

Brett Littman: Alexis, I have been thinking a lot about your early work, particularly the watercolor series titled *The Object of Desire* that you started in 1989.

Can you talk a bit about how you developed your pictorial style during that period?

Alexis Rockman: When I first decided I wanted to be a painter, I spent a lot of time in Paris looking at old master drawings. I really liked the Italian Mannerists, and the Symbolist artists like Odile Redon. Victor Hugo's drawings also had a huge influence on me as well. By close studying and copying these drawings I realized that if I wanted to become an artist, I would need to find my own voice and cultivate a unique iconography.

I realized that as an American I had access to a collective popular culture "image bank" deeply indebted to natural history and that very few people were exploiting this imagery at the time. I decided that I wanted to add to the mythology of artists who had a direct relationship to nature, geology, adventure and travel.

Brett Littman: You went to the Rhode Island School of Design and studied animation. Did this formal training influence you at all in terms of the way you paint?

Alexis Rockman: Actually, after RISD, I didn't think it was possible to be a fine artist and work with the images that I was interested in. At school I was really excited by stop motion animation by Jan Svankmajer, the Brothers Quay and other Eastern European avant-garde film makers working in the medium. At some point I kind of got depressed because I realized that these types of movies were really considered quite obscure and were often relegated to the margins of film history.

So in terms of the early paintings, I have to say that my training in animation didn't directly influence my style but acted more as a catalyst for me to develop my fine art career, which I realized was not going to be related to animation.

Brett Littman: I think it is interesting that in your early work there is a relationship between your subject matter which is insects, birds, toads, fish and the history in the West of collecting and displaying. In medieval Europe the first museums were Wunderkammerns or Cabinets of Curiosities. These were

not per se directly related to fine arts – but were more related to creating an encyclopedic base of knowledge about nature and the exotic non-Western world.

Have you thought about how natural history has been displayed or represented in history? In particular, is the diorama an interesting form for you? I think your early paintings look like two-dimensional representations of the kind of dioramas that you might see at the Natural History Museum here in New York.

Alexis Rockman: Natural history has always been important to me. My mother is an archeologist, and I spent a lot of time at the Museum of Natural History when I was growing up so dioramas were a huge influence. As a young child I had more of a direct experience with nature by looking at dioramas than by seeing things in the wild.

I always saw what I was doing as related to dioramas but also to the images like the ones that you would find in the Golden Field Guides to birds, butterflies, moths, and insects. Other major influences were National Geographic photography and the natural history and dinosaur illustrator Charles R. Knight.

Brett Littman: What about the drawings of Albrecht Dürer or James Audubon?

Alexis Rockman: Dürer is really fascinating. He was obviously working at the beginning of the enlightenment and was really able to personally interpret his unique experience with the natural world around him. Man, could he draw clumps of earth!

Audubon in my case is less interesting. I think as a figure he is obviously very important and powerful but there is something about the way he articulates the scenarios that does not appeal to me.

Brett Littman: In your early works you seem to be very concerned with rendering. There is a kind of clarity in the subject matter which allows one to recognize specific information about the scene. Is this something that you were trying to achieve?

Alexis Rockman: Well, it was a combination of things that I was interested in. I did want to see how far I could go in terms of rendering, but I also wanted to have a collapse of that experience as well. I

do want to point out that when you see these drawings as thumbnail images, they hold together a lot better than they do in person. You cannot really see how out of control they are. I mean, obviously, they're not out of control like an abstract expressionist drawing, but there is this moment when the image comes apart a bit at the seams and is no longer crystal clear.

That reminds me that I was also looking at the work of Stephen Dalton at that time, who in 1975 published, Borne on the Wind. He was a pioneer in documenting the movements of winged creatures, insects and other animals through high-speed photography, utilizing special flashes and environments that he invented. He did a lot of studio setups with animals in impossible acrobatic situations. He obviously photographed them again and again and again and finally found this moment that articulated their physiology in a way that had never been seen before by the human eye.

I was very interested in not only seeing and recreating that impossible moment but also in creating highly artificial effects that looked more like illustration than photo-realism. I was also interested in monsters and freaks and evolutionary nightmares. Interspecies romance, stuff like that. I wanted to make this ultimate version of natural history, and I was the only person I knew who was even interested in this approach.

