) *Welikia* is an expansion of the *Mannahatta* project begun in 1999 and completed a decade later that sought to piece together the ecology of the area now known as Manhattan as it would have looked just prior to Henry Hudson’s arrival in 1609. Visitors to the website are able to map the changes in the natural environment of Manhattan over time, beginning with a heavily wooded expanse and culminating with the highly urban present. You are also able to explore block by block the flora and fauna of different sections of Manhattan over time. *Welikia*, started in 2010 and completed in 2013, expands *Mannahatta* to include Queens, Brooklyn, Staten Island, and the Bronx. The *Mannahatta/Welikia* Project creators propose an aim similar to that of

\(^\text{14}\) The *Welikia* Project, [https://welikia.org/explore/manhatta-map/](https://welikia.org/explore/manhatta-map/).
*Manifest Destiny*, encouraging conservation to avoid the kind of catastrophic future that painting imagines. However, seeing dystopian images of New York City as proliferous and redundant, the project seeks to accomplish these aims not through a visual prediction of the future but by seeking inspiration from the natural beauty of the past. Through Rockman’s *Manifest Destiny* we can begin to imagine an extension of the Welikia project, observing formerly forested areas passing through the centuries, becoming increasingly crowded urban blocks until the population density decreases again, the environment becomes aquatic, and species of fish, seals, and corals are native. The idealization of the former environment is proposed in Welikia as a more viable motivator for action than the threat of catastrophe, but can beautiful or entertaining imagery of potential human destruction also act as a catalyst for change?

On Memorial Day 2004, the same year *Manifest Destiny* was completed and placed on display in the Brooklyn Museum, the blockbuster film *The Day After Tomorrow* hit theaters. *The Day After Tomorrow* in fact opened during the Rockman exhibition, which was on view from April 17 to September 12 of that year, and the film was later used as a comparison in exhibition literature when *Manifest Destiny* went on display at the Wexner Center for the Arts in October of that year.\(^\text{15}\) Widely publicized as a natural disaster action movie about the dangers of climate change, the film was not only a significant commercial success (making almost half a billion dollars in its first month worldwide) but also of great interest to climate scientists who were intrigued by its implications for public perception of global warming, and to political commentators who saw the film as potentially influential during an election year.\(^\text{16}\) In the movie

\(^\text{15}\) Brooklyn Museum

global warming causes rapid and dramatic environmental disasters that, among other things, cause a tidal wave to engulf New York and then freeze the city in a sweeping new ice age. Though the film is obviously a work of fiction and such sudden and extreme changes in global climate as those depicted have been widely disproven as a possibility, an increase in extreme weather is an already visible outcome of anthropogenic climate change that promises only to increase in severity in coming years. In *The Day After Tomorrow*’s images of a flooded New York City (Fig. 7) there are clear visual parallels to Rockman’s painting, and we can imagine these scenes within the film as potential narrative precursors to Rockman’s monumental panorama. However, unlike with Rockman’s work, multiple studies have been conducted seeking to evaluate and analyze the impact of *The Day After Tomorrow* on its audience’s perceptions of climate change. Perhaps through consideration of these studies we can begin, with some tangible evidence, to measure the possible effect such cataclysmic imagery can have as a motivator for environmental activism.

One of the first of these studies, conducted soon after the movie’s release and published in the journal *Environment*, tackled the issue from multiple angles within the United States.\(^\text{17}\) First, the study sought to compare perceptions of risk from global warming between watchers and non-watchers of *The Day After Tomorrow*. This step – which included a control for demographic features such as age, race, gender, and political leanings – revealed that individuals who had seen the movie did perceive their risk to be higher after watching it. In a series of follow-up questions the surveyors asked watchers and non-watchers whether the level of threat they perceive from climate change influences their voting habits (essentially whether they would support candidates who acknowledge anthropogenic climate change and support environmental

