

THE VOCATIONAL ARTIST

A Thesis

by

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This thesis meets the standards for scope and quality of
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and is hereby approved.

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ABSTRACT

Artists are vocational workers in the truest sense of the term. Contrary to the popular stereotype of “waiting for inspiration to strike”, they spend long hours in their studios creating something from nothing using a combination of learned skills, and in many cases, pure physical labor. It is the goal of this paper to present visual artists in their true form as skilled tradespeople, my personal experiences of seeing the vocational trades being downplayed in my community, and to pay respects to workingmen and women. Throughout this thesis we will look at the shared history of vocational trades and visual arts, common characteristics between the two, and the sociological theory of William Morris about the nature of work and production.

The formation of *guilds*, organizations based around a common practice, dates back to the Middle Ages when skilled workers would join together in order to gain control over their particular craft.

The visual arts also share some characteristics with the trades. One of the most obvious is the satisfaction of creating something tangible. A mechanic can work for eight hours and at the end of the day see the physical result of his/her labor.

These concepts can be further explained in the work of William Morris (1834-1895). In his essay, *Art, Labor, and Socialism*, he argues that art is the “pleasure in the labor of production”. He goes on to divide art making into three elements; variety (creating something new, then modifying it), hope of creation (the knowledge that your work could not exist without your hand), and the self-respect felt from creating something of value.

For my thesis show I've created a body of work comprised of common working class materials. I have used the image of the diesel and "straight six" gasoline engines as symbols of the blue-collar work ethic. Diesel motors are known for their longevity and durability which is why I felt they would be the best representation of the what I like to call the "Die Hard Spirit"; workingmen and women who toil everyday, rain or shine, so we can have things like electricity and running water. I'm also exploring the deeper levels of meaning that come from my use of materials; the idea that I'm working within my chosen trade, using the materials of the trades to make work about tradesmen.

DEDICATION

This MFA Thesis is dedicated to the memories of my grandparents, Juan Valdez (RCT US Army 1935-1986), Maria Guadalupe Valdez (1933-2014)/ Mario S. Saenz (PFC US Army WWII 1926-2014), Esperanza Saenz (1925-2003), and my uncle Francisco Orta (1949-2000). Whether it was working as a handy-man, running a ranch, managing a home/business, or representing Levi's workers as the President of UNITE!, they each taught me the values of hard work and perseverance. I know that I made it to this point because of their guidance and encouragement.

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Artists are vocational workers in the truest sense of the term. Contrary to the popular stereotype of waiting for inspiration to strike, they spend long hours in studios creating something from nothing using a combination of learned skills, historical and philosophical sources, and pure physical labor. In the words of American Artist Chuck Close (b. 1940) “Inspiration is for amateurs. The rest of us just show up and get to work.”¹

It is the goal of this thesis to present visual artists in their true form as skilled tradespeople, talk about personal experiences of seeing vocational trades being downplayed in my community, and pay homage to the working class. Throughout this thesis we will examine the shared history of vocational trades and visual arts, common characteristics between the two, and William Morris’ sociological theory about the nature of work and production. We will also explore the concept of *tacit knowledge*, the historical context of certain government programs such as the WPA, and how the vocational trades are slowly being phased out of our public education system.

That’s What Makes You THAT Guy is a body of work comprised of, and depicting common working class materials. I use the image of the diesel and “straight six” gasoline engines as symbols of blue-collar work ethic. Diesel motors are known for longevity and durability which is why I feel they best represent the “Die Hard Spirit”; men and women who toil everyday, rain or shine, so we can have things like electricity and running water. I also explore deeper levels of meaning that come from my use of materials; the idea that I’m working within my chosen trade, using the materials of the trades to make work about tradesmen.

¹ Chuck Close, “Chuck Close Quotes”, *Good Reads*,
https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/166434.Chuck_Close

Guilds

The formation of guilds, organizations based around a common practice, dates back to the Middle Ages when skilled workers would join together in order to gain control over a particular craft. These groups would set quality standards and control the production and marketing of their products.²

In order to join a guild, a prospective member had to complete an apprenticeship during which he/she would learn the “basics” of the skill, as well as perform all menial work such as clean up. As training progressed, the apprentice would begin working alongside the master.

