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In this article, I will be considering contemporary paintings by American artist Alexis Rockman under the proposition of the Anthropocene and provide a commentary upon ironies the concept encapsulates as played out in Rockman's iconography of the human, nonhuman and posthuman. I focus on Rockman's paintings from the global South that encompass visual metonyms of capture which snare the human as trapped in 'his' own Anthropocene. Rockman uses self-portraiture to represent the predicament created from expeditions that re-enact past artist-colonial explorations. I extend T.J. Demos' 'decolonization' to a reading of Rockman's work, baring serious dilemmas, and argue for both painting and the human figure to be included in the emerging Anthropocene art field, and for the importance of artistic engagement with the Anthropocene to support science colleagues pitted against political impediments.

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Self-Capture in the Anthropocene: The Expedition Paintings of Alexis Rockman

In 2012 Donald Trump referred to climate change as a “myth” propagated by the Chinese, and campaigned for US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, a pledge he later fulfilled.¹

Subsequently, on taking office as US President, Trump continued to reportedly call climate change a “hoax”² and the *New Scientist* reported on his selection of a climate change denier to lead the Environmental Protection Agency, and a leader of the energy department who had suggested dissolving it.³ Trump used and continues to use social media to belittle climate change as an unnecessary, illogical expense for the US:

In the East, it could be the COLDEST New Year’s Eve on record. Perhaps we could use a little bit of that good old Global Warming that our Country, but not other countries, was going to pay TRILLIONS OF DOLLARS to protect against. Bundle up! (@realDonaldTrump, Dec 29, 2017)

Scholarly climate research is jeopardized when world leaders reject scientific evidence. Therefore, the imaginations of artists are more critical than ever before, when science is slurred by politicized strategies of igniting uncertainty by the military-industrial complex. It is not presenting additional objective data that is needed politically in this context, as this has been attempted, it is imagination, fantasy, humor, emotion and satire, that can poke and provoke through visualizing climate change insistently. In order for visualization to occur we need, as Nicholas Mirzoeff has urged, “to learn to see the Anthropocene.”⁴

In this article I will be considering contemporary paintings by American artist Alexis Rockman (born 1962, New York) under the proposition of the Anthropocene and provide a commentary upon ironies the concept encapsulates as played out in his visual imagery and iconography of the human, nonhuman and

posthuman. I focus on Rockman's paintings from the global South that encompass visual metonyms of capture, which snare the human as trapped in "his" own Anthropocene. Rockman uses self-portraiture to represent his artistic and ethical predicaments during expeditions that re-enact past artist-colonial exploration and the tensions of capturing nature through representation. I extend T.J. Demos' understanding of "decolonization" to Rockman's work, baring serious dilemmas, and argue for both painting and the human figure to be included in the emerging Anthropocene art field, and for the importance of artistic engagement with the Anthropocene to support fellow scientists who are pitted against political impediments.

This article understands the Anthropocene not only as denoting the human species becoming a geological force as first conceived by Earth System Science (ESS),⁵ but also considers the concept's social and political ramifications. Extractivist global capitalism's pursuit of economic growth through Western notions of progress operationally removes obstacles to development, such as rainforests for monocrop agricultural production or by expropriating indigenous communities' land through coercion or ruination of ecosystems, and nature reconceived as resource. In this context colonialism is continued through multinational corporations and state-financed mining programs.⁶ Extreme weather events caused by anthropogenic climate change are widespread and effect both hemispheres, however across geographies it is the wealthy who have the biggest chance of survival and the vulnerable are left unaided. These social inequalities, blind-spots and disharmonies pulsate through Anthropocene discourse. I argue here that Alexis Rockman visualizes these injustices in the Americas and complicates them through self-mockery and self-implication in narrative-based self-portraits that reveal the role the Western white male holds within an ideology that captures

nonhumans and humans alike.

For the past two decades, Rockman's work has been discussed using environmental, ecological or natural history terminology alongside references to visual culture. However, the Anthropocene concept is now being retrospectively applied. Joanna Marsh, curator and Head of Interpretation and Audience Research at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, teases out Anthropocene tropes in the dystopic futurity of Rockman's paintings of urbanization and infrastructure within his home city New York. Whilst Marsh concentrates on Rockman's built environments and lambasting of American expansionism,⁷ I extend Rockman's critique of expansionist ambitions beyond US metropolises and focus on how he visualizes the human, the *Anthropos*, which is the etymological root of the Anthropocene. I would contend that Rockman is among few artists using pictorial representations of the human form in the context of the Anthropocene, albeit in one painting series in particular, and it is this series that this article will examine.

Anthropogenic Painting

Following the explosion in Anthropocene discourse across fields of study, spreading from ESS origins, there is need for an enquiry into how contemporary painting is engaging with the tropes and contradictions the Anthropocene encompasses. This can be demonstrated in the engagement with paint materiality and pigment provenance by artists Sigrid Holmwood, Onya McCausland, Maria Lalić and Ulrike Arnold – what Jussi Parikka might call a geology⁸ of painting, and the research methods and material enquiries used by pedology experts and artists in the publication *Field to Palette: Dialogues on Soil and Art in the Anthropocene*.⁹ Additional examples of Anthropogenic painting might include artists investigating sustainable materials, recyclables and “natural” dyes such as in the work of Liz Elton; the agency of natural processes and water used in Vivian

Suter's, Peter Matthews' and Jessica Warboys' canvases; nuclear aesthetics as explored by James Rosenquist, Yelena Popova and Adrian Ghenie; speculative landscapes in contemporary imaginings by Amelia Carley; built environment ecologies and concrete jungles in Adriano Valeri's, Luiz Zerbini's and Daniel Richter's paintings; and geology and sedimentation in Per Kirkeby's, Laura Moriarty's and Barbara Nicholls' work.

In contrast, T.J. Demos suggests that much of the imagery visualizing and documenting the Anthropocene is quasi-scientific, satellite-based, remote-sensored or composite.¹⁰ These technologies possess authorial agendas but refrain from disclosing them and feature no visible or identifiable human subject. Through these technologies humans appear to be visualizing "nature" at a distance from themselves, or using aerial photography or drone operation, where "nature" is looked down upon from a God-like perspective, such as in the "disaster capitalism"¹¹ or "Anthrobscene"¹² photography and film work of Edward Burtynsky, which holds a sublime hyper-aesthetic appeal.