\(^{17}\) Leiserowitz
action), and whether they would be taking action personally by recycling, buying fuel efficient
cars, donating to environmental organizations, and so on. This portion of the study found that
individuals who saw *The Day After Tomorrow* were more likely to acknowledge the climate
change threat in all of the following ways: purchasing a more fuel efficient car, talking to friends
and family about how to reduce or prevent global warming, joining, donating, or volunteering
with a global warming activist group, and expressing their views on global warming to
politicians. When the study turned to the larger scale of general public opinion on the issue
within the United States rather than a purely comparative look at watchers versus non-watchers,
it was ultimately revealed that even a blockbuster film seen in theaters by ten percent of the adult
American population was insufficient to measurably alter the general public’s opinions on global
warming.\(^{18}\) However, it is clear from the results of this study that the images of cataclysm in *The
Day After Tomorrow* did not cause its viewership to distance themselves from global warming as
an issue or to disbelieve its plausibility after seeing it framed dramatically. Instead, the film’s
audience was inspired to greater concern and action for the environment. While some scholars
continue to express justifiable doubts about the overall efficacy of this method, it does have clear
and measurable effects.\(^{19}\)

How does this translate to Rockman’s painting? Obviously it is extremely unlikely that
*Manifest Destiny* as a painting (even a very large one), will receive the kind of expansive,
nationwide audience that *The Day After Tomorrow* has had in theaters and in its subsequent
television and home video releases. Yet in the sense that Rockman’s painting converts

\(^{18}\) Leiserowitz, 31.

\(^{19}\) For more writing on the subject see: Ron von Burg, “Decades Away or the Day After Tomorrow?: Rhetoric, Film,
Fritz Reusswig and Anthony A. Leiserowitz, “The International Impact of the Day After Tomorrow.” *Environment*
47, no. 3 (April 2005).
cataclysmic imagery into a form of visual entertainment that has an imbedded environmental message its strategies and subject matter may be compared to *The Day After Tomorrow*’s motifs. Parallels between *Manifest Destiny* and the blockbuster film genre could in part explain the appeal of Rockman’s work among audiences not commonly thought to frequent exhibitions of contemporary art.

In a 2013 article in the journal *Art Education* a middle school art educator and University of Georgia PhD candidate, Joy Bertling, documents her use of the apocalyptic imagery of Rockman’s paintings, including *Manifest Destiny*, as tools for encouraging imagination in place-based ecological learning. Worried about the effects of the paintings’ pessimism, Bertling sought to prevent the spread of any feeling of paralysis that might arise among her students when faced with the negative outcomes visualized in these works. Instead she encouraged the sixth through eighth graders to employ the artist’s highly imaginative strategies to envision better futures for their community, rather than apocalyptic scenes. In the aspirational student output and class enthusiasm about Rockman’s art Bertling saw great promise. Having sidestepped negative imagery, the overall outcome of this educational experiment was considered a success by Bertling but did receive light criticism from an interested parent “amused by some of the students’ visions which she saw as blindly optimistic.”

The adolescents may indeed have benefited from deeper exploration of some of the “entrenched cultural behavioral patterns that can prove an obstacle to change” of which Bertling acknowledges the commenting parent was aware. Such an exploration may have given the students a more thorough understanding of what they will need to overcome in order to see optimistic visions of their community’s future

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21 Ibid., 38-39.
brought to life, thereby allowing them to begin thinking critically about how to overcome these obstacles at a young age. However, the enthusiasm about Rockman’s work among young students and its use to inspire positive change in the classroom hints at an “effectiveness” of his paintings similar to that seen among watchers of The Day After Tomorrow.

Another anecdotal example of the popular appeal of Rockman’s paintings comes from an audience member at a Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) lecture given by Alexis Rockman in 2011. The painter was speaking in association with a major survey exhibition of his work at that institution entitled A Fable for Tomorrow. During a question and answer session following the lecture an art professor who admired the artist’s work prefaced his question about technical aspects of Rockman’s painting with an observation about classroom responses at the college level, sharing that “studio people and art history majors who are very jaded, you know, about what’s cool, respond to your work with sort of eh ok, but the students who are not part of that sort of in-crowd really love your work, and it suggests to me that you really are the person who can bring this message to a large audience.”

Affirming the broad, cinematic appeal of Rockman’s painting, Elizabeth Broun, director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, writes in her foreword to the A Fable for Tomorrow exhibition catalogue that “viewing [the] astounding mural Manifest Destiny . . . feels like a 3-D experience with Dolby surround sound.” Bearing in mind the limitations of comparison between painting and film in regards to medium, narrative structure, viewing environment, and audience, the outcome of the Environment study and anecdotal classroom examples suggest that apocalyptic imagery of environmental events can act as a motivator for increased activism. The SAAM audience member may be quite right, Rockman’s paintings might be exactly the right kind of art to convey an environmental message.

