The living Rockwell
Photographer finds painter's America still alive

By ANDREW S. HUGHES
Times Staff Writer

For decades, art critics dismissed Norman Rockwell's paintings as too optimistic and idealistic, portraits of an "America that never was and never will be," as one critic put it.

Kevin Rivoli disagrees — and he has the photographs to prove it.

In the book and exhibition "In Search of Norman Rockwell's America," currently on display at the Midwestern Museum of American Art in Elkhart through Nov. 11, Rivoli pairs his own images from his career as a photojournalist with Rockwell's paintings to show that the same sort of everyday, slice-of-life moments Rockwell painted still occur.

"Ultimately, it's the world we all are connected to," Rivoli says by telephone from his home in Auburn, N.Y. "The essence in our lives that we live through, that we celebrate, that we cherish. Most of us experience these things: your first dog, your first love, family, friends, the birth of your children, getting married. That's what it's all about."

"In Search of Norman Rockwell's America" began to take shape a few years ago while Rivoli and his wife, Michelle, discussed possibilities for a book of his photography.

They remembered a trip they had taken to the Rockwell museum in Stockbridge, Mass., on their honeymoon, and as they looked at Rockwell's paintings in two books they own, they saw the thematic connection between the painter's work and the photographer's work.

"Whether you work for the New York Times or a small daily in a small town, you're charged with chronicling life around you," Rivoli says. "Photographers, as well as writers, are basically historians. If you look at somebody's work, 50 years from now, you'll get a sense of what life was like.

Although "you realize how important Rockwell's work was or is to the fabric of our society" by looking at it in mass, Rivoli says, he and Michelle initially encountered resistance to their concept.

"At first, we stopped it as a gallery exhibit and that a book would be spawned from that," he says. "A couple thought it was too American and too old-fashioned, and this was the International Center for Photography in New York City and the Eastman House. Michelle is my wife and manages my affairs, and was, like, 'You're kidding, right?'"
Rockwell:
"Wild art" captures essence

They weren't, but five publishers let at the concept, which evolved from a book of Rockwell's photographs with one Rockwell image to represent his work to its current form, 68 paintings of photographs and paintings. Although some of the Rockwell paintings are among his best, known, quite a few in the show and book have rarely been seen exhibited or reproduced.

"Whether we know him, Rockwell, we've seen it and it's in the back of your mind," Rivoli says about Rockwell's work and style. "I think he has helped us to see and understand our own images, our own society."

Kevin Rivoli's "Officer Lumb" pairs well with Rockwell's "Runaway" with its portrait of a police officer calming a young boy while paramedics tend to his mother after a traffic accident. Both images are on exhibit as part of "In Search of Norman Rockwell's America" through Nov. 1 at the Midwest Museum of American Art in Elkhart.

"The book is really about not only Rockwell and the America that he painted, but it's about imagining simple moments," Rivoli says. "Generally, the rules that we cover aren't that good news. Rockwell's book isn't good news. It's hard news, and we tend to forget these beautiful moments in our lives and the traditions we celebrate."

In the 1960s, that depicts four U.S. marathons occurring Ruby Bridges to kindergartens on the first day of a court-ordered desegregation in New Orleans public schools in 1960 is painted, for example, with Rivoli's "Remembering Those Who Came Before Me" a portrait of a young boy looking into the distance, for instance. Other images are colored by tone or trend to create their sense of being complementary colors — Rockwell's "The Problem We All Live With," a cover for Look magazine from the late 1960s that depicts four U.S. marathons occurring Ruby Bridges to kindergartens on the first day of a court-ordered desegregation in New Orleans public schools in 1960.

"I was obviously influenced by him, as well by other photographers and editors," Rivoli says. "I didn't get a Rockwell and say, 'OK, I've got to go get a newspaper or picture a picture with a cat and a dog in it.'"

Aside from his own "Triple Self Portrait" to pair with Rockwell's painting of that title, Rivoli, who has been a freelance photographer for the Associated Press, New York Times and USA Today since 2005, didn't stage any of the images he included in the book and exhibition.

"It was to try to recapture every one of those," Rivoli says. "I would have to stage it, and that's not the purpose of the book," he says. "The purpose of the book is to show what Rockwell painted 40, 50 years ago is still here today. They may look a little different, but the essence is the same, and they are the way we live and celebrate our lives, not how we see the world but how we see the world\u2014how we see the world with the people we love."

The Midwest Museum owns 65 Rockwell lithographs and one original oil painting, "No Credit Given," from 1897. Up since Aug. 21, "In Search of Norman Rockwell," Burns says, has been equal in attendance to an exhibition of Linda McCartney's photography that holds the museum's record.

In addition to local residents, Burns says, the exhibition has drawn tourists from Germany, Austria, Syria and New Zealand who saw it advertised on the Internet and who were going to be near Elkhart anyway.

Other visitors have been residents of Illinois who have made a special trip to the museum to see the exhibition, which will be on the road for three years at museums across the country and in Japan.

"Many people feel Chicago has driven them down, so I would think it's a little bit better," Burns says. "All of a sudden we have three new restaurants within a block, and they're using them... That's all we think we're such a bargain for because we're $4. We were told by International Arts and Artists that most museums decided to charge a special admission of $4 and we said we couldn't do that because the economy is so bad. The only thing we did different is not have our free Sundays for this."