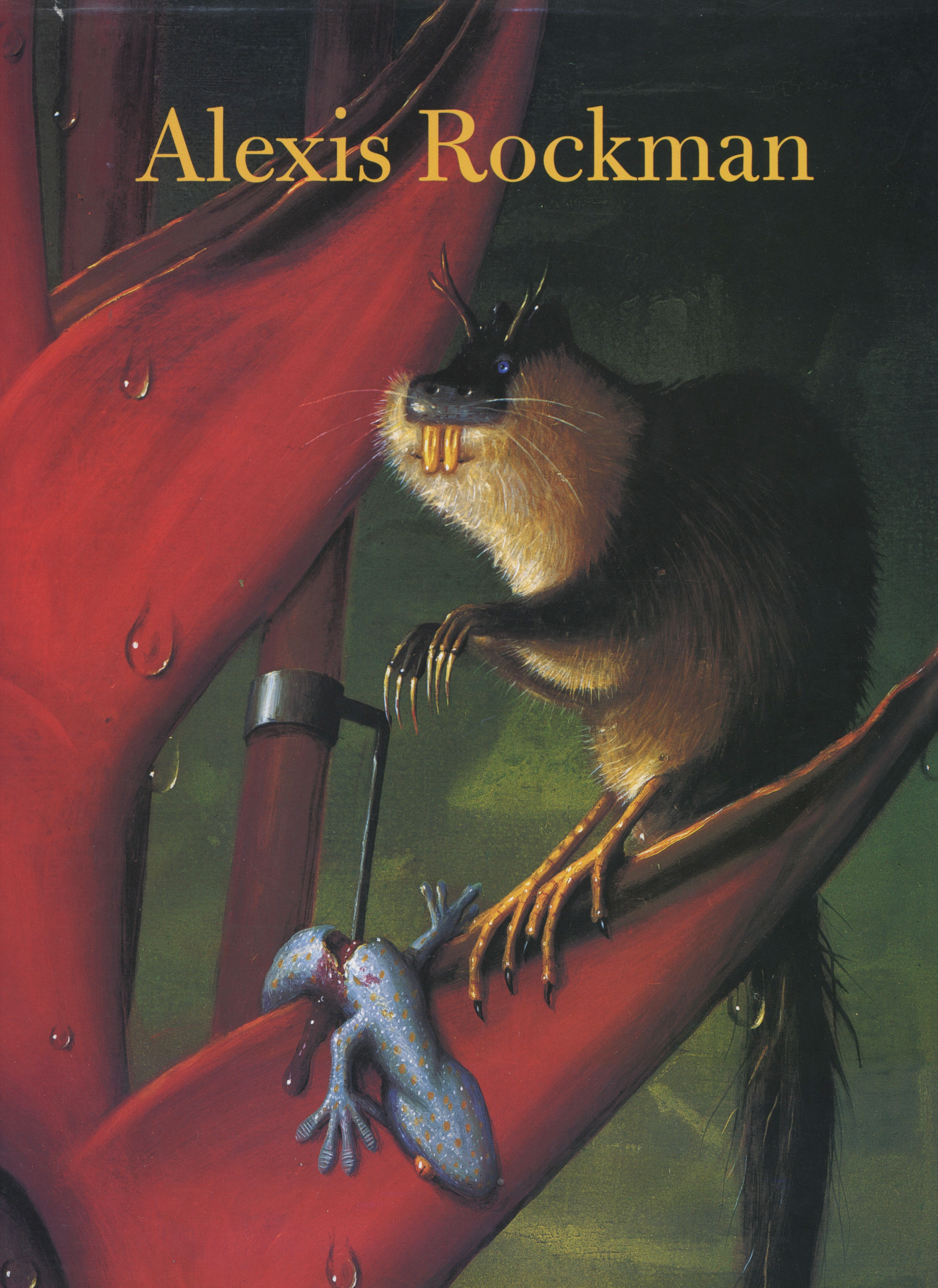
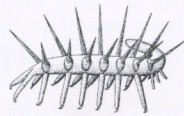