These distancing mechanisms could be seen as continuing the European Western landscape painting genre (landscape as proxy for "nature"), whereby nature is depicted as an inert backdrop to human activity, a static set or "back screen."¹³ Nature in this tradition has been visualized as mastered, conserved, managed or revered, viewed in awe and/or fear, but always at safe distance. This visually secure detachment has created a Western cognitive habit of visualizing nature as removed, othered, permitting its colonization both in terms of controlling nature, but also appropriating new lands, and with that, people.¹⁴ However, this alienation is now upturned and contrary to the Anthropocene's paradigmatic swing of interpreting humans as embedded with and in nature and expelling the distinction between. Therefore, if Anthropocene visualizations are to oblige the concept's proposition, the human - I argue - should not be centered as the only lively entity

against a vapid background as compounded by humanism, but also not entirely absent either.

The Anthropocene thesis has also prompted analysis of the convoluted temporalities of the geological deep time of fossil fuels combusted quickly in the present, discharging anxieties about speculative futures. How to summon these temporal intricacies becomes important in various art practices. In socially engaged art and activist collectives such as Art Not Oil (which include Liberate Tate and other groups) and Platform, the documentation of participation, protest or performance, records the enacted social, political and/or ecological message, and survives beyond the moment of live activity, which underscores these creative strategies. The onlooker of “relational aesthetics”¹⁵ becomes a participant through modes of social interstice and encounter; however, this relationality is determined by the temporal duration of the activity, which once finished, similarly to performance art, relies on documentation to evidence what has occurred while the social relationality ceases, which is the *raison d’être* of the aesthetics. The media documentation re-presents the past activity in a different form. Whereas in painting and other visual art, viewing occurs at a moment established in the present but it can unfold with temporal possibilities in the phenomenological viewing experience, oscillating between past, present and future imaginings, sometimes concurrently. More significantly, the duration of viewing a painting is undefined; it is nonlinear and flexible. The time of the painting’s final image and the time of its making are also unsynchronized. The viewer determines their temporal engagement. Painting keeps time elastic, it accumulates time through making, which is often a different time to its public release and it is a “time battery” that marks and stores time “which remains present on its surfaces, since its constituent marks, which are laid down over time, are always simultaneously available to vision.”¹⁶ I therefore suggest this fluidity in the temporal viewing experience,

within the supposed bounded object of painting, can address Anthropocene temporalities.

Demos urges for a “decolonization” performed through visual culture that does not reside in “institutional” gallery-based contemplations of the aesthetic, folded in his view within the same destructive capitalist networks, but through interdisciplinary modes mirroring “political ecology.”¹⁷ Whilst celebrating the broadness of visual culture addressing climate change and the Anthropocene through activism outside institutional art practice, he completely (perhaps deliberately) misses out painting and its possibilities, which do not have to be entirely studio-bound or gallery-based.¹⁸ Demos demands an aesthetic and ethico-political art marriage, yet the examples he offers, I would argue, are skewed towards the latter. I would also challenge the demonization of the gallery-based ecology, as this condemnation prioritizes one aesthetic and audience, whereas Rockman for instance, conducts field research, interdisciplinary connection, a rejection of the myth of “high art” elitism to engage an art and non-art public¹⁹ through gallery and public museum systems. He also creates illustrations for nature magazines, drawings for commercial films, and public billboard commissions. Rockman uses his didactic populist imagery in an attempt to educate and be accessible to a wide audience through luxurious pictorialism to pedagogically make an impact within a society where heads of state harangue climate action. His technical bravado, bitter humor and high-chroma all fight for attention against social media propaganda to support the sciences.²⁰

The Capitalocene, Painting and Humans

Widely held analysis in critical art history and theory deems painting (and other “plastic arts”) to operate within the commercialized art market²¹ as a commodity that bolsters globalized capital through production, circulation, distribution

and exorbitant wealth exchange, supported by neoliberal financial systems of insurance, taxation, customs, duties, visas, logistics, shipping, sponsorship, ownership, administration and information technology; the Capitalocene.²² These indictments have resulted in recent appeals for painting to *visualize* its distribution and exhibition “networks,”²³ previously vented in 1960s’ and 1970s’ dematerialization of the art object as Conceptual Art recoiled from the plenitude of existing products, but happily borrowed Minimalist aesthetics.

Therefore today, there is good reason for reterritorialization in painting that openly highlights the complicity experienced as both consumer and producer-artist, in a networked system that one could strongly contend anthropogenically contributes to climate change through resource use, waste and perpetuating the Anthropocene’s inequalities of wealth, politicized inertia and privilege. In critically reflecting on contemporary painting’s engagement with the Anthropocene debate, one possibility is to explicitly highlight its human authorship. When you behold a painting, rudimentary understandings of the link to its human creator could be one or more of the following: the painter is perceived through a scrawled surface signature; indexical brushstrokes trace the painter’s gestures and the viewer attempts to virtually re-enact the painting’s genealogy by observation of the mark-making;²⁴ vitalist projections of painting becoming a “manifestation of the absent author”²⁵ and their Marxian “living labor” and lifetime are “*seemingly* stored in it”²⁶ creating value as commodity form and charging paintings with “subject-like qualities”;²⁷ the painting’s facture, which in European 18th and 19th-century modern art characterized the artist’s individuation and “style”; in material-ambered hair or fingerprint traces; and, most obviously, through self-portraiture.

