

Norman Rockwell's Boy Scouts, Updated

By Catherine Wagley Thursday, Jul 4 2013

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A SCOUT IS REVERENT

After the Boy Scouts of America's national council voted to lift its ban on gay scouts under 18 — anyone gay and over 18 can, awkwardly, still be expelled from the organization — last month, certain papers ran reproductions of Norman Rockwell images alongside their reporting on the issue. The popular 20th-century painter, whose images of middle-class American life have an uncomplicated, gee-whiz sentimentality that still makes some culture snobs squirm, began illustrating Boy Scout pamphlets and calendars in 1912, when he was just 18. He kept the gig for 50 years, so there's ample imagery for papers to choose from. *The Dallas Morning News* paired a 1946 image of an Eagle Scout helping a younger boy tie a knot with an article that quotes a conflicted minister. "I would no more allow a gay boy to sleep in the same tent with another boy any more than I would allow a hetero boy and girl to sleep together," the minister says, though he loves everyone, gay or not, and loves "what the Scouts once stood for."

Rockwell, in contrast, often found what the Scouts stood for and what they wanted from him limiting. In 1945, when writer Rufus Jarman profiled him in *The New Yorker*, Rockwell said the Boy Scouts "are simply going to have to devise some new good deed or [Scouts calendar publisher] Brown and Bigelow will be in a hell of a fix," the implication being that you can only paint so many pictures of boys saving kittens or carrying little girls from flooded houses.

"Very often, there is a boy at the center, with a rotating cast of puppies or women cheering him on," Ben Lee Handler says of Rockwell's images. He and Andrew Pogany, a former editor-in-chief of *Flaunt* magazine who now has a master's in Library & Information Science from the same UCLA program Handler completed, have curated an exhibition that reacts to Rockwell's renderings. Titled "Good Intentions," it runs through July 20 at Subliminal Projects, the Shepard Fairey-owned Echo Park gallery whose shows tend to have a foot in the pop or street culture arenas.

The idea for this show took root more than nine years ago, when Pogany purchased a set of Rockwell Boy Scout prints at a garage sale. He was fascinated by their good-natured quirkiness — in one, a small Boy Scout stands on a rickety chair with measuring tape, intently measuring an Eagle Scout's puffed-out chest — and the fact that they seemed oblivious to their own lily-white tunnel vision. He wondered what would happen if he asked contemporary artists to reinterpret them.

"He told me about the idea in January of this year after he started interning at Gagosian," says Handler, who is the resident librarian at that blue-chip Beverly Hills gallery. "We were lamenting the Boy Scouts' initial decision to not permit gay scouts into the organization" since the Scouts had first ruled against allowing any gay members at all.

Handler knew Erica Overskei, Subliminal Projects' gallery manager, and proposed the idea of a benefit show to her. Overskei offered them an open summer slot and they took her suggestion to donate proceeds to Free Arts for Abused Children.

Most invited artists agreed to participate or, even if they declined, showed enthusiasm — Paul McCarthy, known for narrative works that mess with mainstream icons, sent a letter saying he wished he could participate.

The 21 artists included are, on average, young, and intentionally diverse — women, men, queer, straight, black, Asian-American, white. The majority of them work figuratively, rendering at least loosely recognizable scenes and characters, which probably makes them better suited to reinterpret a king of illustrative art than artists who work abstractly.

There's Eric Yahnker, whose most recent solo show featured graphite drawings of Jane Fonda and Farrah Fawcett with bangs covering their eyes; and Alike Cooper, whose collages of scraps and squares of fabric often depict posed women.

Painter Alison Blickle, who replaced a kneeling, praying Boy Scout with a stoic woman covered in black diamonds in her take on Rockwell's *A Scout Is Reverent*, says the project compelled her because she "liked the idea of subverting Rockwell's Boy Scout imagery. His pictures have these elements of ritual, and the sacred, and being connected to something larger than yourself," she adds. "But it's centered on an idealized, all-American, white-boy version of these things."

The exhibition starts with an installation of original Rockwell prints in the foyer, then launches into the reinterpretations. In Christine Wang's *A Good Scout*, based on an image of Rockwell's in which a boy feeds a caged dog, she closely replicates the sweet-faced teenage boy in his tan-and-red get-up and his spare surroundings. Instead of a dog, Wang has painted a pink-haired female manga character on all fours in the cage. The switch-up makes the boy's good deed sinister; it's like he's complicit in some sort of sexually charged subjugation of this cartoon lady.

Yahnker, like Blickle, reinterpreted *A Scout Is Reverent*, but did so more faithfully, drawing a praying scout in a pew next to a clergyman, with Liberace in the background, looking luridly out at the picture's viewers. "I'm not exactly sure if it's a sign of the times or just my own internal issues which make me see perversity when encountering clergy and children together," Yahnker says, "so it's no big surprise it sends my perversion gauge from overdrive to molten lava when I see a priest and a Boy Scout kneeling and reading the Bible among the pews in a goddamn Rockwell print." He noted that Liberace, who has featured in his work before and could keep his sexuality under wraps while still "being so ostentatiously queer," seemed to fit.

An exhibition like this — with a theme pertinent to current affairs and done for a cause — is a dicey undertaking. It's compelling to news outlets, which always want to put art into conversations with bigger political and social occurrences. And it's genuinely exciting to think that artists could come together, weigh in on a topic and then make something happen both ideologically and financially, in this case by challenging ideas of what being a "good boy" means

and helping an organization for abused children.

But the art is often at a disadvantage. Think of the recent "Artists for Obama" campaign, in which well-known figures such as John Baldessari and Richard Serra made prints specifically to support the president's re-election campaign, the political slant of which felt blunt: Chris Burden drew a "prickly cactus" and a common housefly, writing in childish cursive that they could not marry while a tulip and daisy he depicted could, the loose implication being that marriage laws are absurd.

This show does better than that. It's easier to do interesting work when you're reacting to one person's aesthetic instead of gaping issues. But Rockwell was a commercial artist beholden to the ideology of his client, who sold 2 million of his Boy Scout calendars yearly; the artists in this exhibition are beholden mostly to their own ideas. As a result, the art in this show begins to feel exclusive in a far different way than Rockwell's. Made for a venue frequented by relatively liberal, young Angelenos, it can be incisive without real fear of alienating an audience.

A few paintings, Frohawk 'Two Feathers' and Noah Davis' in particular, take a different tack. Two Feathers took his inspiration from Robert Baden-Powell, the British founder of the whole Scout movement, who was an illustrator himself and who fought in the Boer War. The artist depicted, in a folk style, lines of uniformed native scouts and porters who participated in the 1899 Battle of Mafeking.

Davis painted one of the few black Boy Scouts from Rockwell's renderings, basing his portrait's dimensions on the space the boy took up in the original painting and giving him more textured treatment than Rockwell originally did. These works have an openness that likely would draw in even a conflicted minister reminiscing about what the Boy Scouts once stood for.

GOOD INTENTIONS | 1331 W. Sunset Blvd. | Through July 14 | subliminalprojects.com