ALEXIS ROCKMAN

A RECENT HISTORY OF THE WORLD

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The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art

ROCKMAN'S GLOBAL VISION

THE WORLD AND THE EYE BY DAVID QUAMMEN

Let's begin with a safe proposition: Alexis Rockman is talented, dangerous, and nuts. He's also a diligent researcher with almost too much cerebral curiosity to be a visual artist. He reads. He consults field guides, taxonomies, old travel narratives, and serious books of conceptual science. He collects obscure facts and incorporates them (along with the golf balls, the dead seagull and rattlesnake carcasses, the women's underwear, the images quoted from pop culture and art history, and other physical and representational artifacts) into his creations. He pals up with biologists and paleontologists, seeking to broaden his scope; he charges off on field trips to such uncomfortable, unforgiving locales as the rainforest of Guyana. Most recklessly of all, for this insistently reckless artist, he thinks. He concerns himself with the shape of the world. Is it sick or well? Is it beautiful or ugly? Is it thriving or dying—and, if dying, then dying of what? These are the big questions that lurk in the busy brain of a man who, on a less cerebral level, so it seems, just plain loves to paint portraits of copulating rodents.

Of course the shape of the world, whatever it might be, is a god-awful difficult thing to capture in any single work, whether literary or visual. Fifty years ago a Frenchman named René Sédillot published his *History of the World in 300 Pages*, but nowadays not many people would argue that he got it right. Slightly earlier, in 1920, H. G. Wells had likewise compacted *The Outline of History* into a single volume, and that too has not endured as well as his more imaginative, though less ambitious, books. Arnold Toynbee allowed himself ten volumes for *A Study of History*; the Durants carried *The Story of Civilization* to about the same length; and William McNeill devoted a thousand pages to *The Rise of the West*, an admittedly noncomprehensive story of civilization that gives little attention to the East, let alone the South. Then there's Mel Brooks's 1981 movie, *History of the World—Part I*, which like McNeill's book is ambitious but still avowedly partial. This is the august company among which Alexis Rockman places himself with *A Recent History of the World*. The most elemental fact about his *History*, and the most pointedly ironic, is that it hardly converges at all with those other global visions. Instead it ignores them, erases them, overlays them.

Rockman holds a different view of what events have mattered, really mattered, on this planet within the past five centuries—and, even more basically, a different view of what constitutes the world. For many severely important people, the word "world" connotes a realm of human activities—wars, elections, righteous alliances, commercial treaties, multinational corporate bailouts, currency trading—as encompassed by the category *world affairs*, whereas nonhuman activities occupy a secondary realm easily marginalized as *the environment* or patronized as *the world of nature*. But Rockman knows that the world of nature, including us, is *it*. He recognizes that human history is a subdivision of ecology, not the other way around. He sees *Homo sapiens* as a major vector of historical process, but not as its preeminent subject. If you wanted to trace the intellectual influences on *A Recent History of the World*, you could dismiss Toynbee, dismiss McNeill and Sédillot (you might not want to dismiss Wells, though it would probably be the science fiction, not the history, of which you'd find echoes), and go straight to an obscure but prescient little book titled *The Ecology of Invasions by Animals and Plants*. This volume, published in 1958 by a British ecologist named Charles Elton, isn't so cheerily progressivist as most other global visions. I can't say whether Alexis Rockman has actually read it, but either directly or through intermediaries, he has absorbed Elton's message.

That message, as stated by Elton himself, is that "we are living in a period of the world's history when the mingling of thousands of kinds of organisms from different parts of the world is setting up terrific dislocations in nature." The word "dislocations" here carries two-layered meaning: Species have been transported from one locale to another by world-traveling humans, and ecosystems have consequently been disrupted. Invaders have come ashore, onto continents and islands far distant from their native ranges, and after establishing themselves successfully in the new places, have caused ecological havoc. "We are seeing huge changes in the natural population balance of the world," Elton added. Details vary from case to case, but in general the changes have entailed 1) pestilential population outbreaks by alien species liberated into new landscapes, 2) habitat destruction, resulting either from unaccustomed forms of resource exploitation by those aliens or from sheer overexploitation related to their pestilential abundance, and 3) the extinction of native species, which are often more specialized and less opportunistic than the invaders. The proximate cause of extinction may be predation, competition, habitat wreckage, or some combination of such mischiefs. Although this cycle of ecological invasion and conquest isn't so obvious as sailors clubbing the great auk into oblivion or hide-hunters slaughtering 59.999 million American bison, it accounts for most of the documented species extinctions within the past five hundred years. "The larger ecological explosions have helped to alter the course of world history," Elton wrote, and scholars and ecologists are still mining the truth of that thematic lode.

