BOOKS | READING BETWEEN THE LINES. | NOV. 6 2013 10:05 AM

Article from THE Slate BOOK REVIEW

Mi Gosh and By-heck

Deborah Solomon's life of Norman Rockwell, whose art looked back to an America that never was.

By Ben Davis

Illustration by Greg Ruth

In 1972, *Ramparts*, the San Francisco journal that had been one of the key outlets for the 1960s New Left, published a barbed little takedown of Norman Rockwell. Titled "Capitalist Realism," the item was occasioned by a touring career retrospective of Rockwell's work:

> His later work contains attempts at a greater "relevance": but his is one world where nothing has really changed. Rockwell is Rockwell, possibly the only one who sincerely believes in his vision of things. This retrospective is vintage nostalgia. It holds up a mirror to America: not the America that was, or the America that should have been, but the sugar coating that sweetened the bitter pill.

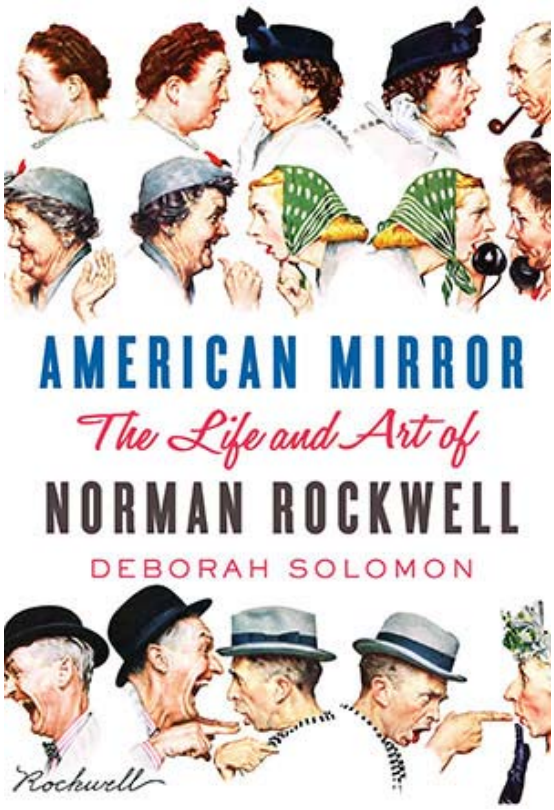
Ramparts' venomous assessment is well-turned but unremarkable—Norman Rockwell was, after all, a representative of the "culture" against which the "counterculture" pitted itself. The funny thing is that five years earlier, the venerated American illustrator had assented to do a

cover for the outspokenly lefty magazine, offering a double portrait of the British philosopher Bertrand Russell for the May 1967 issue (which also contained Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Declaration of Independence from the War in Vietnam.") Evidently, by this time, the Rockwell legend was so overpowering that it was impossible to see through, even by those who might have had a reason to.

The *Ramparts* review uses the metaphor of the mirror, and ***American Mirror: The Life and Art of Norman Rockwell*** happens to be the title of Deborah Solomon's robust new biography. Like the author of "Capitalist Realism," Solomon is aware that Rockwell didn't "mirror" American life in any true way; his work was, if anything, a kind of funhouse mirror in reverse, turning a world that was really full of strange bumps and twists into something eerily becalmed and normal-looking. "Rockwell Land is its own universe, freestanding and totally distinct," Solomon admits at the outset. We think of his work as of the past now, but even in its own time it was out-of-time: Already in 1936, his editor at the Republican, anti-New Deal *Saturday Evening Post* was fuming to Rockwell that the subject of his illustration *The Ticket Agent*, a glum, bony man trapped behind the cage of a window at a small-town train station, came off as too provincial: "We feel it would be more typical of millions of our citizens if he worked in a town of between ten and fifty thousand inhabitants and not such 'Mi gosh' and 'by-heck' surroundings."