Brett Littman: Do you envision your work as a kind of taxonomy?

Alexis Rockman: Well, that is a very interesting point. As a matter of fact, I horde information, my own pictures and images to put in books and more recently on my computer hard drive and I have always viewed this as a kind of taxonomic research.

But what I've always been attracted to in these works are not the triumphs of natural selection or genetics but the failures. The things that became extinct, the things that, somehow, didn't quite make it. I think I have always been attracted to the underdog or the marginal. The artists that I've been interested in have never really been part of the mainstream.

Brett Littman: In 1991, you started to work on preparatory drawings for the large-scale twenty-four foot painting called *Evolution* that you premiered at Sperone Westwater Gallery in 1992.

Alexis Rockman: The ideas that I wanted to play out in *Evolution* were really complicated. I look at that painting now and I'm amazed that I did it in five and a half months. I mean, that is insane. I think it's an unbelievable painting for so many reasons and it really summed up all of my interests and influences up to that point.

And then, after that, I sort of abandoned everything to do with *Evolution* and started to make a body of work based on Douglas Trumble's cult sci-fi film Silent Running and the Biosphere Project. This work was all about my emotional reaction to this alienating, dead-end space and its potential effect on animals and the environment.

Brett Littman: In *Evolution* you seem to have this above world/below world concept. There is a very strong idea of a horizon line or water line.

Alexis Rockman: Water – basically, it is a water line. At the time I was vaguely aware of the serious threat that global warming might pose to this planet, so I saw the water line as a painting opportunity and in a way, as a politicized pictorial space. Little did I know how quickly I would be obsessed with global warming and the sea and how quickly it would become a reality.

Brett Littman: Were any of these early works done "en plein aire"? Did you actually go to specific sites, or do these images come from your memory and imagination?

Alexis Rockman: No, I didn't do any of these works "en plein aire" but there is a series of works from 1994 - 1995 that were made in Guyana while I was camping that were quite important to me in terms of my artistic practice. In 1994, I kind of had an epiphany and decided that I need to strip clean all of my notions about how things looked in the natural world and learn for myself how to use my eyes and my powers of observation without all of the pre-conceived cultural baggage.

Before I went to Guyana I was really turned off by my own behavior, and I won't even get into what – I wasn't really doing drugs, but my romantic life was in shambles and very self indulgent and I thought, 'I'm a fucking a jerk and I just

have to get it together.' Going to Guyana was really like this opportunity to clean out my closet.

Brett Littman: So how did you think that you could achieve that?

Alexis Rockman: With a pencil, a magnifying glass and eight pieces of paper. By drawing the insects, I collected and the things that I saw. I went back to the idea of empiricism and the naturalist diary. Since that time I have probably done a thousand of these kinds of drawings.

This very simple "out of studio" practice reminded me of how much I loved art and the very basic materials of art making and how much I did not want go back to my bad personal habits and perfectly rendering things.

Brett Littman: I see. There is a huge difference between the image of a bee made before 1994 and the drawing of the fern or palm, which is much more abstract, made during the Guyana trip.

Alexis Rockman: I needed to do something for a month because I was stuck in the jungle and I said to myself, 'All right, what will take me the most time?' For me the experience was a bit like Werner Herzog filming *Fitzcarraldo*. I was sleeping in a hammock under a tarp in the jungle. Mark Dion was with me at the time, and we were hard core mother fuckers out there.

Brett Littman: Did you feel that had gotten yourself into a mental or emotional bind at that time in terms of where your career and the work was going?

Alexis Rockman: Absolutely. The trip to Guyana was the first trip that I took where I realized that going somewhere is interesting and gets you out of your studio.

Brett Littman: And what did you learn from this experience? Did this reenergize your interest in your own ideas and methods?

Alexis Rockman: I was taking all the lessons from 1960's earth artist and using what was at hand as my materials and making something pictorial, illustrational and specific out of it. So that trip had this weird tension between being in a specific place, having grown up in a specific culture and trying to understand my immediate surroundings.

I came back to New York, and I was totally excited about art again. Between 1995 to 1997 I did hundreds of watercolors. I had shows in Japan, Milan, Los Angeles, New York and produce a monograph on the Guyana drawings with Twin Palms Press.

I then stopped painting for awhile to explore three-dimensional sculptures. These proved to be very costly and unmarketable experiments for me.

