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A WORKING LIFE

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Fine Arts

Degree

The University of Mississippi

by

BENNY MELTON

May 2014

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ABSTRACT

In our culture, a person's profession is often made evident by the apparel worn or the tools being used. On the surface, urban scenes may convey a gentle flow and constant motion, which are characteristics of an ordered society. Beneath the visible elements are relationships that may represent a vastly different perspective. At times it may be hard to see the truth when it is so close at hand.

My paintings represent a personal perspective of working people at a key point in my own professional career. There are questions and concerns about the decisions I am making. Can I successfully transition into a new career? How and where will I fit in? The answers are yet to come but I believe pursuing the goal with a strong faith and a solid work ethic will ensure that I will arrive at the intended destination.

My affinity for the working person is related to my personal and professional work history. I share common ground with the city workers, the road crews, restaurant staff, and landscapers, shift workers at the manufacturing plant and anyone that ever worked an extra job or two just to make the ends meet. Often, there are unseen elements at work like the pressure in the earth's crust that converts coal to diamonds. The pressures of a working life have the capacity to change people over time.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my late father, William Arthur Melton and to my late wife Teresa

Strickland Melton.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this stage of my journey through life would not have been possible without the unwavering support of my wife, Jennifer Ter Louw Melton. Our faith and dedication to a common goal has sustained us through the challenges of beginning a life together one thousand miles away from where we first met. I am also thankful for the understanding and encouragement from my daughters Brooke Melton Ketchum and Brittany Melton Rodgers and their families. I missed far too many baseball games and church programs pursuing a working life.

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to my thesis committee which included Associate Professor Sheri Fleck Rieth and Associate Professor Philip R. Jackson, and instructor Josh Brinlee. The team environment and professionalism exhibited by this group helped me develop as an artist and a human being. My academic experience here at Ole Miss has truly informed my work and opened my mind to consider art from a much more diverse point of view.

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CHAPTER I

CONTENT

The Working Life and the recognition of working people is the central theme in my work. I believe in the virtues of a strong work ethic as displayed by the working people in our society. Qualities associated with good workers are loyalty, initiative and perseverance. Productivity is essentially ensured when those three elements are present. This leads to a feeling of accomplishment for the individual and validation of the long term goal of retirement. A society is at its best when people are reaching their personal and professional goals.

A society is at risk when goals become unattainable. There are hazards that accompany many professions as there are hazards to anything that requires redundancy, repetition and conformity. Complacency through familiarity may be the greatest danger of a working life. In the execution of this work I recognize the constant pressure of a working life that transforms people physically and emotionally.

A person's outward appearance or identity can be superficially imposed by their profession. Professions that require intense physical exertion cause changes to a person's body and jobs that require little physical activities are also likely to affect one's outward appearance. Physical changes may also be accompanied with emotional or psychological changes over time. My paintings call attention to unseen signals or alarms that I see in the working class.

Historically, the work of artists and painters in particular, has been classified among the crafts in terms of professional identity. Cennino Cennini is quoted in the Craftsman's Handbook (circa 1400) as saying "The Painter is above all a workman." Through the Middle Ages and in classical antiquity this description fit very well. Modern museums are full of ceramics, and relics of a utilitarian nature which are considered some of our most sacred works of art. Ancient civilizations recorded evidence of their everyday life and traditions in paintings on common plates, bowls, cups, tiles and tombs. I find it very meaningful that this highly prized art was produced by crafts people whose identity is only apparent by the work they had performed so long ago.

My paintings advocate people living a working life right now, right here in my lifetime. Are they not due our appreciation in this life? Surely they will be appreciated by others in the distant future. How many of them will be remembered for cooking meals, paving streets, singing songs, or making art?

