

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: A WORKER'S PERSPECTIVE**

Through my own personal experiences I have found that the personalities and facial expressions of working class individuals offer an exciting perspective into portraiture. As a manual labor worker myself, I have felt the physical and emotional challenges that many of these workers experience in their daily routines. Also, through the workers closest to me, I have gained a deeper understanding of the lifestyle, dedication, and the spiritual characteristics that each of them embody. My intention in my own work is to rediscover the human spirit of the working class that is so often overlooked.

To genuinely represent the working class I rely upon my personal relationship with each individual that I paint. By developing an emotional connection between myself and those I portray I achieve a deeper understanding of not only their facial expressions, but also the spirit behind their expression. To further understand the concepts of human expression in portraiture I will examine the emotional and social roles of the workers both close to me, and in a historical context. As I search for the subject matter of the workman I look toward historical references such as Gustave Courbet or the overall movement of social realism. However, my main influences extend beyond the subject matter that I intend to represent.

I find that the most important influences that help me to gain a stronger perception of portraiture include: Leon Golub for his emphasis on representing issues prevalent to American society and for his scraping processes, Vincent Van Gogh for his early work and profound urge to represent the peasants he adored, and Kathe Kollwitz for the emotional impact she achieved through her representation of the human figure. Although

there are differences between them, each artist has provided a foundation for me to build upon both physically in my process and conceptually in my concepts. By understanding how human expression has been represented in fine art of the past I can better understand my own responsibilities within my body of work.

In my paintings I also convey the rugged responsibility that these individuals bear to provide for their families, and the ways in which they have laid the foundations for our American way of life. These characteristics are accomplished through both my physical working process and the psychological understanding of the workingman's social roles.

Physically, as an oil painter, I have found that the techniques of scraping the paint into and out of the canvas allow for the rugged and tattered feel that these workers embody. I work primarily without a brush using palette knives or any other tool capable of scraping and degrading the canvas surface. As I have grown to understand my process better I have also become aware of how to better treat the paint in relation to the expressions I represent. By using both painting and drawing within my work I chose to bring as much clarity as possible to the spirit of each worker I represent.

Conceptually, representing the archetypal worker helps to rediscover the spirit of social realism that has been overlooked in both the world of sensual painting and in our own society. However, to capture the more personal human spirit of the laborer I chose to represent the workers who have made an impact on my life. These workers that I have worked alongside, of which are all men, provide me with a personal subject matter. For this reason I can relate my work to what is most important to me: depicting the heroes in my life who I believe preserve our society and deserve our recognition.

To justly recognize the spirit and expressions of the working class I will also examine their roles both socially and economically. When something important is overlooked in society, fine art has the responsibility to direct the community's attention toward those significant subjects. In my experience the human spirit of the working class is something that I have both lived and must make aware to the public. While what is beautiful in art is defined in many ways, there is a unique beauty found in the lifestyle and expressions of the working class. This also brings attention to the fact that through an unusual perspective on a specific subject, in this case the worker, one can achieve a degree of social importance.

As I examine my influences, my working process and the social importance of fine art I will provide insight into a more contemporary portraiture. However, it is my experiences that have shaped my sense of responsibility to aesthetically depict and psychologically represent the manual workers closest to me. By choosing to represent an emotional kaleidoscope of each of my subjects I can justly provide the strongest representation possible due to the many dimensions of the working individual. Ultimately, as my work progresses I strive for my portraits to embody the human spirit and emotional facets of the worker's reality that many do not understand.

## **CHAPTER 2: INSPIRATION AND CONCEPTS**

Over the past few years my work has developed in conjunction with events that have deeply affected me. Many artists draw upon emotions, phases, or hardships they have experienced to challenge their own subject matter and working process. In my own experience I have relied upon a variety of manual labor jobs to support my education. It was only a matter of time before my job and my painting began to conflict.

In the summer of 2010 I was enrolled to complete a painting research course. However, like many of my summers, I was working a construction job between fifty and sixty hours a week. As I came to this crossroads, I was overwhelmed by the time constraints between my painting and my labor. This challenge; however, turned out to be the breakthrough in my life as an artist.

My inspiration came from my labor. I began organizing my thoughts and ambitions for the summer by describing how my job affected me and how I could depict my emotions. My summer job brought words like sweat, heat, straining, and exhaustion to my mind. This list of characteristics helped me narrow down my subject matter to the flesh and mind of a worker and their struggles.

In the summer heat my co-workers' forms, figures, and expressions also became imprinted in my mind. My previous passion for portraiture began to follow a new path. Through those laborers, I found personality in their expressions that I had not seen before. These expressions were not merely based upon proportions or values; they embodied the reality of our daily lives.

Initially, my course that summer primarily dealt with the research of various artists, techniques, and my own experimentation in my work. Over time my ambitions for the class took on a new aspect. As my job began to correlate with my painting, I began to research the faces of those around me rather than the artwork of the artists I was once inspired by. I followed this pursuit by taking photographs at the jobsite and sketching portraits during lunch breaks. However, the most inspiring aspect to my research was asking my co-workers questions about themselves and developing relationships with them.

In portraiture, I firmly believe that to truly represent someone there must be a personal relationship. In my body of work I have made it a requirement for myself to meet and talk with any of the workers that I paint. This allows me to truly understand them as people, rather than just another face that can be painted. This deeper understanding gives an artist insight into the emotional kaleidoscope each worker possesses. I have found that each worker portrays this kaleidoscope, or array of emotions that is potentially overlooked if the artist relies solely upon a photograph rather than on a relationship. Overall, my experiences in working manual labor for the past four years have helped me to understand the personalities, lifestyle, and responsibilities of the working class.

To further pursue my passion for working class portraits I have also observed the emotional and social role of the worker, both close to me, and in a historical context. Historically, the themes of social imbalance and neglect have been recurring in the art world for centuries. As I began to research a historical understanding of working class portraiture, I was inspired by the work and writing of French painter, Gustave Courbet.

