

Alexis Rockman: Manifest Destiny, June 17, 2005-September 18, 2005

Artists have long been inspired by natural beauty and by utopian visions of the future. Blending realism, fantasy, and science fiction, Alexis Rockman creates an apocalyptic vision of the Brooklyn waterfront 3,000 years from now in his monumental painting *Manifest Destiny*. As a result of unchecked global warming, Rockman's hauntingly detailed but ruined city is submerged under the sea. This eerie cityscape is devoid of human beings, but populated by a variety of plant and animal species. Some have survived from our own time (harbor seals, jellyfish, and a lone cockroach, for example), but they are joined by new and mutant forms of life. Diagrammatic images of deadly viruses, including HIV, West Nile, and SARS, float on the surface of the water. In order to achieve scientific accuracy as well as visual impact, the mural is based on painstaking research with architects, ecologists, archeologists, paleontologists, and climatologists.

Rockman is, however, equally interested in the traditions of landscape painting and, in particular, the 19th-century American examples that he encountered at the Museum when he was a student at RISD in the early 1980s. In *Manifest Destiny*, the artist cautions us about the effects of current policy on future survival, in marked contrast to the earlier representations of the natural environment depicted in a more optimistic era.

Manifest Destiny was commissioned by the Brooklyn Museum and made possible by grants from Tim Nye-the MAT Charitable Foundation & Foundation 2021; the Dorothea Leonhardt Fund of the Communities Foundation of Texas; and Grand Arts, Kansas City, Missouri.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Eugène Laurent Vail, American, 1857-1934
The Grand Canal, Venice, ca. 1904
Oil on canvas
Museum Collection 49.379

Alexis Rockman, whose monumental painting *Manifest Destiny* depicting the Brooklyn waterfront 3,000 years from now is currently on view in Lower Farago Gallery (gallery map 4.2), has singled out this painting. Venice has contended with flooding as a normal occurrence for centuries, as its waterways are central to the city's exotic allure. In contrast to this romantic image, Rockman's painting imagines a bleak future in which Brooklyn is submerged under water as a result of the rising sea level caused by global warming.



RISD MUSEUM

William Bradford, American, 1823-1892

Arctic Sunset, 1874

Oil on canvas

Gift of Mrs. George H. Davenport 18.192

Alexis Rockman, whose monumental painting *Manifest Destiny* is currently on view in the Lower Farago Gallery (gallery map 4.2), appreciates Bradford's luminist seascape for a number of reasons. Bradford's painting features a dramatic flowing sunset, while Rockman's has an equally hyper-real, tannic orange sunrise. Despite the differences in geography and time, both artists have employed scientific research into unknown terrain, careful observation, and accumulated data. Both paintings depict extreme environments that are inhospitable also exists. The arctic ice cap depicted by Bradford is now slowly melting, which is causing the sea level to rise. As a result, in 3,000 years, Rockman's vision of Brooklyn's submerged waterfront may be just as real a representation as Bradford's, unless the course of global warming can be averted.



Winslow Homer, American, 1836-1910

Fishin', 1879

Oil on canvas

Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.935

This atmospheric scene highlights the innocence and pleasure of childhood. The girl and boy are depicted in an idyllic landscape, engaged in an ordinary summer activity. Alexis Rockman was impressed by what he describes as the paintings carefully observed luminosity, orientalist pattern, and optimism and by its warmth and affection for home; qualities that contrast sharply with his own much more ominous vision.



RISD MUSEUM

Martin Johnson Heade, American, 1819-1904
Brazilian Forest, 1864
Oil on canvas
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. C. Richard Steedman 68.052

This painting, which has been on view in the Museum's Main Gallery (gallery map 5.10), is a particular favorite of Alexis Rockman. It is a realistic representation of the South American jungle and its extraordinary botanical wonders. Heade was one of the first American artists to travel to South America. His view is not heroic or concerned with dramatic incident, but rather a microscope analysis of the environment itself: trees, minerals, flowers, and wildlife, with a feather-leaved tree fern as the center of attention. Rockman, who has studied natural history since childhood, described the painting as a postcard from an impossible place and a collision of natural science with exotic travel.