I also started to work on a series of book covers for scientific publications. This was really an excuse for me to immerse myself in the science that I had always been flirting with in my paintings. I started to cultivate relationships with people like Edward O. Wilson, Ernst Mayor, who just died, and Stephen J. Gould.

Brett Littman: What kind of influence did Stephen J. Gould have on you?

Alexis Rockman: Stephen J. Gould was a very important figure to me. He wrote two very long essays in 1994 and 2003 about my work and really codified my interest in the intersections between art, science and politics. At the time I was a little turned off by the art world to put it mildly. I really wasn't interested in the fashion industry or pop culture in a way that others in my generation seemed to be. I saw conservation as a serious issue and that is what I wanted my work to deal with - I was an activist, really.

Brett Littman: So, you viewed yourself as an activist?

Alexis Rockman: I became more and more angry and political. Unfortunately, I think it removed the pleasure I used to feel about making art and my career suffered because people were turned off by the message – which became this tightly wound self-loathing resentment. I don't know how relevant this is to what we're talking about.

Brett Littman: No, it's extremely interesting.

Alexis Rockman: In >>> I ended up making a body of work that was categorized as “educational tools.” I was commission by the Department of Fisheries to make a big painting of anything I wanted. It became a map of the world except it was all about the humiliating failures of human-induced extinctions.

The introduction of rats onto small islands, the spread of malaria and the last Stephen Island Wren being caught by a lighthouse keeper's cat and so on. I mean a laundry list of pathetic blunders and disasters both intentional and unintentional. After I completed this work, I ended up being pissed off and bitter and really felt that the work was not very generous.

In 2004, I completed a large-scale mural for the Brooklyn Museum called *The Manifest Destiny* that took me seven years to produce. And that was really the last straw. I was like, if I paint another God damned window in perspective, in relationship to a vanishing point, I'm going to die.

So, in 2005 I felt that I had done my time. I had proved to myself that I was credible and that I need to move on. I told myself, 'I'm a painter. This is a physical thing that should really happen quickly – not something that should take seven years.'

This is when I started the *Weather Series* that will be shown at The Rose Museum at Brandeis University.

Brett Littman: So, to start this series you got a bunch large pieces of paper and stapled them onto boards?

Alexis Rockman: Right. Because I didn't want it to be rigid – anything that's too uptight, I'm not into it. I spent two weeks getting images off of the Getty website and other search engines of subjects that look like interesting painting opportunities....

Brett Littman:and you came upon weather as a kind of organizing concept.

Alexis Rockman: Yes. I'm very structured in terms of the way that my bodies of work are organized – they are like pieces of a puzzle that need to fit together. All the angles have to work for me to allow myself to give the green light to a project. Images of weather patterns, clouds, lightning strikes, tornados all fit into what I was doing with the work and seemed open-ended enough to allow new possibilities. For me it also referenced some of the work I was doing back in the 1980's so I saw it as a very elegant way of dealing with that memory loop.

Brett Littman: Are these works about abstraction?

Alexis Rockman: Absolutely.

Brett Littman: But really – there is totally readable content in these works. Are you saying that painting a cloud is different than painting a fish?

Alexis Rockman: Yes, for me those are two very different strategies. The way I'm interested in representing fish it wouldn't push the buttons that I need to right now. For me, weather pointed to new pictorial opportunities and a notion of speed in my production which I felt was missing in my work for a long time.

Brett Littman: You want that kind of immediate physical experience between the image, the paint and the paper?

Alexis Rockman: I grew up being an athlete and I'm really at my best when the materials have a physical life of their own.

Brett Littman: So you feel that your body is more fully engaged in this kind of work?

Alexis Rockman: Completely. I have to stretch out every morning, or I can't make the paintings.

Brett Littman: The surfaces of these new works seem to reflect that physical engagement. They are much rougher and more textured than what I have seen in your past work.

What about the relationship of speed to the subject matter? You have paintings of tornadoes, lightening strikes, and mudslides which in the real world maybe take about a millisecond to ten seconds to occur.

Alexis Rockman: Well for me that is one of the appealing aspects of the subject matter – and just thinking about how quickly these phenomena occur in the world really pushes me to work faster.