One of the most powerful examples of working class imagery is found in one of Courbet's letters, in which he remarks,

There is an old man of seventy, bent over his work, pick in the air, skin burnt by the sun, his head in the shade of a straw hat; his trousers of rough cloth are patched all over; he wears, inside cracked wooden clogs, stockings which were once blue, with heels showing through. Here's a young man with his head covered in dust, his skin grayish-brown; his disgusting shirt, all in rags, exposes his arms and flanks; leather braces hold up what is left of a pair of trousers, and his muddy leather shoes are gaping sadly in many places. The old man is on his knees, the young man is behind him, standing up, carrying a basket of stones with energy. Alas, in this occupation you begin like one and end like the other!<sup>1</sup>

As I reflected upon this passage I found it quite powerful knowing the social implications behind Courbet's subject matter. During this time period there was great dissention amongst the social classes in France. As a painter Courbet believed that it was his responsibility to inform the bourgeoisie of the toil of the working class. In this passage he was describing his own painting, "The Stone-breakers" (fig. 1).



Figure 1. "The Stonebreakers"

From this example I discerned that, like Courbet, I wanted to bring social awareness to the lifestyle and realities of the working class. This awareness, which

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<sup>1</sup> Clark, T.J. *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1973. 30.

started in Europe, has been practiced and sharpened in the mind of the American artist for many years. This can be seen specifically in social realism and the subject matter dedicated to representing those people neglected by the upper class.

The movement of social realism, primarily in the 1930's, reflected a social unrest within American society. Artists began to question their government and socio-economic realities resulting from the American Depression. This unrest was depicted in a variety of ways within their art. Some social realist painters, such as Thomas Hart



Figure 2. "Mine Disaster"

Benton, used satire and heritage to convey the plight of the average American. Other artists, such as photographer Dorothea Lange, used expression and social imagery as an approach to conveying the nation's economic depression. In my own

study of social realism the paintings of Philip Evergood gave me the deepest insights into the realities of the working class. In his painting, "Mine Disaster," one experiences an adamant cry for social awareness (fig 2). As seen in the

detail below, the entire piece can essentially be characterized by the expression on the miner's face (fig. 3).

This demonstrated to me the power of facial expression as a means to achieve a greater impact upon the viewer.

While there were many artists associated with the movement of social realism, I believe the most successful



Figure 3. Detail

artists imprinted the spirit of the working class upon the awareness of society through the use of facial expression.

These issues of the past have once again been made relevant to the art world today due to our country's present recession. Overall, my portraits aspire to create an awareness for the American working class that is often overlooked in our daily lives. By using my own personal experiences, knowledge of portraiture, and art movements of the past I am painting portraits in pursuit of a more contemporary social realism.

### CHAPTER 3: TODAY'S SOCIAL REALITY

As I became inspired by the relationships I developed with various workers, my work in the studio showed considerable progress. My work began with representing the concept of the working class, but was continually evolving into a more personal relationship between the worker, my painting, and myself. This however challenged me to take a further step into understanding the subject matter I was presenting.

Art movements tend to coincide with current events in any culture. I find that just as social realism questioned American social structure during the Depression, today's recession is an open call for artists to provide a social dialogue within their work. In his study on themes in American painting Robert Henkes wrote, "As long as America has social problems the artist will be there to record those problems in hopes of promoting a solution."<sup>2</sup> My own work emphasizes the expressions of the working class and challenges the viewer to relate and interact with someone that they may normally overlook. However, due to my subject matter and our nation's current recession, I needed to inform myself about how society is reacting to the roles of the upper, middle, and lower class; and especially the role of the worker.

In American society today there is very little concern over the wealth distribution amongst the upper, middle and lower class. This can be seen in the response of Dr. William Domhoff to a study done by Norton & Ariely, 2010. Domhoff states,

A remarkable study reveals that Americans have no idea that the wealth distribution is as concentrated as it is. When shown three pie charts representing

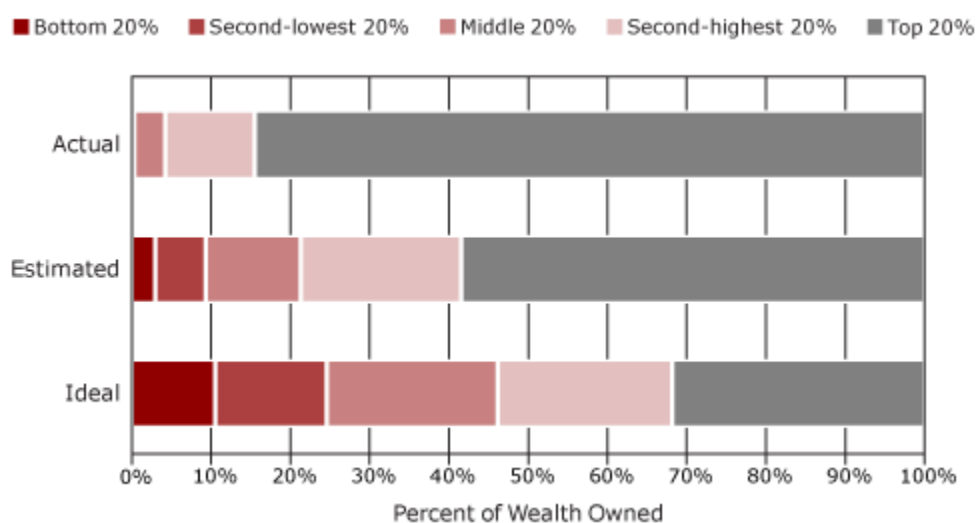
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<sup>2</sup> Henkes, Robert. *Themes in American Painting: A Reference Work to Common Styles and Genres*. Jefferson: MacFarland & Company, 1993. 208.

possible wealth distributions, 90% or more of the 5,522 respondents – whatever their gender, age, income level, or party affiliation – thought that the American wealth distribution most resembled one in which the top 20% has about 60% of the wealth. In fact, of course, the top 20% control about 85% of the wealth. Even more striking, they did not come close on the amount of wealth held by the bottom 40% of the population...which hold just .3% of the wealth in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

This study on America's awareness (fig. 4) demonstrates the obvious disparity prevalent amongst those in the lower class, many of whom are manual labor workers.