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22 Rockman, “Art and Science Lecture Series.”
However conflicted Rockman may be about his role as artist and activist he still seems in part to agree with the above assessment. In the same Smithsonian lecture the artist expressed his feeling, though slightly tongue in cheek, that Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*, “got him off the hook, so to speak” and “eased the burden” of making a painting like Manifest Destiny that “came from a sense of desperation that no one really believed or took seriously . . . the reality of global warming.” This poses an interesting question. If we use nonfiction as a reference point for Rockman’s work rather than fiction, to what extent might we consider *Manifest Destiny* documentary? Alexis Rockman’s art is greatly inspired by the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) where he visited frequently as a child while his mother, an anthropologist, worked as an assistant to Margaret Mead. Many of his works imitate the style of a natural history museum display or scientific illustration. Some are even direct imitations. Rockman’s 1988 painting *Object of Desire* recreates Ernst Ludwig Taschenberg’s 1892 illustration *Aasinsekt en einem Maulwurfe* (German “carrion insects on a mole,” Fig. 8) and *Forest Floor* (1989) is an adaptation of a forest floor diorama at the AMNH originally installed in 1958 (Fig. 9). *Manifest Destiny* in many ways adopts the style of a large-scale diagram, particularly in association with its labeled visual guide, or a background mural for a taxidermy display with its multi-layered cutaway view, and while the originals in museums and texts that inform Rockman’s paintings are meant to be empirical reflections it is critical to note that they ultimately are subjective as well. Though designed to convey purely factual information to the reader or visitor, it is impossible to completely eliminate all elements of artistic interpretation in products of human creation. Taschenberg’s depiction of insect activity is arguably as stylized as Rockman’s, and either could function as an illustration of a biological phenomenon or artwork.

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24 Alexis Rockman, “Art Science Lecture Series.”  
Similarly the forest floor diorama at the American Museum of Natural History and its recreation in Rockman’s painting are both on an exaggerated scale – the centipede in the museum display is about the length of a grown man and Rockman’s painting is 68 by 112 inches. All are manipulations of reality, constructed to aid in academic understanding or to create an aesthetic experience and symbolic meaning. Though museum display is more closely associated with academic understanding and painting with aesthetics and symbolism, both could fill either of these roles. Scientific illustration is more a reflection of currently available knowledge and artificial mechanisms for conveying that knowledge than it is a reflection of the empirical reality it regularly claims to be or is accepted to be by its audience. Additionally, illustrators often intentionally include elements of personal artistic expression in their work to make it more engaging and appealing to the viewer.

In the illustrative category of “paleoart,” or depictions of the prehistoric past, artistry becomes particularly significant. According to Mark Hallet the artist who may have coined the term paleoart to describe his work within the genre during the 1990s, a “paleoartist” is loosely defined as an “illustrator who researches and recreates the life of the past.” More specifically, the purview of paleoart is widely understood to include depictions of biological life prior to the rise of agriculture and human civilization around the Neolithic Period. The public face of paleoart is primarily depictions of dinosaurs, but in actuality paleo-artworks include a wide range of subject matter from pre-dinosaur life on earth in ancient seas to the rise of mammals and human ancestors (hominins) and numerous diverse points between. The genre is also significantly older than a not yet thirty-year-old label, encompassing illustrations approximately 150 to 200 years old associated with a range of scholarly publications and institutional displays.

following the French geologist Georges Cuvier’s “discovery” of extinction at the end of the eighteenth century. Since that time, the work of paleoartists has striven to depict with accuracy a primarily unknowable past using available evidence including fossil finds, climatic studies, and observations of extant organisms believed to be in some way similar to the artist’s extinct subjects. Increasingly, genetic data plays a role in this process and more three-dimensional models are being produced employing “traditional mediums like clay and resin, as well as CT scanning and 3-D printing.”