Alexis Rockman



Alexis Rockman
.....
Second Nature

with essays by
Douglas Blau, Barry Blinderman,
Stephen Jay Gould, Prudence Roberts,
and Peter Douglas Ward



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* PLATES 5-8, 10, 11, 14, 15 and 17 are oil on canvas;
all other PLATES are oil on wood

Who's Minding The Laboratory?

by Barry Blinderman

IN AN AGE OF GENETIC ENGINEERING in which Darwinian natural selection has entered the mythical realm of Noah's Ark, Alexis Rockman creates seductive and perverse paintings alluding to the hallucinatory interface of biology and technology. Using botanical and zoological illustrations and early 20th century naturalistic murals as his springboard, Rockman skews the evolutionary tree to feature opportunistic (r-selected) species, interspecies couplings, and a wide variety of surgically or genetically altered creatures. His exquisitely rendered paintings, as glossy and precise as photographs, are amalgams of science-fiction film, natural-history dioramas, and historical genre and landscape painting. Eerie and entrancing, Rockman's work "collides our complex negotiation between nature's construction of us, and our construction of it."¹

*Late-twentieth century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between real and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.*²

In *Biosphere: Tropical Tree Branch*, the phrase "as above, so below" is apropos—the primordial curvature of the galactic spiral prefigures the composition of all life forms, whether primate or protozoan. Dappling constellations shine through a viscid haze, no more or less tangible than their reflections in the water. Turgid orchid pulp glistens with hyperreal dew, beckoning us toward its yellow incandescence. In the tree branches, sinuous plant tendrils are as still and symmetrical as in Rousseau's dream-tinged jungle. Yet upon these branches, filaments are astir in electrified fur. An electronically "jacked-in" African red colobus monkey initiates a cross-geographical, cross-species daisy chain by mounting a collared anteater who, in turn, injudiciously tongues the hindquarters of an orange-and-black striped poison dart frog. The opulent and quite toxic frog gleams like a vacuformed plastic creature—for just as reptile skin seems specifically designed to be replicated synthetically, Rockman's nature possesses a more-than-real aura that is only obtainable in the artificial. Everything in the artist's peculiar index of nature is color-coded for an evolutionary sleight-of-hand trick that eludes us ever more as nature is further quantified and categorized.



PLATE 9
Forest Floor, 68 x 112 inches
1989

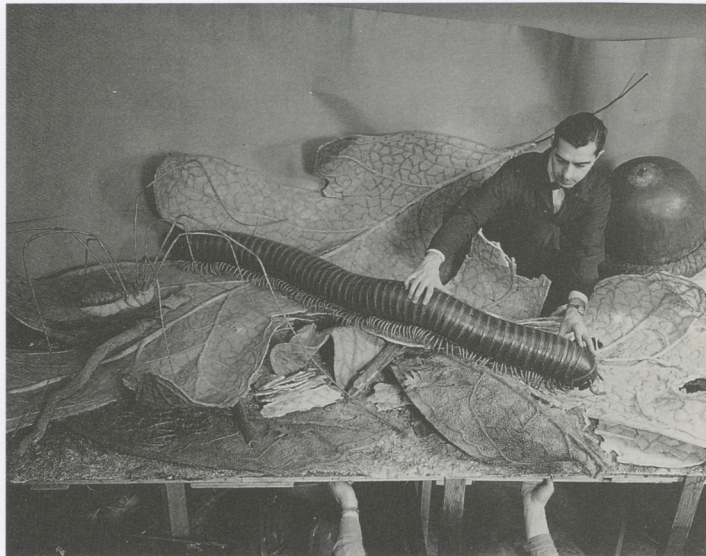


FIGURE 9
Diorama installation
the American Museum of Natural History
1958



PLATE 12
The Fall, 56 x 44 inches
1990

Boundaries and Categories

by Stephen Jay Gould

ART AND SCIENCE MINGLE BEST when the special attributes of one discipline aid the other in ways that cannot be accessed by tools of the enterprise receiving help. If artists, for example, reach an impasse over attribution by style, scientific data on the chemistry of pigments or the dating of woods may fix provenance in a persuasive manner. The aid rendered by art to science, however, tends to be more subtle, but often far more comprehensive and globally enlightening.