In order to earn the final title of “Master”, the apprentice, now journeyman, was required to create a high-quality example of their studies to provide evidence of mastery; a masterpiece.³ Visual artists received similar training through the workshop system that was common before the advent of formal academies.⁴ A product of this type of training was Michelangelo di Ludovico Simoni (1475-1564) who was apprenticed to the fresco painter Domenico Ghirlandaio (1449-1494) at the age of thirteen.⁵

Similarity of Characteristics

The visual arts also share many numerous psychological characteristics with the trades. One of the most obvious is the satisfaction of creating something tangible. A mechanic or a plumber working for eight hours can see the physical result of labor.⁶ The next similarity is the

² Rudi Volti, *Introduction to the Sociology of Work and Occupations*, (Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage Publications, 2012) p. 29

³ Ibid, p. 32

⁴ Robert Williams, *Art Theory: An Historical Introduction*, (West Sussex, United Kingdom, Blackwell Publishing, 2009) p. 56

⁵ Cristina Acidini Luchinat, *Michelangelo: Sculptor*, trans. Sylvia Adrian Notini (Milan, ORE Cultura srl, 2010) p. 14

⁶ Jeremy Anderberg, “Reviving Blue-collar Work: 5 Benefits of Working in the Skilled Trades”, *Art of Manliness*, last modified Nov. 24, 2014, www.artofmanliness.com

requirement of creativity and problem solving skills in vocational work. Anytime an electrician is on a job site trying to figure out why the lights will not work, they have to “think on the fly” and troubleshoot the problem based on the information available.⁷ The visual artist works under the same conditions and influences as the mechanic and plumber. They work out solutions to problems that may arise during their work and have physical evidence of their labor at the end of the day. The artist/tradesman can look at their work and say, “there it is, there is the result of my labor.” They don’t have to justify what they do because they have physical evidence to back them up.⁸

These concepts can be further explained in the work of William Morris (1834-1895). In his essay, *Art, Labor, and Socialism*, he argues that art is the “pleasure in the labor of production.” He goes on to divide art making into three elements: variety (creating something new, then modifying it), hope of creation (the knowledge that your work could not exist without your hand), and self-respect from creating something of value.⁹

Even though he was a key founder of the Arts and Crafts Movement, Morris was not completely against the use of modern industrialization. He advocated the use of mechanization for lower-level and tedious tasks which he deemed undignified of a skilled craftsman. The use of machines at this stage of production allowed the artisans the freedom of creativity in the aesthetic of their work.¹⁰

⁷ Jeremy Anderberg, “Reviving Blue-collar Work: 4 Myths About the Skilled Trades”, *Art of Manliness*, last modified Nov. 10, 2014, www.artofmanliness.com

⁸ Dr. Matthew Crawford, “The Case for Working With Your Hands”, *New York Times*, last modified May 25, 2009, www.nytimes.com

⁹ William Morris, “Art, Labor and Socialism” in *Marxism and Art*, ed by Maynard Solomon, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979) p. 85

¹⁰ Robin Langley Summer, et al, *The Arts and Crafts Movement*, (New York, Barnes and Noble Books, 2003) p. 8

This similarity of working conditions leads to the concept of *tacit knowledge*, or knowledge gained through hands-on experience. In his book, *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, Dr. Matthew Crawford argues that working in any of the manual trades requires a deep interaction with the material world and this interaction allows for a deeper learning within the craftsman. A good example is the veteran carpenter who can determine what species of wood would be best suited for a specific building project.¹¹ In this same vein an experienced painter can tell the difference between oil and acrylic paint and what quality of paint was used to create a piece.

The WPA

During the Great Depression, the U.S. government created the Civil Works Administration (CWA), which would later be renamed the Works Progress Administration (WPA), in order to provide work to the unemployed. The official goal of this initiative was to provide work to the unemployed and “preserve the skill and morale of unemployed professionals.” Many of those who received help from the CWA were visual artists.¹² Allowing the artists to “provide socially useful work” fits perfectly into Morris’ third element of art making.

Under the leadership of Holger Cahil, the WPA set about the task of creating a uniquely American aesthetic. Many artists believed that the best way to go about this was to paint images of common people in common settings; chief among them was the man picked to be their teacher; Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975). This in turn formed two different schools of American Painting: American Regionalism (depicting small town/rural life) and Social Realism

¹¹ Dr. Mathew Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, (London, United Kingdom, Penguin Books, 2009) p. 21

¹² Heather Becker, *Art For The People*, (San Francisco, CA, Chronicle Books LLC, 2002) p. 74

(focusing on urban and industrial scenes).¹³ In his role as one of the instructors, Benton brought his blunt blue-collar mindset to the various mural projects.