Often a model or illustration will be released alongside publication of a new species as with the recent public debut of *Homo naledi*, a new human ancestor. The work of paleoartists is also frequently associated with Hollywood special effects, an association that might explain the genre’s increase in visibility during the age of *Jurassic Park* (1993). However, the relatively recent discovery in human intellectual history of extinction and the dramatic changes in scientific understanding of dinosaurs even since the early 1990s when

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27 Elizabeth Kolbert, “The Mastadon’s Molars,” in *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (London: Picador 2014), 23-46 provides an account of this. I provide a summarized description here. While working in the Paris Museum of Natural History in the 1790s, the young scholar Cuvier spent considerable time conducting independent research on elephants generally, and elephant dentition specifically. In doing so Cuvier not only identified Asian and African elephants as morphologically distinguishable species, he asserted that a group of large osteological remains uncovered in Russia did not belong to an elephant at all. Nor were they the same as similarly massive elephantine bones discovered decades earlier along the Ohio River. Realizing that there were no living examples of the animals represented by these remains, Cuvier labeled them *espèces perdues* (lost species), and in so doing proposed the concept of extinction. Previously, the idea that an elephant-like species or any species could die out entirely and cease to be present on earth was not considered with any sincerity. It follows that prior to this point no true paleoartworks could exist, though it is worth noting that ideas and depictions of fantastical creatures including dragons and apish wild men that appear at times similar to prehistoric creatures are nearly as old as art itself.


Jurassic Park arrived in theaters indicate the challenges and limitations inherent in paleoart. It is natural to think of that which has already happened as more fully comprehensible and real than the future. It is true that the past is already determined and unchangeable while the future is constantly in a state of flux based on what occurs in the present. However, the issue at hand is not one of actual occurrences in the past or future, but the breadth of human understanding. Both depictions of the distant past and the future require extrapolation from limited known data, interpretation, and imagination. In a 1995 essay about Rockman’s paintings the paleontologist and evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould writes that “fiction is often the truest pathway to understanding our general categories of thought and analysis, and artifice often illuminates the empirical world far better than direct description. This paradox arises because we can best understand a natural object or category by probing to and beyond its limits of actual occurrence into realms that science, by its norms of discourse, cannot address, but that art engages as a primary interest and responsibility.”

Why not then consider Rockman’s Manifest Destiny as a form of illustration as well? The painter’s work is at once high art on display in galleries and major art institutions and also an adaptation of popular imagery like film and illustrations. By adopting these popular artistic modes his work can become a kind of art-based outreach that extends beyond the exclusivity of an art world environment. Through Rockman’s depiction of a possible future for New York City based on currently observable facts that include warming trends, patterns of sea level rise, structural integrity, extant animal species and their ranges of habitat, he engages in a practice of future illustration parallel to paleoart’s artistic investigations of prehistory.

30 Since Jurassic Park (1993) paleontologists have determined that many dinosaurs, including the iconic velociraptor, were colorful and feathered rather than the gray, scaly creatures they are shown to be in the Spielberg film. Unfortunately, the 2015 continuation of the franchise, Jurassic World, did not incorporate these discoveries.

This at once parallel and divergent trajectory for Rockman’s painting and paleoart is nowhere more visible than in the relationship between his work and that of Charles R. Knight (1874-1953), perhaps the most iconic and prolific paleoartist to date. His much-loved works appear in natural history museums across the country including the American Museum of Natural History where young Alexis Rockman would have seen them. Though Rockman was born nearly a decade after Knight’s death their art suggests the two might have been kindred spirits due to their shared voracious curiosity. When reconstructing a landscape Knight imbued his works with the kind of aesthetic and narrative drama that draws attention. In one of Knight’s murals depicting Pleistocene California for the AMNH (Fig. 10), he imagines a brewing watering hole battle between approaching giant ground sloths, poised saber-toothed cats, and looming vultures. In *Battle Royale* (2011, Fig. 11), Rockman presents a similar survival of the fittest, predator/prey scenario in which a large alligator stretches out of the water to catch a Canada goose in its jaws. However, this and many other stylistically and thematically comparable pieces within Rockman’s oeuvre, including *Manifest Destiny*, are more than tributes to classic paleo-artworks, they are also subversions of the genre. In Rockman’s environments there is no linear evolution and nature is often messy and chaotic rather than orderly and noble. In many ways this is more realistic than common illustrations of similar subject matter (which may in part explain Stephan Jay Gould’s appreciation) which tend to tidy up biology and the natural world. These elements of homage and subversion are not limited to comparisons between Rockman’s art, paleoart, and other scientific illustration, but are embedded in the very medium and style of a painting like *Manifest Destiny*.