Fiction is often the truest pathway to understanding our general categories of thought and analysis, and artifice often illuminates the empirical world far better than direct description. This paradox arises because we can best understand a natural object or category by probing to and beyond its limits of actual occurrence into realms that science, by its norms of discourse, cannot address, but that art engages as a primary interest and responsibility. I first understood this paradoxical principle when I read the ice-age novels of my colleague Björn Kurtén. He was one of the world's finest paleontologists and he wrote copiously and well in his primary discipline. But when he wanted to explore the interaction of Cro Magnon and Neandertal people in ice-age Europe some forty thousand years ago, he wrote novels—for, in fiction, he became free to address some probable reasons for Neandertal death and Cro Magnon survival that do not leave evidence in the fossil record and, therefore receive little emphasis in scientific literature (which must be biased towards “hard” explanations rooted in surviving bones and tools, while evanescent features of mentality, including language and modes of logic, rarely enter scientific discussion even though we know that answers probably reside in such invisibilities). Fiction cannot resolve such questions, but a good novel can expand the boundaries of scientific thought by intelligent treatment of the empirically undiscussible.

The empirical world yields its secrets reluctantly and is hard enough to decipher in its own terms. But scientists greatly exacerbate their problems of understanding by viewing the world through dark glasses of prejudice based upon psychological hopes and sociocultural preferences. (All human thought is so constrained, for this is the way we work as cognitive animals. But we scientists face a special problem of denial and inattention to our personal prejudices, for our “official” methodology proclaims objectivity, and we can therefore be maximally fooled.)

