

## Alexis Rockman Depicts the Ominous Beauty of Glaciers and Shipwrecks

Rockman renders crashing ships invisible behind clouds of snow.



Louis Bury July 4, 2023



Alexis Rockman, "The Wreck of the Ancon" (2023), oil and cold wax on wood, 48 x 80 x 2 inches (all images courtesy Sperone Westwater)

Dramatic glacier cliffs, painted in craggy daubs of blue and white, tower above the sea throughout Alexis Rockman's portentous exhibition, *Melancholia* at Sperone Westwater. Each painting, in oil and cold wax on wood, depicts one of two scenes: a historical arctic shipwreck, such as the freight and passenger ship Ancon's 1889 crash near Alaska, or an ablating glacier. Both types of scene fixate on a moment of loss, portraying the ship's impact with the ice or the glacier's runoff as kinetic bursts of paint. The surprising visual resemblance between these two different subjects underscores maritime exploration's historical role in contemporary ecological decline, while also romanticizing that decline.

Rockman has painted a sublime arctic landscape before — the gargantuan “South” (2008), which spans almost 30 feet in length across seven pieces of gessoed paper — but the artist typically works in a surreal, almost comic register. The majority of his acclaimed landscapes imagine fantastical eco-dystopian futures, with cross-sectional above-and-below-water compositions that resemble certain natural history museum dioramas, in which exotic animals teem amid the ruins of human civilization. *Melancholia*’s glacier paintings, in contrast, offer no glimpses of what lies beneath the water’s surface and are almost devoid of human or animal presence, with even the crashing ships rendered invisible behind clouds of kicked up snow. A small lone kayak occasionally dots the paintings’ foreground waters, the kind of detail sometimes present in Hudson River School paintings to convey the grandeur of nature’s scale.

That Hudson River School influence finds its most telling expression in Rockman’s “The Wreck of the Ancon” (2023), which alludes to Albert Bierstadt’s late-career painting, “Wreck of the ‘Ancon’ in Loring Bay, Alaska” (1889). Bierstadt was actually a passenger aboard the Ancon when it crashed into an iceless harbor reef; after being rescued, he spent the next week drawing studies of the wreck from a nearby beach. His painting of the scene is uncharacteristically prosaic: beneath a drab sky, the Ancon lists, sleepily, near the shore. Rockman’s version is not only more theatrical, with a large spray of snow depicting the crash itself, but also fictionalized, reimagining the crash as occurring against an imposing glacier. This creative liberty encapsulates *Melancholia*’s stylized sadness, the way its arctic paintings portray loss as sudden and spectacular. Such ominous beauty makes it hard to perceive the many gradual, ordinary steps on the path to collapse.





Alexis Rockman, "Chattermarks" (2023), oil and cold wax on wood, 48 x 40 x 2 inches



Alexis, Rockman, "Exfoliation" (2023), oil and cold wax on wood, 48 x 40 x 2 inches

**Alexis Rockman: Melancholia** *continues at Sperone Westwater (257 Bowery, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through July 28. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*

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