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Representational oil painting is one of the most traditional and historically sanctioned art forms in existence. It is the medium of royal European portraits, the Renaissance, the Dutch Golden Age, the academies, and the upper crust of Gilded Age America. Rockman regularly riffs on three of the medium’s most common types – portraiture, landscape, and still life. This highly recognizable, and generally more easily digestible mode of art making may be yet another component of Rockman’s popular appeal. However, in spite of its ubiquity in art history, or more probably because of it, representational painting is not common in the contemporary art world. When it is used in contemporary contexts the artist is often being intentionally historicizing and the medium and technique of the work represent an embedded layer of meaning. A striking example of this is the artist Kehinde Wiley’s body of work which consists primarily of painted portraits in which European rulers of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries are recast as young African American men and women in contemporary dress against colorful fabric-pattern backgrounds (Fig. 12). In these works Wiley’s virtuosity is on display, but the artist’s chosen medium clearly plays a significant role in constructing meaning as he recasts historical white power figures as modern African American individuals, all seemingly “average” men and women now in the poses of royalty. Wiley subverts the authority of the source paintings’ original subjects and encourages a new framing and understanding of his own. As in Rockman’s paintings, there is a touch of humor in these portraits but also serious and sincere intent.

Art critics and historians often make comparisons between Rockman paintings like Ornitholestes (1991) and Dutch still life, or Manifest Destiny and landscapes by Frederic Church or Thomas Cole. These references are usually intended by the artist. In creating Manifest Destiny, as an example, Rockman was inspired by Albert Bierstadt’s Storm in the Rocky
Mountains, Mt. Rosalie (1866, Fig. 13) and Church’s Twilight in the Wilderness (1860, Fig. 14) among other works. Why make these references? Arguably it is done in part for the fun of it. Rockman, and Wiley for that matter, undoubtedly enjoy their work and the process of creation involved in producing their numerous paintings. Yes, medium is meaningful, but it is also something with which the artist is comfortable. An element of respect for the challenges and potential beauty of oil painting should not be ignored. However, there is a challenge authority also apparent in Rockman’s oeuvre, a challenge inherent in adopting a traditional, accepted medium and disrupting it with, in some cases, grotesque mutants (Still Life, 1991, Fig. 15) and cross-species fornication (Jungle Fever, 1991). Both Bierstadt’s Storm and Church’s Twilight are classic nineteenth century landscapes that depict wild environments devoid of human intervention. Considering them in relation to the scenery of Manifest Destiny, Rockman simultaneously employs the portrayal of a pristine environment and the after images of apocalypse. Ideally as a work with an environmental message this juxtaposition allows for the encouragement to appreciate natural beauty intended by something like the aforementioned Welikia Project, which also focuses on the idea of an “original ecology,” and the threat of something like The Day After Tomorrow, which suggests the disastrous outcomes of maintaining the status quo in regard to climate change, and allows them to coexist in a single work of art. Though whether this combination makes each element stronger or weakens the message of both is difficult to determine.

Rockman is however committed to this method and does not leave his prolific seventeenth through nineteenth century references in the studio, instead taking them out into the field. The most well-known and extensive of these field trips remains the artist’s 1999 trip to

33 Brooklyn Museum
Marsh, A Fable For Tomorrow
Guyana with friends and fellow artists Bob Braine and Mark Dion. Initially considered by Rockman a way to get out of the studio, the excursion proved highly productive artistically, leading to *Guyana*, a book of the artist’s paintings and drawings from the trip, as well as the Expedition series focused on the artist’s self-mockery of his role as eco-tourist. More than artistic fodder, this trip and similar smaller bouts of field work at the Burgess Shale, Karoo Desert, La Brea Tar Pits, and Fresh Kills Landfill place Rockman in a semi-performative role as the historic naturalist or early biologist, a role that calls to mind another scientifically curious art maker – H. G. Wells.

As a child there was for Alexis Rockman “no identification whatsoever with the cuddly, comforting, Disney side of nature. Beatrix Potter’s anthropomorphism, on the other hand, with its dark Victorian edge, was a definite influence.”