There were other artists who helped bring together the visual arts and trades. One was Michael Lenson (1903-1971) who, as the Assistant State Supervisor of the Mural and Easel Division in New Jersey, implemented workshops that employed carpenters, cabinetmakers, printmakers, and muralists. These workshops created furniture, rugs, and drapery designed by artists and then manufactured by the skilled workers. While the furniture was being designed and manufactured, the printmakers were creating posters that would educate the people across the country about the benefits of the WPA programs (Fig. 1).¹⁴ Lenson also re-opened a defunct glassworks in Vineland New Jersey. Here, workers were taught traditional glass blowing techniques while producing low cost glassware for local hospitals and public libraries.¹⁵

The Index of American Design

The Index of American Design was created to catalogue native crafts, folk art, and other traditional skills that were unique to the United States. Originally initiated by Romana Javitz, curator of the New York Public Library's picture collection and artist Ruth Reeves, it was the hope that this index would become a valuable research tool for future artists. The program employed about five hundred professional artists along with field researchers who toured the country looking for examples of art and craft that were brought back and recorded (illustrated) by the artists (Fig. 2&3).¹⁶

Contemporary Practice

¹³ Nick Taylor, *American Made: The Enduring Legacy of the WPA*, (New York, Bantam Dell, 2008) p. 273

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 277

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 276

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 279

In the present day there are many artists who continue to practice the creation of fine art as a trade skill. One such artist is glass blower Dale Chihuly (b. 1941). Trained in the 1960s, Chihuly was heavily influenced by Earth Art and the idea of fusing fine art and handi-craft.¹⁷ After earning a Master's of Science degree in glassblowing from the University of Wisconsin in 1967, where he studied under Harvey Littleton, he attended the Rhode Island School of Design and earned his Master's of Fine Arts, later establishing the school's glass program. In 1969 Chihuly received both a Tiffany Foundation Grant and Fulbright Fellowship to study glassblowing at the renowned Venini Factory¹⁸ It was here that he was first introduced to the team approach to glassblowing that he has employed ever since.¹⁹ In 1974 he was invited to build a glass studio at the Institute of American Indian Art in Santa Fe New Mexico where he taught glassblowing to local Native Americans. During this time he was exposed to Navajo blanket weaving which later inspired him to create *The Navajo Blanket Cylinders*. (Fig. 4) Here he laid out shards of multi-colored glass and then rolled a piece of molten glass over them in order to fuse the color into the cylinder.²⁰

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Cuban economy shrank drastically without the support of Moscow. Castro called this the "special period" in which all Cubans would have to make sacrifices for the good of the nation.²¹ Coming out of this difficult time was artist Rene' Francisco Rodriguez (b. 1960) who believed in the idea of "Pragmatic Pedagogy", or basing his

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 60

¹⁸ Barbara Rose, "Dale Chihuly's Paradise Regained", from *Chihuly Projects*, (Seattle, Portland Press, 2000) p. 8

¹⁹ Craig Blanche, "Dale Chihuly" from *Contemporary Glass*, (London, Black Dog Publishing, 2008) p. 60

²⁰ Barbara Rose, "Dale Chihuly's Paradise Regained", from *Chihuly Projects*, (Seattle, Portland Press, 2000) p. 9

²¹ Peter R. Kalb, *Art Since 1980: Charting the Contemporary*, (London, Lawrence Kind Publishing, 2014) p. 223

practice on the practical needs of his audience.²² In 1989, Francisco formed the group *Desde Una Pedagogica Pragmatica* (From a Pragmatic Pedagogy) or DUPP. One of the first group projects was *La Casa Nacional* (The National House) 1990 in which the artists went into the neighborhoods of Havana and asked what types of services the residents wanted and/or needed. Varying between art pieces and home repair, the artists would live with the family who they were providing services for. Studio practice and creative thinking were augmented by the inclusion of practical skills like plumbing and the conversations with the ordinary citizens of Havana who lived outside the art world.²³

Vocational Education in our Society

During my time working as a public school teacher I witnessed vocational classes being underfunded and overcrowded or just plain phased out altogether. The Culinary Arts program at my campus offered courses in cooking and restaurant management and even though it was a popular class among the students, the district decided to completely eliminate it; even after recently purchasing all the necessary equipment to setup an industrial kitchen. Our auto-tech and woodshop classes were constantly being placed with students considered to be “problems”, essentially turning these classes into dumping grounds.

