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Art review: Christopher Russell at Luis de Jesus Gallery

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Romantic literature and its predecessors are filled with shipwrecks — Byron, Defoe, Poe, Shakespeare, Swift, etc. Even Homer's tale had Odysseus tossed about at sea by supernatural forces. The ship as an emblem of life's journey through the unknown — at once beautiful, thrilling and treacherous — and its eventual wreckage as a necessary platform for renewal have served lots of writers well.

Shipwrecks are at the core of Christopher Russell's new work at Luis De Jesus, his first show with the gallery, in both an artist's book and a large group of quirky drawings. The collective title, "Runaway," comes across as having several meanings. Partly it's a traditional description of the artist as fugitive from society (as romantic a notion as there is for an artist's role). Partly it's an urgent command to his audience, suggesting that they join him. And partly it characterizes the runaway torrent of imagery that constantly crashes into contemporary life, from which there is hardly any escape.

Many of Russell's drawings begin with rustic landscape photographs that are the opposite of technological — a remote forest stream, tree limbs draped in Spanish moss, a frozen lake and especially a rocky gorge — which he brings into the fold by manipulation in the computer. Doubled, flopped, patterned like kaleidoscope chips, the photograph becomes a color ink-jet print that, in its largest format (as much as 7 feet tall) has the creepy look and claustrophobic feel of scaly Victorian wallpaper. Russell draws on it — not with a pencil or brush but with a sharp stylus or blade, scratching away the surface to reveal the white paper beneath.

The technique is quietly effective, at its best exuding a feral quality of clawing for release from domestic confinement. Like Robert Rauschenberg erasing a drawing by Willem de Kooning, it also acknowledges the authority of pervasive digital imagery while declining to be limited by it. The show would benefit from some editing (there's too much to take in), but the old-fashioned four-masted schooners that emerge throughout as negative spaces amid the encroaching gloom assume a ghostly quality of positive release.

--Christopher Knight

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Luis De Jesus Gallery, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 453-7773, through Nov. 27. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.luisdejesus.com

Photo: Christopher Russell, "Runaway," 2010 (installation view); Credit: Luis de Jesus Gallery