Following on from this, a human author can be inferred in part of the painting making process, no matter how remotely, technologically or digitally generated. Painting as ontology

unfurls the meaning of the Anthropocene as a geological signature of the human on a planetary scale within paint application. Human cultural engagement with environments is prehistoric: ever since our species began mark-marking we have been engaged with Earth pigments, in caves and on bodies, and as geologist Ruth Siddall adds, “the procurement, preparation and application of ochres is arguably the earliest exploitation of Earth materials.”²⁸ Therefore, the activity of painting is directly connected to manipulation of the Earth. Burtynsky calls the Anthropocene the “indelible human signature.”²⁹ I would argue that the Anthropocene creates distaste for the human, an embarrassment perhaps, or knowing reminder that humans (not all of course) have overproduced to an entropic magnitude. This “Great Acceleration” of excess has also propelled human population size, energy consumption, urban populace, mega-dams, water usage, paper production, telecommunications, fertilizer dependency, transportation, international tourism, methane levels, carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide use, tropical forest loss, shrimp aquaculture, and many more. These fast-paced upward propulsions since 1950 have been dramatically and graphically visualized,³⁰ curving continually upwards throughout Rockman’s lifetime.

In tackling the baffling question *What is Nature?*³¹ Kate Soper convincingly argues that despite the pressure and perhaps desire to adopt post-anthropocentrism, humans are always going to present an anthropocentric view. This poses problems for the different philosophies of speculative realism and object-orientated ontology, new materialisms, animism, posthumanism and panpsychism, all poised towards an attempt to remove anthropocentric blinkers. If, as Michael Sanchez writes, “visibility can be equated with legitimation,”³² the deficiency of self-imagining within Anthropocene visuals, I suggest, erases human self-presence, perhaps warping interpretations of contribution,

responsibility and involvement, but also cogent acknowledgment of the human connection to biological, ecological, socio-political, technological and economic systems within the Anthropocene. Self-representation does not have to be a formula or forum for a subject's expressed guilt, pity or confession in light of socio-economic and environmental biases in the Anthropocene,³³ but recognition of complexity whereby citizens in rich-countries visualize perceptions of relations to nonhumans and other living and non-living organisms. I would like to stress then that painting (embracing expanded and interdisciplinary practices) *and* its human creator, as well as its machines and technologies, through whichever mode (digital or analogue), should not be missing from the Anthropocene visual canon, as there is justification to include both.

Thwarting Anthropocene Visualization

The difficulty of visualizing the Anthropocene has been expressed by many theorists. Jean-Luc Nancy maintains that humans have lost the ability to form an "image of the world" as it is "hypercomplex"³⁴ and questions whether this results (whilst in conversation) in what John Paul Ricco calls "a picturing of the world through which humans take humanity out of (the picture of) the world?"³⁵ Due to this complication, Nancy suggests that humanity is now in a position beyond representation and only has an *idea* of the world, not an image. The paradox Ricco points out is the "image of humanity's erasing of the human from geologic time that in part accompanies the assertion of the Anthropocene."³⁶ In other words, in naming the Anthropocene, humans both write themselves into geologic time and visualize themselves out through the prospect of becoming the next Sixth Mass Extinction event.³⁷

The scalar anthropogenic planetary-system changes in the stratosphere for instance, or in remote locations such as Antarctica, are hard to visualize and comprehend. Timothy Morton christens these vast phenomena “hyperobjects” as “they so massively outscale us, [and] have magnified this weirdness of things for our inspection: things are themselves, but we can’t point to them directly.”³⁸ Nixon similarly remarks on this struggle:

How can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world? How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention [...]?³⁹

However, despite these complex, slow, accelerated, and spatially vast obstacles outlined above, visualization is not wholly irresolvable. Throughout the history of Western painting, visualizing the invisible has been tackled through several means: Judeo-Christian symbolism and iconography developed for representing divinity and the Holy Trinity; Renaissance linear perspective to condition illusions of spatiality and depth; channeling of eidetic and entoptical imagery and other neuro-physiological phenomena; influence from spiritualist literature, theosophy and occultism to produce visionary paintings - these are but a few examples.⁴⁰

The spatial and temporal hurdles complicated by the Anthropocene still problematize visualization, which is reliant on scientific modelling. Climate change, for instance, is measured by climate scientists using data from the past to calculate future climate. Researcher Adam Brenthel has argued that climate (as opposed to weather) cannot be visualized for present purposes,⁴¹ as scientific predictions are future-orientated, and he also

contends that visualization of the future should be temporally represented, not spatially as landscape for example, and accurate future forecasting is almost impossible, particularly if tipping points transform the planet beyond human comprehension.⁴² However, the priorities for Brenthel are to communicate climate change in order to foster responsive action through visualizations so as to influence the public and policymakers, and he argues this is achievable by aesthetic images being “supplementary” to scientific images.⁴³ Whereas for our purposes here, aesthetic images do not need to be supplements, in Rockman’s paintings they combine, or ingest, scientific research, bringing together the fictive and factual in one. Additionally, local or grounded manifestations of environmental change can be detected, visualized or textualized, such as those empirically observed by Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring*⁴⁴ where the decline in birdlife in US communities prompted her to mix literary fable with scientific research, recording the effects of the pesticide DDT (dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane), most famously in her first chapter *A Fable for Tomorrow*, a title later borrowed for an Alexis Rockman publication and exhibition.⁴⁵

Apparatuses of Capture

Human ocularism, and the “seeing is believing” Western scopic regime, seem at odds in the Anthropocene where changes to Earth system cycles test the naked eye. The accelerated presence of radionuclides in the atmosphere post-1950 is the likely “golden spike” the Anthropocene Working Group will formally seek to date the Anthropocene from. Atsuhide Ito reaffirms that visualizing the hyperobject of radioactivity is antagonistic to the biological mechanism of the eye. The invisibility of high frequency short-wavelengths requires technological intervention to detect and represent

(e.g. via a Geiger counter). Ito presents the case study of filmmaker Vladimir Shevchenko, who filmed in Chernobyl after the nuclear disaster in 1986, and whose very film revealed evidence of radioactive interference. Shevchenko and his equipment were exposed to radiation and he died one year later. Quoting Ito at length:

The operator of the apparatus of capture becomes captured as an indexical representation of radiation. In a paradoxical way the human subject who attempts to capture a form of energy to translate it into visuality becomes the outcome of the process. Through this [...] the subject becomes a medium and an outcome of the photographic process and, conversely, skeletonizes their ontological impossibility of being in its material and physical body immersed in the field of ionizing radioactivity that destroys their atomic structure.⁴⁶