One of those scholars is Alfred W. Crosby, whose excellent 1986 book, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*, offers a global vision in the Eltonian school. Among other sad tales, Crosby documents the defeat and near-liquidation of indigenous American peoples (on both American continents) by smallpox, a Eurasian virus carried across the Atlantic by European explorers and settlers. Smallpox was as crucial to the overseas victories of white imperialism, Crosby posits, as gunpowder—possibly more crucial, since native peoples such as the Sioux did eventually turn rifles on the enemy, but they couldn't turn smallpox against white soldiers who were already immune. Crosby also pays notice to the black rat (*Rattus rattus*), the brown rat (*Rattus norvegicus*) and the domestic pig, three species which (along with the domestic cat and a certain species of Asian mongoose, *Herpestes auropunctatus*) have done to endemic bird species in remote landscapes—especially on the world's tropical islands—what smallpox did to the Aztecs, the Iroquois, and the Mandans. The dodo itself, preeminent emblem of lost species, a flightless but not ill-adapted creature that had succeeded quite well on its predator-free island for centuries, was probably persecuted unto extinction as much by rats, pigs, and other egg-eating mammalian invaders as it was by the bird-eating humans who sailed the ships that carried the rats.

This brings us back to Rockman's *A Recent History of the World*. Along the lower margin of the left panel you can see the whole dreary epic of ecological imperialism foreshadowed in a few enterprising rats, a fertile sow, and a handful of unsuspecting birds. Each of these birds represents a unique species or subspecies endemic to some remote island, and from the barred-wing rail (*Rallus poecilopterus*) to the Tahitian rail (*Rallus pacificus*), they are all now either extinct or nearly so. The Wake Island rail (*Rallus wakensis*), if it didn't quite succumb to the rats, may have been polished off by starving Japanese troops during World War II.

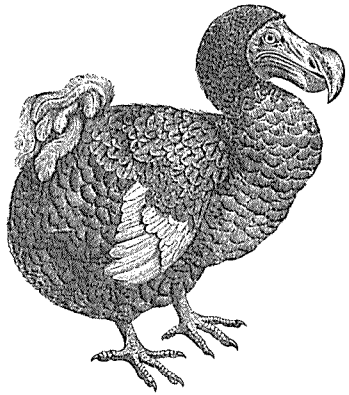
All around the planet, this ruinous trend of ecological relocation and upheaval is one of five major factors ultimately responsible for the recent and ongoing losses of biological diversity, which will forever mark our modern age as a low point in the long record of life. The other four factors are habitat loss, habitat fragmentation, direct overkill by human hunters or harvesters, and ecological falling-domino effects. We're doing an efficient job, one way or another, of turning Earth into a place that will be uglier, lonelier, and more boring than the planet that, say, Ferdinand Magellan wandered around in the early sixteenth century. Pretty soon, if the trend continues, we'll have a standardized assemblage of fauna and flora in every part of the globe, instead of the old-fashioned place-by-place diversity that gave meaning to a science called biogeography. In that coming age-after-biogeography, the roster of living species will be globally uniform, but short, and folks won't be tempted to visit such distant, inconvenient places as Madagascar, since the giant jumping rat (*Hypogeomys antimena*) will be gone—elbowed out by the brown rat or scarfed down by the pig—and the last *Brookesia peyrieresi*, a chameleon no bigger than an almond, will have been squashed beneath the foot of a farmer or an ecotourist. Wildlife, dense forests, and teeming wetlands will be marvels seen only via cable TV, based on footage from the archives. Instead of diverse and differing ecosystems filled with localized, unique species, the postmodern Earth will feature pavement, agribusiness, varmints, and weeds.