Solomon is a veteran of the artist biography genre, with books on Joseph Cornell and Jackson Pollock under her belt, and *American Mirror* is a book of dazzling and accomplished detail about an accomplished but thoroughly undazzling life. The book spans from Rockwell's prehistory—his artist grandfather's struggles in mid-1800s New York—to his early attempts to define himself creatively in New York in the 1910s, through his long allegiance to such quaint bergs as New Rochelle, N.Y., Arlington, Vt., and, finally, Stockbridge, Mass., where he died a peaceful death in 1978, a certified national treasure at 84. For most of its 400-plus pages, *American Mirror* tells the story of a neurasthenic illustrator who was almost willfully uninteresting.

What drama there is comes not from the incidents of Rockwell's life but from how, in Solomon's telling, everything in his art actually represents its opposite. Rockwell created the imagery of the Boy Scouts—his most lucrative and long-lasting gig was for the annual Boy Scout calendar—but he was himself not particularly outdoorsy, a neat freak who couldn't bear to get dirty. He created memorable images of piety (*Saying Grace*, 1951), but his clan was uninterested in religion; captured scenes of scampy



rebellion (*The Shiner*, 1954) but was rule-bound and order-obsessed; and, most damningly, painted odes to family togetherness (*The Homecoming*, 1948) but was so affectionless that his own family despaired of ever knowing him. His first bride, Irene O'Connor, divorced him in 1930 on grounds of "mental cruelty;" his second wife, Mary Barstow, was driven to alcoholism and finally the mental hospital by his remove. Only his third wife, Molly Punderson, whom he met when he was 65 and she 64, seems to have been a fit, and they slept in separate beds. "At last he had found his feminine ideal," Solomon writes: "an elderly schoolteacher who was unlikely to make sexual demands on him."

American Mirror's most controversial point will likely be Solomon's conclusion that part of the sexless character of Rockwell's oeuvre can be traced to his own repression, specifically the fact that he was attracted to men but unable to express it. While living in New Rochelle, Rockwell forged an extremely intimate relationship with the Leyendecker brothers, famous illustrators who created the proto-metrosexual "Arrow Collar Man," and were gay. Seeking therapy in the late '50s, Rockwell apparently confessed to having "overly intense relationships" with men, though he was so reserved, even in his private correspondence, that it is hard to know what he meant by this. Piecing together the details of a two-week-long long fishing trip he took to Canada in 1934 with his handsome model and studio assistant, Fred Hildebrandt, Solomon comes to a suggestive dead end:

> The trip raises a complicated question: Was Rockwell homosexual? It depends on what you mean by the word. He demonstrated an intense need for emotional and physical closeness with men. From the viewpoint of twenty-first-century gender studies, a man who yearns for the company of men is considered homosexual, whether or not he has sex with other men. In Rockwell's case, there is nothing to suggest that he had sex with men. The distinction between secret desires and frank sexual acts, though perhaps not crucial to theorists today, was certainly crucial to Rockwell.

Whatever the case on this score, Rockwell's detachment was not confined to his personal affairs. While his public persona was all self-deprecating humor and his illustrations usually had a jokey vibe to them, he could be extraordinarily, robotically cold. In the late '30s, he moved to Arlington, whose residents became part of his folksy New England cosmology. Yet when he moved abruptly away more than a decade later, in 1953, to pursue psychotherapy at the Austen

Riggs Center in Stockbridge, it was as if a switch had been turned off: "If someone had been a very close friend, when Norman moved ... it was as if they never existed," an associate remembered. "Everyone complained that he never kept in touch. People said, 'We were his best friend, and now we don't hear from him.' "

Perhaps Rockwell's greatest moment of popular relevance came in the '40s, during World War II, when his "Four Freedoms" became icons of pro-American propaganda, and his Rosie the Riveter suddenly gave his life-long difficulty in representing traditional femininity a national purpose in recruiting women to the war industries. Having already been doing covers for the *Post* for a quarter century, Rockwell was by then an institution—but he was also becoming an icon of the past. Photojournalism was eroding the basis for magazine illustration as a vital profession, and TV would erode the basis of magazines themselves. Victory in World War II would make the United States a global power, undermining the hold that Rockwell's whimsical provincialism had on the national imagination, though it admittedly had a long afterlife in Eisenhower's suburban '50s.

