

NATURAL HISTORY

11/11



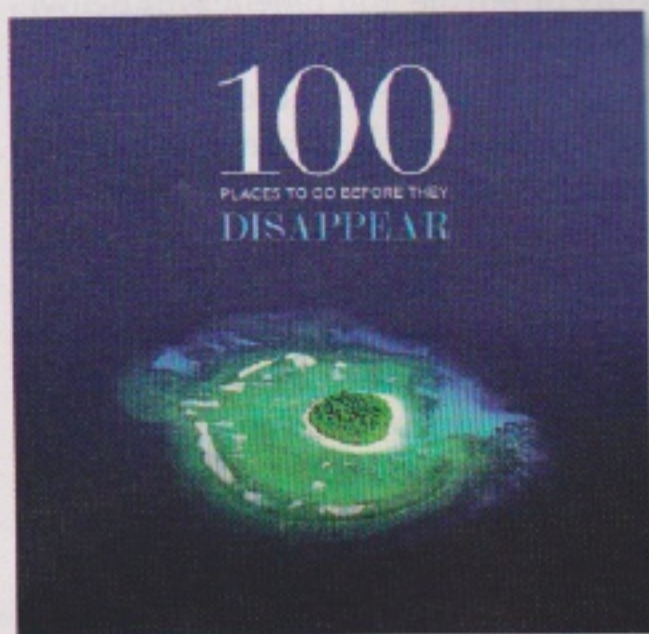
THE ART OF
PIETER BOEL

\$3.95 USA
\$4.95 CANADA



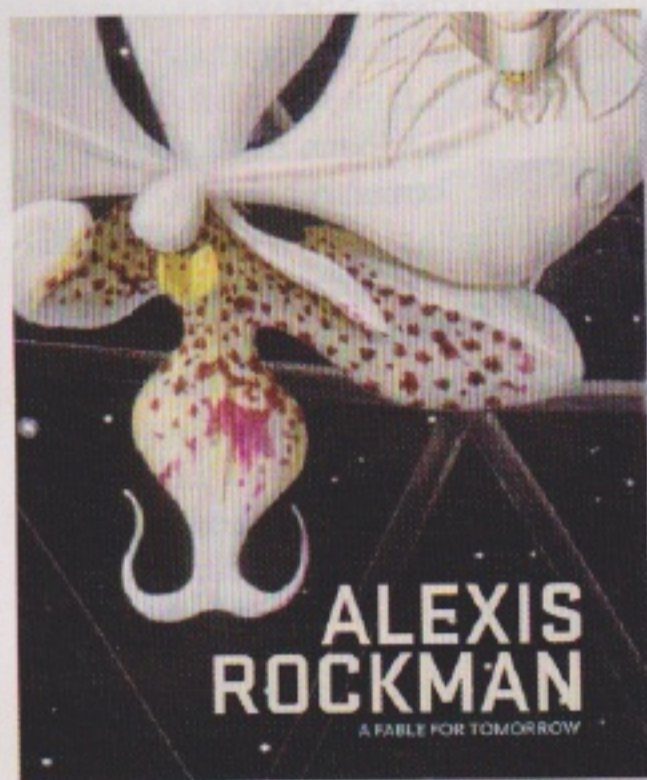
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snow-covered landscape into the surface of an alien world. Wark may have left no trace on the lands he overflowed, but his photos will leave indelible impressions in your mind.



100 Places to Go Before They Disappear, by Co+Life, foreword by Rajendra K. Pachauri, contribution by Desmond Tutu; Abrams, 2011; 256 pages, \$24.95
100 Places to Go Before They Disappear is not a personal vision like Wark's book, but an environmental document, produced by an editorial team in collaboration with the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The book's striking photographs and concise explanatory blurbs highlight some of the most unusual and remarkable locations that are feeling the effects of global warming—or that will feel those effects in the near future. Many of them are not wilderness areas, and the only difficulty readers may have in visiting them is that they are in imminent danger of losing their unique character, precisely owing to climate change. Venice, whose historic buildings were built on wooden poles pounded into coastal marshes, has been sinking for centuries, a situation made worse by rising sea levels. Mountainous Veracruz, Mexico, is facing a decline in the productivity of its small coffee farms, vital to the local economy, as unusual cold weather and increasingly severe cycles of drought and flood threaten the area. Even Chicago has already seen deaths from heat waves and in-

frastructure damage from flooding. And as I write this review, Bangkok, Thailand is experiencing its most severe flooding in memory, as witness the poignant pictures of homeless families on the nightly news. "Unless urgent steps are taken," this book tells us, "large parts of Bangkok could be under water before the end of the century."



