

Artsy, March 30, 2016



Alexis Rockman Uses New York City Soil to Depict 360 Million Years of Its Wildlife

by Hilarie Sheets



Photos of Alexis Rockman, Riverside Park, October 11, 2015. Photo by Hilarie Sheets

In 1994, towards the end of a six-week expedition along the Mazaruni River in Guyana collecting specimens of wildlife and making drawings, Alexis Rockman wore down his last pencil. "I ran out of materials," says Rockman, now 53, who is known for his vividly representational panoramic paintings conjuring the past and future of the natural world and mankind's meddlesome impact. "I got this idea to make drawings out of mud because I had nothing else." Over the last two decades, the artist-cum-amateur naturalist has collected organic materials during extended travels to places including Tasmania, Madagascar, and Antarctica and made delicate field drawings of the things that live in each environment from the soil samples collected there, mixed with water and matte acrylic medium.

For his exhibition "A Natural History of Life in New York City," opening at Salon 94 in New York on April 18th, Rockman—a native New Yorker—has trained his lens on his own backyard. A salon-style installation of 75 field drawings will create a snapshot of the animals and plants that have inhabited the five boroughs, from the Carboniferous period 360 million years ago up to the present. "I thought it would be fascinating to use the fossil record because it is so unexpected with ideas about New York, where we think it's all about humans," says Rockman, who has only lived outside the city for two years, while he studied at the Rhode Island School of Design. He returned to New York to finish his BFA at the School of Visual Arts, where he graduated in 1985.

Artsy, March 30, 2016



Works by Alexis Rockman, clockwise from top left: Laurel Prunus (Bushwick, Brooklyn Water Tunnel #3), 2015; Cervid Cervacies (Jacob Riis Beach, Queens), 2015; House mouse *Mus musculus* (69 Bedford St, Manhattan), 2016; Tyrannosaur Appalachianus (Bushwick, Brooklyn Water Tunnel #3), 2015; American Cockroach *Periplaneta americana* (69 Bedford St, Manhattan), 2016; Eastern Oyster *Crassostrea virginica* (Jamaica Bay, Queens), 2016; Mink Whale (Pelham Bay Park, Bronx), 2016; Virginia Opossum *Didelphis virginiana* (The Lake, Central Park, Manhattan), 2016; Parfish: Blue Gill, Pumpkin Seed, Black Crappy *Lepomis macrochirus*, *Lepomis gibbosus*, 2016. Images courtesy of Salon 94 and the artist.

Having never delved deeply into the past of a geographic place, Rockman consulted with various ecology specialists to pinpoint where to collect soil, sand, and random detritus. Carl Mehling, for instance, who works at the American Museum of Natural History, which Rockman haunted as child, took the artist on a driving tour of significant sites around the boroughs. Rockman depicted a hadrosaur and an ankylosaur with soil gathered at Clay Pit Ponds State Park Preserve in Staten Island, where fossils from the time of these dinosaurs had been uncovered, and an American mastodon with material sampled from Tighe Triangle in upper Manhattan, where a tusk from the Pleistocene-era mammal was dug up in the late 19th century. He waded into the East River underneath the Queensboro Bridge at low tide to collect sand and pebbles, with which he created the barnacle-like texture in his drawing of a manatee once spotted swimming upriver. He dodged oncoming traffic on Bruckner Boulevard in the Bronx to scoop up dirt infused with garbage, with which he rendered the tree fern and horsetail plants.



Works by Alexis Rockman, clockwise from top left: *Arihroplesura* (Bruckner Boulevard, Bronx La), 2015; Quahog *Mercenaria mercenaria* (Coney Island, Brooklyn), 2015; Large Mouth Bass *Micropterus salmoides* (The Lake, Central Park, Manhattan), 2016; Gloke (Bushwick, Brooklyn Water Tunnel #3), 2015; Pale Male, Red-tailed Hawk (Central Park at 73rd and 5th Ave), 2015; Monarch Butterfly *Danaus plexippus* (Coney Island, Brooklyn), 2015; American Mastodon *Mammus Americanum* (Tighe Triangle, Manhattan), 2015; Horsetail *Calamites* (Bruckner Boulevard, Bronx), 2015; Eastern Gray Squirrel *Sciurus carolinensis* (69 Bedford St, Manhattan), 2016. Images courtesy of Salon 94 and the artist.