In the case of the artist-painter, operating the painting-apparatus of capture, capture can be representational through self-portraiture, indexical as mentioned above, and through material consumption and absorption, whereby volatile pigments of carcinogenic invisibles radiate through the painting-body into the human body. In Rockman's 2007/2008 series *Half-Life*⁴⁷ he appropriates Morris Louis-esque pours of paint veils, florals, columns and unfurleds as back-curtains, or in his words "placeholder[s] for history,"⁴⁸ to his biological organisms painted with verisimilitude. Rockman quotes American Color Field painting, which used a staining technique, to speculate on whether Louis' death from lung cancer was due to inhalation of vapors from the Magna acrylics he used. Rockman's paintings



Alexis Rockman, *Only You*, 2008. Oil and resin on wood. 54 x 96 in. Courtesy of the artist

sully the nonrepresentational modernism of Louis through corruptive figuration, but in turn the contaminated paint of abstraction scorches pictorial insect wings and cremates leaves.⁴⁹ Within this series nonhumans become trapped and caught in viscous modernist paint.⁵⁰ Corrosive color fields also leach from Louis' flat plane formalism and seep into creating three-dimensional space depicting oil spill spoilage.⁵¹ Additionally, these paintings evince psychotic disturbances or hallucinogenic rumblings⁵² whereby paint fumes and paint forms create a heady mix. Rockman fictionalizes Louis' pigments as poisonous, developed as by-products after the Second World War from the chemical military industry and these seem to suggest that the artist's body-mind is captured, transformed and pooled onto and into the painting object with the human subject stained in the process of lethal painting, contaminating formalist opticality with warfare technology.⁵

Colonialocene

Alexis Rockman fuses imaginative imagery with research garnered from biologists, zoologists, geologists, ecologists, paleontologists and archaeologists for paintings that mine art history, natural history illustration, popular culture and science-fiction. His subject matter (global warming, post-planetary existence, extinction, pollution, genetic engineering, biotechnology, deforestation, "cryptids" and invasive species) can be placed directly within Anthropocene discourse *avant la lettre* and he paints subject matter using a variety of stylistic modes such as highly-detailed Old Master realism, loose painterly gestures and pop art flat color. Human presence is always anticipated,



Alexis Rockman, *Forest for the Trees*, 2008. Oil and acrylic on wood. 54 x 96 in. Courtesy of the artist

but I would argue Rockman is among the limited number of artists visualizing the human figure in relation to the Anthropocene, in particular by representing himself.

The diorama *The Ecotourist* (1997) was inspired by Rockman's first two-month trip, in 1994, to Guyana, a former Dutch and British colony that imported West African slaves, and introduced new species and disease, similar repercussions of which are highlighted in paintings *Recent History of the World* (1997–1998)⁵⁴ and *First Encounter* (1997). Exploration and exploitation in this context go hand in hand.⁵⁵ Travel to provide empirical research for paintings is integral to Rockman's practice and he also sends specimens back to the United States, re-enacting the Age of Discovery's amassment of seeds, skins, bones, fauna and flora for colonial collections, and identification.

Demos (and Nixon) explicitly interpret climate change as belonging to a wider political and economic malfunction. Demos insists the colonization of nature pertained to the colonialist expansion of human territories "emerging from the Enlightenment principles of Cartesian dualism between human and nonhuman worlds, [which] situated the nonhuman world as objectified, passive and separate."⁵⁶ Similarly, Jonathan Crary has written that during the period of colonial conquest, nature was treated as amassment, limitless, and collected objects for *theatrum naturae*, *Wunderkammer* and *nature morte* resulted in the translocation, "circulation and intermingling of life on a planetary scale."⁵⁷ These assortments created a homogenization of ecologies and cultures, or "Homogenocene,"⁵⁸ and hybridization as monstrously depicted in Rockman's paintings of cross-species congress, and invasive and introduced species - which become further pronounced as species migrate, driven by habitat loss and climate change. Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin name this transfer of material (living and non-living, human and nonhuman) the "Columbian Exchange." They propose

to date the start of the Anthropocene to 1610 when atmospheric levels of carbon dioxide plummeted due to afforestation as indigenous populations perished from newly introduced diseases.⁵⁹

Rockman's first Guyana trip was a precursor to a 1998 journey, resulting in the *Expedition* series. Both involved establishing a field station camp within the jungle and Rockman joined fellow artists Mark Dion and Bob Braine as part of their wider *Neotropic* project.⁶⁰ Designating the latter series *Expedition*, recalling 16th-century "imperial adventurism"⁶¹ and romanticized voyages encountering "pristine" nature, could perhaps be misconstrued as a form of cultural deterritorialization or neo-colonialism as visual culture can dangerously legitimize empire.⁶² However, I will illuminate how Rockman reveals these tensions of the "colonialocene."⁶³

Decompositions and Eco Homo

For *The Ecotourist* Rockman wanted to treat his own body "with the detachment and thoroughness"⁶⁴ that he embellishes other subjects and his full-length self-portrait decomposes into humus on the jungle floor. The punch line of this *mise-en-abîme* is his rotting chest tattooed with a jungle painted in the naïve, untaught style of "outsider" French artist Henri Rousseau. Rockman's use of Rousseau's "primitive" language, which was eventually canonized, is pictured on to the cadaver borrowed from Matthias Grünewald and Niclaus of Haguenau's *Isenheim Altarpiece* (c.1512-15),⁶⁵ where in the lamentation base-panel the green oozing corpse of Christ reminded the faithful of



Alexis Rockman, *The Ecotourist*, 1997. Envirotex, digitized photo, artificial plants, carved styrofoam, acrylic and oil paint, botanical models, synthetic hair, plasticine, latex rubber, clothing, nylon waist pouch, bird field guide, wedding ring, Fresnel lens, rice, plastic taxidermy human eyeball, leaves, empty pack of Camel unfiltered, and oil paint on two wood panels. 56 x 88 x 5 in. Courtesy of the artist

his agony and humanity. The medieval altarpiece was placed in a chapel in an Antonite hospital monastery where monks treated the poor for "St Anthony's fire" (later diagnosed as being caused by eating infected bread made from rye contaminated with a parasitic fungus, ergot). Christ's body is gangrenous and symptomatic and the Rye plant (*Secale cereale*) takes root in Rockman's work as a nod to this artistic piracy.