Alexis Rockman: A Fable for Tomorrow, by Joanna Marsh, with contributions by Kevin J. Avery and Thomas Lovejoy; Smithsonian American Art Museum/D Giles Ltd., 2011; 176 pages, \$49.95
 Artist Alexis Rockman is no sentimentalist. His surrealistic paintings, forty-seven of which are faithfully reproduced in this handsome book, along with copious critical commentary, combine a remarkable technical ability with an edgy pessimism that is profoundly unsettling. Leafing through the book you see echoes of other artists who, like Rockman, drew from nature—still lifes and animal portraits that resemble illustrations in eighteenth-century natural history books; panoramas with the luminescent cloudiness of the Hudson River school. But Rockman's works are marked by incongruities, exaggerations in perspective and shading, that add a hallucinatory tone to what might otherwise have been innocent reality. A number of paintings bring us close up to frogs,

fish, and insects, so close, however, that the mundane becomes grotesque. *The Bass* leaping from the water almost leaps out of the picture, while an out-of-focus shadow in the background suggests the menace of the fisherman, even though no hook is obvious. On a facing page, in a painting called *Cataclysm*, an armada of bizarre flying insects pose in front of an indistinct but ominous dark cloud. What might have been a Norman Rockwell-like scene at the Sea World aquarium in 2004 slides into surrealism: the tentacles of an unseen octopus arch up in the foreground, a "whale" leaping for a fish dangled by a bikinied attendant has the fangs and armor plate of a prehistoric reptile, and the whole scene evokes the weirdness of Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*. All told, this is not a book for the faint- or soft-hearted. But it is filled with thought-provoking, unforgettable images.



The Menagerie of Pieter Boel: Animal Painter in the Age of Louis XIV, by Paola Gallerani; Officina Libreria, 2011; 88 pages, \$29.95
 For a preview of this book about a long-overlooked artist, see this issue's "Endpaper," page 48.

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Blue-Blooded Zoo

By Paola Gallerani

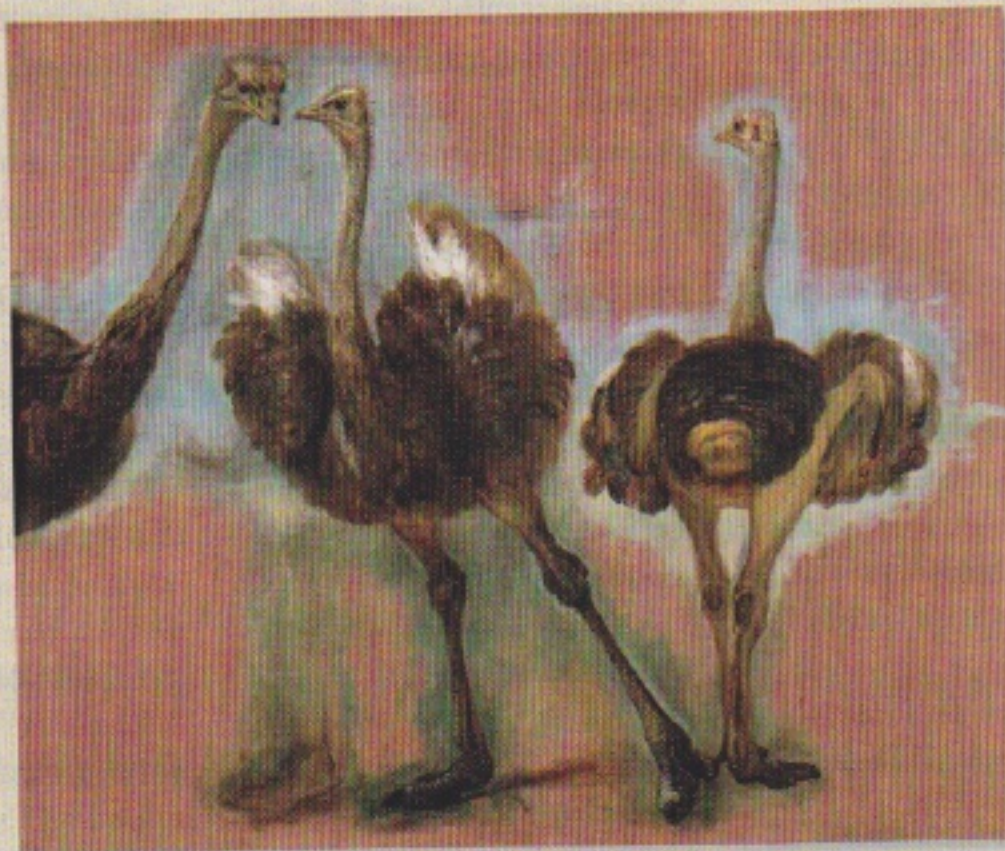
Versailles, spring of 1669: Under the Sun King's proud gaze, international guests—decked out in furs, feathers, and other exotic livery—parade amid fountains and ponds. Standing on a balcony, a Flemish painter fills sheets of paper, his pencil swiftly capturing the details of the chaotic horde. The artist is Pieter Boel, and the leading players of the colorful cortege are lions and leopards, badgers and raccoons, demoiselle cranes and storks, not to mention eagles, foxes, flamingos, and chameleons—all guests in the new royal menagerie.