Figure 4:



Note: In the "Actual" line, the bottom two quintiles are not visible because the lowest quintile owns just 0.1% of all wealth, and the second-lowest quintile owns 0.2%. Source: Norton & Ariely, 2010.

As artists it is our responsibility to not only become aware of instances such as this, but to make others aware through our art. Another resource that inspired me to represent the

<sup>3</sup> Domhoff, William G. *Who Rules America? - Power in America: Wealth, Income, and Power*. 2011.

social reality of the working class was found in a study of statistics released by the U.S. Department of Labor. Aside from agricultural work, “Four of the most dangerous jobs are held by those involved in sheltering us from the elements. Loggers came in second place, iron and steel workers fourth, roofers fifth and construction laborers 10th.”<sup>4</sup> These statistics show just how much respect we owe to workers that provide an invaluable framework for our country.

In my paintings, I feel obligated to represent those individuals whom I know. Workers have been lost in the eye of the public, media, and also the government. To express my own concerns over this matter I have chosen to acknowledge the working class from a specific standpoint. While my paintings are meant to raise awareness for the working class, my work is not meant to represent these laborers through tragedies or as martyrs. I have chosen to make society aware of their presence through what can have the greatest visual and emotional affect upon the viewer: expression.

Through understanding my subject matter from an economic standpoint I acquired a foundation for my own perspective on today’s social realities. From an aesthetic standpoint I am trying to put a more contemporary spin on social realism. By abstracting, fragmenting, roughing up, and distorting workers from today’s society within my work I convey the message of reality from a contemporary perspective. I find that this artistic decision to paint laborers runs parallel to the motivations of many social realists of the 1930’s. My main ambition now is to capture this current reality that exists in the lives of working class America by using expression as a venue. Overall, in the field of painting a handful of artists have affected my work deeply through their use of expression.

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<sup>4</sup> Dunn, Christopher. “The Most Dangerous Jobs Vitrally Important for Modern Society.” *The Collegiate Times*, 2011.

## **CHAPTER 4: INFLUENTIAL ARTISTS & THE RESILIENCE OF EXPRESSION**

Through studying my role as an artist, in relation to my commitment to the working class, I have become interested in the work and experiences of particular artists. It seems to me that each of the artists I find inspiration from, Vincent Van Gogh, Kathe Kollwitz, and Leon Golub, all build from the experiences of psychological and internal unrest. Their personal burdens are reflected in their choice of subject matter, and to solve their issues with humanity they often rely on human expression to provide answers.

The work of Vincent Van Gogh challenges both one's aesthetic experience in relation to his paintings and one's psychological capabilities to relate to his subject matter. To Van Gogh his painting process was not just an expression of himself, it was a religion. In studying his earlier works, I have found that his experiences and relationships to the working class provide an important resource for my own ambitions as a painter.

As a young painter Van Gogh related to certain personalities within society. He found inspiration through his experiences with people of the lower working class. Van Gogh lived amongst the miners in Belgium for a number of years, and later he shared experiences with the textile weavers and seamstresses in Nuenen, a rural Dutch province of Brabant. His choice of subject matter was not merely contrived of his visual interest, but it extended into his personal experiences while living amongst the lower class laborers.

In his decision to paint the laborer, Van Gogh went so far as to enter and work amongst the miners in Belgium. 'Being a laborer,' he wrote, 'I feel at home in the

laboring class...”<sup>5</sup> Through studying his letters one finds that he was more comfortable in the dirty environment of the mines rather than amongst his relatives in the city banks.

One sees this passion and dedication to his newfound lifestyle in his painting, “The Potato Eaters,” (fig. 5). In this piece one views a reflection of the family-life and hardships that Van Gogh’s compatriots experienced



Figure 5. “The Potato Eaters”

on a daily basis. This painting, amongst many others, provides a depiction of working class individuals and reflects the burdens that Van Gogh chose to experience himself in order to strengthen his paintings.

Looking further into Van Gogh’s early work provides a sense of more than just a relationship to his subject matter. Van Gogh offers a new perspective on what constitutes beauty within a work of art. In a study on Van Gogh, Albert Lubin states, “He found these human hearts in the ‘simple Brabant types.’ – the poor, malnourished peasants who tilled the soil worked its looms and spinning wheels, and lived in its dark huts. They were not beautiful or handsome people, perhaps due to long hours of work and poor diets, and their faces showed signs of suffering. On viewing the face of a dead friend, he remarked, ‘Oh! It was so beautiful; to me it was characteristic of all the peculiar charm of

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<sup>5</sup> Lubin, Albert J. *Stranger on Earth: A Psychological Biography of Vincent Van Gogh*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972. 60.

the country and the life of the Brabant people.”<sup>6</sup> To Van Gogh the working class individual was a source of beauty where others saw ugliness. Van Gogh focused on painting the workers as he saw them, weary and filthy from their daily work, and in this he captured their true spirit and character. This concept of beauty from a different perspective was a central theme in Van Gogh’s paintings for the rest of his life.

While Van Gogh painted the workers and peasants to reaffirm the somber reality of his own social demeanor he also painted them to emphasize the injustices in class structure. Overall, his passion for the working class, his relationship to them, and his perception of beauty are all characteristics that I have attempted to employ in my own work. However, while I share this responsibility to emphasize society’s neglect of the working class individual I hope to positively depict the worker’s roles and responsibilities rather than represent them for the sake of demonstrating today’s somber realities.

