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Updating Norman Rockwell's 'Four Freedoms' for a Modern, Diverse America

Hank Willis Thomas and Emily Shur recreated Norman Rockwell's "Four Freedoms" series, featuring scenes that reflect this country's complexity and diversity over 75 years later.



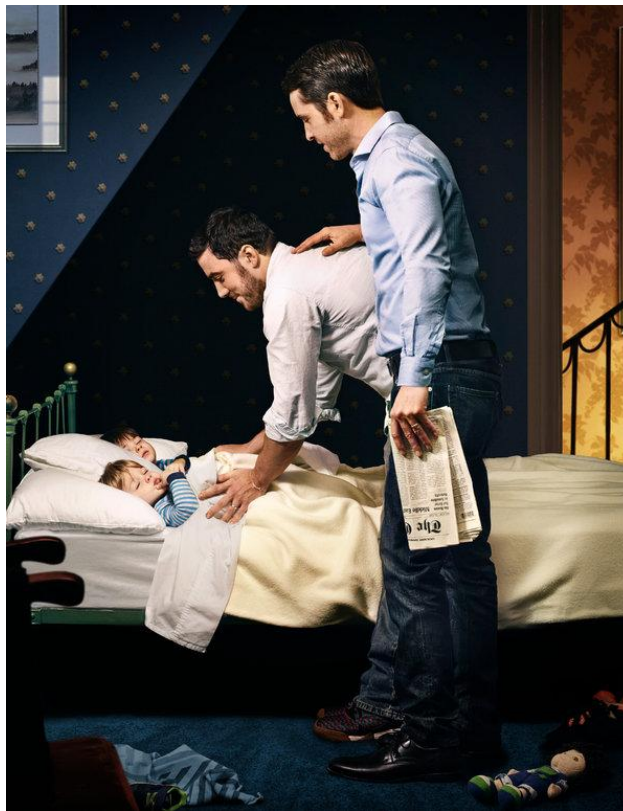
"Freedom from Want," 2018. Credit Hank Willis Thomas, Emily Shur, Eric Gottesman and Wyatt Gallery, courtesy of For Freedoms

Norman Rockwell's "Four Freedoms" series presented an image of America intended to bolster patriotic spirit during World War II. Based on a 1941 speech by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in which he extolled the global right to freedom of speech and worship, freedom from want, and the freedom from fear, Rockwell's canvases were a celebration of Americana.

It was, however, a selective celebration.

When Rockwell made these paintings in 1943, Japanese-Americans were imprisoned in internment camps while African-American soldiers who grew up under Jim Crow fought in segregated units. "At that time in America, it seems what it meant to be American was white Anglo-Saxon," said the photographer and conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas. "We want to shine a light on the fact that artists' work is often political and shapes culture and society."

Using Rockwell's paintings as a starting point, Mr. Thomas has reimagined the illustrator's vision by recreating scenes that include faces that reflect this country's complexity and diversity. Mr. Thomas — whose previous projects have examined race, commerce and advertising — enlisted the photographer Emily Shur, the video artist and activist Eric Gottesman, and the photographer Wyatt Gallery to produce the work exhibited in "For Freedoms: Where Do We Go From Here?" now at the International Center of Photography Museum.



"Freedom from Fear," 2018. Credit Hank Willis Thomas, Emily Shur, Eric Gottesman and Wyatt Gallery, courtesy of For Freedoms

Rockwell often painted his neighbors, presenting an image of America before desegregation ended. "The scene from Rockwell's 'Freedom of Speech' was inspired by a community meeting he attended," said Ava Hess, curator and exhibition manager at the photography center. "His paintings were inspired by things he saw in everyday life and they still resonate today, reigniting a conversation about the freedoms he imagined."

To create these highly stylized and staged images, Ms. Shur said they worked with a team of retouchers who helped make the photos using elements like wallpaper samples, walls, staircases and environments that weren't actually present when the photos were taken.

"You can't really make those Rockwell paintings as photographs the way they are," Ms. Shur said. "In terms of perspective and depth-of-field things you can do in painting, you can't do in photographs. We really had to plan and we shot people individually, as well as elements like the table, the wall, and food platters. We had to use different pieces from different photo shoots. I often shoot a lot of composites and actors, people who can't be in the same room at the same time. This was on a big scale in terms of planning and really gratifying. There were a lot of tedious details. It took months and months after the shoot to work on the retouching."

In the original Rockwell paintings, some of the faces were obscured, but the photographers felt it was important that their subjects — more than 150 people, including celebrities like the actor Rosario Dawson and Chuck D of Public Enemy — be visible.

Since starting in 2016, For Freedoms has grown as an artist led platform to include 800 artists whose work has appeared in all 50 states, Puerto Rico and Washington D.C., in exhibits and on billboards that allow new images to enter the public discourse on art and activism. Offering varied views on issues like campaign reform, racism, gender equality, gun control, reproductive rights and freedom of expression, the For Freedoms 50 State Initiative included the creation of more than 250 billboards, many of them on display in the exhibition. For the first time, audiences can view photographs of the billboards, prints and posters inspired by Rockwell, and lithograph posters depicting Rockwell's paintings



"Cotton Bowl," San Francisco, Calif., 2018. Credit Hank Willis Thomas and Imprint City

displayed side-by-side in a museum setting. The immersive installation also has a working space for the collective's members who host in-gallery activations and workshops where people are invited to join the discussion.

"People can feel very strongly about these freedoms and their interpretations of them," Ms. Hess said. "Each one of us has so much multiplicity in our lives and our expression of it. Sharing our personal visions helps us deepen our understanding of what freedom means."

A public program on the role of art and visual representation will be presented on March 27 and gallery activations, workshops and performances will be held through April 29.

"The response to the images were so overwhelming," Mr. Thomas said. "We're doing town halls to turn critical dialogue into political discourse about fine art practices. But, we also think it's important to be visionary not reactionary. When thinking about long-term impact, we want to aim to make statements that will last beyond the current moment."

- Fayemi Shakur