Also, when I started this series I had been looking a lot at the late 1970's and early 1980's de Kooning paintings. I had a really negative reaction to them when I first saw them in the 1980s but for some reason they sort of grew on me. I found myself more and more attracted to them and they really formed my understanding for the handling of the paint for the *Weather Series*.

Also, somehow, I read in a sense of hysteria in these works which really appealed to me. Making the work it seemed was a matter of life and death for de Kooning. Every day in the studio it was all or nothing - he had to get it done, since his life depended on his painting. That mythical sense of urgency was a big motivator for me to speed things up.

Brett Littman: What are the source images for these works?

Alexis Rockman: They are all computer manipulated archetypal images that we have all seen, or if we haven't seen them, we feel that we know them.

Brett Littman: What interests me is that you have decided to take a path where you are not just simply rendering something – a source image from the web or a newspaper but that you are constructing the image from multiple found images in Photoshop.

Alexis Rockman: That is true. I can spend about a week tinkering with the image before I begin the process of working directly on the paper. PhotoShop has been so liberating for me. I am someone who resisted computers for a long time but now I can get all my compositional headaches out of the way at a very early stage of the process.

Brett Littman: Do you sketch out the structure of the image on the paper before you start painting?

Alexis Rockman: I might take very simple shapes and project where the horizon might be. Then I plan out what I'm doing that day because on days when we have to do a lot of heavy lifting to pour or trowel the paint, we have to let it set up overnight. For instance, in this work [a drawing with a sky] anything above the horizon was done first. That's pretty much the rule.

Brett Littman: Are you working on multiple paintings at the same time in your studio?

Alexis Rockman: I can do one pour a day. That means my assistant mixes up the paint and does the preparatory work underneath the physical stuff, sets the background colors or does a fade back and forth between the sky and the ground.

Brett Littman: Is there a deeper statement in this body of work about where the human race is heading, or is the subject matter purely a means to explore painterly or aesthetic concerns?

Alexis Rockman: It is a combination of both. I need an excuse to make the work and to look for interesting personal aesthetic opportunities and challenges. The environmental issues are still important, but my feeling is that they are now not so much my problem, but they are Al Gore's problem.

Brett Littman: So, you do not really want to be the artist advocate for the environment all the time?

Alexis Rockman: I am now just a painter, and I want to make the most interesting images I can. Frankly, the thing that really gets me going about the *Weather Series* is when I look at this cloud I think, 'What the fuck, it's still a cloud, but it's so weird looking.' What I want to retain is that sense of magic and discovery in the working process so that it is very child-like and exciting.

In terms of the past, I remember when I was first showing in the 1980's and I was the only painter in my gallery. Other artists in that gallery's stable like Joseph Kosuth hated my work and I was like 'Fuck You.' I was fiercely territorial because I felt that I had to stake out my own vision, be aware of what was happening around me but not be obedient to any one thing.

Brett Littman: Well, I think that you have had focused of vision with more or less success over time. It is admirable that over a over twenty-year plus career you have stuck to your vision and allowed the activity of painting be your dominant mode of expression.

Alexis Rockman: That is how I want to spend every day – thinking and painting.

Brett Littman: What are you working on in your studio now?

Alexis Rockman: I am actually doing a completely different body of work right now and you didn't see any of it. They're color field related paintings - to describe them is ridiculous because they are truly visual experiences but imagine a detail of a Morris Louis painting that has been manipulated or turned around somehow. The project is called *Half Life* and it has to do with

the effects of radiation on biological things in Louis's work. The painting might be a puddle, it might be rays of energy, it might be a blurry background of trees through the forest, but always in relationship to some sort of mutated or fucked up Louis image.

Brett Littman: Does this series build on some of the issues that you have raised in the *Weather Series*?

Alexis Rockman: I've done maybe seven or eight of these paintings so far. They are literally so different from everything that I have done before that it would be hard to know it was my work if you saw it blind.

Brett Littman: Is that exciting for you?

Alexis Rockman: I am very excited about them. I have shown them to a couple of close friends and colleagues, and they were interested in them in a way that was completely different from anything they had seen me make before. I don't know what I'm doing with these paintings yet, but they seem to be inducing some interesting reactions already. .

This interview was recorded on December 13, 2007, at The Drawing Center in New York. Brett Littman, is the Executive Director of The Drawing Center, the host of Material Culture on wps1.org and an active art and design critic based in New York.