Rockman's remains are equally "grotesque" and Jonathan Crary evokes the grotesque as employed in Mikhail Bakhtin's writing on carnival in Rabelais' literature.⁶⁶

Bakhtin views humor,

inappropriate exaggeration and excessiveness as characteristics of the grotesque: "the grotesque body [...] swallows the world and is itself

swallowed by the world" and the parts of the grotesque body which transgress it, outgrowing it and hyperbolized, are the bowels and phallus as "they can detach themselves from the body and lead an independent life."⁶⁷ Rockman's self-

deprecating grotesque material enriches the nonhuman as a Coatimundi emasculates and dismembers the artist by running away with his penis, establishing its agency and expelling the passivity the nonhuman world is objectified as being.

Escaping Rockman's rigid hand in *The Ecotourist* is a copy of *Guide to the Birds of Colombia*, suggesting the artist had strayed across Central American borders. It is no longer indigenous people and nonhumans deemed out of place, but the lost, Western, eco do-gooder male artist, fallen in terrain he is ill-equipped for. Nixon views ecotourism, designed for privileged rich-country citizens, as a continuation of the slow violence and environmentalism of the poor in the global South, where



The Isenheim Altarpiece, c.1512-15 (oil on panel), Grunewald, Matthias (Mathis Nithart Gothart) (c.1480-1528) / Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar, France / Bridgeman Images. Source: Wikimedia Commons

locations are green-washed and local communities segregated from resources (which are depleted) and dispossessed of their ways of life. Forms of neoliberal tourism resume imperialist incursions within cultural globalization and mediatization,⁶⁸ and landscape itself becomes a commodity and packaged for tours.⁶⁹

I would like to advance that Alexis Rockman re-casts the casualties of the former (and arguably continuing) colonization of the New World (through ecological resource imperialism, outsourcing of environmental waste, dispossession, displacement,⁷⁰ militarism, and nuclear colonization), where Amerindians fell victim to introduced epidemics of small pox, measles, influenza and other pathogens.⁷¹ Here, Rockman offers his own body as a site for colony and conquest, and reoccupation or repatriation by the forest in providing it with nourishment. Nature is re-colonizing the artist's deceased body in the forms of Carrion beetle and Blue Bottle fly, magnified in the foreground, and a King vulture and Turkey vulture await their gains. Rockman reverses the outcome of the first exploits of people and nature in the Americas, re-enacting them in the same location where the intrepid explorer is now made vulnerable, lost, prone to infection, and ultimately expires.

Writing for the inauguration of the new science and technology museum La Cité de la Villette in Paris in 1986, Paul Virilio argued that museum displays should make accommodations for accident, since each new technology is accompanied by a novel catastrophe, for instance the automobile is complemented by the car crash, the sea vessel beckons the shipwreck. Virilio believes "what is needed is a new scenography where only *what is exploding or decomposing is exhibited*. A paradoxical *mise-en-scène* of the obscene, where decomposition and disintegration follow artistic display and high-tech design."⁷² In the context of the Anthropocene where humanity's existence is perceived to be perilous, decomposition should be visualized perhaps more

than composition, and the human body and its inseparability with death should also be respected.⁷³ In Rockman's case his body is exposed, a taboo for some, and without burial or ceremony, and it is visualized as material that is dematerializing. In *The Ecotourist* the dead linger, not entombed away but juxtaposed amongst the living in the lively rainforest as existence continues. The terminated are frequently featured in Rockman's work as road kill, predator-prey tussles or returning extinct species in paintings where death for nonhuman animals is inescapably part of life. In *The Ecotourist*, an identification key (an interpretational device borrowed from museum displays) lists *Homo sapiens sapiens* alongside nonhumans, democratizing species and equalizing the dead and the living. However, anthropocentric taxonomic classifications intended for and only interpreted by humans, are further made ironic in a potential posthuman Anthropocene.

When the viewer is not provided with a "key" to meaning, Rockman's work operates in a similar vein to Dario Gamboni's "hidden images," which draw upon Jean-Didier Urbain's "crypto-images." These operate as puzzles to be deciphered. In Gamboni's analysis the beholder is provided with information with a "specific intention" to communicate its content, but it also has "been subject to a form of censorship" or withdraws from full disclosure so ambiguity still fizzes.⁷⁴ As soon as hidden images achieve revelation, however, their mystery weakens and their job is complete. This "coding and decoding" is a game Rockman revels in.

The Ecotourist crystallizes in diorama format, first patented by Louis Daguerre in 1822, and originally designed as what Kevin Avery describes as "landscape theatre,"⁷⁵ a mode of advertised entertainment for the audience's mnemonic travel or as a fantasy "travel machine" as Virilio describes Daguerre's Paris Diorama.⁷⁶ Rockman's dioramas borrow the aesthetics of natural

history museological displays, which often include taxidermy specimens that are “real,” dead and fabricated. He is captivated by those in the American Museum of Natural History in New York, where his mother worked as assistant to anthropologist Margaret Mead. Avery views Rockman’s dioramas as being closer to the inanimate genre of still life. I would also champion this analysis and extend it further as the material encasement of *The Ecotourist* traps a mix of “readymade” organic and inorganic material, sealed in layers of synthetic resin with a digital photograph as backdrop, and in between the veneers Rockman inserts his own hand-painted imagery.⁷⁷ These vitrine-like painting-objects hybridize real and fake, biological and artificial, two and three dimensions, complicating what is now considered natural since the human is geologic.

After visiting the exhibition *Amber: Window to the Past* at the American Museum of Natural History in 1996, Rockman became fascinated by the gummed amber insects as “moments trapped in time”⁷⁸ and the capturing of time in Rockman’s work resounds throughout his projects. Amber transmutes into viscid polymer in his dioramic cases of temporality that evoke the strata of evidence the Anthropocene Working Group are tasked with finding. Therefore, Rockman’s dioramas of still life are assemblages of “readymade” material, capturing life, *nature morte* or dead nature.