Beginning research into the topic of the working class led me to artists like Diego Rivera, Thomas Hart Benton, Robert Henri, Edward Hopper and Maynard Dixon, but the image that keyed my interest in this subject matter is *The Stonebreakers* by Gustave Courbet. In this painting an older man breaks rocks with a hammer while his younger assistant loads the smaller rocks into a basket to transfer the material for some unforeseen project. Both figures have their backs to the viewer and their faces obscured forcing attention onto their clothing and the task at hand. Courbet presented this piece, along with his massive painting, *The Burial at Ornans*, at the

Paris Salon in 1850-51. Critics were outraged by the artist's stark depiction of common people in a format traditionally reserved for historical paintings. Courbet's realism blurred the line of class distinction (Galitz, Kathryn Calley).

The significance of Courbet's subjects in *The Stonebreakers* not making eye contact with the viewer intrigued me. This indirect method of communication suggests that the meaning contained in the painting is not readily apparent. There is more than meets the eye. It has been said that the eyes are the windows to the soul. In that same context, I believe that artists are the eyes of the soul. Most of the figures in my paintings have no eyes or the eyes are barely indicated. The lack of this visual detail symbolizes the idea that people often fail to see that which is directly in front of them.

Courbet and Hopper are my strongest influences in preparing this series of paintings, but other significant influence comes from artists that were closer to the front lines of social realism in America. I approached the topic of social realism with the apprehension of being associated with a political ideology. It has been my experience that labels can become anchors that hinder exploration and so, I continued with a focus on the situations and not political considerations.

The murals of Rivera are being revived in current day Detroit, Michigan not as tribute to the workers employed in automobile manufacturing but instead are being valued for auction so that the city can sell the art to pay off creditors due to the city's bankruptcy terms. Many of the automobiles produced in the early days are now considered collectible while the artists and

workers are for the most part totally anonymous. (Gonyea, Don “Detroit Industry: The Murals of Diego Rivera). Rivera’s work taught me that the vision of the artist has to ring true for the artist if not the audience.

Benton’s work created during the Works Progress Administration (1935-1943) champions the rural labor of farmers, small town businesses and workers in the industrial complexes and shipyards. The W.P.A., as it is more typically known, was part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “New Deal” directive to provide work for the long-term unemployed. Almost every community in the country had some large construction project underway that provided opportunities for laborers and the largest segment of the population but the W.P.A. is probably more famously known for the art work created in support of the Federal Arts Program (F.A.P.). Painters, poets, writers, directors, actors, were employed in media related efforts. This is where Jackson Pollack and others began their professional careers as artist (Adams, Dr. Henry, *The History of Water*). Benton’s work and that of other regionalist painters demonstrates the value of place in the pictorial narrative of a culture.

Henri and his colleagues in the Ash Can School produced gritty scenes from along the wharfs, docks and bustling streets of the big cities in the eastern region of the country. Robert Henri’s collaborators were also illustrators for newspapers. They were hired for their ability to quickly render the human form in the unnatural environment of concrete, steel and glass.

Edward Hopper was not fond of the idea that his work should fit into any particular category. Hopper is often considered one of the quintessential painters of American Realism and it is probably no coincidence that a lot of his work contrasts the plight of the individual against the constantly changing landscape and architecture of contemporary America (Weinberg, H. Barbara. "The Ashcan School").

When speaking of Edward Hopper's work, art historian Arthur Danto once described it in terms of "...social realism of course, celebrated labor, industrial and agricultural, as the hammer and sickle projected..." Hopper was a man of few words but his actions often spoke volumes. He was known to have personally picketed the Whitney Museum because he believed the curators turned their backs to painting realism in order to promote abstraction and abstract expressionism in particular (Danto, A.: *What Art Is*).

Hopper and Courbet appear to have shared a familiar battleground with critics. Could Hopper have been rebelling against European influence over the definition of America's artistic identity? He avoided associating himself or his work with artistic movements or political agendas and likely would have taken exception with Danto's reference to the hammer and sickle. I do believe however, that the artist would have had strong opinions about the future conditions of the working class of our country. Hopper provides inspiration for my work in that the quality expressed through color, light and shadow suggest a poetic simplicity.

