

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A DIRTY OLD MAN A NEW STUDY OF NORMAN ROCKWELL FINDS SEXUAL INNUENDO LURKING AMID HIS CLASSIC IMAGES OF INNOCENCE

[THIRD Edition]

Boston Globe - Boston, Mass.

Author: Christopher Shea

Date: Oct 1, 2006

Start Page: D.1

Section: Ideas

Text Word Count: 1191

Document Text

Critical Faculties Christopher Shea's column appears biweekly in Ideas. E-mail critical.faculties@verizon.net.

ALL WILL AGREE THAT Norman Rockwell's famous 1954 painting, "Girl at Mirror," portrays a girl in the midst of one of life's great transitions. The near-adolescent sits on a stool in a white nightgown, chin in hands, pondering her appearance. A magazine on her lap is opened to a glamour shot of Jane Russell.

The viewer can fill in her thoughts: When will I be a woman? Am I pretty enough? When can I wear lipstick like Jane Russell? (A tube sits beside her stool.)

Richard Halpern, an English professor at Johns Hopkins University and author of the new book "Norman Rockwell: The Underside of Innocence," adds another question: What's with that creepy doll on the floor? "There is something slightly indecent about its posture," he writes, noting the raised rump. The doll, he suggests in language too colorful to repeat here, appears to be engaged in a quasi-sexual act with the mirror frame.

And it's no accident, as Halpern interprets it. Adolescence isn't all sweetness and light, of course, and the doll signals Rockwell's awareness of its more carnal side. The doll, he writes, "grotesquely amplifies...the delicate point of sexual transition at which the girl finds herself." Eroticized dolls—a running theme in Rockwell's work, Halpern says—are just one category of sexual or Freudian images that Halpern detects in Rockwell's paintings. He enumerates them in an effort to show that Rockwell is a "darker and more complex figure than most people are willing to accept."

"I think he intends to test the viewer," Halpern says in an interview from his Manhattan apartment.

To Halpern, Rockwell's main theme is not just innocence, but the denial required to make "innocent" images in our complicated world. As a result, people owe Rockwell another look: Innocence with lasciviousness peeking in at the edges, he says, is a lot more interesting, and challenging, than mere innocence. . . .

Rockwell was always candid about the fact he painted an idealized world, not the harsher one he lived in. Both of Rockwell's wives suffered from depression deep enough to lead to institutionalization, and Rockwell had his own bouts, according to a 2001 biography by Laura Claridge. His mother was icy and withholding, and he was cripplingly self-conscious about his gangly appearance. But Halpern's argument is that hints of the real world that Rockwell claimed to have disavowed are often there in his work, if you look closely enough.

Laurie Norton Moffatt, head of the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, finds this all a bit much

to take. Of "Girl at Mirror," she says, not without a sense of humor: "I'm a woman who grew up as a girl loving her dolls. I would not see that in a doll.

"I think he is reading more into these pictures than was intended," she said.

Art historians know that Rockwell wasn't the naif that he pretended to be in interviews.)

Paintings like "Triple Self-Portrait" (1960), with its allusions to Rembrandt and Van Gogh, or "The Connoisseur" (1962), which depicts a man in a gray suit viewing an Abstract Impressionist painting, wittily engage the question of where the illustrator fits in the Western artistic tradition.

And even Halpern's emphasis on sexuality isn't unprecedented. In a contribution to the catalog for a landmark traveling exhibition of Rockwell's work in the late 1990s, for example, the Stanford University art historian Wanda M. Corn took note of a "hilarious" and bawdy detail in "The Connoisseur": "an explosion of white paint" in that Abstract Impressionist painting right at the belt level of the man in the suit. Nor would many critics dispute that Rockwell's "Rosie the Riveter" (1943) carries an impressively phallic rivet-gun.

But Halpern goes further than anyone else. Consider "Cave of the Winds (Girl with Skirt Blowing Up)," a Saturday Evening Post cover from 1920. With a grinning boy behind her, a girl at an amusement park is captured in the moment when jets on the floor fire air up into her skirt. The picture's true subject, Halpern says, is not childhood fun but "the shock of sexual difference." The girl has closed her knees and predictably grabbed her skirt, yet her hand finds itself in a suggestive location, Halpern notes. Her face is "flustered" with alarm, but also, perhaps, pleasure.

But Freud is really in the details. An empty peanut bag floats at knee level, its opening pointed at the viewer. Halpern says that motif is repeated meaningfully: "The Cave, the bag, the balloon, the billowing skirts, the girl's pursed but open lips—all are externalized emblems of the empty...cavelike thing we are not allowed to see but see nevertheless."