Author Deborah Solomon

Photo courtesy Christian Oth

American Mirror only gets truly interesting in its final fourth. Artists often have late-period turnarounds—Titian going quasi-impressionist, Goya lining the walls of his house with nightmare imagery, Matisse breaking free of canvas with his luminous paper cuts. Rockwell had his own, and it took the form of a sudden and public turn toward liberal progressivism. When at last he cut himself free of the declining *Post*, he had the chance to reinvent himself, though it was too late to shift gears stylistically. His well-known *The Problem We All Live With*, made in 1964 for the interior of *Look*—three years after the event it depicted—shows in sympathetic detail the entrance of a young, black schoolgirl into a desegregated school, escorted by National Guards, the brutal epithet "NIGGER" scrawled in the background, a blood-red splash of rotten tomato behind her, as if she is just one step ahead of the mob. In its own way, it is as homiletic as his earlier work, but of a different world (partly because, Rockwell remembered, the *Post* had editorially mandated that African Americans only be shown in service-industry roles); it reflects news from his titanic near-present, not a transmission from a quasi-mythic past.

Rockwell hardly became a political crusader, but amid the *sturm und drang* of the '60s he did at least speak up. In 1962, he became a public "sponsor" of the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, his name appearing alongside Martin Luther King, Jr. and Benjamin Spock on its

masthead. He did a startling, cinematic piece about the murder of Civil Rights activists during the "Freedom Summer" for *Look*, and even was made a lifetime member of the NAACP. As Vietnam reached the heights of savagery, he repeatedly telegrammed Lyndon Johnson, whose portrait he had once done, pleading with him to end the war. "Times are changing now, and people are getting angry," he wrote in 1965. "I'm beginning to get angry too." No comparably passionate statement appears in the first part of the book, where Rockwell comes across as almost pathologically disengaged. Still, *American Mirror* doesn't exactly explain the change, just document it; Rockwell remained an aloof figure, closed into his own quirky world, until the end.

Why return to Normal Rockwell, now, in 2013? That is a difficult question. Solomon wants to reclaim him as a "postmodern" artist, but I don't think that quite flies. We are separated from his imagery of quaint civic rituals, small-town contretemps, and easy patriotic faith by Vietnam and Watergate and Stonewall, by Afghanistan and Lehman Brothers and WikiLeaks. The rage for "Americana" that Rockwell fed in the '20s was, Solomon reminds us, a novel phenomenon of the time, an appetite created by a modernizing America looking for a simple and stable past. Similarly, she says, "Rockwellian" as an adjective is an invention of the disillusioned 1970s. In art, we think of this as the period of post-minimalism and performance and the feminist breakthrough. But in politics, Nixon tried to name and speak for a "silent majority"—hostile to the counterculture, pro-business—and the coronation of Rockwell as an unsung American Master was a kind of cultural correlate; his art was populist and unchallenging and, after all, commercial. That touring museum retrospective that the *Ramparts* article lambasted was, Solomon recounts, the creation of Madison Avenue dealer Bernard Danenberg, who saw a market niche to exploit, and pitched the show to the Brooklyn Museum as a way of attracting large audiences. Rockwell himself declined to show up.

The right-wing activists who dress in tricorne hats at Tea Party rallies are, perhaps, the contemporary audience for a "Rockwellian" myth of America, longing for a homogeneity that never existed. There's a reason why, when looking to deify Sarah Palin, a conservative fan would figure her as Rockwell's Rosie the Riveter. Will such an audience want to wade through Solomon's account of Rockwell's life in its petty, oddball human actuality? Do they really want to hear about Rockwell's disdain for his hypochondriac mother, about his trip to England to secure a safe abortion for his second wife in pre-*Roe* U.S., his dependence on pills to control his anxiety, his 1962 admission that, "I was born a white Protestant with some prejudices which I am continuously trying to eradicate"? Likely not, because to learn about the actual Rockwell is to undo the power of the "Rockwellian" spell. As for the rest of us, Solomon's book gives us the set-up to a punch line we already knew. Rockwell's art is most interesting when he is least Rockwellian. I can't say that *American Mirror* convinces me that his classic images are secretly more complex than we thought. On the contrary: The story of his life makes clear all the complexity that for the most part his art lacks.

American Mirror: The Life and Art of Norman Rockwell by Deborah Solomon. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

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