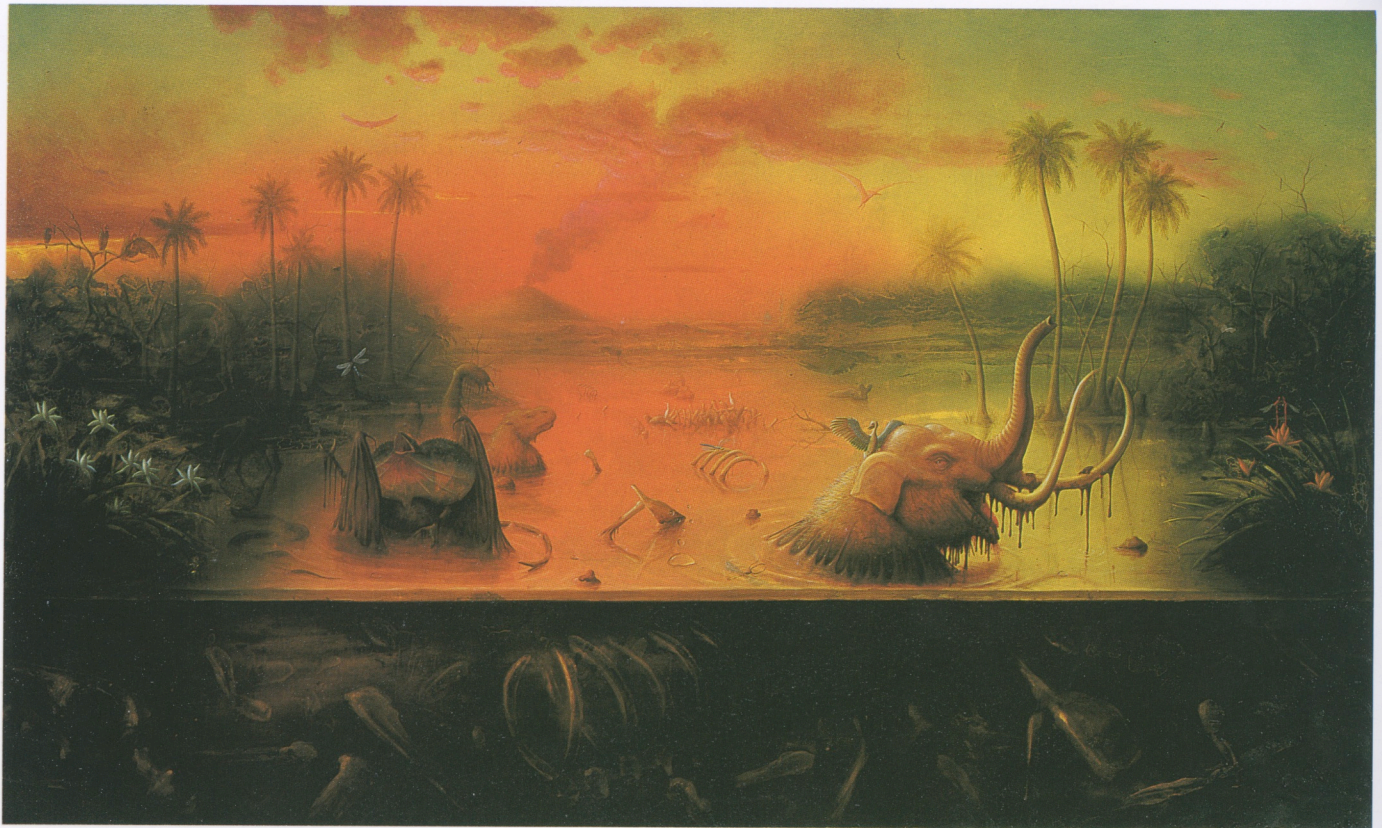


PLATE 13
Omission: The Fossil Record, 50 x 84 inches
 1991

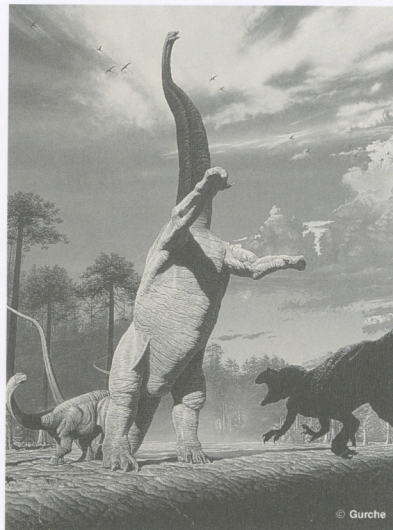


FIGURE 11
 John Gurche, *Barosaurus Defends Her Young*
 1991

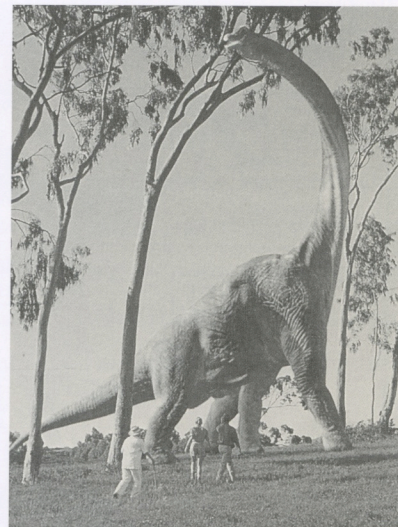


FIGURE 12
 Still from *Jurassic Park*
 1993

No prejudices are more pervasive than those arising from our failure to recognize our taxonomies as socioculturally embedded and therefore not ineluctably given as natural truth. Humans understand by classification and categorization. If our basic categories record vestigial preferences of history (class structures and national boundaries, for example), or limits of mental processing (our lamentable tendency to dichotomize and rank, for example), but we falsely attribute these divisions to objective reality, then we fail to understand the rich interaction of human mind and external matter, or of culture and nature, that shapes (and either retards or stimulates) all our understanding.