Maynard Dixon's "Forgotten Man" series features despondent unemployed men searching for work during the great depression. Some of the paintings show union organizers being beaten by policemen and hired thugs or demonstrators. One painting that stands out to me is the one of a man sitting on a street curb next to a fire hydrant. Behind the man is a throng of moving feet and legs symbolic of his withdrawal from the "rat-race". The scene has a strong element of melancholy with the sun at the back of the main figure. His face reveals the signs of fatigue and frustration. This is not the heroic Atlas bearing the weight of the world on his shoulders. The subject has stopped moving, he is being transformed, absorbed into his environment. This piece varies in dramatic fashion from Dixon's early illustrations or of his later sprawling landscapes of the West where the color and space appears to be a reward for a soul in search of isolation (*Hard Times: Maynard Dixon's Paintings of the Great Depression*. Brigham Young University Museum of Art).

CHAPTER II

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

My primary method of relating a message to the viewer is to compare and contrast items within the composition. Some of the subjects may carry tools of their trade or wear clothing that seems strangely out of place. Locations may be juxtaposed to suggest divergence between urban or rural settings.

Appearance and identity are closely related through the suggested comparisons within my paintings. My intention is not to promote class warfare. I am simply making a statement about the things I see around me. I wonder what value successive generations may associate with the quality of life being lived right here and right now.

Eye contact may be implied to heighten tension between people. Figures within a composition may be aware or unaware of the viewer. They may be aware or unaware of other subjects in the composition. Some of the settings may be more about the place and less about the figure but the figure of working people remains constant. Movement is contrasted against stillness. Sometimes the work may convey a sense of quiet or stillness but there is always an expectation of movement. My subjects are frequently moving, at work or in stride. The camera is invaluable for capturing fleeting moments such as these.

Many of my figures are contained in tightly cropped compositions. The backgrounds are squeezed into the negative space around the figures which results in a somewhat abstraction of forms in the spaces. Each cube of the grid essentially echoes the feeling of confinement and they are painted in a very loose expressive manner. The individual squares become somewhat like the days in a calendar; stacked, redundant and repetitive, which is somewhat a characteristic of a life spent on an assembly line. People come to work every day and do the same task hour after hour, day after day, week after week, and year after year. Their personal lives are scheduled around their professional life. Work is the center of their existence.

Recreational or leisure lifestyles are contrasted with task oriented physical labor. Identities are compared and suggested by apparel or actions of the characters. Like Courbet's Stonebreakers faces are often de-emphasized and forms are rendered with a loose application of pigment to capture expressiveness in the play of light and shadow. They are clouds drifting by. The viewer cannot see the face yet they know the subject.

CHAPTER III

THE GRID

I began using the grid after returning to earlier research on Chuck Close. He leaves the grid in place as it is a significant part of the process used in painting his mural sized portraits. The grid itself is not readily apparent in his work when observed at a distance. Close developed a system which uses organic shapes within the cubes of the grid to represent form through color change and optical mixing. This process was developed to help the artist overcome a personal disability with facial recognition. He adapted through his handicap and invented a way to “see” and paint the faces of his friends and family.

Close’s approach made me realize my interest in the science of how we see. Our brain has the capacity to fill in where our eyes cannot. This brings to mind the phenomena of pareidolia in which a person perceives a random stimulus as something significant e.g. sees faces in clouds or on buildings. Another form of this is the condition known as apophenia or seeing patterns in random data. Close uses a minimum amount of information in each pixel but his results are clearly photographic when viewed from afar. Some of Chuck Close’s individual pieces have been determined to contain well over 10,000 different color combinations.

My approach with the grid is to acknowledge the photograph as a reference tool as Mr. Close does, but I am deconstructing the photograph in order to deskill the technological origination of the image. Rackstraw Downes has said that the photograph has become the

standard for realism in art (Johnson, Ken). My compositions are worked out with thumbnail sketches, charcoal drawings and the splicing together of photos. The size of the grid is determined by using an architects' scale to make sure the finished piece still retains the intended proportions within the overall design. Each line of the grid is then drawn over the photo with a yellow coloring pencil and a mechanical pencil. The yellow color helps define grid lines over dark areas of the image.

