

## Norman Rockwell, Kevin Rivoli together: Americana in their art

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In Print: Sunday, February 21, 2010

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Norman Rockwell codified in his art a cherished mainstream belief in America's essential goodness, and, because of his choices, he was more beloved by the masses than respected by the professionals. A richly comprehensive touring show that made a stop in 2008 at the Orlando Museum of Art did much to rehabilitate his reputation, demonstrating his superb talent as a draftsman and painter. (It's still touring, by the way; it recently left the Art Museum of Fort Lauderdale for Wichita, Kan.)

"In Search of Norman Rockwell's America" at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art is a new, smaller show that also acts as an *apologia* for Rockwell as a serious artist. It's the inspiration of photojournalist Kevin Rivoli, who 20 years ago began amassing a portfolio of outtakes while on various news assignments that captured intimate slice-of-life moments. He started concentrating more on these smaller moments in his work and, as a Rockwell admirer, he was struck by the similarities of these contemporary sideline scenarios to those Rockwell created for decades, mostly for *Saturday Evening Post* magazine covers. He wrote a book juxtaposing his black-and-white photos with Rockwell's art and solicited short essays from celebrities and connoisseurs to accompany them. This show is based on the book, with about 60 prints, paintings, drawings and photographs split between the two men.

Rivoli's premise is that Rockwell's vision is true and timeless, that he encounters the same human stories in 2010 that Rockwell began painting almost 100 years earlier. The artist created his scenes using models and staged backdrops so they're more easily dismissed as sentimental yearning. It's harder to argue with a photograph.

And Rivoli makes a credible point. The sweet, telling moments of connection continue to be found, chronicled and loved. But those moments are just that:



An American rite of passage is the subject of a lithograph from Norman Rockwell's 1957 painting *After the Prom* as well as Kevin Rivoli's 2007 giclee *Before the Prom*.

fleeting encounters, however meaningful, that are part of the larger human experience. Critics of Rockwell's work have said that he ignored the fuller story.

I don't think that matters. Rockwell's real issues with the art world were twofold. Though he created original paintings, they were done in service to commercial reproduction and Rockwell would even alter his work at the behest of editors. His other problem: He was the most traditional kind of representational painter in an era when art being taken seriously was moving toward abstraction.

I'm comfortable with my fondness for Rockwell's work. Art that can touch us is validation enough for me.

So this show will not advance any arguments about Rockwell's place in art history. It isn't designed to be scholarly or revelatory. It functions mainly as a pleasurable reminder of why we like Norman Rockwell. Rivoli's photographs, though nice, won't advance Rockwell's case with critics or admirers.

Be advised, too, that most of the Rockwell works here are reproductions. Though they were made in fairly small runs — 200 or so — they really aren't fine art prints because they aren't conceptually original; they're simply copies of his paintings. Their scarcity makes the paintings special; you can study how well made they are and marvel over the extraordinary detail Rockwell invested in them.

This is a fine show for a family outing. An interactive gallery is stocked with lots of low-tech toys along with a time line of American toys and lots of books for kids and adults to peruse. The education department has a Flickr project by the photo-sharing company in which museum visitors photograph their own "Rockwell Moment" that will be added to a looping slide show in the gallery. Every Saturday from 1 to 4 p.m., kids can assemble a cardboard toy chest and decorate free wooden yo-yos and tops. There's also a free family guide to help you enjoy the show together.

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