Alexis Rockman, *Tropical Hazards*, 2000.
Oil and acrylic on wood. 72 x 84 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Tropical Hazards

Whereas the inaugural Guyana field trip yielded paintings of extraordinary flora and fauna in vibrant detail,⁷⁹ the *Expedition* series is remarkable in Rockman’s oeuvre for its steadfast

inclusion of the human form. In *Tropical Hazards* (2000) the host of bacterial, fungal and parasitic bodies that have infected the Anthropocene body (Western, white, heterosexual, male, wealthy) deny full illusionistic submersion into the painting – entry is prevented by circular pocks and diarrhetic abstract-expressionist splatters of illness. The posturing “macho” artist, again a self-portrait, soils his own “image” and painting surface. I would argue that Rockman mocks himself, and New York School painting, by instead preferring small-brush precision and stylized execution. The artist consulted experts in molecular biology and tropical medicine to harness the fears of exotic travel and naivety of the adventure-seeker, illustrating parasites and health risks he did and did not experience: Hookworm, Electric Eels, Banana Vipers and Candiru.⁸⁰ Rockman’s body acts as a host for microorganism colonization and outbreak, which I suggest ridicules one-species hegemony, illustrating the human body as “a multiplicity of beings (including the bacteriological) all enmeshed within complex multispecies ecologies.”⁸¹

David Joselit argues that since the 1990s the human body has expanded through connectivity via digital means and networks, and simultaneously tapered through microscopic reduction to DNA – contractions manifested through the Internet and Human Genome project. The human body becomes transformed as Cyborg or Posthuman through technological extensions of the body, which Joselit terms “biocollage.”⁸² Adapting Joselit’s notion of “biocollage” and uncertainty over subjectivity and embodiment, in *Tropical Hazards* the taut human body simultaneously bulges with microscopic hosts and projects *outwardly* from its “normal” corpus, and the microbiological visualizations of bacteria in petri-dishes portray the body *inwardly*, as the supposed single subject becomes a biocollage of many.

Addressing images outside the Western fine art history canon (“outsider,” anti-art, postcolonial and popular culture) art historian James Elkins considers “informational images” to be neglected visual forms. These include graphs, maps, charts, plans, official documents, technical and architectural drawings, scientific imagery, pictograms, ideograms, currencies, seals, stamps and so forth. Due to their affiliation with writing and numbers (therefore deemed less expressive than painting) informational images are marginalized to join graphic design, printing, linguistics, typography, mathematics, archaeology, and are excluded from fine art and art history. Pertinently, this unnoticed imagery constitutes the majority and Elkins compares this to overlooked nonhuman species: “fine art, non-Western art, medieval art, outsider art, and popular imagery might be the familiar mammals and other chordates, and informational imagery, the many other phyla.”⁸³ Rockman celebrates the informational image, such as the map and key, to hybridize “high” art with “low” instrumental imagery. He also privileges the importance, scale, number and variety of nonhumans in his paintings, especially championing “low” species such as ants that gnaw their way through the pictorial vegetation in the *Expedition* series.

Capture and Traps

Jonathan Crary places the image in crisis due to the atrocities and seismic events witnessed in recent history, which have overridden human powers of imagination. The art critic interprets Rockman’s work as stemming from this predicament and views his paintings as possessing an “after-image” effect.⁸⁴ This effect defamiliarizes the recognizable through pictorial fiction and image theatrics based on scientific research, placing Rockman’s work somewhere between fantasy and reality, perhaps even a fantastic realism. His work has faced criticism for being illustrative and content-driven⁸⁵ and reveling in too

much technique.⁸⁶ However, Rockman's stylistic overtures can lure a viewer, trapping them in seductive surfaces, preventing any easy interpretation or, importantly, a way out. Rockman's art pivots on capturing attention, forcing us to look at anthropogenic impacts through discomfort.

Paintings of angling (another mode of capture) in the *Expedition* series, such as *Fishing* (2000) and those from the *Guyana* series, feature an over-under or split-shot angle, customary in nature photography and natural history documentaries, semi-submerging the viewer in an aquatic environment through a wide-angle vision or what Virilio calls

a deliberate "point of view," that of the nonhuman.⁸⁷ Rockman's ploy is

to present a "fish-eye" perspective, contrasting with the Western art tradition of painting the natural world correlated to the human. Crary recognizes this detachment in visualizing nature as an indicator of an urban culture which is removed from living, depending, and sustaining itself on nearby land and so "the landscape image becomes an imaginary figuration of

a recovered wholeness."⁸⁸ Landscape in Western art history is rendered lifeless and excludes or sidelines zoological content motivated by human exceptionalism and remoteness,⁸⁹ and

scenic beauty as perceived in landscape itself becomes endangered,⁹⁰ even more so in the Anthropocene. However, in Rockman's paintings flora and fauna outnumber the human and are in close proximity.



Alexis Rockman, *Fishing*, 2000. Oil on wood. 84 x 72 in. Courtesy of the artist

Jungle Vision

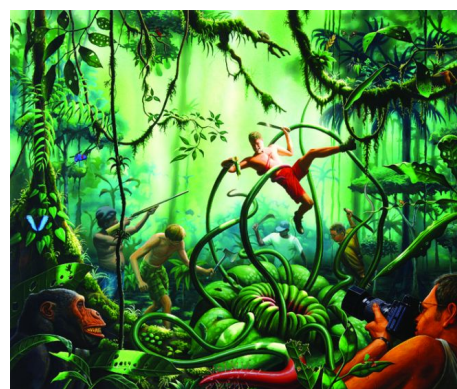
Commenting on the *Expedition* paintings, Joanna Marsh writes: “the verdant jungle [...] becomes the backdrop for a human drama starring Rockman and his friends in the role of ‘ugly Americans.’”⁹¹

Marsh remarks that Rockman’s paintings predate and perhaps anticipate reality TV series such as *Survivor* (2000–present). In both *Big Game* (2000) and *Man-Eating Plant* (2000) photographic media is implied as having captured the “action,” with artist as actor and author, both capturing and captured. The presence of a photographer in both, visualized in *Man-Eating Plant* and implicit in *Big Game*’s explicit posing, creates “the effects of a given illusion but also exposes to view the means of this illusion’s production.”⁹² Rockman exposes himself through auto-imaging as a self-conscious protagonist in the Anthropocene and a self-embroiled subject.