Beyond Potter, Herbert George Wells was the purveyor of “dark Victorian edge” in the later portion of that period. A student of the famed biologist T. H. Huxley (grandfather of *Brave New World* author Aldous Huxley), Wells moved away from teaching and writing on biology in the mid-to-late 1890s and began publishing the literary works for which he both was then and is now famous. As a “man of science,” Wells cared deeply about the kind of technological innovation and biological experimentation he portrays in novels like *The Time Machine* and *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. However, he did not subscribe to the idea that all scientific “advancement” was positive or improving to the human or global condition. The author’s deep concern about rampant misuse of science is the primary focus of his literary works and one of the elements that make him the widely accepted founder of the science fiction genre. In Wells’ proto-science-fiction era these writings were known, perhaps more accurately, as “scientific romance,” a label Wells himself partially employed in prefacing

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34 Quoted in *Alexis Rockman* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2003), 36.
his novel *The Invisible Man* as a “grotesque romance.” The “romantic” label implies adventure and heroism, but also fewer of the elaborate devices and aliens present in many more recent science fiction works. Instead, Wells’ novels focus on a single development at the heart of each of his stories— the grafting of humans and animals (*The Island of Dr. Moreau*), a time travel device (*The Time Machine*), or a chemical potion that makes a person invisible (*The Invisible Man*). Stories like these call to mind a softer and more diffuse fictional exploration of science, an approach with painterly associations made unavoidable by the inextricable connection between the Romantic Movement in the visual arts and the Romantic Movement in literature. Though garnering frequent and justifiable comparisons to science fiction in literature and film, Alexis Rockman’s paintings generally are more the work of a scientific romanticist, anachronistic as such a label is. In *Manifest Destiny* he not only employs the artistic mode of Romantic-era artists’ sweeping landscapes of dramatically lit sunsets and poetic ruins, he employs the literary conventions of Wells’ later-day romanticism, combining skepticism and adoration in his portrayals of humanity’s extreme manipulation of our world.

This is perhaps the greatest contribution works like Rockman’s can make to conservation and environmental activism. The course of human history thus far makes clear that to-date no “scientific romanticist” from H. G. Wells at the turn of the twentieth century to Alexis Rockman at the turn of the twenty-first has been able to halt our species’ bullish persistence for ever more command (or what we think to be command) over nature and our planet – no matter the negative consequences inherent in this constant conquest. No oil painting, website, film, or work of literature is likely to single-handedly instigate a global paradigm shift in how the public and policy makers view our relationship with nature. Wells and his literary descendants were unable to prevent continued industrialization or the rise of genomic experimentation. The numerous
individuals behind *The Day After Tomorrow* did not change the outcome of the 2004 presidential election and see the more environmentally conscious John Kerry elected over President George W. Bush. Rockman’s art too has not and will not on its own bring about the changes necessary to prevent the possible future his *Manifest Destiny* imagines, much as paleoartists like Charles R. Knight, no matter how loving their artistic treatments, can never truly revive their extinct subjects. Yet all have maintained and encouraged, entertainingly and often beautifully, an attitude of questioning, presenting a constant challenge to dominant and destructive voices and policies. These scientific romanticists make us consider our mortality as earthbound organisms in a global timeline defined by mass extinction, and allow us to imagine the potentially cataclysmic outcomes of our present behaviors as well as the beauty we can sustain if we act appropriately. At its core this kind of artistic production and *Manifest Destiny* specifically challenge the harmful ideals of divine right, inevitability, exceptionalism, and the anthropocentrism of a concept like the original philosophy of Manifest Destiny, the tenants of which live on destructively in contemporary society. However, if posing these challenges does prove insufficient to effect significant, lasting change, let us at least hope that we could leave behind us a landscape as picturesque and flourishing as that of Rockman’s *Manifest Destiny*.