The work of Kathe Kollwitz also depicts an intimate relationship to her subject matter, as well as her desire to raise awareness through both tragedy and reverence. Much of Kollwitz’s drawings and etchings revolve around the concept of a mother’s relationship to her youth in German society. Kollwitz was an active artist during the World Wars and the German recession. Her work was deeply affected by WWI as a result of her son being killed in action. Her passion for raising social awareness is also evident when considering her experiences with the tragedies of war and the plight of the working class. In her personal memoir, *Diary and Letters*, Kollwitz’s artistic resolve was often challenged by her intimate relationship to her subject matter. Hans Kollwitz stated of his mother, “She constantly swung between long periods of depression and inability to

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<sup>6</sup> Lubin, Albert J. *Stranger on Earth: A Psychological Biography of Vincent Van Gogh*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972. 34.

work and the much shorter periods when she felt that she was making progress in her work and mastering her task.”<sup>7</sup> Kollwitz’s struggles to justly represent her subject matter provided her with more integrity within her pieces.

In my study of Kollwitz I have also found that her struggle to create successful work relates similarities in lifestyles of the worker and the artist. As an artist one may go through long laborious periods when his or her work seems futile and stagnant. To a manual labor worker, his or her job can seem consistently repetitive and they may feel this internal struggle in their day-to-day, week-to-week, and even year-to-year routine. The concept of determination to overcome a stagnant condition is central in the lifestyle of a worker and in Kollwitz’s work. I believe that every individual goes through these periods of withdrawal from passion and a sense of purpose in their lives. Kollwitz makes one aware of this social and emotional dilemma and begins to point the viewer toward the human spirit of the individual as an escape from stagnation.

In her etching “Plowman” (fig. 6), she conveys a message of determination within



Figure 6. “Plowman”

the spirit of the working class. As one views this piece they must understand that to “toil the fields” may initially seem like any other profession; however, when one gets no recognition from society, their peers, or even

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<sup>7</sup> Kollwitz, Hans and Kathe Kollwitz.. *Diary and Letters of Kathe Kollwitz*. London: Northwestern UP, 1989. 7.

their family it weighs upon their spirit. Her work pointed toward determination as a way to transcend the recession and wars in Germany. Reflecting on her interest in the spirit of the working class Kollwitz wrote, “my real motive for choosing my subjects almost exclusively from the life of the workers was that only such subjects gave me in a simple and unqualified way what I felt to be beautiful. For me the Königsberg longshoremen had beauty; the Polish jimmies on their grain ships had beauty; the broad freedom of movement in the gestures of the common people had beauty. Middle class people held no appeal for me at all.”<sup>8</sup> For her to capture this beauty and determination Kollwitz used the facial and gestural expression of each individual.

To heighten the emotional impact of her work Kollwitz often relied upon expression to capture her audience. This can be seen in her etching, “The Weavers Revolt,” (fig. 7). This piece



Figure 7. “The Weavers Revolt”

uses both facial expression and body posture to create an understanding of the German working class. This etching also shows how Kollwitz often relied upon expression, rather than proportion, to create a more emotional piece. The strength of her work was in its emotional impact, which Kollwitz would strive to emphasize no matter what her choice of medium.

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<sup>8</sup> Kollwitz, Hans and Käthe Kollwitz. *Diary and Letters of Käthe Kollwitz*. London: Northwestern UP, 1989. 43.



Figure 8. "Help Russia"

I would describe Kollwitz as a master of expression. Her involvement in painting, etching, drawing and sculpture all radiate the emotional impact she discovered through expression. Her sense of mark and rendering of visual

information are seen in her lithograph "Help Russia" (fig. 8). The emotional qualities in this work are characterized by her expressive use of linear drawing.

Overall, by understanding the work of Kollwitz, I am challenged to develop an intimate relationship with my subject matter in order to provide more integrity within my own work. I also have found that her reliance upon depicting facial and gestural expression despite, at times, neglecting proportion is a successful way to achieve a greater emotional impact. To further pursue a greater emotional impact in my paintings I have studied the work of Leon Golub. Golub, who I find to be my greatest influence, exhibits a heightened sense of emotion and awareness in his paintings through the psychological and physical choices within his work.

In the case of Leon Golub one finds a deeper sense of expression within his representations of individuals. Golub found that by studying the work of the past, specifically classicism, he could develop an understanding of how to represent humanity in his present context. His painting, "Fallen Warrior" (fig. 9), provides an example of

how his perception of classicism was redefined. By reinventing the concept of the classically idealized individual Golub breathes a more human perspective into the statues of old. Just as existentialism brought new meaning to the art world, Golub's work brought new meaning to the mindset of Classicism. In his response to Golub's work Donald Kuspit stated, "In Golub, the classical sense of man's irreducible presence and dignity stands in unconscious relationship to the sense of inadequacy and 'absence' from the self revealed in modern man's unstable and uncertain relationship to his body, his ambiguous, even violent conception of it."<sup>9</sup>

Through studying his work it is evident that Golub is not merely casting the classical form in a new light. Rather, he is shifting the ideal of what classicism embodied. The classical figure portrayed heroism, idealized beauty, and a narrative for perfection. Golub uses the pedestal which classicism created for the human figure and brings it into our world: today's reality. By emphasizing humanity's most primitive natures such as violence and unrest, Golub alters the classical form to represent the deep natures within ourselves. This in turn creates a dialogue for self-reflection and what human nature truly embodies: not perfection, but unrest.

My own work responds to Golub's reinvention of Classicism in relation to existentialist ideals. Just as Golub's paintings depicted a re-interpretation of classicism, my own work is intended to reinterpret a different movement in social realism. The



Figure 9. "Fallen Warrior"

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<sup>9</sup> Kuspit, Donald B. *Leon Golub, Existential/Activist Painter*. New York: Rutgers UP, 1985. 15.

movement of social realism is prevalent in our current society, both socially and artistically. Social realism embodied an interest in the working class that is often overlooked in recent artistic subject matter. Historically one can compare art movements to social change because they coincide. In my own work I am not necessarily reforming a movement, as Golub did with Classicism; rather, I am re-establishing the movement of social realism in a more contemporary context. Just as Golub called for self-realization within his work, my paintings invite a realization for the forgotten individuals within our society. With this realization the viewer must experience self reflection, just as Golub achieved, in accordance to his or her won awareness and roles within society.

