

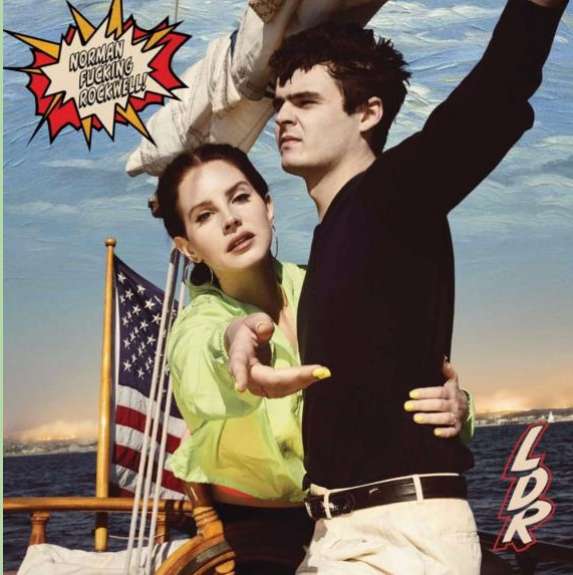
Carson Morgan

morgancr@etsu.edu

Dr. O'Donnell

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	<p>Norman Fucking Rockwell!</p> <p>Artist: Lana Del Rey Released: August 30, 2019 Run Time: 67:38 Tracks: 14 Label: Polydor, Interscope Available on iTunes for \$11.99</p> <p>8.6/10</p>
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The Pursuit of Happiness: Lana Del Rey's *Norman Fucking Rockwell!*

On *Norman Fucking Rockwell!*, the sixth album from singer-songwriter Lana Del Rey, the artist looks into the void at the center of America. With endless empathy and forthright emotion, Del Rey charts a way forward— if we want it.

Lana Del Rey begins the lead single off her sixth album— “Mariners Apartment Complex” from the cleverly titled *Norman Fucking Rockwell!* — with an accusation: “You took my sadness out of context.” Critics of the singer-songwriter cannot help but feel implicated. Since the beginning of her career, Del Rey has been the favored punching bags of critics who lob

accusations of inauthenticity, weepiness, and the perfectly nebulous “derivativeness”. It is difficult to write about Lana Del Rey and not be haunted by the ghost of her less interesting critics. On *Norman Fucking Rockwell!*, Lana determinedly situates herself within her context: the ruin of a burning world.

For Lana Del Rey, there is no option but to look back. “Miss doing nothin’ the most of all/ Hawaii just missed that fireball/ L.A. is in flames, it’s getting hot,” she sings on “The Greatest”, a stand-out on the album’s second half. Del Rey looks on resignedly as she peers through the smog of her Laurel Canyon home, pollution indistinguishable from wildfire smoke, to see a ghost world. *Norman Fucking Rockwell!* does not so much chart a transformation of Lana Del Rey’s artistry or a dissolution of the American Dream, but instead exposes how little has changed in the wake of climate catastrophe and the ascendance of American fascism.



In the music video for “The Greatest”, Lana Del Rey remains dedicated to her kitsch imagery as the world burns in the background.

desert rock-inflicted pop music with trip hop production, still pledges her allegiance to the open road, to Lou Reed and the Beach Boys, to pink flamingos decorating the yards of suburbanites. Her Los Angeles is a land of the living dead. We live on in rote performance of the past.

Though she retired her American flag iconography following Trump’s inauguration, her work remains largely concerned with the same mid-century Americana, equal parts placeless Gothic and winking camp. She still plays the same

Unlike many other artists in our era of neoliberalism and nostalgia, Lana's longing is almost never optimistic. She does not seem to believe a return to old form would free us from the destruction of our time. The quaint pastoralism of Norman Rockwell is intercepted by a deadpan "Fucking". On the titular track, she doesn't fantasize of an idyllic America, but exposes its failures. "Goddamn, manchild," Del Rey coyly opens her record, redressing her man, the "self-loathing poet, resident Laurel Canyon know-it-all". Del Rey's men are never knights-in-shining armor. They are selfish, aggressive, constantly in need of attention. "Cause you're just a man/ It's just what you do/ Your head in your hands/ As you color me blue," Del Rey sings on the same track, in a moment of capitulation. The America of Rockwell never existed, it was only ever propaganda.

Where her pop contemporaries— the Arianas and the Lizzos of the world— would plot out a triumphant escape from these relationships, Del Rey does what the rest of us have to do to get by: she stays with her shitty boyfriend. The album is devoid of a "Fight Song". In a pop landscape of canned "empowerment", Lana Del Rey's music paints a much more troubled image of female subjectivity. If you only listened to the radio, you might be led to believe that we are living in something of a post-feminist future. Yet despite the advances of feminism, life still looks grim for many women.