Each square within the grid echoes the closely cropped figures used within the composition. The feeling of containment and restrictive behavior is a constant source of pressure for individuals within a society. Use of the grid makes me slow down and look more closely at the elements of color, value and form. I am achieving a higher level of focus in doing this as the overall considerations of the composition often distract me.

My process of reading the photo includes the use of a cropping tool. I use a 4 x 6 inch postcard and cut a single opening in the center of the card that matches the size of a square in the grid. This allows the viewing of only a single square at a time. The resulting resolution causes an abstraction of the complete composition and allows me to isolate all the other colors. I am then able to quickly render color and value blocking in the basic structure of each box.

Line quality is achieved in some areas by letting the red under painting show through in places where colors come together. I find that the color red suggests a thermal quality when used

in this fashion. Black or dark outlines tend to read more abrupt or terminal in my opinion and lack the implied energy of the warmer color.

Artist Joe Forkan is a contemporary painter that uses a grid in much the same manner as Chuck Close. Forkan's primary intent is to eliminate expressive drawing in order to focus on color relationships. My work is just the opposite of this. I am deskillling the photograph in favor of mark making which reveals the hand of the artist. Close revered the detail and depth of field of Daguerreotype photography so much that he developed a modern day version of the antique camera to capture images of the people he paints. I prefer capturing a suggestion of detail in a fleeting moment because it brings me closer to a feeling or an emotion. This is how I attempt to be more poetic in my paintings.

Recently, other artists have come to influence the way I think about using the grid in my work. In a sense, the artists Paul Cezanne and Jenny Saville are using non-traditional grids in many cases are unnoticeable in their work. Cezanne's work is famously labeled post-impressionistic and said to have been a major influence over the movement to Cubism. His technique of using faceted passages in his still life paintings suggests a skewed perspective or simulated movement within the composition.

Artist Jenny Saville blends figures at varying angles in her convincing portrayal of human flesh. Her enormous figures sometimes seem to have multiple heads or other body parts

that come and go within the layers of drawing and painting. Saville's grid becomes organic as it seems to facilitate the mapping of the skin and body parts.

For me the grid represents order in chaos. The structure it provides is part of the process and the focus it provides facilitates the concept. Each square is a separate painting. It is fragile and in search of identity. I like to approach the individual cubes as "premier coup" or first strike paintings. I prefer to complete each quickly and in one pass. Edwin Dickinson was taught this technique by William Merritt Chase at the Art Students League around 1911. The intent is to capture the general patterns of light and shadow through spots of color, one next to the other. This process differed from the traditional academic model of building up form in values first. In an oral interview for the Smithsonian Institution with Dorothy Seckler, Dickinson described the process as taught by Chase.

"...there was no time in "premier coup" to do any underpainting of any kind. And, nobody attempted it. We all painted just to go to work on premier coup."

In a sense each stroke of color becomes a small part of a grid within a grid. Together the cubes provide structure and strength but some areas are out of focus or misaligned providing hints of fragility. One square of the grid is to the picture as one day is to the person who lives a working life. And so, I paint just to go to work.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Ironically, the first image most viewers will notice in my thesis exhibition will be a charcoal drawing titled *Finish* (figure 1). It is a polar opposite of the color filled canvases that dominate this show. Much like the other pieces, the drawing displays an appreciation for those living a working life. In reality, the piece also represents the starting point for this body of work. I possessed decent drawing skills at the beginning of this endeavor and I intended to develop a similar expressiveness in my paintings. In order to achieve this goal I first had to learn to see better. Life is not as limited in its color palette. Individuals however, may be limited in their vision. This piece taught me that the worker is the artist and I am the apprentice in search of knowledge.