At the time, Versailles was a favorite plaything of Louis XIV, who had transformed his father's hunting lodge into a palace. Before the court officially moved there in 1682, the gardens provided the backdrop for parties, hunts, and outings.

Ultimately the menagerie, set up at the southern end of the park, became the destination. The king saw its exotic inhabitants as symbolic of his power, wealth, and scientific interests. (When animals died, they were immortalized through the anatomical dissections of the Royal Academy of Sciences.)

The creatures populated seven courtyards. The *cour de la ferme*, for instance, held farm animals, as well as swans, peacocks, Barbary sheep, fal-

low deer, and gazelles. Life in another courtyard centered on a triangular pond, in which splashed African species of pelicans, ducks, and geese, while huge kori bustards sipped water at the edge. Or imagine the ostriches' domain, covered with sand to re-create the effect of the desert and shared by crowned cranes and little egrets. Another area contained flamingos, a rare albino crow, badgers, civets, cassowar-



ies, dromedaries, and an elephant—a gift from the Prince of Portugal.

Born in Antwerp in 1622, Boel (also spelled Boul, Boels, or Boulle) studied with his father, Jan, an engraver and publisher, before venturing abroad to complete his training in Italy. At the age of forty-seven, Boel settled in Paris, and was recruited by Charles Le Brun—then Louis XIV's "premier painter"—to work at Ver-

sailles. In two years Boel made more than 400 sketches and painted 86 canvases exclusively of the menagerie animals. The still life genre had been in vogue, and Boel's vivid portrayal of "moving life" was innovative. He grasped not only animals' features but also their poses, and even their moods.

The studies contributed to the design of some thirty-two tapestries, the *Months or Royal Residences*, that the king had commissioned. The twelve principal tapestries, each about thirteen feet high by twenty-one feet wide, portray the various royal residences with court scenes, hunts, and more. But stealing the show, Boel's storks and African spoonbills strut gracefully, an ostrich peeks out, macaws peck at fruit, porcupines and badgers appear to feel at ease, and a coati looks lost.

Boel died in 1674. When some of his canvases made their way to the Musée royal (Louvre) in 1823, they were cataloged as the work of "anonymous," and hundreds of Boel's drawings were listed under incorrect names (those of Le Brun or Alexandre-François Desportes). Finally in 1960, the art historian Georges de Lastic traced them to their originator. Still, Boel remains relatively unknown, though he preserved the most vivid record of the Sun King's long-gone menagerie.

Adapted from The Menagerie of Pieter Boel: Animal Painter in the Age of Louis XIV, by Paola Gallerani (Officina Libreria, 2011, distributed in the U.S. by ACC Distribution). Gallerani earned her master's in art history from the University of Milan.



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