Postscript:

It seems unfair to send this text out in the world, dealing as it does with the limits of objectivity and the strengths of subjectivity, without acknowledging openly my presence in this thesis. I confess that I am not a purely objective analyst, historian, or critic. Like many of the sources I have quoted or referenced here, I experienced an immediate attraction to Rockman’s paintings. My first encounter occurred in the fall of 2014 in Dr. Craig Adcock’s course in Art
and Ecology. The image, I remember, was the 1992 painting *Harvest* in which a menagerie of grotesquely mutated creatures hang about around a brick wall and a largely metal tree “growing” out of several feet of water. The seeds for writing this senior thesis were planted then, and they continued to grow as I returned to Rockman again in Dr. Julie Hochstrasser’s fall 2015 History and Methods course. There is something about the childlike curiosity Alexis Rockman conveys through his paintings that attracts the childlike curiosity in others. First of all, in most of his paintings there is just so much happening. It is the elaborate complexity of a “Where’s Waldo?” puzzle that makes the viewer want to seek out every hidden thing. This complexity is also in part responsible for comparisons between Rockman’s work and my to-date favorite painting (and it is a popular favorite) – Hieronymus Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights*. Like many of even the most horrific scenes of hell in that famous work, Rockman’s paintings are often very funny, and I catch myself chuckling from time to time.

Sitting down to my breakfast on April 28, 2017 I noticed on the front page of the *New York Times* a featured story describing the progress being made on a major new cable-stayed bridge project in that city. The three bridges depicted and described are remarkably like the suspension bridge designed by Chris Morris with Alexis Rockman and then inserted into *Manifest Destiny*. The *New York Times* story, appearing amidst coverage of the policies – environmental and otherwise – of the Trump administration was a sudden, visceral reminder that every day we may be heading into a future like the one imagined in that painting.

I openly acknowledge that, as in the immortal words of that iconic *X-Files* poster, “I want to believe.” I want to believe that art can make a difference for our environment. I want to

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37 Coincidentally, Gillian Anderson, the actress famous for playing Agent Dana Scully on *The X-Files*, owns Alexis Rockman’s painting *Ecotourist*. 
believe that earth’s ecosystems as we know them are not doomed, and yes, that we as humans have not doomed ourselves. I want to believe that “life, uh . . . finds a way.” But I am also concerned that this is just wishful thinking. Either way, Alexis Rockman’s paintings suggest that we have the good grace to face it all with a sense of humor.

38 To quote Jeff Goldblum as Dr. Ian Malcolm in *Jurassic Park.*
Bibliography


The Welikia Project. https://welikia.org/explore/manhatta-map/

Fig. 1
Alexis Rockman
*Manifest Destiny*
2003-4
Oil and acrylic wood
96 x 288 inches
Fig. 2
Alexis Rockman
Manifest Destiny Key
Fig. 3
“The Far West – Shooting Buffalo on the Line of the Kansas-Pacific Railroad”
*Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*
1871
Wood engraving
Library of Congress AP2.L52 1871
Fig. 4
Bison skull pile
ca. 1875
Fig. 5
John Gast
*American Progress*
1872
Oil on canvas
Fig. 6
Alexis Rockman
*Ecotourist*
1997
Envirotext, digitized photograph, artificial plants, carved Styrofoam, botanical models, latex rubber, synthetic hair, nylon waist pouch, metal wedding ring, Fresnel lens, plastic taxidermy human eyeball, acrylic, and oil paint
56 x 88 x 5 inches
Fig. 7
*The Day After Tomorrow*
2004
Film still
Fig. 8
Left:
Ernst Ludwig Taschenberg
_Aasinsekten an einem Maulwurfe_
1892

Right:
Alexis Rockman
_Object of Desire_
1988
Oil and acrylic on canvas
48 x 40 inches
Fig. 9
Top:
Forest Floor Diorama
American Museum of Natural History
Prepared ca. 1958

Bottom:
Alexis Rockman
*Forest Floor*
1989
Oil on wood
68 x 112 inches
Fig. 10
Charles R. Knight
_La Brea Tar Pits_
1920
9 x 12 ft
American Museum of Natural History
Fig. 11
Alexis Rockman
*Battle Royale*
2011
Oil and alkyd on wood
96 x 216 in.
Fig. 12
Kehinde Wiley
*Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps*
2005
Oil on canvas
108 x 108 in.
Fig. 13
Albert Bierstadt
A Storm in the Rocky Mountains, Mt. Rosalie
1866
Oil on canvas
83 x 142 ¼ in.
Fig. 14
Frederic Edwin Church
*Twilight in the Wilderness*
1860
124 x 185 x 13 cm
Fig. 15
Alexis Rockman
Still Life
1991
Oil on wood
40 x 48 inches