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ART

Rockwell Re-enlisted for a Nation's Darker Mood

By [DAMIEN CAVE](#)

AVENTURA, Fla. — Elliott Earls's reinterpretation of [Norman Rockwell's](#) "Four Freedoms" practically screams. A little girl seems to be crying, her eye bruised, with an American flag in the background and two words framing her figure: "Liberty Weeps." The color scheme is red, white and blue, but patriotic pride has been supplanted by sadness.

"She is begging us with her eyes to take responsibility for our actions as a nation," Mr. Earls said of his creation in an e-mail message. "And to live up to the greatness embedded in our social fabric by the brilliance of our founding fathers."

Clearly, Rockwell's America this is not. It is Sunday afternoon at the Aventura Mall in South Florida, and I've come to gauge the impact of a handful of images displayed in 14-foot-high posters near Nordstrom. Culled from a surprising new exhibition at the Wolfsonian museum at Florida International University titled "Thoughts on Democracy," they are all artists' responses to Rockwell's wartime "Four Freedoms" series.

Sixty artists contributed to the show. But their creations bear little resemblance to the Rockwell paintings, which helped raise \$133 million for the war effort in 1943 after the government turned them into posters. There is no folksy man standing up to speak his opinion (exemplifying "Freedom of Speech"), no devout group praying ("Freedom of Worship") no wholesome family sitting down to a Thanksgiving meal ("Freedom From Want").

And while the fourth freedom, "Freedom From Fear," does reappear, the message seems ominous. In Guillermo Kuitca's rendition of Rockwell's image of parents putting their small children to bed, the family is surrounded by a sea of blackness. In James Victore's remake, tears burst from the parents' eyes as they pull an American flag over a wooden coffin.

What all of this suggests is not just a reinterpretation of Rockwell but a meditation on an American crisis of self-confidence: the sense that trust in American ideals is giving way to fear and uncertainty about how they are exploited. Culture has long been a documentarian of sorts, and this somber mood is also reflected at the box office these days, where the dystopian world of "Wall-E" is a hit, and in bookstores, where titles like "Are You There, Vodka, It's Me, Chelsea" are best sellers.

Many of the artists interviewed said they felt that now was not the time to emphasize American greatness, as Rockwell did, but rather to caution people about the risks of complacency. They said they created the posters because they loved their country — about two-thirds of the 60 are American — but felt that their fellow citizens needed to wake up, to break free from anxiety and a habit of looking away.

In the mall at least, the artists' instincts seemed to be borne out. In an hour and a half, more than 100 people walked by the exhibit. Only 8 stopped to look.

"People don't care anymore," said David Babich, 31, one of the few who lingered, gazing at the prints. "They aren't as affected by stuff that happens."

Rockwell time might not have been entirely different. Nostalgia for World War II has often obscured what the era's most famous war correspondent, Ernie Pyle, once wrote during a visit home: "A great many people don't know there's a war on, or don't seem to care."

Rockwell's art, too, has been obscured or whitewashed. His scenes of domestic bliss are far better known than later images like "The Right to Know" (1968), which shows a group of Americans clamoring around an empty chair that is meant to signify government bureaucracy during the Vietnam War.

Nonetheless, the divide between battlefield and home front seems to be widening. When I returned from Iraq in January, after reporting there for about 18 months on and off, I found myself stunned by the war's lack of impact on people's lives or thoughts.

"OURS ... to fight for." That simple phrase sits atop the Rockwell "Freedom From Want" and "Freedom From Fear" posters. But today, as many returning soldiers have witnessed, that sense of collective responsibility often seems absent, except for the occasional campaign speech.

There are no calls to arms among the 80 posters in the Wolfsonian's show. Those that directly tackle the war — including Mr. Victore's coffin and Helene Silverman's poster of a soldier's face, striped in red and white with the names of other soldiers laid over it — emphasize the losses.

Words like "ours" also seem to have disappeared, just as they have from posters on the walls of recruiting offices nationwide and military bases

in Iraq. In urging people to sign up or re-enlist, they do not address why “we” fight but rather what “you,” the average 18-year-old, can get from a job in uniform.