Don't blame the critic, Halpern says: It's the painting, not his reading, that's "heavy handedly Freudian."

In his Christmas illustrations, Rockwell returned several times to the moment a child learns something unsettling about Santa Claus. But, Halpern asks, in "Santa's Surprise" (1949) is that really the revelation we're talking about? A boy has opened a door to find his mother on her knees, sewing the back side of Dad's Santa pants. Dad has only the bottom half of the suit on (he's still wearing a shirt and bow tie), and a tremendous pillow bulges out at a 45 degree angle from the front of his pants. "I trust I can leave this one to the readers' imagination," Halpern writes. (Maybe not. The Rockwell Museum's Moffatt says she sees no "sexual innuendo" at all in the painting.)

Dave Hickey, a freelance art critic who teaches at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas—and a past defender of Rockwell against his critics—says he's sure the sexual gags are there, given how "iconographically self-conscious" the artist was. But his reaction is, "So what?" Such instances are trivial, he says, in comparison with Rockwell's formal skills of composition and his creation of "a kind of Dickensian mythology" about childhood and domestic life.

One painting Halpern discusses, however, is particularly noteworthy, because Rockwell's own sons found it disturbing, partly on a sexual level. In "The Art Critic" (1955) an art student inspects a detail in an Old Master portrait of an older woman hanging in a museum. In classic Rockwell fashion, the woman in the painting is animate, and thinking the young man is inspecting her décolletage, she flashes him a coquettish look. Meanwhile, Dutch burghers in a nearby painting look on, aghast at the young man's forwardness.

The inside joke (if one can call it that) is that the model for the woman, as Claridge explains in her biography, was Rockwell's wife. The model for the art critic was his son Jarvis, who had artistic aspirations himself. Neither knew the direction Rockwell was going with the painting. When Jarvis saw the final result, he was "disgusted," he told Claridge, by the Oedipal overtones. Another brother, Peter, thought the painting cruel.

There was an incestuous tinge to the painting, and the joke itself was incestuous: All the shame was contained within the family, Halpern points out. Readers of the Saturday Evening Post, meanwhile, thought it was just one more cutesy scenario from the ever-innocent Norman Rockwell.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

Abstract (Document Summary)

Rembrandt and Van Gogh, or "The Connoisseur" (1962), which depicts a man in a gray suit viewing an Abstract Impressionist painting, wittily engage the question of where the illustrator fits in the Western artistic tradition. And even [Richard Halpern]'s emphasis on sexuality isn't unprecedented. In a contribution to the catalog for a landmark traveling exhibition of Rockwell's work in the late 1990s, for example, the Stanford University art historian Wanda M. Corn took note of a "hilarious" and bawdy detail in "The Connoisseur": "an explosion of white paint" in that Abstract Impressionist painting right at the belt level of the man in the suit. Nor would many critics dispute that Rockwell's "Rosie the Riveter" (1943) carries an impressively phallic rivet-gun. But Halpern goes further than anyone else. Consider "Cave of the Winds (Girl with Skirt Blowing Up)," a Saturday Evening Post cover from 1920. With a grinning boy behind her, a girl at an amusement park is captured in the moment when jets on the floor fire air up into her skirt. The picture's true subject, Halpern says, is not childhood fun but "the shock of sexual difference." The girl has closed her knees and predictably grabbed her skirt, yet her hand finds itself in a suggestive location, Halpern notes. Her face is "flustered" with alarm, but also, perhaps, pleasure. But Freud is really in the details. An empty peanut bag floats at knee level, its opening pointed at the viewer. Halpern says that motif is repeated meaningfully: "The Cave, the bag, the balloon, the billowing skirts, the girl's pursed but open lips—all are externalized emblems of the empty...cavelike thing we are not allowed to see but see nevertheless." Don't blame the critic, Halpern says: It's the painting, not his reading, that's "heavy handedly Freudian." In his Christmas illustrations, Rockwell returned several times to the moment a child learns something unsettling about Santa Claus. But, Halpern asks, in "Santa's Surprise" (1949) is that really the revelation we're talking about? A boy has opened a door to find his mother on her knees, sewing the back side of Dad's Santa pants. Dad has only the bottom half of the suit on (he's still wearing a shirt and bow tie), and a tremendous pillow bulges out at a 45 degree angle from the front of his pants. "I trust I can leave this one to the readers' imagination," Halpern writes. (Maybe not....

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.