Artists can therefore be most useful to scientists in showing us the prejudices of our categorizations by creatively expanding the range of natural forms, and by fracturing boundaries in an overt manner (while nature's own breakages, as subtle in concept or invisible to plain sight, are much harder to grasp, but surely understandable by analogy to artistic versions). I have been attracted to the work of Alexis Rockman because he succeeds so well in mingling the boundaries that scientists view as inviolable in the "real world" (but really represent limits of our own thinking), and in fracturing or juxtaposing the mental categories that scientists construct to keep the objects of nature separate and ordered.

Rockman promotes his iconoclasm (literally "image breaking") in a paradoxical context by drawing his fantastic world within the most traditional genres of illustration in natural history. His plants and animals are rendered in the usual detail of realism. He uses traditional iconographies, often starting with a parody of the most conventional form and then expanding by departure. Consider, for example, his series on phylogenies, or genealogical trees of life. He begins with a copy of the founding icon (Haeckel's 1866 tree of life in *Phylum*) and then moves on to increasingly overt intrusion of human construction—industrial piping of the tree in *Harvest*, or the hi-tech metallic framework for a reef in *Biosphere: The Ocean*—as if to remind us that Haeckel's original tree, with all its organic bark and branching, is no less an imposition upon nature of human schemes for ordering.

Or he may paint vast scenes of ancient life, in the style of museum wall murals, thus paying homage to Charles R. Knight, the great artist-naturalist who "owned" this genre from the 1920s until his death in the 1950s and composed nearly all the great scenes—in museums of New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles—that have become canonical icons for our concept of life's history. But whereas Knight either romanticized his images, or turned them into domains of gladiatorial combat with "survival of the fittest," Rockman shows opposite tableaux of decay rather than "dignified" battle (a good way to make fossils from bones and provide limited evidence, as in *Omission: The Fossil Record*), or of diversity in a hodge-podge, without the usual bias of progressive directionality towards "man" as found in all of Knight's mural series. (Note how the central space in Rockman's *Evolution* features a titanotheria [large extinct mammal] and pterodactyl moving right and a turtle and duck going left.)



FIGURE 13
Charles R. Knight, *Rancho La Brea Tar Pits*
1925

Other genres parodied by Rockman move closer to explicitly artistic conventions. Several scenes show the rich colors, flowing and swirling lines, and chockablock organisms of Haeckel's *Kunstformen der Natur* (Artforms in Nature), while others mimic the still life genre in classical Dutch painting. But thus utilizing both "artistic" and "scientific" genres for illustrating natural history, Rockman shows us the fallacy of this central dichotomy in our taxonomy of fine art vs. faithful illustration of nature—for both use studied conventions and artificialities of human imposition.

Within these traditional genres (or their parodies), Rockman then proceeds—and I find the central genius of his work in this tactic—to blur all the conventional boundaries of all standard categories in natural history, ranging from apparently objective and uncontroversial domains as the size of organisms to dichotomies fraught with obvious baggage of human sociology (exploiter and exploited, primitive and advanced, cycles and directionalities).

Rockman even blurs our comfortable allocation of organisms to nonoverlapping classes of *size*, with preference of higher status awarded to such larger creatures as our mammalian selves. We all know that insects are small (however numerous) and vertebrates large, but in Rockman's scenes, a mantis takes the upper and active role in copulating with a rodent, while a bee does similar honors to a hummingbird. Clear divisions of *place* also merge, as land and water may be separated by a clear and linear boundary, but a single amphibian eye focuses in both domains at once (in Rockman's *Pond's Edge*).