Feminist theorist and visual artist Audrey Wollen writes, "The sadness of girls should be witnessed and re-historicized as an act of resistance, of political protest [...] Girls' sadness isn't quiet,

Track List:

1. Norman Fucking Rockwell (4:09)
2. Mariners Apartment Complex (4:07)
3. Venice Bitch (9:37)
4. Fuck It I Love You (3:38)
5. Doin' Time (3:22)
6. Love Song (3:49)
7. Cinnamon Girl (5:01)
8. How to Disappear (3:48)
9. California (5:06)
10. The Next Best American Record (5:49)
11. The Greatest (5:00)
12. Bartender (4:23)
13. Happiness is a Butterfly (4:32)
14. Hope is a Dangerous Thing for a Woman Like Me to Have (But I Have It) (5:24)

weak, shameful, or dumb: It is active, autonomous, and articulate. It's a way of fighting back." As young women are told to empower themselves through personal choice rather than collective action, to maximize production, to "lean in" as Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg instructs, expressing discontent in a public forum can be a way of opting out of the endless trudge of cruel optimism and capitalist production. Del Rey is the latest lachrymose warrior in the apathetic battle for sad girls. Del Rey joins the pantheon of embattled femininity dating back to the tragic victims of antiquity— Echo, Persephone, Eurydice— to the Old Hollywood melodrama of Judy Garland to the crooning angst of Fiona Apple. Her music, descended from a long lineage of sad girls, captures the melancholy of girlhood in our deeply atomized age, of being the Echo to an endless line of Narcissuses.

Echoes are not merely repetitions, however, but also distortions confronting us with the hollow ring of our own words. When Lana sings of "candles in the wind," of "crimson and clover, over and over," she does more than just copy pop music of the 60s and 70s. She holds up a mirror to America, its image growing more and more distorted with each stray quotation and clipped image. On what might be her magnum opus, "Venice Bitch", the nine-and-a-half-minute psychedelic refraction of the two preceding tracks of the album, the America of yesteryear is not one of homespun comforts, but strange and alien. Her repetitions spiral out of control into a kaleidoscopic image of brokenness and beauty.

Elsewhere, she is empathetic to a fault. In "Mariner's Apartment Complex," Del Rey assumes the position of her impotent lover, loftily calling out from the sea: "I'm your man." He can only be assured of her love when he sees himself reflected back. In her hands, even the insufferable ska of Sublime sounds affecting. In Del Rey's cover of the band's 1996 song "Doin' Time", their SoCal scumbag lyrics are met with an earnest love for the seedy and sunny kitsch of

California. Where the original plays out with a measured and often misogynistic apathy, the sincerity of Del Rey's version registers more as a genuinely cool indifference. In her rendition, she imagines herself in the position of her lover, violent as he may be ("I'd like to hold her head underwater"). Again, on "Happiness is a Butterfly," she flirts with danger, empathizing melodramatically with yet another unscrupulous man ("If he's a serial killer, then what's the worst/ That can happen to a girl who's already hurt").

Though the fourteen-track album lags during the middle, particularly during tracks like "Love Song" and "How to Disappear", it quickly picks up with "California", "The Next Best American Record", and the album's closer, "Hope is a Dangerous Thing for a Woman Like Me to Have (But I Have It)". If it were cut down to its bare essentials, the 67-minute album could run about 10 minutes shorter. The album transitions smoothly from one track to the next, however, and even when it falls on its more mediocre tracks, it feels like an aimless stroll through Lana's empty America.

"They write that I'm happy, they know that I'm not,/ But at best they can see I'm not sad," she laments on the album's closer, "Hope is a Dangerous Thing for a Woman Like Me to Have". Despite what critics suggest, Lana has not yet found peace. She has not turned over a new leaf. She is an artist dedicated to fine-tuning the themes she has always been working with. But maybe the pursuit of happiness was never her mission. She asks us to slow down on our endless drive toward mindless happiness, to take stock of the ruin we find ourselves in, and embrace our negative emotions to empathize with others as an agent of collective power.

If you think Lana Del Rey sounds like a broken record, you might just finally be catching up to her intentions. On *Norman Fucking Rockwell!*, Lana Del Rey does not stray far from her formula of 70s-inspired indie pop. Instead, she digs further into her mythos, displacing her

identity through the images of American kitsch to ambiently survey the hollowness of the American Dream. *NFR!* demonstrates the potential of pop music during the fall of an empire. Hope might be a dangerous thing to have in these times, but by some stroke of luck, Lana Del Rey still has it.