Alexis Rockman: Shipwrecks
September 24–November 27, 2022

I make paintings and watercolors about the history of natural history, but from my very peculiar and particular perspective—which has everything to do with the voices that aren’t often heard from, that aren’t often privileged in the official version of history.

– Alexis Rockman

Shipwrecks have long symbolized humans’ inability to control the natural world, and the extreme encounters with nature that can result. In this new body of work, the New York–based artist Alexis Rockman reenvisions shipwreck narratives to focus less on human drama and more on the broad planetary implications of the forces behind these events, including trade, migration, colonization, and globalization. Rockman’s vivid series of large canvases and intimate watercolors, titled Shipwrecks, points to how an increasingly interconnected world has generated profound ecological change. The artist uses shipwrecks to suggest the ways that hubris and folly have impacted the earth’s equilibrium well beyond particular disasters at sea.

Rockman is among the most accomplished contemporary eco-artists, having for several decades examined issues at the nexus of natural history, climate change, and biodiversity. His work has focused on the malign effects of human development on nature, conjuring possible futures should we continue to ignore them. With Shipwrecks, he shifts his lens to reimagine specific events in maritime history, viewed from a perspective that considers all life-forms and the earth’s climate.

Karl Kusserow
John Wilmerding Curator of American Art
Perhaps the most renowned of all shipwreck paintings is *The Raft of the Medusa*, Théodore Géricault’s huge portrayal of the harrowing events that followed the wreck of the frigate Méduse off the coast of West Africa in 1816. Rockman’s lurid reformulation of Géricault’s iconic painting is set following the rescue of fifteen survivors from a makeshift raft. Pivoting from the human story to its aftermath, the artist asks, “What happened to the raft after the survivors were rescued, and what types of animals would see the place of tragedy as an opportunity?” Similarly, in *Robinson Crusoe’s Horse*, Rockman supplies an alternative narrative to Daniel Defoe’s classic shipwreck novel (1719), imagining the experience not of the hero but of his horse, who, like Crusoe, is a hapless survivor of forces beyond its control.

Some of the shipwrecks that Rockman explores were directly caused by human, rather than natural, events. The sinking of the British ocean liner RMS Lusitania by a German submarine during World War I caused the deaths of 1,198 human passengers as well as uncounted animals. Rockman portrays two impassive victims, a cat and a canary, bobbing on flotsam while people in lifeboats attempt to save themselves. Three centuries earlier, in 1622, nine Spanish galleons laden with plunder from the Americas sank during a hurricane near the Florida Keys. Rockman depicts one of them, the Nuestra Señora de Atocha, aflame behind cargo that represents the Columbian Exchange, the system of trade that introduced “exotic” foreign goods to Europe and brought commodities such as livestock to the Western
Hemisphere—along with pathogens and systems of racial oppression that decimated Indigenous populations. A more intimate narrative is suggested in *The Sinking of the Brig Helen*, which caught fire in 1852, consuming valuable specimens and notes documenting four years of research conducted by the naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace in the Amazon rainforest. Wallace developed the theory of natural selection at the same time as Charles Darwin but received little credit. His contribution to his field, along with his status as someone relegated to the margins of history, makes him a hero to Rockman, who states:

For those who don’t know who Alfred Russel Wallace was, he was perhaps the greatest naturalist-explorer in England, if not the world. I have always viewed Wallace as the underdog in the evolution story since Darwin beat him to the punch and took most of the glory for natural selection. . . . The observations he made in Brazil would have gotten him a foothold in the Royal Society that was unavailable to him beforehand because he was poor and didn’t have connections to power. . . . I tried to think about this painting representing the emotional response someone might have if they lost years of work.

*Lusitania, 2020*
Oil on wood
Collection of Jonathan O’Hara

*Nuestra Señora de Atocha, 2018*
Oil on wood
Private collection, courtesy of Tripoli Gallery, New York
Rockman’s fascination with the personal and professional circumstances of Wallace’s life demonstrates his larger concern for both natural history and the history of humanity’s encounters with nature. He evokes both perspectives in works that represent the realm above and below the waterline. The compositional split in these paintings enables the artist to consider human and nonhuman engagements with the same environments and events simultaneously. In contrast
to the traditional perspective of the large canvas *Lusitania* in the previous gallery, *The RMS Lusitania* evokes the tragedy—in the appropriately aqueous medium of watercolor—from multiple vantage points, including that of the sea turtle who swims imperturbably below. The same could not be said about the vigilant seal portrayed in *Seal Hunters 2 (after Bradford)*, who warily regards the predatory hunting ship positioned near its head—an outlook Rockman sympathetically invites us to share. In *Luxborough Galley*, the grisly facts surrounding the 1727 burning of that ship, long involved in the transatlantic slave trade, are of no concern to the exquisitely rendered jellyfish floating beneath the conflagration. In each of these works, Rockman unsettles anthropocentric artistic convention by positing the viewer as mediator between disparate worlds.

**USS Indianapolis, 2020**  
Watercolor and acrylic on paper  
Collection of Jonathan O’Hara, courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York

**The Nile, 2019**  
Watercolor and acrylic on paper  
Private collection, courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York

**Steller’s Sea Cow, 2019**  
Watercolor and acrylic on paper  
Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York
Hawaii, 2020
Oil on wood
Courtesy of the artist and Tripoli Gallery, New York

Luxborough Galley, 2020
Oil on wood
Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York

The RMS Lusitania, 2019
Watercolor and acrylic on paper
Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York

Seal Hunters 2 (after Bradford), 2019
Watercolor and acrylic on paper
Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York
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However much Rockman reveals of life below the waterline, life above crucially impacts our shared future. The migration and trade Rockman’s paintings explore affect environments in ways both intended and unintended. *The Things They Carried*, created at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, represents an inadvertent byproduct of globalization and the human appetite for travel and exchange—animal vectors of disease. Set beneath skeletons, which evoke mortality, displaced animals are trapped on isolated remnants of land. In equally foreboding paintings, Rockman depicts the effects of anthropogenic climate change on those who lack agency and power. In *Drifting*, a poignantly stalwart dog floats alone on a melting sea. If we are to save ourselves from our own impact on the natural world, Rockman’s work collectively asserts, we must also consider the fate of others. As the artist describes, “Identifying with animals, thinking about how they feel in relationship to humans—they are unwitting and unwilling pawns in this capitalist buzz saw that is shredding the planet: the innocent bystanders of our dashed hopes.”

*The Things They Carried, 2020*
Oil on wood
Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York

*Hagia Sofia, 2020*
Watercolor and acrylic on paper
Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York
**Drifting, 2020**  
Watercolor and acrylic on paper  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Sperone Westwater, New York

**Lifeboat HMS Terror, 2020**  
Watercolor and acrylic on paper  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Sperone Westwater, New York

**Ablation, 2020**  
Oil and wax on wood  
Courtesy of David Zwirner Gallery,  
New York

**Calving, 2020**  
Watercolor and acrylic on paper  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Sperone Westwater, New York
Unless otherwise noted, all works are by Alexis Rockman (born 1962, New York, NY; active New York) and are © Alexis Rockman.

*Alexis Rockman: Shipwrecks* is organized by Guild Hall of East Hampton, New York, and presented by the Princeton University Art Museum. At Princeton the exhibition is curated by Karl Kusserow, John Wilmerding Curator of American Art.

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