

# The New York Times

## Wrong Image? It Depends on Beholder

By [PETER APPLEBOME](#)

Published: June 14, 2007

NEW CITY, N.Y.

Was everyone stunned that there was some sort of a fuss over the 130-foot-long mural painted by the artists who have come to be known as the Rockland 11? Probably not.

Art, after all, can push people's buttons in different ways. So, Andy Golub, who picked the artists and artworks for the mural on Congers Road in this largely well-to-do Rockland County community, figured some people were not going to like some of the art. Maybe it would be Tjokorda Gde Arsa Artha's Balinese goddess or Kai Ladzinski's triptych of a meditating woman, Andy Sovia's take on surrealism or Mr. Golub's own R. Crumb-like offering that included a dancing eyeball. You slap 11 pieces of art on a wall in the middle of a suburban shopping district; someone's not going to like something.

Nevertheless, a week into the kerfuffle over the Rockland 11, he's still a little shocked. It turned out that the backlash wasn't really directed at any of the pieces by a variety of Rockland County artists. Instead what critics seemed to focus on almost without exception was this thought, usually expressed in these words: It looks like the Bronx.

Or, as one letter writer to The Journal News, which covers the northern suburbs put it, many people moved to Rockland County from the city to seek a better way of life and now, "somehow, the town had managed to bring the ghetto to us. Making downtown New City look like slums of the Bronx is not the best way to bring a community together."

Edwin J. Day, the Rockland County legislator whose district includes New City, said he heard the same thought over and over from his constituents and did not disagree with it. "It's more the kind of thing you expect to see in a major urban center, rather than a suburban area," he said. "Some of it may be very nice, but it's not what they have in mind for their community."

Chances are the battle over the Rockland 11 would never have happened had it not been for the garbage cans. Over the last few years, a local nonprofit group called Keep Rockland Beautiful has had artists paint garbage cans in assorted fanciful ways. So when officials in the Town of Clarkstown, which includes New City and several other hamlets,

started thinking about the drab wall across from the Town Hall on a heavily trafficked road, they thought, “Why not let them do the wall as well?” Mr. Golub was picked as curator and he decided that the theme, essentially, would be that there would be no theme, just an attempt to highlight the individuality of the different artists.

So there’s a bucolic Hudson River landscape by John Elliot, one by Jennie Chien mapping Rockland County in petroglyph-style images from the American Southwest, an evocation of post-Katrina New Orleans by Ed Kirkland, a bright fanciful one by Lisa Grubb that looks like pages from a children’s book.

The artists did their painting in public the first weekend in June, each working on a 12-by-6-foot panel. And when they finished, the whole thing seemed a modest triumph of taking a public eyesore and turning it into public art.

But that’s when the critics started calling Town Hall and local legislators. Now, a week later, some, like Mr. Day, say the right thing to do is to take this to a local planning body to see what people want or do not want. And if this isn’t what they want, they should paint it over and try something else. (Clarkstown officials say they’ve heard much more pro than con.)

Andy Stewart, executive director of Keep Rockland Beautiful, said that in retrospect, perhaps they could have gotten input from more local groups but, “if we went to every stakeholder out there, we never would have been able to do anything. It’s virtually impossible to create a public artwork which everyone likes.”

And if art is supposed to make us think, maybe the Rockland 11 has already succeeded. As Mr. Stewart said, how did this art by Rockland artists get everyone hot and bothered about the Bronx? Didn’t more of us come from the Bronx than from the old farms around here that we are all supposed to feel nostalgia for? Are folks so haunted by the specter of the Bronx that they cannot appreciate public paintings that have nothing to do with the Bronx? How did murals become synonymous with the Bronx, anyway?

“I don’t think it really has much to do with the mural at all,” he said. “Somehow this became a lightning rod, a trigger, for all sorts of anxieties about urban and suburban, our feelings about the city. I think it touched something very deep that maybe we need to think a lot more seriously about.”