

Pops Peterson's art: Rockwell's America restaged in a changed American landscape

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Pops Peterson's 'It hasn't ended,' appropriates Ruby Bridges, the little girl from Norman Rockwell's 1964 painting about integration, 'The Problem We All Live With,' and places her in a blasted, post-riot Ferguson landscape.

LENOX – “Reinventing Rockwell,” a solo show by Stockbridge artist Pops Peterson reinterprets Norman Rockwell's artwork with contemporary views on politics, social issues, and technology. Sohn Fine Art Gallery, 69 Church Street, Lenox, through March 15, Tel. 413-551-7353, info@sohnfineart.com

By SCOTT CHRISTIANSON and TAMAR GORDON

When America's beloved illustrator and icon-maker Norman Rockwell died on Nov. 8, 1978, his body was moved across the street from his home to the funeral parlor at 7 South Street in Stockbridge — a structure that now houses the sprightly yellow-and-white Seven Salon Spa, the co-owner of which, Pops Peterson, is today bringing Rockwell back to new life.



Pops Peterson's 'Freedom from what,' a reinterpretation of Norman Rockwell's 'Freedom from Fear.'

reducing them nostalgia pieces or records of some historic milestone that happened long ago.

Enter Pops Peterson, a 21st-century digital artist who is also black and gay. And attempting to make Rockwell up-to-date.

Born in Harlem in 1952, Maurice Peterson grew up in Queens and attended the High School of Music and Art in frenetic Manhattan. Before graduating from Columbia University in 1973 he made a name for himself writing about celebrities for Andy Warhol's Interview, the Village Voice, Essence, and The New York Times, but never really struck it big. He later bounced around as a singer and recording artist, playwright, and screenwriter before settling into a career in website design.

In 2005, when he and his husband Mark Alan Johnson moved to the Berkshires, opening the upscale hair salon in Stockbridge, Pops felt he might be "headed out to pasture" as a creative artist, never realizing that it would mark the start of a new career.

It's not that Rockwell ever completely expired in town, of course, since Stockbridge has preserved the old master's legacy as much as any place could, and the orderly little town's identity remains largely bound up in the Norman Rockwell Museum and its surrounding Rockwellia.

But Rockwell's Americana art can appear frozen — like objects in a time capsule, or relics of a bygone and idyllic era. Although the images once captured signature moments of their time, that time has long since passed, sometimes

Peterson says he found the place “intensely beautiful,” and the people so “loving and supportive” that he came to feel at home in his new surroundings and began to realize the importance of community in his life. The more he studied Rockwell, the more he came to view the artist’s work as connoting “security, caring, tenderness, beauty, love, and peace — a brighter day,” he says. “Rockwell’s images and my own experiences in town seemed to teach that people need each other, that everybody here in the community is important.”

Peterson had grown up envying Rockwell’s comfortable American mythology. “I loved it,” he says. “I just wished I could see myself in it. The only time anyone dark appeared was in the controversial ones, the ones that were all about an issue.”

Returning to his former interest in painting, Peterson quickly began to develop his distinctive, colorful style of digital art. He established a blog and began to receive commissions for portraits. He had several small exhibitions around the region and began to be featured in local media. Last summer he had his first solo exhibition, NEW FRONTIERS IN POP ART, at Lauren Clark Fine Art in Great Barrington.

Then he hit on the idea of trying to do a whole series of Rockwell-like works that would have today’s style and today’s people and today’s attitude — to make the pictures as if Norman Rockwell were creating them today.

Rockwell’s illustration process, detailed in his 1947 book *How I Make a Picture*, described image-making as a hybrid process involving sketches, photographic studies, the casting of models, props, elaborate staging, and finally, painting. He also used a giant contraption called a balopticon, a forerunner of the slide projector, to project photographs he would later trace and color in to form his paintings.

Peterson’s process is also mediated by a machine. His works are created in Adobe Photoshop and printed as giclee prints. He uses 21st century hybrid techniques that combine Photoshop’s unlimited opportunities for graphic invention with his own meticulous staging using photographs and sets. The results recall the hyperreal quality of Rockwell’s illustrations, while radically “updating” his idealized, white, hetero-normative America.

The typical Rockwell painting is a snapshot of a complete world that tells a story. Peterson has transposed that quality to a 21st century America that is struggling with old and changing paradigms of race, gender, sexuality, and class.

Two of his most powerful pieces created thus far harness two of Rockwell’s works to enunciate contemporary narratives of race. “It hasn’t ended” appropriates Ruby Bridges, the little girl from Rockwell’s 1964 painting about integration, “The Problem We All Live With,” and places her in a blasted, post-riot Ferguson landscape.

“Freedom from Fear” from the 1941 painting of the same name, features African-American parents in the iconic pose of covering their sleeping children. Far from the serene parents of Rockwell’s wartime painting, they are in fact consumed with fear; the father holds a newspaper with the headline “I Can’t Breathe.” If viewers look carefully, they can also see a tiny photograph of the

same Ferguson neighborhood that appears in “It Hasn’t Ended.” Both parents appear profoundly pained, angry and afraid, expressions that Rockwell avoided throughout his career, but that cue modern audiences to the racial violence that didn’t end with the civil rights struggle.

Other works in the show deal with subjects other than race and civil rights. Peterson’s “Ode to the Pear Trees of Great Barrington” captures a fleeting moment in Great Barrington history, just as Rockwell’s “Stockbridge Main Street at Christmas” did for that town. “Sailor on Leave” recreates a Rockwell tableau of a sailor lounging in a hammock. Rockwell’s male rite of passage of the first haircut is presented in updates form in a unisex hair salon. The traditional Thanksgiving dinner scene now includes a gay couple and other contemporary touches.

“I am re-imagining and transforming Norman Rockwell scenes with 21st-century people, 21st-century families, fashions, technology and friendships,” says Peterson. “I feel if he were alive today he would want to do exactly this. He would want us to bring the work up to date and make it vibrant once again.”

Rockwell’s work has been both lionized and criticized for its sentimental appeal to the broadest possible audience. Peterson supplies a playful and at times powerful corrective to that idealized world. He fully embraces Rockwell’s vision by rendering a multicultural world of inclusion and



‘Thanksgiving Gay Dinner,’ another reinterpretation of one of Rockwell’s iconic images.

visibility. His digital collages and compositions are not postmodern pastiche — citation, irony, parody — but deeply human stories that embody Rockwell’s fundamental project of portraying friends, family, community and society in their best and most hopeful incarnation.

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Monday, Mar 9 - “Well, I prolly don't have much time left. That's why I wrote it to her. So I prolly wouldn't be able ta stop waitin on her ta write back before I had the chance ta do anything, before the old bucket kicked me. Guess everybody dies waitin for somethin they ain't gonna get though.”



Bits & Bytes: Folk duo at Dewey Hall; Rudolf Steiner School circus

Saturday, Mar 7 - "Through activities like tumbling and acrobatics, children are encouraged to feel comfortable moving their bodies as well as extending into the space around them, and they become aware of their strength both physically and emotionally. The adult capacities of being flexible, leading a balanced life, helping and supporting others and juggling life's tasks are exercised in childhood through circus arts." -- Krista Palmer, Great Barrington Rudolf Steiner School athletic director and circus creative director