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Shades of Rockwell

BY David Wilcox / The Citizen

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AUBURN - Kevin Rivoli was taking his twin 2-year-old sons, Nick and Jack, to see Santa Claus in Hoopes Park last month when Rivoli witnessed a moment that transcended the wonder of their meeting.

The children were examining the stone chimney inside Hoopes Park's clubhouse in amazement at Santa's ability to climb down the confined space. They were soon joined by Santa himself, who discussed his journey with the two boys.



Sam Tenney / The Citizen

Kevin Rivoli is an Auburn based photojournalist who has compiled a group of photographs reminiscent of the paintings of Norman Rockwell. The photographs will be displayed alongside Rockwell's paintings in an upcoming traveling exhibit and published in book form this September.

As the three huddled together and pointed toward the chimney, Kevin, a photographer, hurriedly pulled out his camera and captured the moment.

"I think Norman Rockwell showed up in Hoopes Park that day," Rivoli said. "It was that little slice of Americana."

Some say Norman Rockwell's America is a myth.

Critics of the late artist allege his idyllic works of family, friendship and community depict an illusory America.

But Auburn photographer Kevin Rivoli believes Rockwell's America does exist. And he's preparing to prove it in a book, "In Search of Norman Rockwell's America," that will pair Rivoli's photos with similar works by Rockwell.

Some of the 60 couplets share more of a visual resemblance than others, but every one of Rivoli's pictures embodies the same theme expressed by its counterpart Rockwell piece.

Rockwell's "Can't Wait" features a buoyant child striking a salute pose in baggy fatigues. Its subject is mirrored by the young boy, dressed in similarly loose pants,

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saluting a line of Fort Drum soldiers in Rivoli's "Off to War."

Rivoli captured his photos over the course of almost 20 years working as a photographer in central New York, first for The Citizen from 1988-'96 and later as a freelancer for the Associated Press, the New York Times and other national publications.

The book, to be released in September, will be accompanied by a cross-country exhibit Rivoli will take on the road with his wife, Michele, who will curate it.

"He's had people look at his work and say it looks like a Rockwell, and he finds it a huge compliment," Michele said.

Though the resemblance between Rivoli's work and that of Rockwell is undeniable, the photographer never consciously sets out to replicate the artist's work.

"I try to make the best-looking image I see; not a Norman Rockwell image, a Kevin Rivoli image," Rivoli said. "Most of the time it's later that I see that Rockwellian nuance to it."

Rivoli attributes the similarity to his affinity for small-town America. He grew up in Penfield, a suburb of Rochester, where a high school teacher once told Rivoli he wasn't good enough to pursue a career in photography.

But Rivoli's photos impressed the Rockwell estate, which is eagerly collaborating with him on his twin projects.

"They're all very excited about this," Michele said. "It's a great way to introduce Rockwell's work to younger audiences."

Gathering that work has required extensive contact with the Saturday Evening Post - which published the artist's cover illustrations for more than 40 years - and its parent, Curtis Publishing. While they own the rights to the bulk of Rockwell's images, most of the works themselves belong to private collectors. Through discussion with each of them, including Rockwell collectors George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, the Rivolis have secured more than 80 original pieces for display in the book and show.

Crating and transporting the pricey paintings - some of which are up to 12-by-14 in size - will demand considerable effort. Due to concerns about the paintings' exposure to light and travel conditions, some Rockwells will be rotated with others at various points in the show's tour.

The Rivolis shopped "In Search of Norman Rockwell's America" to several firms. The first few to respond passed on producing it.

"They said it's great work and they love the images, but it's way too happy and too Americana," Michele said.

International Arts and Artists agreed to work with the Rivolis after seeing Kevin's photos. IAA Senior Exhibitions Manager Amanda Cane feels his work deftly communicates warmth and positivity without appearing corny.

"Some of the photos are uncanny in how they resemble actual Rockwell paintings or how they could easily have been a Rockwell," she said. "I was totally fascinated."

Cane feels the family-friendly nature of the show will gear it toward most galleries, including Syracuse's Everson Museum - where the Rivolis hope to debut the show.

"Sometimes I have trouble booking a show because there's a lot of photography out there," Cane said. "But with this one, the response has been overwhelming from all different types of museums: smaller museums, universities and large, well-known museums."

Once they take their "Search" across the country, Kevin hopes the sight of his work alongside Rockwell's will restore optimism to a public wearied by pictures of war, death and misfortune.

"We live in a time where we're inundated with bad news, but this confirms that there are also a lot of good things out there," he said. "Norman Rockwell's America is alive and well today."

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