One of my co-workers, Mr. Dale Cramer taught electronics and woodshop and told me about the decline of industrial arts courses in our district. When he started teaching in the mid 80s our campus offered almost ten areas of vocational training ranging from masonry to plumbing. At that time the building trades class would even build houses in the community, allowing students the opportunity for “on the job training”. However, by the early 90s many of

²² Ibid, p. 225

²³ Ibid, p. 226

these courses were eliminated. Usually this was done by attrition; if one of the teachers retired, their position was simply closed out.²⁴ By the time I started working in the fall of 2008, the only full time voc-ed courses that remained were auto-tech, welding, and cosmetology (woodshop and electronics were only offered part-time).

Traditionally “middle class” occupations are now moving closer to the “working class” in terms of characteristics. The integration of business practices into fields like education and health care have created a situation where educated professionals are treated like retail sales associates. A good example of this is the adjunct professor who, regardless of quality of education, usually has no real power at the university they work for. Even now adjunct work is becoming a more permanent position as the possibility of promotion to full-time faculty has become more of a rarity. This has caused some adjuncts, (traditionally middle class) to begin unionizing (working class)²⁵

There are a number of reasons for this shift away from vocational training in our public schools. One cause was the heavy push for computer literacy in the early 90s. Cost was another contributing factor. *Industrial Arts* (courses designed to teach a manual trade) are generally expensive, requiring hundreds of thousands of dollars in tools and are potentially dangerous, making them easy target for budget cuts.²⁶

In his book, *Profoundly Disconnected*, “Dirty Jobs” host Mike Rowe elaborates on our society’s attitude towards vocational training in our schools. He talks about a personal incident from high school in the late 70s. While meeting with his guidance counselor he was shown a

²⁴ Dale Cramer, phone interview, October 11, 2016

²⁵ Michael Zweg, *The Working Class Majority: America’s Best Kept Secret*, (Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 2000) p. 27

²⁶ Dr. Matthew Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, (London, United Kingdom, Penguin Books, 2009) p. 11

poster depicting two different men - one a dirty mechanic and the other a clean office worker in a shirt and tie. The caption of the poster read “Work smart, not hard”, implying that any kind of “hard” or physical work was somehow subservient to “intellectual” or white-collar work (Fig. 5).

Mr. Rowe continues by discussing what he calls the *skills gap*, or the lack of skilled workers needed to fill open jobs in the industrial sector. He talks about how the skills gap is a symptom of our country’s shift in values; things have become disposable and people are looking for instant gratification. His quote, “ We’ve moved from having American icons to American Idols” is a good summary of this situation.²⁷ I believe what Mr. Rowe is referencing with this comment is the idea that society values the people who can win game shows, earning their fifteen minutes of fame, versus praising diligence and a good work ethic. This attitude has been aided by society’s lack of a personal connection to the goods they consume. “Forty years ago it was easy to buy American...because we actually knew the people making the stuff in question,” but that’s not the case today.²⁸

During the recession of 2008 there was a lot of coverage about the loss of “good” jobs in our country, yet there was high demand for workers in the industrial sector. Rowe goes on to say that this was due in part to a *Willingness Gap*, a lack of people willing to learn a manual skill. He claims that the shift in our economy from manufacturing to financial services has created an environment where our public schools push the traditional four year college path as the superior road to success; anything else is seen as subordinate.²⁹

Fortunately the trades are starting to make a comeback in our education system. Jason Torres is a middle school shop teacher for San Antonio’s Northside ISD; a school district that is

²⁷ Mike Rowe, *Profoundly Disconnected*, (MRW Holding, 2014) p. 9

²⁸ Ibid, p. 59

²⁹ Ibid, p. 61

making an effort to present the vocational trades as a career path equivalent to the college path. Mr. Torres' district has *magnate schools*, (campuses that focus almost exclusively on subjects like engineering or the arts) like Warren High School, which focuses on construction. Students in the district are given the choice whether or not they want to pursue college prep courses or learn a trade. Students who take vocational classes then have the opportunity to earn certificates in their respective fields once they graduate from high school. This is possible due to the support of the administration and the Superintendent.³⁰

Starre Vartan argues in the article "Why we should bring back vocation training," that having access to industrial trades classes benefits ALL students, not just the ones seeking those particular career paths. Vartan talks about how she always wanted to learn basic auto mechanics, but wasn't allowed to take the class in high school because her graduation plan didn't allow space in her schedule. Ironically, it was Vartan's mechanical inclination that helped land her first jobs in the science and technology industry. Just because a kid wants to learn how to be a plumber doesn't mean they can't appreciate the arts and vice versa.³¹