“It’s the sublime and the ridiculous,” says Rockman, who had no contact with actual fossils but got swept up in the symbolism and mental time travel he experienced at these geographic sites. He’s enchanted by the biodiversity that continues to thrive at the margins of New York’s manmade landscape, from the red-tailed hawk known as Pale Male that nested on the facade of building at 73rd and Fifth Avenue to the American cockroach,

Artsy, March 30, 2016

mourning dove, and house mouse that all inhabit his home and backyard on Bedford Street. "We have lots of cracks and parks where things can make a living," says Rockman, who had a major retrospective in 2010 at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., and is currently working on a monumental cycle of paintings about the history and ecosystem of the Great Lakes that will be shown at the Grand Rapids Art Museum in 2018 with a constellation of related field drawings. "I walk down the street and I'm looking in the sewer. That's where there's the underdog."



Works by Alexis Rockman, clockwise from top left: *Untitled (Composite)*; *Untitled (Flounder)*; *Untitled (Guilper)*; *Untitled (Goblin Shark)*; *Untitled (Food Chain)*; *Untitled (Jelly)*; *Untitled (vent)*; *Untitled (Draper Octopus)*, all works 2013. Images courtesy of Caroline Nitsch and the artist.

In tandem with the exhibition at Salon 94, on April 1st, Carolina Nitsch is opening a show of works from Rockman's series of ethereal deep sea creatures painted in gouache on black paper. Titled "Bioluminescence," the works are an outgrowth of the visual concept art the artist created for the tiger's dream sequence in Ang Lee's 2012 film *Life of Pi*, and reflect the influence of the glowing dioramas in the dark Milstein Hall of Ocean Life at the American Museum of Natural History. "I've never been to the bottom of the ocean, so these works are more about my inner life and fantasy than the field drawings, which have more to do with empiricism," he says.

Yet both bodies of work are similar process-wise and are executed with an incredible fluidity and lightness of touch. He starts with a puddle of his medium on the paper and uses a brush to work in a loose manner like calligraphy. "I love how the images fall apart and then start to come together as something," says Rockman, noting a high rate of failure in his improvisational approach. The images in the exhibitions are like apparitions, immediately recognizable yet fleeting and ephemeral in appearance.

While Rockman takes some liberties with his bioluminescent organisms, connecting a seahorse, say, to a pipefish, which wouldn't happen in the natural world, his field drawings are faithful to the specific species they represent. Together, the works at Salon 94 form a kind of map or family tree of the organic life of New York and testify to the resilience of nature. "The idea that this geographic site has been teeming with life forever," he says, "and will be teeming with life regardless of what we do, is sort of a magical and sobering thing."

Artsy, March 30, 2016



Works by Alexis Rockman, clockwise from top left: *Hadrosaur* (Clay Pit Preserve, Staten Island), 2015; *Orange Sea Star Linckia sp.* (Coney Island, Brooklyn), 2015; *Ankylosaur* (Clay Pit Preserve Staten Island), 2015; *Alliarthus* (69 Bedford St, Manhattan), 2016; *Snowy Owl* (JFK Short-term Parking, Queens), 2016; *Double Breasted Cormorant Phalacrocorax auritus* (Jamaica Bay, Queens), 2016; *Magnolia Magnolia grandiflora* (Turtle Pond, Central Park, Manhattan), 2016; *Musk Ox Ovibos* (Jacob Riis Beach, Queens), 2015; *Eastern Painted Turtle Chrysemys picta* (Turtle Pond, Central Park, Manhattan), 2016. Images courtesy of Salon 94 and the artist.

—Hilarie M. Sheets

“Bioluminescence” is on view at Carolina Nitsch, New York, Apr. 1–30, 2016.

“A Natural History of Life in New York City” is on view at Salon 94, New York, Apr. 18–May 5, 2016.