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Waxman, Lori. "Alexis Rockman's large-scale works bring an essential show to the Cultural Center."
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A detail from "Forces of Change," by Alexis Rockman, part of a show on display at the Chicago Cultural Center. (Adam Reich photo)

Do I appreciate Lake Michigan? Sure I do. My drinking water comes from it, as does all the other water I use at home. I regularly bike along the lakefront, frequent a local shoreline bistro and take my kids to the beach. We've been to the dunes in Indiana. I sometimes buy lake trout from Whole Foods. I've read that an invasive species of mussel, the zebra mussel, is responsible for the lovely clarity of the waters. I plan to rent an SUP and go out paddling one morning soon.

This familiarity did little to prepare me for the wonder and devastation of Alexis Rockman's "The Great Lakes Cycle," a masterly suite of monumental paintings and experimental drawings on view at the Cultural Center through early fall. Rockman, a talented figurative painter famed since the mid-'80s for his environmentally acute artwork, here offers a stunningly ambitious visual synthesis of the past, present and future of one of the world's premier ecosystems. Oh yes, it is: the interconnected Lakes Erie, Huron, Michigan, Ontario and Superior together hold 20 percent of the planet's fresh water, cover a surface equal in size to the United Kingdom, and anchor a \$5 trillion regional economy.

These are lakes whose waters have caught on fire from rampant pollution, whose native fish populations have been decimated by invasive species, whose provision of drinking water to 48 million people in two countries is threatened by massive algae blooms. Formed 14,000 years ago by receding glaciers, the Great Lakes have been deeply altered by human forces over the past two centuries, and as the planet continues to undergo the effects of global warming, they promise to become a fiercely fought-over source of fresh water across the continent, even the world.

I had no idea.

Ignorance like mine can be perilous for the lakes — they need all the environmental protection they can get and that takes governmental support, which requires a knowing and impassioned citizenry. Fortunately “The Great Lakes Cycle,” which debuted at the Grand Rapids Arts Museum, will travel through 2020 to museums in Cleveland and Minneapolis, with a final stop in Flint, where the need for clean water will surely not be lost on residents.

GRAM initially invited Rockman to visit the region in 2013, setting him off on a series of research trips across eight U.S. states and Canadian provinces, from Pictured Rocks in the Upper Peninsula to the Toronto Power Plant. Along the way he met with scientists, historians, anthropologists and ecologists. He amassed a sizable database of scientific readings and source imagery on topics including the battle of 1812, cargo ships, coal plants, fish anatomy, invasive animals, and phytoplankton.

He gathered sand from the Cuyahoga River and soil from Presque Isle, eventually mixing these and other collected materials with acrylic polymer to create modest studies of local creatures large and small, from a walleye to a spiny water flea. In a twist, Rockman calls these field drawings; though not sketched in the field, they are nevertheless of it. Most of the 28 that hang on the walls at the Cultural Center are innocuous but a few unsettled me, especially a common loon, emerging like a ghost from the black coal dust of the Grand Haven Power Plant. Easy enough to imagine that as a reality.

There are also a half-dozen oversize watercolors on view, but the undisputed stars of the show are five enormous, densely packed panoramic oil and acrylic panels. Six feet high by 12 feet long each, they look like a cross between the natural history museum dioramas Rockman visited as a kid in New York City; classic fantasy films like “Fantasia” (1941) and “2001: A Space Odyssey” (1968); straightforward scientific illustrations of the kind found in Golden Field Guides; high-speed nature photography, with its supernatural, stop-motion detail; and every genre of historical painting save for portraiture. They are fit to burst. Everything is here: the Laurentide Ice Sheet, the once-plentiful lake sturgeon, the remains of a Columbian mammoth, the wreck of the SS Edmund Fitzgerald (a freighter downed by storm along with its crew in 1975), a zebra mussel-encrusted shopping cart, Paleo-Indians and the caribou they are hunting, iron ore mining and its toxic tailings, astronomically enlarged Type E botulism and hepatitis C virus, a fur trappers camp, multiple varieties of non-native salmon, commercial fishing nets, the yellow warbler and the monarch butterfly, a futuristic chicken with six wings, spongefly larvae, Horseshoe Falls, a ConAgra grain elevator and a party of explorers in a canoe.

And that’s but a partial list. For complete details, see the handy laminated keys that accompany each painting, identifying every compositional element by silhouette and number. If that sounds didactic, it is and isn’t, a combination that proves surprisingly powerful. It’s crucial to know what’s what if we are to make sense of all that impossible but strangely true pictorial co-existence: millenniums of time, centuries of transit development, species that range in size from the microscopic to the megalithic, the marvels and disasters of nature and of human engineering.

Ultimately the panoramas are as familiar as they are otherworldly, as idyllic as they are apocalyptic. Just like the Great Lakes: right next door lies one of the most significant environmental landscapes in the world, a case study for the endless ways in which humans have used, abused and altered the natural world on which all of life, including but by no means limited to our own, depends.