By suggesting that our society neglects many who contribute towards its existence another aspect of humanity is emphasized. Our disengagement with the working class has created a false appreciation of who keeps our country intact. Too often, governing officials and corporate factions are held in esteem, yet the American blue-collar worker is not characterized as heroic. Golub was existentialist and later activist. By interacting with social and political issues he assumed the role of an activist painter. My work was initially created simply to use the working class as a basis for expression in portraiture. However, through the relationships I built, my experience in labor, and my evolving awareness my portraits have become a dialogue not just for expression, but for social heroism. This may be achieved through a heightened relationship between my paintings and the viewer.

To achieve the greatest emotional impact possible Golub used a variety of methods within his working process and artistic decisions. These decisions include his use of scale, expression, and texture. As his work transitioned with current political and

social issues Golub chose to represent the victims and soldiers involved in Vietnam. He further pursued the concept of making society aware of concealed issues when he pursued a series of paintings on torture victims in America and abroad.

In Golub's compositions one is forced to interact with the figures represented. This interaction is achieved through the scale of the figures and also the composition of the figures in relation to the canvas. Golub's figures were often ten feet tall. This massive scale was also accompanied by their sole authority in the canvas. Golub primarily represented his figures in relation to each other rather than an environment or a setting. This can be seen in his painting, "Interrogation I" (fig. 10). The lack of depth in his paintings creates an interaction between the audience and the figures that is rarely achieved. In terms of my own use of scale I do not rely upon the scale of the canvas to engulf the viewer. Rather, I rely upon the scale of the figures and their compositional dominance within the canvas to shift the viewer's attention to their reality rather than a setting or a place. By being forced to acknowledge the worker's expression and spirit, through the scale of the portrait, the viewer experiences an enhanced interaction between themselves and the worker.

Another important artistic decision that Golub achieved in his work was his use of texture. Golub used knives, cleavers, and scraping tools to achieve a rough surface and a greater sense of disturbance in his figures. In an interaction with



Figure 10. "Interrogation I"

Golub's work Jon Bird states, "The scraped, distressed surfaces strip his subjects of affectivity and depth; they are captured in performative enactments of attitude, gesture, and facial expression which image power as a masquerade of identity."<sup>10</sup> As one sees in figure 10 there is a relationship between expression and texture achieved through Golub's process. By eliminating brushwork there is a more intimidating experience when one views Golub's work.

Aside from sharing his interest in scraping and distressing the canvas, I was intrigued by how Golub chose his subjects. I found that Golub's initial sources came from materials such as "photographs, torn and cut-out magazine pages, and Xeroxes."<sup>11</sup> These choices, which suited Golub's subject matter, were not consistent with my own process. In my paintings I believe in the importance of knowing and building relationships with the individuals I represent, while Golub did not emphasize this. I believe this is a significant difference in portraying a political or a more personal painting.

Overall, Leon Golub, Kathe Kollwitz, and Vincent Van Gogh provided me with different examples of how to capture an awareness of society. While their choices of media and methodology were different each artist used expression through representing the face, form and gesture to achieve an emotional connection to the observer. In my own process I have made adjustments in accordance to certain ideals and techniques that each of these artists have demonstrated.

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<sup>10</sup> Bird, Jon. *Leon Golub: Echoes of the Real*. London: Reaktion, 2000. 85.

<sup>11</sup> Cadava, Eduardo; Littman, Brett. *Leon Golub: Live and Die Like a Lion*. New York: The Drawing Center, 2010. 21.

## CHAPTER 5: THE PROCESS OF A WORKER

My own working processes took shape after both research and experimentation. When I first became inspired to paint my co-workers I was most concerned with how to depict a worker's flesh. This interest came from examining my own hands and those of my co-workers. Many times we would not wear gloves during construction and our hands would become worn and bloody, essentially taking on different colors and textures. This led me to my first experiments in which I attempted to capture the torn flesh of a manual labor worker through a variety of materials and mixtures.

My early experiments were based upon photographs and sketches of my hands, and my coworkers' hands, after a day's work. In deciding upon what type of surface to paint on, I chose to use Euca board, a hard-board that is 1/8 of an inch thick. The Euca board allowed me to use materials that would otherwise damage or tear a canvas.

My first series of Euca board experiments were conducted on six two by two foot boards. After applying gesso to the boards I chose to use a variety of materials within my mixtures including: spray paints, filter sand, play sand, cements, and formulated vermiculite. Many of these materials were used on the job site and provided me with an enhanced connection between my manual labor and my paintings. I also chose to apply each of these materials, mixed with oil and acrylic paints, in an attempt to create the textures and colors of a workers flesh.

In my series of six test boards I found that many of my sand and cement materials were not compatible with my paints. Despite using a variety of mixtures including stand oils, linseed oil, and liquin, the materials would not combine with the oil paint. I

therefore decided to mix the materials, primarily the vermiculite, with acrylic paint and then layer washes of oil paints over the surface. This is seen in one of my test boards (fig. 11). After this series I chose to pursue formulated vermiculite as the primary material that would depict the flesh of a worker.