These are the inspirations for *That's What Makes You THAT Guy*: the underrepresented working class, craftsmanship, and work ethic. My content focuses on structural paintings of old diesel and gasoline inline engines. I see a parallel between these motors and the working class. Diesels and *inline 6s*, engines with six cylinders arranged in a row, are built for durability, and yet simple to work on and maintain. I found these characteristics in guys like my father who

³⁰ Jason Torres, phone interview, October 13, 2016

³¹ Starre Vartan, "Why we should bring back vocational training", *Mother Nature Network*, last modified August 2016, <http://www.mnn.com/green-tech/research-innovations/blogs/why-we-should-bring-back-vocational-training>

almost never took a sick day from work and was usually working two jobs just to keep food on the table.

I have memories of my dad coming home with bloody knuckles or dislocated fingers and the only first aid he would render was a bandage/splint and some aspirin. One of my uncles worked as a heavy equipment operator paving roads for Hidalgo County and later the City of McAllen, while on the weekends he played gigs as a Tejano drummer. He did this for years while suffering from carpal tunnel syndrome in both of his hands. They had injuries and illnesses through their careers yet never let it stop them from going to work because they HAD to. As an artist I put in twelve to fourteen hour days at school and in my studio regardless of how hungry or tired I am because I have a deadline looming or some other obligation.

I created my body of work with all these characteristics in mind. My art making process incorporates plywood, nails, power tools, and carpentry skills; things usually associated with the vocational trades. Essentially I am working within my trade, using materials and techniques of the trades to talk about tradespeople.

After having worked my first two years of grad school on traditional stretched canvas I wanted to try something different that would allow me to incorporate all the aforementioned materials and skills. I remember one of my professors suggesting that I build an actual motor and present that as my piece. While I would love to do something like that, I have neither the money nor experience to rebuild a motor from the ground up. Instead I thought back to my time as a kid, building model cars and planes. This started the idea of “building” a painting. My first piece was an experiment in low-relief sculpture that only had minimal carved and constructed elements. As the work progressed I began trying different vantage points and pushing the three dimensional aspects of the work in order to play with the illusion of form (Fig. 6).

I feel that my process is just as important as the work itself because I am using the skills and tools associated with carpentry to create these structural paintings. The same professor who wanted me to build the engine spoke once about developing a working relationship with tools and how that applies to a studio practice; I can attest to this personally. Just like the Cuban artists of DUPP, I have been able to use my prior experience building models and working in woodshop classes to help me develop my low-relief paintings.

As I said before I saw a parallel between these motors and the working class. I have been asked multiple times “Why don’t you paint a 350 Chevy small block with all the chrome?” I chose not to paint the small block Chevy because of its connection to racing and hot rodding. As much as I love the hobby, I wanted my pieces to be connected to the themes of work and perseverance. I chose my engine imagery with that in mind. During my research I learned about the 235 ci. Inline 6 from General Motors and how this motor was the standard in literally every vehicle GM produced between 1929 and 1975. My dad had one in his first car, a 1969 Chevy van, and told me about its simple, yet durable construction. These motors were not built for speed or looks but for endurance under heavy strain (Fig. 7)³².

I see the same spirit in the road workers who are out in the heat and cold, dodging traffic in order to complete a street maintenance project or the A/C guy who spends the summers climbing through attics in order to fix something.

I have spent this experience learning through trial and error.

Robert Henri (1865-1929) referenced this with his quote, “When the artist is alive in any person, whatever his kind of work may be, he becomes an inventive, searching, daring, self-

³² Levi Watson, “A Brief History of GM’s Inline 6”, *Chevy Classics Magazine*, last modified 2015, <http://www.chevyclassicsclub.com/a-brief-history-of-gms-inline-six/>

expressing creature”.³³ As I was working through the problems of depicting illusion in my relief pieces I was forced to get inventive in solving those problems, which goes back to the characteristic of having to “troubleshoot” on the job, leading to the same formation of tacit knowledge-from the carpenter to the visual artist.

I will relate an anecdote to prove the point. When I first arrived to Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi to begin the MFA program, I had primarily worked in acrylic paints. During my first semester I began to learn traditional oil painting techniques such as underpainting and glazing. One day while in the studio I was talking with my supervising professor and I noted that I preferred house paint instead of gesso to treat my canvases. He simply looked at me and said “okay”. Later, after treating a canvas with the house paint, I began my underpainting, which quickly turned into a mess. Instead of being able to wipe away the still wet oil paint it seemed to dry almost immediately. When I asked my professor about this he responded with “Of course it did, you used house paint as a base. House paint soaks up all the binder (liquid component) in oil paint so it dries quicker.” He knew what would happen, but he let me learn the hard way.

