

STUDIO SESSION

All Over the Map

JOHN ALEXANDER'S WORK RANGES FROM REVERENT RENDERINGS OF THE NATURAL WORLD TO ANGRY SCREEDS AGAINST CORPORATE GREED. BY CHRISTOPHER HANN



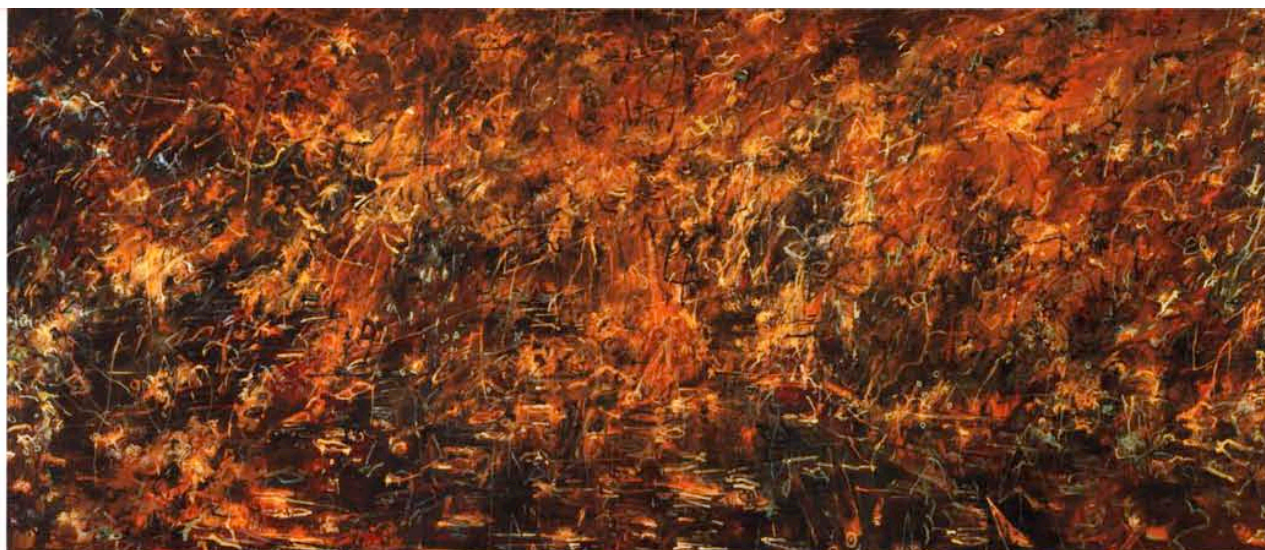
JOHN ALEXANDER grew up in Beaumont, in east Texas, birthplace of Big Oil. So his retrospective now on exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, featuring nearly 100 works from the past 30 years, represents something of a homecoming for the 62-year-old artist. Although he left Texas for New York City in 1979, Alexander's work has always been informed by the years he spent exploring the swamps, bayous and industrial ghettos in and around Beaumont.

Those experiences inspired not only Alexander's reverence for the natural world, but his sorrow over its degradation and his contempt for those responsible. It's fair to say that much of his work today stems from a strong personal loathing for the sins of greed and hypocrisy—and he's not shy about speaking his mind. Get him started on, say, the perceived sins of fellow Texan George W. Bush, and you may need to cancel your afternoon appointments. Now, in the waning days of Bush II—Alexander says the past seven-plus years have made him “politically obsessed”—the artist's convictions go on full display in a far-ranging collection of frenzied drawings and lush and lavish paintings.





Standing over 7 feet in height, "Parade," 2006, oil on canvas, is the largest painting in Alexander's retrospective at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. "Man With Two Lives" (facing, left), 2007, oil on paper.



"I've Been Living in a Hydrogen Bomb" (top), 1982, oil on canvas. "Night Garden," 2005, oil on canvas.