At the start of my academic journey I believed that the ability to see and vision held identical meaning. My research led me to understand that there are many reasons for people to lose sight of things. The redundancy and repetition of a working life can lead to complacency even in the most dangerous of occupations. Individuals need challenges to make them grow intellectually and physically.

Retirement, for example, is a goal of most working people. It is portrayed as a reward for persistence and personal sacrifice. For some retirement is more like an illusion; the proverbial carrot on a stick. It may be unattainable due to economic reasons or the realization that one is

happier to continue working. A person without vision may find themselves far from the intended destination.

My research has led me to two other conclusions. One is that the working people in a society are actually major indicators of the social and economic health of that society. They are in a sense the canary in the coal mine. Our culture values productivity and when the people that make up the majority of our population are unchallenged or sit idle due to lack of opportunity we all become ill. Secondly, I have come to understand how artistic vision and practice can be inspired by observing people at work. The Paris Salon was outraged by Gustave Courbet's portrayal of peasants in place of traditional historical paintings. Some suggest the artist was creating the work as propaganda for the proletariat in place of elitist propaganda for the rich and powerful. I believe Courbet was seeing and revealing a truth about the beauty that existed in simple episodes of everyday life by focusing on those closest to him and closer to nature.

Sometimes the artist's vision goes beyond the obvious. Occasionally reality bubbles through to the surface in paintings. The aristocrats at the time of Courbet felt betrayed and were in fear of revolution from the peasant class. They had good reason to fear because people were suffering and war did come to the towns and cities of France as the country seemed to be in a perpetual state of revolution during the 19th century.

I think our culture is at a similar position as France was. Oddly enough the situation is not without precedent in our own national history. One only need revisit the time of the great

American depression to see the danger at hand. Our infrastructure is failing. Bridges, highways, buildings pipelines, railways, and waterways are in major need of repair. Many of these assets were projects that were built or started in the days of the W.P.A. and Roosevelt's "New Deal". Another great wave of greed has consumed our sense of direction for our people. In the rush to gather material wealth we have sold out the working people of the middle class. The idea of a service based economy has eroded manufacturing and put in its place a dependency on bureaucracy and the need for entitlement programs to simultaneously pacify the poor and bail out the rich.

Plants have been closed and the assets sold to other countries half a world away. In many instances our working people train the competition to take their jobs. One political party prides itself in putting people in the unemployment line while the other tries to keep people there. Together they work with investors to ensure stock value for boards of directors and their own financial interests at the expense of working people. When those "investors" make bad decisions our government comes to their aid in the form of bail outs subsidized by taxpayers that can only sit and watch their own pension plans and 401k's evaporate. The people responsible for sending the jobs away have outsourced the part of our economy that provided a means to sustain entitlement programs for those less fortunate.

Unfortunately, only a photograph of Courbet's painting *The Stonebreakers* survives. Allied bombers destroyed this great work along with another 150 pieces of art as they were being

transported by enemy troops at the close of World War II. The painting out lived the painter but it was ultimately destroyed because of greed and desire not because it glorified the peasant class.

We need to make things in this country and to stop bombing ourselves. People need to have a purpose other than filling out forms or selling some intangible service related product. An alarm has been sounded. There are canaries to be saved.