In preparing to make these works I started looking at artists who used similar methods and came across Charles “Red” Grooms (b. 1937). As a child growing up in Nashville TN, Grooms’ father worked as a coppersmith between jobs and encouraged his son to study art, even taking classes with him under Juanita Greene Williams. During the summer of 1958 Grooms began experimenting with found object sculpture, mainly constructions made of driftwood. In explaining his process he said, “I think sculpture is very good work because you start and you get closer and closer to the thing...it is going progressively and workmanlike towards the finish of

³³ Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit: Robert Henri*, (Harper & Row, New York, 1958) p. 15

the conception”.³⁴ Grooms is talking about the tangibility of the work he creates; the fact that he can build a sculpture for five hours and have something physical to show for it at the end of the day.

When it came to the painted elements of my pieces I made the choice to use loose brushstrokes to create *implied detail*, different marks, colors, and tones that give the illusion of actual detail. I used Michael Newell’s three theories, Resemblance, Conventionalism, and Experience-based, while painting the works. *Resemblance Theory* states that an image depicts a thing as another way of sharing information about that thing. The uniform color schemes and heavy drips in my works convey a sense of the dirt, sweat, and physicality of blue-collar work. *Conventionalism* says that an image, like a word, is a symbol whose meaning is determined by certain conventions. I use the motor as a symbol for the “Die Hard” spirit of the working class since these particular models of engines are made to run harder and longer than the average motor. *Experience-Based* theory is the idea that a picture depicts X in virtue of the capacity to generate a visual response based on the experience of X.³⁵ In showing my work I have had maintenance workers at school and people in galleries approach me and not only name the specific engine depicted but they almost always share some personal story triggered by the image.

The classic red shop rag is another vital material to my work because of its association to physical labor. I screenprint portraits of my grandparents and one of my uncles on the rags, both dirty and clean, as a replacement for paper so that the images depicted imbue the rags with symbolism (Fig. 8). I also felt it fitting to use the screenprinting process due to its roots in

³⁴ Judith E. Stein, “Red Grooms: The Early Years (1937-1960)”, *Red Grooms: A Retrospective 1956-1984*, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1985

³⁵ Michael Newell, *Painting and Philosophy*, Philosophy Compass

industry. Early twentieth century screenprints were used to create mass-produced wall coverings and other home goods.³⁶

There are multiple reasons why I chose to add these pieces to my overall body of work. First, they give a human face to the ideas of working-class spirit that I am conveying through the pieces. Both sets of grandparents were very influential in helping me develop my personal work ethic. Neither of my grandfathers had more than a junior high education, and as a result they both worked numerous manual trades from carpenter to rancher in order to provide for their families. My paternal grandmother was a professional seamstress who ran her own business for almost three decades until her death in the fall of 2014. Despite all their struggles or lack of formal schooling, my grandparents stressed during my youth the values of education, integrity, hard work, and perseverance. I feel the nature of the rag, being used, washed, and ready to go again, made it the best material with which to honor my family members.

The fifth portrait is of my late uncle Frank Orta who worked at the Levi's Jeans plant in McAllen for over twenty-five years. During his time at the plant he also worked for the interests of his fellow employees as the president of UNITE!; the Levi's worker's union. For almost three decades he labored diligently at his factory job to earn a living and feed his family, and ultimately it cost him his life. My uncle died from lung cancer in the summer of 2000 from years of exposure to treatment chemicals used while transporting raw denim. It is this reason that I named his portrait *John Henry's Legacy*, as a reference the myth of the American railroad worker who died on the job.

I included these family members in my thesis as they were so instrumental in forming who I am. It is also the closest I will get to having them at my show.

³⁶ Catherine Sullivan, *History of Screen Printing*, Janet Turner Print Museum, last modified 2011,

I have also been heavily influenced by work of the aforementioned Thomas Hart Benton. During the Great Depression Benton worked as an art instructor and created murals in an effort to develop a uniquely American/blue-collar aesthetic.³⁷ When asked why he chose to depict the common people of the Midwest in his murals Benton was quoted as saying, “The average businessman has an uninteresting face because he has dealt with abstractions for so long that he has ceased to be a realist. Only people who handle things, objects, actualities have interesting faces. Your garage man, your coal man, your farmer...are men with interesting physiognomies.”³⁸

My choice of colors is partially inspired by Benton’s palette since he was depicting dock, steel, and factory workers. The blues, greens, browns, and greys are all based off my observations of different work uniforms from mechanics to city workers. He also used a loose mark to his brushwork, which created a stylized aesthetic that I chose to emulate.