That has been the government’s pitch for decades. “Back in 1973 when we made the decision to end conscription, part of the Pentagon’s decision was, we’re going to compete in the labor market and we’re going to work with ideas that get people to work for the armed forces,” said David R. Segal, a military sociologist at the [University of Maryland](#). “There was a decision made to downplay values and emphasize economic incentives.”

Not surprisingly, many of the Wolfsonian artists blame the Bush administration for discouraging broad-based sacrifice and starting a war that proved to lack a credible cause. Mr. Victore, an independent designer in New York, who comes from a military family and whose father flew refueling missions over Vietnam, said he had been particularly disillusioned by what he sees as the government’s use of fear to drum up support. He said he hoped his poster would remind Americans to raise questions suppressed by anxiety.

“A fearful public is a submissive one, and we willingly — with no clear cause submitted as reason — continue into this quagmire,” he said.

Many of the images in “Thoughts on Democracy” can also be viewed as a rebuttal of the president’s call after Sept. 11 to keep shopping, lest the terrorists win. In Daniel Arsham’s gray and white poster, “WANT” is a building that towers over everything else. Chip Kidd, a well-known book-jacket designer, produced four posters, with “Freedom From Want” appearing above the image of an obese man’s stomach.

The most powerful efforts tackle the tension between the American democratic ideal and its practice. The Map Office, a design studio in New York, produced three unequivocal images. One poster shows democracy as a green goo spread across a pristine landscape; another reads, “kiss the fist of democracy.” A third says, “Democracy is the Helvetica of Politics,” reflecting its ubiquity, openness and adulteration, the artists said.

In some images, government seems to be the problem, a seller of enlightenment ideas that have been so used and reused that their meaning has been diminished.

In George Mill’s poster, “FREEDOM” comes with a disclaimer. “Certain restrictions apply,” it says. “Subject to change without notice. The right of Freedom is made available ‘as is’ and without warranty of any kind.”

Oh, and one more thing: “The right of Freedom may be exercised on the strict understanding that neither the Government nor its ministers, employees or agents shall be liable for losses of any kind.”

A paradox is embedded in this round of cynicism and self-doubt. American ideas like free markets and democracy are on the march. Poverty has declined, with 18 percent of the world’s population living on \$1 a day in 2004, down from 40 percent in 1981, as [Fareed Zakaria](#) points out in his book “The Post-American World.” And a recent poll of 17,000 people in 19 nations by researchers at the University of Maryland found that 85 percent agreed that “the will of the people should be the basis for the authority of government.” Tellingly, the most robust support surfaced not in Western democracies but in countries like Ukraine, Nigeria and Indonesia.

Even at the Wolfsonian, a handful of posters suggest that the globalization of democracy can be a force for good. In a piece by the Zimbabwean-born artist Chaz Maviyane-Davies, “We the people” appears in five languages, including Arabic and Spanish.

Why, then, are we so depressed? Perhaps, as the artists’ work suggests, because we are no longer so young and naïve. The spread of democracy has been messier than Rockwell’s generation expected, and better publicized.

Iraq is a potent example, but there are so many others. Salvador Orara, a designer at The Map Office, said assassination attempts against his cousins who work in the Filipino government made him realize that American-exported democracy did not necessarily mean security.

Mr. Mill recalls coming of age in the former Yugoslavia during the 1980s and believing deeply in freedom and human rights. A decade later, during the Balkan war, he said, “those values disintegrated before us in the name of ‘higher causes.’”

In many cases the results feel more like heartbreak than like anger. The emotion in more subtle works, like Richard Tuttle’s simple drawing of Uncle Sam hidden behind a wall, reminded me of what I saw in the faces of Iraqis and Americans when things went horribly wrong. It was the marine frustrated by his inability to protect a Sunni ally from assassination; the reporter crushed to discover the lies of an American official; the Iraqi politician saddened by the circus of his country’s Parliament.

Democracy often seems to grow uglier with age.

But amid the happy, escapist shoppers at the Aventura mall, these thoughts felt as out of place as Rockwell’s proud posters. The sprawling darkness of Mr. Kuitca’s remake of “Freedom of Fear,” with the original tucked in the corner, seemed far more apt.

“Thoughts on Democracy” is on view through Dec. 7 at the Wolfsonian museum at Florida International University, 1001 Washington Avenue, Miami Beach; (305) 531-1001, [wolfsonian.org](#).

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