IMAGES



PLATE_1

Finish

Charcoal on paper, 2014

22" high x 20" wide



PLATE_2

Three Graces

Oil on Canvas, 2013

36" high x 24" wide

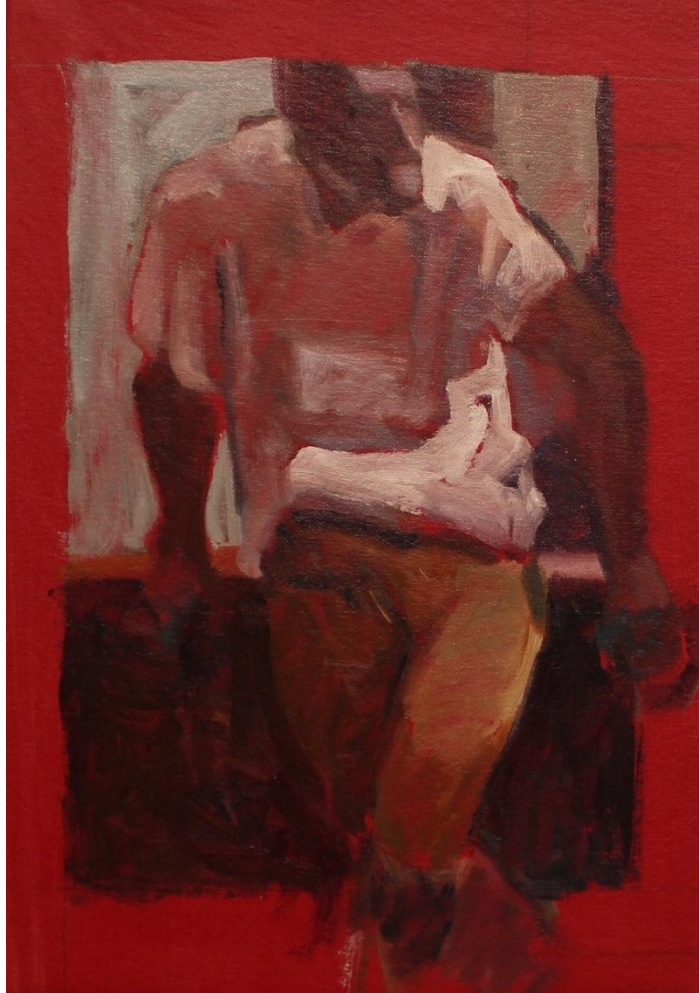


PLATE_3

Juxtaposition of Jurisdiction

Oil on Canvas, 2013

48" high x 16" wide

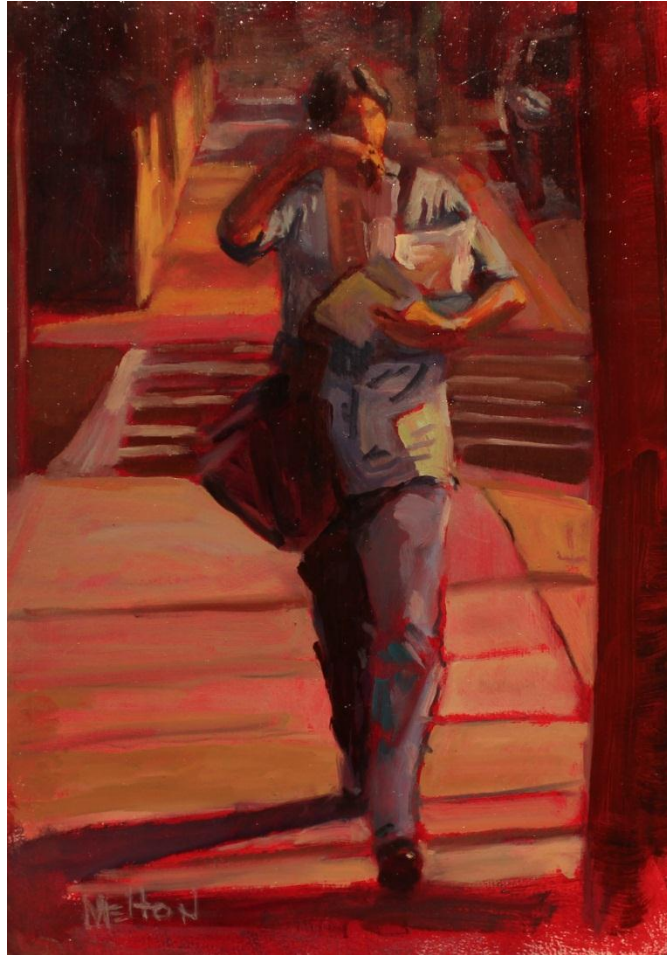


PLATE_4

Job Wanted

Oil on Canvas, 2013

15" wide x 10.5" wide



PLATE_5

Postal

Oil on Panel, 2013

12" high x 8.5" wide

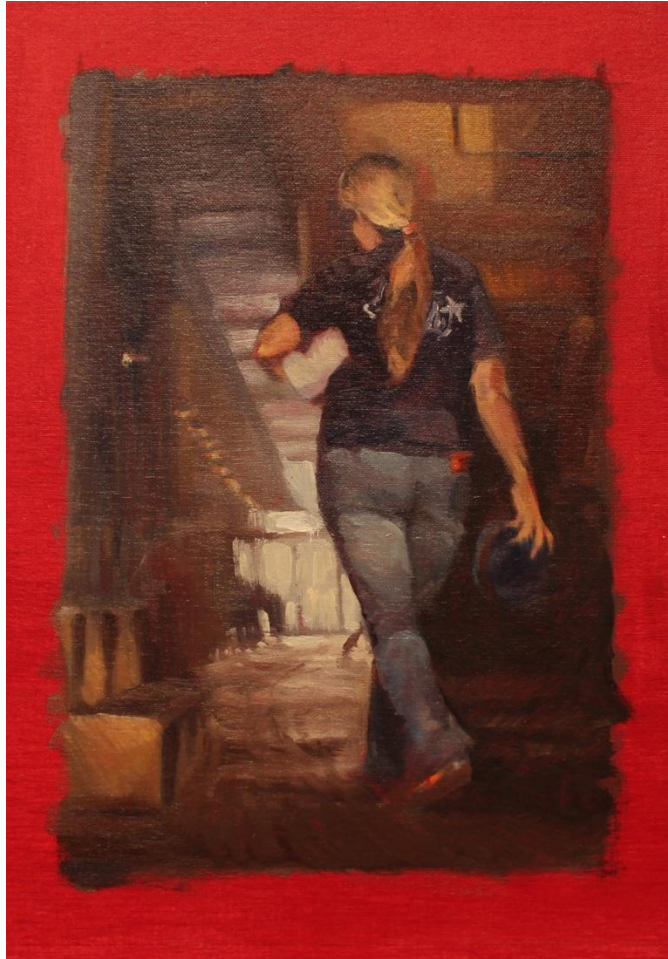


PLATE_6

Power Struggle

Oil on Canvas, 2014

11.25" high x 13.75" wide

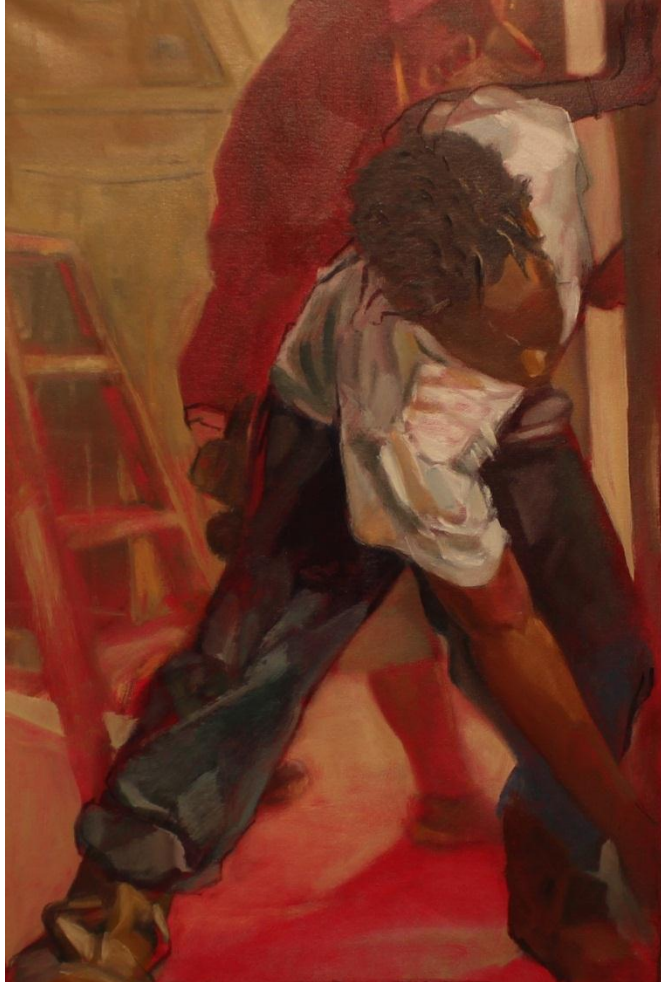


PLATE_7

Venus de Irie

Oil on Canvas, 2014

15" high x 10.5" wide



PLATE_8

Hangin' Rock

Oil on canvas, 2014

32" high x 21.5" wide



PLATE_9

Hands Fuel

Oil on Canvas, 2014

15" high x 10.5" wide

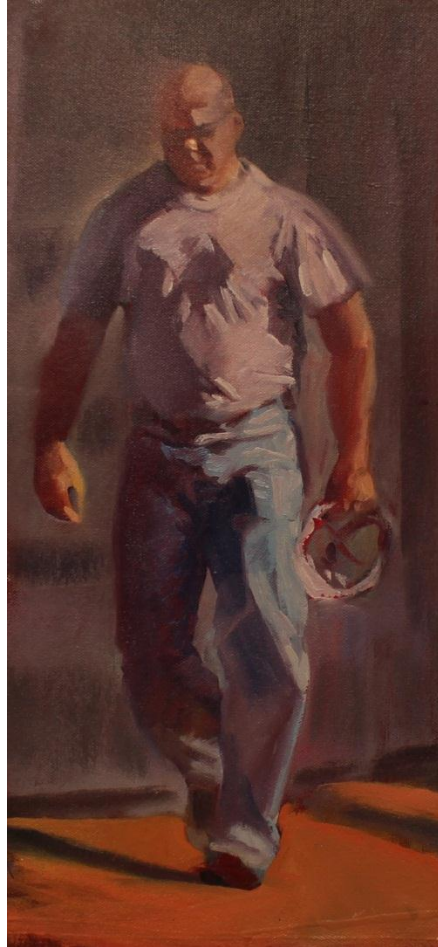


PLATE_10