Figure 11. "Vermiculite Test"

Formulated vermiculite is a water soluble mineral that is used for gardening, but it is also mixed with cement when used for construction. I had the opportunity to work with this material during my summer job and found that it had a texture that would complement my paint effectively. I used the vermiculite in two of my tiles, but still struggled to control it. The vermiculite did mix with the acrylic; however, it would bunch in certain places. At that point in my experimentation I was hoping to incorporate additional oil paints to achieve a broader palette and a more painterly rendering of the flesh. I tested the mixture with water based oil paints and even used a damar varnish to create better layering of the vermiculite. However, my experiments and methods using the oils and vermiculite would not properly adhere to the board, or be controlled. After experimenting with both oil and acrylic mixtures on these two foot test boards I concluded that to achieve a better understanding of the working class I needed to take a more representational perspective.

As I thought of additional ways to emphasize a worker's reality through a workman's process I began to research various artists that dealt with the same subject matter. I became interested in the form and gesture of my co-workers on the jobsite and during breaks. This inspiration became solidified when I researched the work of Leon Golub, who achieved a commanding presence in his figures. Golub also used a scraping process that complemented my own purposes. The more I studied Golub and his work, the more I became familiar with the physicality of using palette knives and the effort it takes to accomplish a working process similar to his own. I therefore decided to primarily pursue the techniques and process that Golub had laid forth to complement my own purpose of achieving the physical hardships and realities of a manual labor worker.

As my work progressed I decided to use canvas, just as Golub had, instead of using Euca board as my surface. This provided me with more surface texture in which I could scrape the paint into and out of the canvas thread. I also chose to eliminate the vermiculite and use solely oil paints. Golub chose to use acrylics, but my choice to use oils would allow me to have a broader pallet just as I had seen in the flesh of other figurative artists such as Lucian Freud or Jenny Seville. I began my newfound process by

draping large canvas on the wall with nails. These paintings, which I draped in a similar process to Golub's, were 4 X 8 feet each. This scale was something that I



Figure 12 "Untitled"



Figure 13. "Dave"

was not accustomed to and required me to stretch both my drawing and painting abilities.

In one of my first large scale paintings I chose to use photographs and sketches as a basic foundation for my images. These photos were taken from my jobsite and each captured a certain worker. I chose to take a variety of photographs depicting different angles of the worker and his environment to achieve multiple perspectives from which to work. This is seen in comparing the photograph (fig. 12) and my painting, “Dave” (fig. 13).

My working process in this painting started with charcoal sticks and brushes to create a sketch from which I could work. I then built my images up primarily by using palette knives. The constant scraping and sculpting of the flesh seemed to be exactly the physical process I wanted to be involved in. Due to the scale I was also forced to use larger knives and even a ladder. In this painting I also chose to begin integrating items in my composition such as tools and a gas can. These choices allowed me to create an explicit and obvious depiction of my co-workers as laborers. I decided to place a heightened emphasis on the texture of the painting. The worn and tattered surface achieved through the use of palette knives became a vital tool for me to render the flesh and attire of the worker.

As I began to paint more of my co-workers I became more confident in my working process. I began to experiment with a broader color palette and a variety of oil glazes. I gained a better understanding of how to treat the surface of my work with a diluted oil mixture glazed over the surface of the painting multiple times and at multiple stages. I created these layers using both wet on wet techniques or waiting for the painting to dry completely before applying my solutions. I developed a mixture of  $\frac{1}{4}$  linseed oil,



Figure 14. "Workman's Toil"

$\frac{1}{4}$  stand oil, and  $\frac{1}{2}$  mineral spirits.

This allowed me to have a more spontaneous affect in the final layers of my painting, rather than the stucco affect I achieved in my early work. I also became aware of the emphasis a light source could place upon the

individual I was representing. The new oil mixtures and light source can be seen in my painting, "Workman's Toil," (fig. 14). The introduction of a strong light source and thin layers of oil paints became a central quality within my body of work from this stage on.

Through the use of scraping, layering and mixing I achieved a textured surface that represented my understanding of a laborer's physical exertion. However, I was still unhappy with the lack of emotional impact my paintings were achieving. I began to search for different methods and perspectives for me to represent those workers closest to me.

## CHAPTER 6: EVOLUTION OF MY PAINTINGS

The spirit of the working class continued to evolve in my paintings. Although I was satisfied with my working process, I still desired to achieve a stronger connection between my paintings and the viewer. To establish this connection I pursued different compositional devices within my work.

Unlike my early work I sought new compositional possibilities to heighten the emotional impact of my paintings. I began to impose a large face of the specific worker I was representing over a pre-existing scene of their work environment or setting. This emphasis on facial expression in relation to work environment also allowed me to play with moments in time or space.

This play on different moments engages the viewer more interactively because the information presented and explicit connection to the subject's working context is not as obvious as my previous



Figure 15. "The Tool-Man"

compositions. This technique can be seen in my painting, "The Tool-Man" (fig. 15).

In this painting there were a variety of new techniques I used to achieve more interest within the composition. I chose to use tools in the background to give visual aid to the perception that these are workers I am representing. I also used a wider range of tones within a monochromatic palette to create more depth in the painting. Aside from the use of items and symbols to emphasize the workers' roles I also created a stronger

narrative within the paintings. This narrative was achieved by imposing a larger than life face in the foreground of the painting. The emphasis on expression invites the viewer to acknowledge the worker more than any other part in the painting. I decided to pursue this perspective of heightened expression in my paintings from that point forward.

In my next series of paintings I continued with my concept of imposing a face upon a pre-existing scene. In “Miller Time,” (fig. 16), I used my sketches, photographs, and relationships with co-workers as a point of departure. The original painting was of two workers smoking at twilight: a common ritual during break time. To integrate a feeling I used facial expression. In this painting Dave, whom I chose to represent, always smiled around dusk when he could have a 40ounce beer after a long days work. While I still incorporated my process of scraping, integration of a light source, and wider



Figure 16. “Miller Time”

range of color, all of these elements played a secondary role to the expression upon Dave’s face.

The way I treated the expression also

provided the viewer with more visual interest. In “Miller Time” there is a degree of mystery that I achieved through how I represented and fragmented Dave’s face. By representing certain features and leaving others unfinished there are intriguing elements created in the composition. Through representing facial expressions from an unfinished perspective I began to engage the viewer on a deeper level.