It was in Houston that Alexander received critical early support as an artist. In 1972, not yet 27 years old, he took a job teaching at the University of Houston. Four years later the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston staged the first major museum exhibition of Alexander's work. He cut a rakish figure in those days—motorcycle boots, leather jacket, handlebar mustache—a picture of post-Watergate, anti-establishment Baby Boomer culture. It was around this time, also in Houston, that he experienced his political awakening.

The 1977 killing by two city police officers of 23-year-old Joe Campos Torres, a Mexican-American and U.S. Army veteran, prompted Alexander to produce what he

describes as his first "overtly in-your-face statement about a political event." The officers convicted in the Torres case were accused of throwing him off a bridge into Buffalo Bayou. Alexander's painting, titled simply "Joe," showed a man's body, face down, under shallow, muddy water. "I think in a way it changed the whole dynamic of my paintings," Alexander says.

In the ensuing years Alexander has used his art to attack big business, religion and politics. His canvases crawl with clowns, ravens, skulls, skeletons, screaming monkeys and assorted demonic ghouls (sometimes dressed in business suits) hidden behind garish masks with long, pointed beaks. The Houston show includes a 1989 series of oil paintings of masked, white-robed clerics that you can bet will never hang in the Vatican. They are titled "Pope Huey," "Pope Louie" and "Pope Dewey." Although much of Alexander's work today is saturated with social satire, he is as gregarious and likable a skeptic as you'll ever meet, quick with a good story delivered in a drawl still so thick you'd think he just punched the clock on the night shift at a Beaumont refinery.

The Houston show reunites Alexander with two pivotal figures from early in his career. Peter Marzio and Jane Livingston helped organize the artist's first museum show outside Texas, at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington in 1980. Marzio, then the director of the Corcoran, is today the director of the MFAH. Livingston, then the Corcoran's chief curator, is today an independent curator whom Marzio tapped to organize the current show, which runs through June 22. The exhibit's 240-page catalogue contains superb essays written by Livingston, Alison de Lima Greene, the




Curator Jane Livingston writes of "Ship of Fools," 2006-07, oil on canvas: "In this painting, we are witnessing a doomsday scene, the end of excess and foolishness."

curator of contemporary art and special projects at the MFAH, and art critic Robert Hughes, a longtime friend of Alexander's. "If the great writer Cormac McCarthy painted in the style of Antoine Watteau, then the result would be the kind of tense relationship evident in Alexander's work," Marzio writes in the foreword. "So much of what Alexander paints has a fête-galante, 'look-Ma-no-hands' ease layered on top of anger and aggression."

The Houston show includes approximately 30 more works than were displayed at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, where the exhibition opened last Decem-

ber. In preparing the show, Alexander says he worried that the scope of his subject material and even the evolution of his painterly style over 40 years might pose something of a dilemma. His richly colored renderings of the natural world—birds, plants, trees, fish, crustaceans, the swamps and swamp life of east Texas—evoke the exacting beauty of John James Audubon. But other, more frenetic works, monochromatic by comparison, are filled with the iconography of a planet on the verge of destruction and carry titles such as "Paranoia Can Destroia" and "I've Been Living in a Hydrogen Bomb." In all, Alexander

says, he and Livingston considered some 1,300 paintings and another 1,000 drawings. As it turns out, the culling came easily. "You go for the best examples of work in each period and genre and mode," Livingston says. "John and I had virtually no disagreement about what were the best examples from every period."

The painting reproduced on the cover of the catalogue, "Ship of Fools," 6½ feet wide and 8 feet tall, depicts a band of monkeys, skeletons and corporate titans—including a pig in a suit—slipping from a sinking boat, their money drifting away in bloodied waters. The largest painting in the exhibition, "Parade," which is 7 feet high and 15 feet wide, employs similar figures but tosses in more businessmen, more priests, a smattering of sorcerers, at least one devil with pitchfork and lots more pigs. Taken together—both paintings were completed within the past two years—"Ship of Fools" and "Parade" represent marvelously both Alexander's abundant gifts and the current state of his artistic imagery, to say nothing of his state of mind. Say what you will, but this much is true: Subtle Alexander ain't. 

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