As we move to conceptually more laden dichotomies of *power*, for example, Rockman shows plants eating animals (even vertebrates, as a poor hummingbird waits for her mate atop a pitcher plant that has already drowned the poor male inside), but don't we all know that dominion flows the other way? Rockman then blurs the most fundamental of all distinctions (in Levi



PLATE 22
Still Life with Muskmelons, 18 x 24 inches
1990



FIGURE 19
Otto Marseus van Schrieck
Poppies, Thistles, Butterflies, Snakes, and Lizard
ca. 1660

Untitled (Time Machines)

by Peter Douglas Ward

SO, YOU KNOW HOW IT MUST BE. We academics so widely admired and castigated (often in the same breath); what is it that we do in our offices all day, anyway? And especially if we are natural historians, and better yet paleontologists . . . it is just as you suspected, we loaf a lot. We sit back, look out the window and we dream. We dream a lot. And we dream that we have time machines.

OK, so if you dream, you often get what you want, and my model is lifted right out of the wonderful George Pal movie (named, of course, by dear dead H.G.) *The Time Machine*. So back I go—to the wild Paleozoic days and humid Mesozoic nights, to shallow unmixed oceans teeming with giant herrings and long necked saurians splashing about in the fetid moonlight. But you have been there too, each night really, and even the most familiar places are just not quite right in these dreams. You know it is real but you know it isn't, and sometimes you hope it is only a dream.

It is quite a treat going through Rockman's body of works. Some of the paintings, like *Evolution*, are much like places I seem to have visited, and why not, since we both seem to have paid homage to Charles Knight and the other heroic illustrators of bygone eras. But I also come away disturbed after looking at Rockman's paintings, because so many of the images are so frankly hallucinatory. . . . A movie comes to mind when I think of Rockman's work; *Jacob's Ladder*, the Adrian Lyne film in which the hero so quickly and seamlessly moves from happy family life to nightmare. That is a theme which emerges from Rockman's work; how quickly the natural world, our world, even the world of the past, moves and changes from dream to nightmare. And that, I am afraid, is how I see our own natural world changing over the next 500 years.

I think the appalling dichotomy emerging from humankind's influence on the natural world is all too apparent. We are creatures of evolution, and what creature ever evolved is more beautiful than we humans? But at what price is our beauty and resourcefulness to the rest of the world? Rockman supplies an all too real answer. We see the animals of *Concrete Jungle*, for instance, pestilent, dying, rotting, decaying. . . . In many paintings we see the horrific image of species copulating with completely different species, of two-headed monsters, of laboratory experiments run amok. These are searing images, beautifully painted but head-turning, off-putting, like the



FIGURE 26
Production still, *Animal World*
1956

well-dressed swell passed out on a street corner, or the beautiful young crack addict dying between hits. To me, they are reflections of a world gone mad, a world where there are 5.5 billion *Homo sapiens* running madly about, reproducing like crazy, making the Pope happy, with unnumbered mad scientists relentlessly working away to make sure nobody ever dies so the world can become even more overpopulated.

But I am becoming tiresome. And tired of the present. Which is why I retreat to my time machine as often as I can, to journey back to long-ago times, before beer cans and plastic bags from Safeway have polluted our world, to times illustrated by Rockman showing visions of my favorite creatures, the shelled cephalopods of the Paleozoic days, or his wonderful *Rhamphorhyncus* family. I usually find the lone paleontologist back here in these bygone sandstone days, the misanthropic members of my paleontological profession who deal in souped up or rococo time machines to delve back into the mysteries of evolution and earth history—fellow time-travelers escaping the Barnyard Scenes and Harvests and Aviary's of our modern day. Rockman, clearly, is a fellow traveler. And, I believe, equally tired of the perversion of nature so rampant in the late Twentieth Century.



PLATE 40
Biosphere: Tropical Tree Branch, 32 x 40 inches
1992

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by Douglas Blau

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