House of Doom: Three Towers

Oil on Canvas, 2014

16" high x 20" wide



PLATE_11

Pipe Fighter

Oil on Canvas, 2014

16" high x 7.5" wide



PLATE_12

Descent

Oil on Canvas, 2014

11" high x 14" wide



PLATE_13

A Working Life

Acrylic on Canvas, 2014

42" high x 54" wide



PLATE_14

Retirement Community

Acrylic on canvas, 2014

48" high x 36" wide



PLATE_15

Line Man

Oil on Panel, 2014

24" high x 24" wide



PLATE_16

Border Crossing

Acrylic on canvas, 2014

34" high x 34" wide



PLATE_17

Forge

Acrylic on Canvas, 2014

42" high x 40" wide



PLATE_18

Change of Plans

Acrylic on canvas, 2014

48" high x 36" wide

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VITA

Benny Melton was born in Mitchell, South Dakota on May 2, 1958. He attended Yazoo City Public Schools in Yazoo City, Mississippi and received his first formal art lessons at Delta State University in Cleveland, Mississippi in the fall of 1976. Benny also attended Mississippi College and graduated from Belhaven University in Jackson, Mississippi with a Bachelor of Science in Business Management in the fall of 2005. He worked in the chemical industry with Mississippi Chemical Corporation for 25 years in jobs ranging from lab technician to plant operations and human resource manager until being transferred to Sioux City, Iowa in the fall of 2005 to work in a corporate sales position for the new owners, Terra Industries International. In October of 2010 he returned home to enroll at the University of Mississippi and was accepted into the graduate program to pursue a Master of Fine Art degree in painting under the tutelage of Associate Professor Philip Jackson. He will graduate in May 2014.