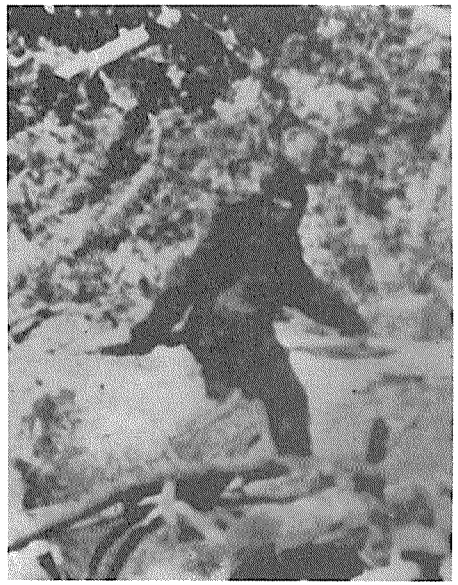
Then again, maybe not. That's only one global vision (a dour one, informed by science and demography but not by hope) among various possibilities. Whether it happens to be or not be the one to which Alexis Rockman subscribes, clearly it isn't the only one he can imagine—as manifested by the other two works in this new triad. Both his *Map of Cryptozoology* and his *Creationist's Classroom* portray other global visions, each presented with a degree of caustic or whimsical detachment that's not apparent in *A Recent History of the World*. What interests me most about all three works is not so much the cumulative wealth of details or the world-circling reach (in *Creationist's Classroom* it's a philosophical reach, not a cartographic one) as the matter of where Rockman has chosen to place his own eye, and ours.

The composition of each is panoramic, and in two of the three it includes a sort of orbital overlook of the planet; yet each also contains a primary point-of-view that's down low on the ground, with humble particulars looming big in the foreground. (Rockman used similar perspectives in the oil and watercolor works of his book *Guyana*, foregrounding bomber-size beetles and cicadas in flight high above the forest, with river bends, macaws, and rotting fish appearing distant and small below.) In both *A Recent History* and *Map of Cryptozoology* it's not so much a foreground-and-background effect as a sort of curved space, which brings beachfront scenes up close along the periphery of our wide-angle view from space. There's nothing accidental about these placements of viewpoint; they give us hints of where Rockman himself stands. I love the fact that we're eyeball-to-eyeball, in *A Recent History*, with that bird-eating rat, to which the artist allows a brazen, roguish vigor even while he convicts it as an agent of doom. I note that, in his empty creationist's classroom, Rockman has taken a front-row seat near the door, possibly for early escape. (The sterile primness of this scene is best appreciated, I think, in counterpoint to the funky fecundity of his 1992 painting *Evolution*.) And in the *Map of Cryptozoology*, that chart of romantic illusions and fabulous rumors, I'm touched to find myself peering over the shoulder of the little barefoot boy in shorts. There he stands, before the beached carcass of some weird proboscidean sea beast, his arm raised in that joyfully (sorrowfully?) easy gesture. Who is this kid waving to? What is he reaching for? I suspect that the little kid inside Rockman himself persists in his fondness for the crypto in cryptozoology, even while belief in the world's gentler and more wonderful monsters lies dead as a putrescent pile of blubber.

Have I said that Alexis Rockman is reckless? Let the sweet ingenuousness of that boy's uplifted arm stand in evidence. Have I said that he's dangerous? Our foremost modern portraitist of the vibrant inevitability of rats. Have I mentioned that, deep down, he's secretly sane?

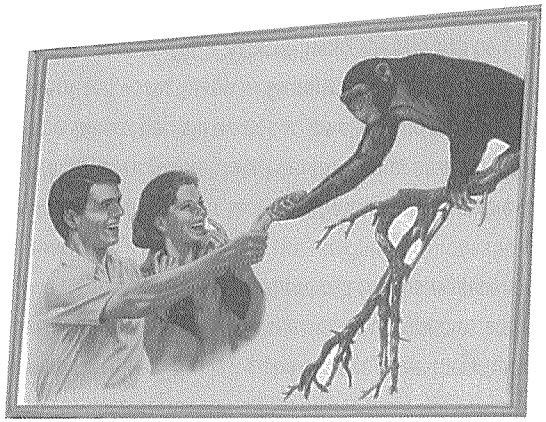
David Quammen is the author of eight books including The Song of the Dodo *and a recent essay titled "Planet of Weeds."*





Above: Dodo, extinct c. 1680
Right: "The surgeons photo" Lochness Monster, 1934
Far right: Sasquatch, Northern California, 1967

Creationist's Classroom, detail



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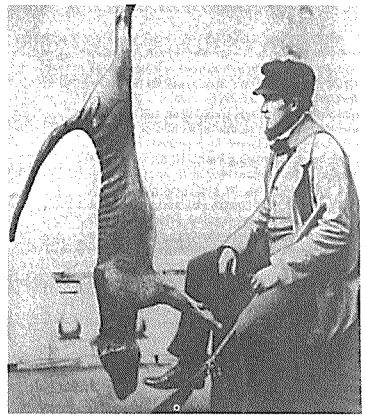

thylacine (Tasmanian Wolf or Tasmanian Tiger),
extinct c. 1936

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