This idea of leaving specific information for the viewer to decipher and interact with is seen in Philip Evergood's piece, "North River Jungle" (fig. 17). In this drawing Evergood chooses specific information to emphasize and other information to leave vague. This method therefore allows the viewer to fill in certain information themselves, while still being impacted by the central role of expression in this drawing. In my own work I have adopted the theme of leaving the viewer responsible for certain information. However, as my work has continued to evolve, I have chosen to integrate a variety of drawing and painting techniques to enhance the emotional impact within my paintings.



Figure 17. "North River Jungle"

## CHAPTER 7: AESTHETIC DECISIONS: DRAWING AND PAINTING

As I began to introduce various drawing and painting techniques within my work I found a route to achieving a more contemporary perception of social realism. My paintings became more visually captivating when I introduced a mixture of both my scraping process and expressive lines. Initially, I was inspired by the late work of Leon Golub as he integrated multiple dimensions of design within his work.

Golub's late work incorporated different themes as he began to deal with his own perception of reality and death.

This new perspective can be seen in his painting, "Aging Golden Sphinx" (fig. 18). As Golub's work became more personal he became less interested in the medium he was using and more interested in the mood he was reflecting. Golub chose to



Figure 18 "Aging Golden Sphinx"

incorporate drawing, staining, and other techniques in addition to his traditional scraping process. In response to Golub's late work Eduardo Cadava stated, "Golub illuminates the paradox of paintings that can be drawings and of drawings that can be paintings."<sup>12</sup> This allowed his work to evolve while still bringing important issues to the attention of the viewer.

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<sup>12</sup> Cadava, Eduardo; Littman, Brett. *Leon Golub: Live and Die Like a Lion*. New York, The Drawing Center, 2010. 70.

As I reflected on Golub's late work I began to understand the benefit to using multiple resources and techniques to increase the visual and emotional impact of the workers I was representing. The expressiveness in the line-work of artists such as Kathe Kollwitz and Philip Evergood portrayed an energy that I wanted my portraits to possess. This can be seen in my painting, "Vince" (fig. 19). In this painting I chose to initially start with purple acrylic washes and drips as an under-layer before going into the painting



Figure 19. "Vince"

with oil paint and my palette knives. Through my application of oil paints I achieved the sculpting of the flesh rather than a flat representation. This sculpting created a stronger depiction of emotion and likeness to Vince. I also wanted to achieve the sculpting while depicting

other areas as flattened or more transparent. This was achieved by using acrylic under-layering in certain areas and thick oil layering in others. Within the oil painting I also incorporated a variety of marks using pastels to achieve an energy within the emotion he characterized. Overall, this painting helped me to understand that while my scraping process allowed me to achieve a certain feeling, and the texture of a worker's flesh, I did not have to solely rely upon scraping as a means for expression.



Figure 20. "Patriot"

Another important aspect in this painting was my choice to emphasize only the face. In my previous work I was often concerned with a narrative or a setting. However, in this painting I decided to abandon the extra imagery, tools, and environments and primarily focus upon the individual's expression and spirit. I also chose to represent the worker in a shallow space and at a large scale to make them more commanding to the observer. From this point I decided to

emphasize certain aspects of each worker I chose to depict.

My reliance upon a specific facial feature to capture the attention of the viewer is seen in my paintings, "Patriot" (fig. 20) and "The Handy-Man" (fig. 21). These paintings create an immediate impact upon the observer through my emphasis on the center of their expression. In my painting "The Patriot" I chose to place emphasis on the mouth to acknowledge his cheerful personality. This emphasis was achieved through my compositional placement of the mouth in the center of the painting. I also chose to include more detail in his teeth and lips to direct the viewer's attention to the center of his expression. In my painting, "The Handy-Man," I chose to place emphasis on his eyes. This worker often had a



Figure 21. "The Handy-Man"

muted expression, but there was always a spark within his eyes that characterized his personality. To accomplish this perception I fragmented many area's within the composition, but I left the eyes specifically intact. Again, I chose to place the eyes in the center of my composition to direct the viewer's attention to his gaze.

By using a focal point such as the mouth in "Patriot," the flesh in "Vince," or the eyes in "The Handy-Man," I command the viewer to give notice to each individual and the specific emotion that he is representing. Ultimately, with each choice I make, whether it is in the variety of media I use or the facial feature I choose to emphasize, I believe that the expressions of the working class challenge our daily perceptions of certain individuals that deserve our attention.

When dealing with my portraits I continue to ask myself certain questions such as: Why do I paint workers? What is my intent? Am I exploiting the workers that I paint for my own purposes? These questions all may be answered by my constant reliance upon personal relationships. From this standpoint, regardless of how my process or decisions change, I can determine my integrity and purpose as an artist. All the decisions in my paintings, both aesthetically and emotionally, revolve around my desire to capture the spirit of the laborers that I understand through a personal relationship.

Furthermore, my work has now developed so that my personal relationships may raise the awareness of others in society who may overlook the beauty of a manual laborer. As an artist one is gifted with the ability to reach people on an emotional level. Overall, my work provides a contemporary response to how the viewer and myself may interpret the reality of a worker. Through this recognition the viewer is challenged to interact emotionally with the expressiveness of a working class portrait.