The *Expedition* series oscillates between what late paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould calls the human as “enlightened observer to intent participant,”⁹³ and Rockman is viewing events through a digital and residual anthropocentric lens, but a knowing one. The slowness of geological and ecological processes are pitched against high-speed digital technology, instantaneity and globalized connectivity, and perhaps hyper-time in these



Alexis Rockman, *Big Game*, 2000. Oil and acrylic on wood. 160 x 193 cm. Courtesy of the artist



Alexis Rockman, *Man-Eating Plant*, 2000. Oil on wood. 183 x 213 cm. Courtesy of the artist

paintings. Nixon avers that human brain circuits are being “reprogrammed” in our fast-paced society and have access to so much they have reached a point of “info-whelm” and “perpetual distraction.”⁹⁴ Jungles are “wild” habitats that need to be “civilized” by forging a thoroughfare for human access. In *Man-Eating Plant*, perhaps based on the mythic Laocoön wrestling serpents, the artist is tangled in triffid tentacles, hacking against his own painted creation, conceivably analogous to the predicament of humanity’s complicity within the Anthropocene. The artist and friends are armed with machetes, whilst a local man seems to be seizing the opportunity to shoot the vine-captured artist. Alongside conjuring up sci-fi vegetal revenge movie sets, this painting makes direct ancestral links to human-animal descent through the Chimpanzee (or perhaps an early human ancestor, such as *Ardipithecus*) at the composition’s edge. The Chimpanzee is a member of the Hominidae family and classified as endangered, threatened by urban residential development, transportation, agriculture, mining, logging, hunting and trapping, and climate change, all Anthropocene symptoms, alongside six other species in this family; the only population not decreasing but increasing is *Homo Sapiens*.⁹⁵ Chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*), and other chimp species (Bonobo, *Pan paniscus*) are non-migratory Old World African-based primates, and here Rockman profiles a great ape in a geography it doesn’t belong to, a deliberate incursion, and she observes her struggling cousins perhaps as a talisman, whilst a photographer shoots, capturing the action. Both these *repoussoir* peripheral figures act as lead-ins to the painting, at the “threshold” between observer and observed, a device used to sit-in for the viewer.⁹⁶ This stratagem is repeated in a parallel *Expedition* painting, *Big Game*, which chronicles the desire to touristically photograph landscape as an object and fetishized commodity,⁹⁷ and also portrays again the actions of cutting, as

trees are felled. Rockman developed these paintings in his studio from photographs and the shutter's eye combines with imaginary imagery. As he has stated, "I wanted to re-photograph things that never existed,"⁹⁸ and strive for "painting the un-photographable, painting time travel."⁹⁹ The human form as *repoussoir* in *Big Game* is possibly an Arawak tribesman or Carib native Indian and this foreshadowing figure is critical, as "who gets to see, and from where? When and how does such empowered seeing become normative? And what perspectives – not least those of the poor or women or the colonized – do hegemonic sight conventions of visibility obscure?"¹⁰⁰ This is not a marginalized pictorial figure regressed spatially into the background but a foregrounded one turning his back on the "ugly Americans." This figure is stilted, possibly developed from an anthropological model. However, representing subordinated groups raises vexed questions, with no clear answers, and "transculturation" is not afforded by this one-way dominant cultural gaze.¹⁰¹ *Big Game* brings together a collision of capturing into a single frame; trophy killing; perhaps localized hunting or foraging culture; and the photographic capture and shot of the lens.

The prized beast in *Big Game* resembles a giant sloth, a megafauna species that was likely to have been made extinct through expansion and hunting by *Homo sapiens*.¹⁰² The impact on ecosystems from megafauna extinction contributed to Earth system changes and it has been (disputedly) speculated that the Younger Dryas event that started the Holocene, marked by a change in climate, also featured drops in methane levels coinciding with the arrival of humans in the Americas, implying the extinction of the megafauna and the decline in atmospheric methane were primitive anthropogenic effects on the Earth system.¹⁰³ Megafauna were not the only species decimated by modern humans, but so too were other hominin relatives. The

insertion of evolutionary and paleo struggles, and ongoing conflicts between members of the same species into *Big Game*, becomes a “contact zone,” defined by Mary Louise Pratt as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.”¹⁰⁴ Contact zones operated where spatially and temporally separated subjects were co-present and despite the lack of interaction and seeming apartheid in Rockman’s jungle interior, he makes use of “arts of the contact zone” – including storytelling and “critique, parody, and comparison (including unseemly comparisons between elite and vernacular cultural forms).”¹⁰⁵ Rockman is not of course the subjugated, but by using parody through inflicting his own self-image to humiliation and ridicule, he edges into the contact zone and has expressed his desire to confront difficult histories: “I wanted to [...] have masterful paintings of things that were disgraced, or things that we hated about our landscape or ourselves.”¹⁰⁶ The ownership of landscape projected by a single viewpoint is challenged by Rockman presenting multiple lenses and apertures: “everyone must *acknowledge* or ‘own up’ to some responsibility for it, some complicity in it,” as fawning over landscape as an aesthetic object of contemplation is not an innocent activity to be naturalized but the imperial gaze, or “evil eye,” must be unveiled.¹⁰⁷

In *Big Game* the tableaux of the outward-looking triumphant ensemble, the inward-looking gaze of the assumed photographer or camera self-timer, and the sideways ambiguous glance of the Indian pushed against the picture plane towards the observer’s space, all bring a scopic confluence that is haunted by the “seeing-man,” the Western bourgeois male of landscape discourse who surveys with his “imperial eyes” and possesses through this passive gaze.¹⁰⁸ This applies also to *Man-Eating*

Plant with its gunsight, camera viewfinder, and primate's retinas all creating the imperial gaze.

