

INTERVIEW: ALEXIS ROCKMAN

James Barron: How long have you seen yourself as an artist-activist? Were you doing this when you were in college?

Alexis Rockman: I didn't know I was going to be a painter until the third year of undergrad art school. I always thought I'd be in the film industry because I didn't see a place for the types of images and ideas that I was interested in, in terms of contemporary art in 1980-81. I realized through a series of good strokes of luck that if you could make a credible case for yourself, you could make anything you wanted. There was incredible diversity -- so many different things going in the early 80s in New York and specifically in the East Village. Once I was exposed to that I realized I could really carve out a niche in terms of natural history and iconography.

By the early 90s I started to feel a little bit guilty about the success that I had, that I wasn't doing something to try to preserve the natural world that I love so much. I started to reach out to scientists like Stephen Jay Gould and E.O. Wilson, and I went on a trip with Mark Dion to Guyana. That really opened my eyes to the idea that I better start to speak not only through my work, but also as a quasi-public speaker. As an artist, if you get a chance to lecture on your work every couple of weeks, you have a platform. So that's where it really started. It was my reaction to feeling like, "Now I better do something with my incredible good fortune."

These glacier paintings are more lyrical and melancholy than direct activism. It's more of being a witness to not only the geology that we're losing — glaciers are geology — but also the culture of Inuit people and their way of life that are going by the wayside as well.

JB: What artists do you draw inspiration from in your work?

AR: Obviously I love the history of art, and there are so many references in my mind while I'm thinking about or making these paintings, from Constable to Goya to Turner to Courbet, even de Kooning, and the great landscape painter Peder Balke.

JB: We have to talk about Heade!

AR: Oh, of course. Heade was the armchair naturalist; he went on a couple of trips, unlike Frederic Church, who actually went to many of these places over and over again. I love that he basically went to Brazil once and then spent a career rearranging the flowers on the tabletop to include hummingbirds, making great paintings about them.

JB: Proust wrote from his bed. As long as you can make it real, that's the whole point of art, right?

AR: It just proves how rich an internal life can be.

And since you brought up Heade, one of the things that excites me to no end is this idea of taking different languages and having them co-exist. There's an exciting tension between very delicate, meticulous details, almost like toy soldiers, and these very big gestures of paint, a type of controlled chaos. I love the tension between these two languages that don't often get put together.

JB: In your glacier paintings, there's obviously finesse, where it seems like you're using a very miniscule brush in order to paint the people in the boats, and then there's this really heavy impasto in the glaciers.

AR: I've gone back and forth between a more rendered type of pictorialism and impasto. If you saw paintings I made from 1985 until 1994, there was as much impasto in parts of those paintings as there is now. I've just gone back and forth. The more science-y the paintings, the less impasto, because I'm more interested in a different type of articulation of space.

JB: Can you talk a little about the boats in these two paintings?

AR: I'm fascinated by both kayaks and umiaks. The boats in these paintings are umiaks, which families use to move on from animals that they're hunting. There's no agriculture in the Arctic, so they need to move to other areas that animals have migrated to, and they need to bring everything with them, which includes all their equipment, all their tools, and of course their families. The kayak is used primarily by men to hunt and fish, but the umiak is not a hunting boat; it's a family boat going from one place to the other. Umiaks have been around for thousands of years, and no one knows how long their design has existed. They're made from animal skins stretched over frames, which can be built from whale bones.

JB: Tell us about the titles of the two paintings.

AR: "Niovgroyok" means "travels far away." It was so poignant to me because they travel far away, going from one camp to another — but what if your way of life no longer exists, and there's no other place to travel to? And of course "Fjord" is one of the great words in the history of the Scandinavian languages. What's more evocative than a space like that? Very deep trenches of glaciated water that are connected to the ocean.

JB: Your mother did anthropological work, right?

AR: Yes. Her name is Diana Wall and she was the chair of anthropology at City College [of New York] for a number of years. When I was a kid, she worked as an assistant for Margaret Mead before she finished graduate school. Her office was at the Museum of Natural History, so she opened my eyes to the idea that not only were dinosaurs cool and animals are great, but also that human history was full of twists and turns and there were dark periods of human history. I was always very aware of that from the beginning.

JB: Moira Dryer came from this family of mathematical geniuses. Did you ever talk about this kind of similarity between yourselves?

AR: I wish I had known! You look back at your life and you think, "Wow — I didn't know Moira well at all." But there was something about her that I found intriguing and that I identified with. There was a melancholy to her, and I had no clue that she was sick until much later.

I didn't know what she was sad about, but I felt it in the work, and I of course was sad about the demise of the natural world. I also felt like she didn't want to be part of a club, like an art club or a group. She was sort of off in her own world. Very unique, very emotionally attuned.

I look back on that period and think of other artists I identified with, like Frank Moore, who was a good friend of mine. He was making work about having HIV. The three of us were making lyrical paintings

about some sort of emotional interior life. And I always felt like Moira was underrated; she didn't seem like she was valued in a way that she should've been.

JB: Moira Dryer's aunt was at the Panama Canal, and she saw a wave that was standing but kept moving, and then she developed a mathematical formula. It seems to me like a normal wave has a crescendo, and then it has a release, and it kind of tosses this energy that moves in cycles. How do you see this relating to your glacier paintings?

AR: The waves in these paintings have to do with the idea that not only is the energy released, but it's the outcome of the release of this piece of geology. Every wave has the implication of reaching us somehow, wherever we are, because of sea level rise. It's just an appetizer of what's to come. It's like the great philosophical question: if a tree falls in the forest and no one sees it or hears it, did it happen? Well, these things are happening constantly to glaciers around the world, and the effects are going to reach us no matter what.

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