Conclusion

Working as a visual artist is no different than working as a plumber or an electrician. All these fields require critical thinking skills. They require the practitioner to possess an inventiveness and creativity in order to overcome any unexpected obstacles that may arise on the job. While working through these problems the practitioner develops tacit knowledge through the accumulation of experience. We have seen how the removal of vocational education from public schools can affect ALL students by taking away the chance for any kind of tangible,

³⁷ Nick Taylor, *American Made: The Enduring Legacy of the WPA*, (New York, Bantam Dell, 2008) p. 273

³⁸ Justin Wolfe, *Thomas Hart Benton: A Life*, (New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012) p. 256

hands-on learning. This has led to a negative stigma surrounding the manual trades; viewing them as somehow inferior to higher education.

My hope is that my MFA thesis exhibition will shine a light on the vocational trades and asks viewers to consider the road workers out in the heat and the mechanic under the hood of their cars, and equally the visual artist working hard to perfect their craft.

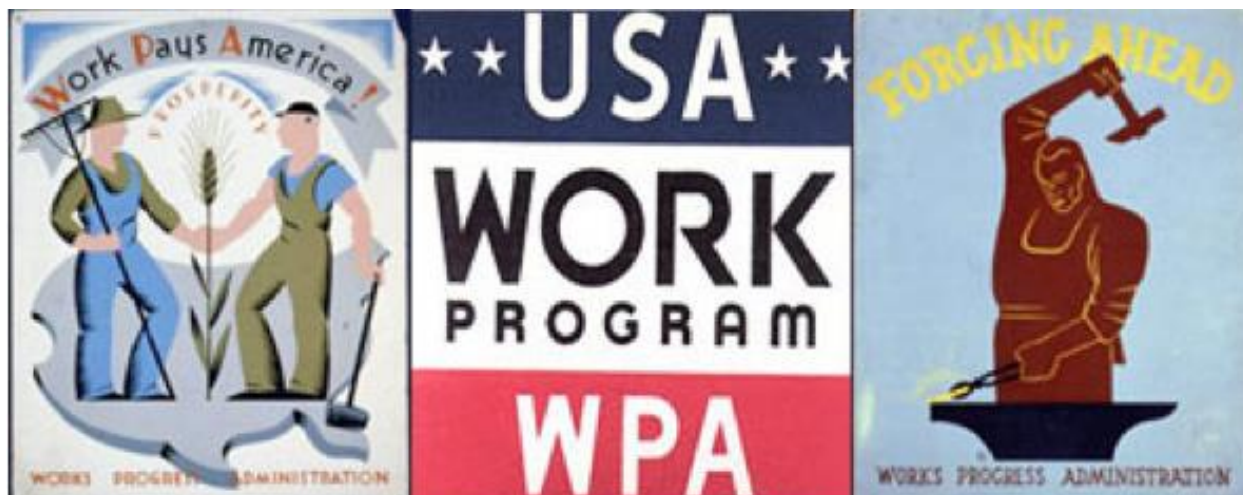


Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

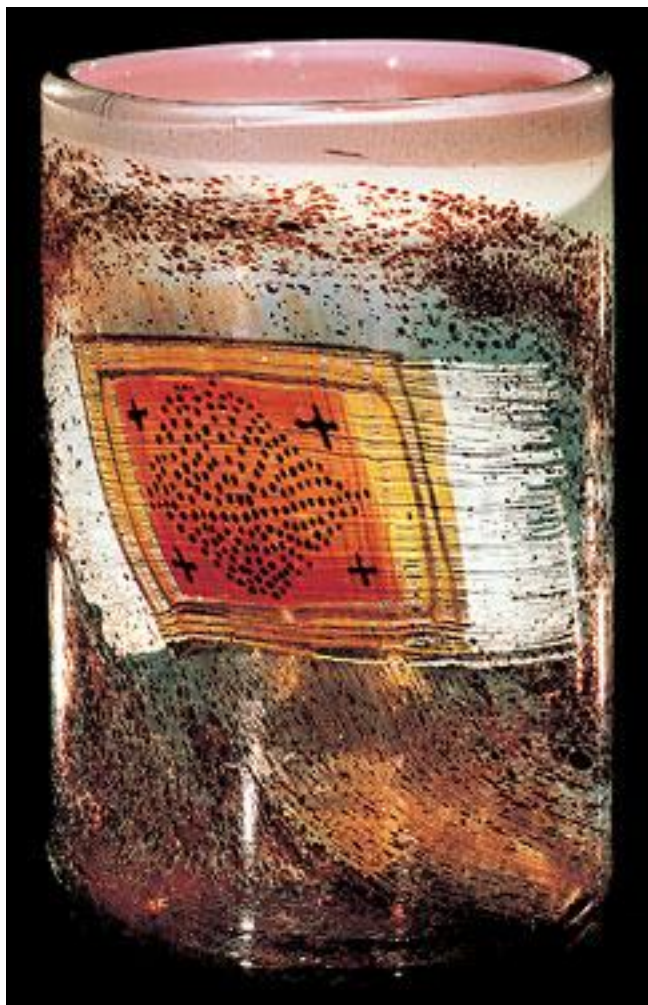


Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

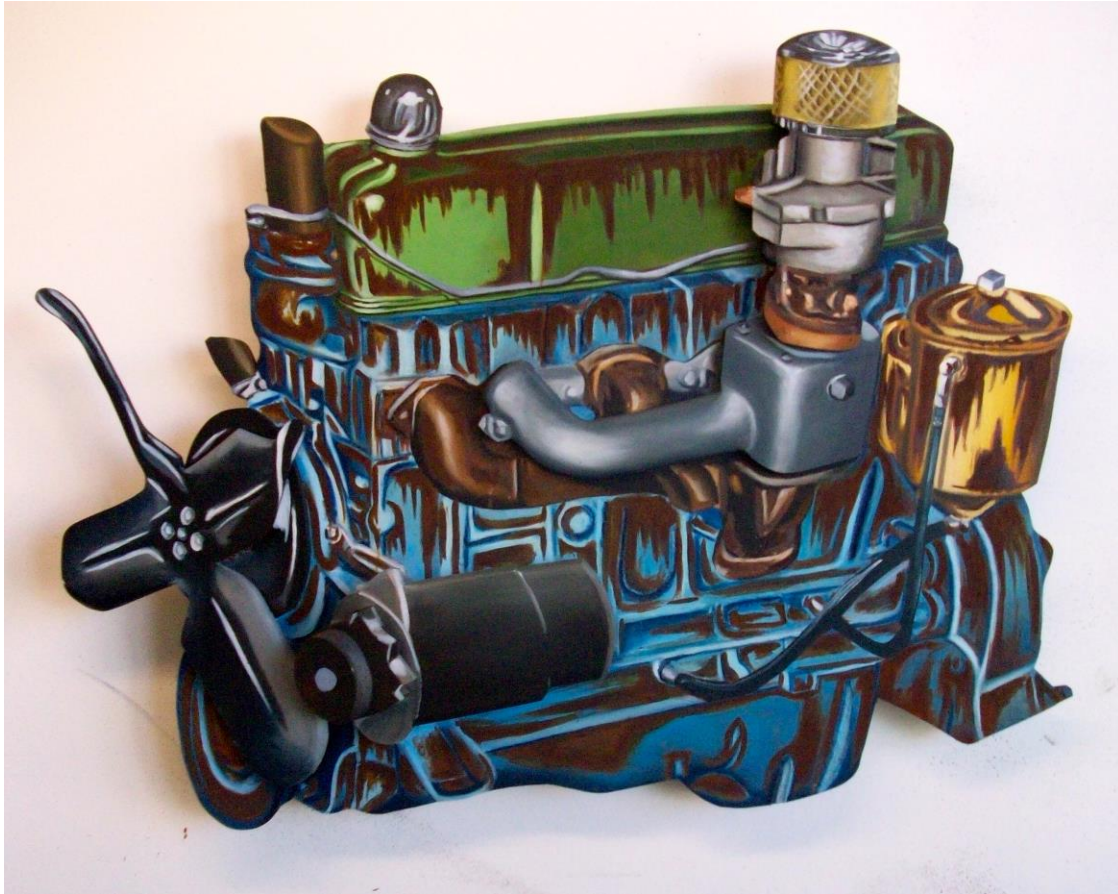


Fig. 7



Fig. 8

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