It is critical to reemphasize: the primacy of vision and how it has separated and ruled over the other senses in modernity;¹⁰⁹ the enlistment of "Nature" through landscape perception and representation to legitimize Western modernity;¹¹⁰ and the scopic regime determining a majority visuality and authored gaze. The importation of European pastoral and picturesque landscape conventions onto representations of conquered land, and depictions of the cultural 'Other' such as those exemplified by W.J.T. Mitchell in New Zealand and the South Pacific, become "pictorial colonization."¹¹¹ Mitchell makes the stark link connecting European Western imperialism to the representation of landscape through processes of emancipation, unification and naturalization.¹¹² This unification in Western landscape painting from the 17th to 19th-centuries translated separate objects into a unified whole for the purposes of aesthetic cohesion but also united them under Western national and imperial ideology creating an "imperial 'vision'" for the "naturalistic representation of nature."¹¹³ I would argue that unity is disjointed in Rockman's un-naturalistic paintings where peripheral figures and discordant elements, some from art history, natural history, science-fiction, National Geographic magazine style reportage and so forth, do not create a united whole but a difficult assemblage of images and collaged references. For Mitchell, landscape is a "medium of exchange, between the human and the natural, the self and the other"¹¹⁴ and since the human is natural, even more so in the Anthropocene (although Mitchell still differentiates the two), landscape becomes a "*natural* representation of a natural scene," an "icon of nature *in* nature itself, as if nature were imprinting and encoding its essential structures on our perceptual apparatus." Mitchell casts this as "Nature representing itself to itself," through reflections in water

for instance¹¹⁵ and the reflection of Rockman's mirror-image through self-portraiture, reflects back on the viewer, most likely a Western consumer of art.

In an interview with the artist, Corbett introduces Rockman as a "painter of eco-dystopias, no-man's lands."¹¹⁶ No-man's land is as apt description in relation to land ownership in the Anthropocene – who does the polluted land belong to and who is responsible? The Oxford English Dictionary defines this compound as "the terrain between two opposing (usually entrenched) armies. Also: a stretch of disputed territory" and "an imaginary or intermediate place [...] an indeterminate state, a state of confusion or uncertainty" and "a dangerous or forbidden place; a no-go area."¹¹⁷ You could say, the Anthropocene as a concept between nature and culture, rich and poor, colonized and colonizer, is a metaphorical and physical land that calls to be bridged but owned by no one.

Humans Caught Sleeping

I will conclude with *The Hammock* (2000), a painting that pauses on the human as captor and hunter of other species and its own, signified by the propped-up resting rifle. The human figure is reversed from active predator to prostrate prey as gargantuan mosquitoes hover over the prone human body, presumably the unaware artist (repeated throughout the *Expedition* series) and revealed through two feet exposing tempting flesh to the bloodsucking gnats, with proboscises ready to pierce his skin. The dramatic chiaroscuro in this nocturne uses a lamp-light technique similar to that perfected by 18th-century British painter Joseph Wright of Derby. Alongside this visual similarity and Rockman's



Alexis Rockman, *The Hammock*, 2000. Oil on wood. 60 x 72 in. Courtesy of the artist

inspiration perhaps from 1995 cult horror science-fiction film *Mosquito*, the formal composition of *The Hammock* recalls Giotto's 14th-century fresco *The Lamentation of Christ*¹¹⁸ in the Scrovegni (Arena) Chapel in Padua, Italy. In Giotto's powerful encapsulation of grief, the diagonality of the rock wall recurs in Rockman's draped fabric hammock, and Giotto's angels' sorrowful flurry above the dead body of Christ is replaced by Rockman's imposing mosquitoes dancing overhead the dead or sleeping artist.

The loss expressed in the Florentine artist's work over the sacrifice of the Lord's human embodiment, in Rockman's colonial-setting becomes a reminder that human position in the world is important for other species but not the center of the Earth.

Through Rockman's demotion in scale and shrinkage in importance of the human concealed in the hammock, *Anthropos* becomes diminutive in a mortal world. The human for Rockman is vital to nonhumans as sustenance and cohabiters, where it becomes necessary to put down guns and weapons of capture in order to fully understand how humans are entangled in the Earth system. Therefore, the use of drama, visionary devices, the human figure, imagination and humor in painting, might challenge the inadequate justifications of the Trump regime on climate change and the continuing colonization of all forms of nature.



The Lamentation of Christ, c.1305 (fresco), Giotto di Bondone (c.1266-1337) / Scrovegni (Arena) Chapel, Padua, Italy / Photo © Raffaello Bencini / Bridgeman Images. Source: Wikimedia Commons

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- Miles, "Viral Art – Strategies for a New Democracy," *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 1, no. 2 (2001): 71–79.
- 95 "Chimpanzee," The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, accessed May 2, 2019, <https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/15933/129038584>.
- 96 Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," 23.
- 97 Ibid., 15.
- 98 McGlynn and Rockman. "ALEXIS ROCKMAN with Tom McGlynn."
- 99 Tranberg, "In the Studio: Alexis Rockman," 94.
- 100 Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 15.
- 101 Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 5.
- 102 Lewis and Maslin, *The Human Planet*, 104–107.
- 103 Ibid., 104–112.
- 104 Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession*, (1991): 34.
- 105 Ibid., 40.
- 106 McGlynn and Rockman. "ALEXIS ROCKMAN with Tom McGlynn."
- 107 Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," 29. Original emphasis.
- 108 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 7.
- 109 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1992).
- 110 Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," 13.
- 111 Ibid., 22. Original emphasis.
- 112 Ibid., 9–13.
- 113 Ibid., 19.
- 114 Ibid., 5.
- 115 Ibid., 15. Original emphasis.

- 116 Rachel Corbett, "Painter Alexis Rockman on His Dire Eco-Dystopian Visions," September 10, 2013, https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/studio_visit/studio_visit_alexis_rockman-51528.
- 117 "no man's land," Oxford English Dictionary, updated December 2003, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/256795?redirectedFrom=no+mans+land#eid>.
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