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## **IMAGE CATALOG**



**Figure 1**

Gustave Courbet

*The Stonebreakers*

65 x 94 inches

Oil on Canvas

1849



**Figure 2**

Philip Evergood

*Mine Disaster*

40 x 70 inches

Oil on Canvas

1933-1937



**Figure 3**

Philip Evergood

*Mine Disaster, Detail*

Oil on Canvas

1933-1937



**Figure 5**

Vincent Van Gogh

*The Potato Eaters*

32.3 x 44.9 inches

Oil on Canvas

1885



**Figure 6**

Kaethe Kollwitz

*Plowman*

16 3/8 x 24 1/4 inches

Etching

1907



**Figure 7**

Kaethe Kollwitz

*The Weavers Revolt*

8 7/16 x 11 11/16 inches

Etching

1893-1897



**Figure 8**

Käthe Kollwitz

*Help Russia*

16 ½ x 18 inches

Lithograph

1921



**Figure 9**

Leon Golub

*Fallen Warrior*

81 x 73 inches

Lacquer on Canvas

1960



**Figure 10**

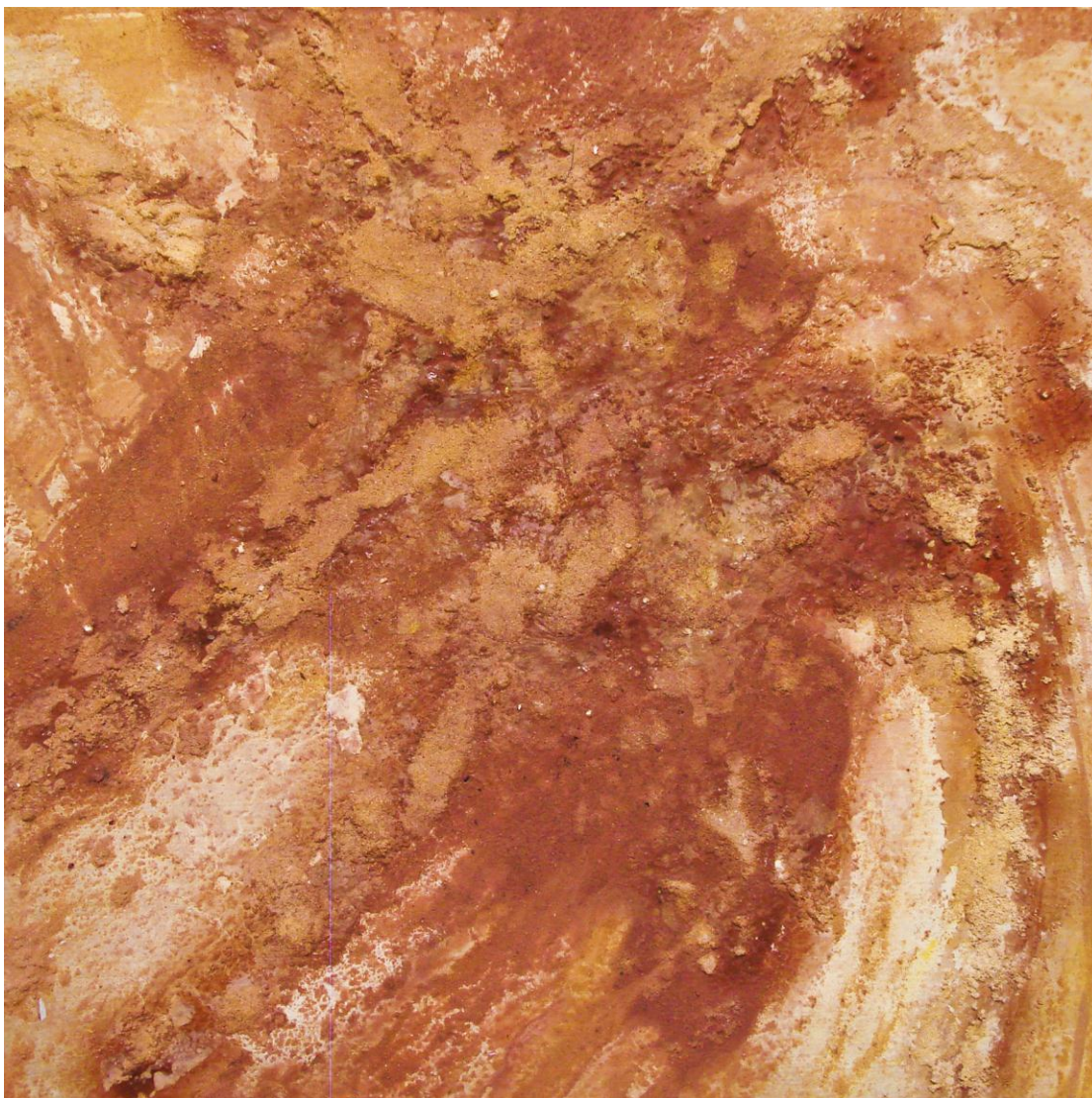
Leon Golub

*Interrogation I*

120 x 168 inches

Acrylic on Canvas

1981



**Figure 11**

Jonathan Murrill

*Vermiculite Test*

24 x 24 inches

Acrylic and Vermiculite on Hardboard

2010



**Figure 12**

Jonathan Murrill

*Untitled*

5 x 7 inches

Digital Photograph

2010



**Figure 13**

Jonathan Murrill

*Dave*

72 x 44 inches

Oil on Canvas

2010



**Figure 14**

Jonathan Murrill

*Workman's Toil*

26 x 38 inches

Oil on Canvas

2011



**Figure 15**

Jonathan Murrill

*The Tool-Man*

28 x 40 inches

Oil on Canvas

2011



**Figure 16**

Jonathan Murrill

*Miller Time*

48 x 26 inches

Oil on Canvas

2011



**Figure 17**

Philip Evergood

*North River Jungle*

18 7/16 x 22 7/8 inches

Pencil on Paper

1933



**Figure 18**

Leon Golub

*Aging Golden Sphinx*

8 x 10 inches

Oil Stick on Bristol

2002



**Figure 19**

Jonathan Murrill

*Vince*

38 x 37 inches

Oil on Canvas

2011



**Figure 20**

Jonathan Murrill

*Patriot*

34 x 46 inches

Oil on Canvas

2011



**Figure 21**

Jonathan Murrill

*The Handy-Man*

54 x 48 inches

Oil on Canvas

2011