

PORTRAITS OF HUMANITY

WARREN CHANG



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Although Warren Chang primarily paints the farmworkers of Monterey County where he was born, he admits that his true interests lie in the human condition. With his sketch book or digital camera he captures the pivotal moments of human experience and behavior that most resonate with him. His observations of farmworkers hard at work, or alternately enjoying an impromptu card game during a lunch break become paintings imbued with feelings of camaraderie or struggle. “I could not paint bankers or stockbrokers,” he says, “I can’t find any meaning in that.” He paints itinerant wanderers fallen on hard times too, bestowing a kind of attention rarely afforded them. Clearly he is drawn to the kinds of lives that his favorite author and fellow Monterey native John Steinbeck describes so well in novels like *The Grapes of Wrath* or *Cannery Row*.

When he glimpsed a man lying next to a wall on a busy urban street reading a book, Chang knew he wanted to paint the scene. The result, *Man With Dog* (2022), instantly raises the questions that such a situation evokes. Who is this man, and why is he reading on the street? Doesn’t he have a place where he would be more comfortable, with a chair to sit on or a bed to lie down on? That he has chosen this place confirms him as an outsider, yet he seems at ease, with a little dog at his side for companionship. Chang has described a life lived on the edge captured in a sunburned face, a coat used as a pillow, and a dog’s close and attentive posture. While it acknowledges a society that fails some of its members, the painting succeeds because the humanity of the subject is its central theme. Chang never passes judgement; his reader could be any one of us.

Fields of strawberries and artichokes are a fairly common sight on the roads of Monterey County. The farmworkers who tend them often support families living far away or travel from place to place following the seasons. Uprooted from a settled and stable homelife, they live at the margins. While we chase luxury and the glamour of the latest trendy possession, these workers

tend the food that sustains us. But what about the texture of their lives, their thoughts, acts, and dreams that make up their experience? Chang’s powerful painting *Invisible People* (2022), describes a page from such a story. In a spare composition of newly tilled fields rimmed by distant, dimly lit traces of another world, a small group gathers at the side of the road under a stormy sky. It is difficult to guess whether they are headed home or starting out on another day of fieldwork. Although the four primary figures seem to have a close family relationship, each one, from the young child to the grandmother, is focused on their own private world. The fifth figure looks away from the group towards the past, or possibly, to where he is heading next. Very likely only their fellow workers would notice this group, or acknowledge their individual and collective experience. But Chang has done so by recognizing each of them so expressively in the painting, while at the same time confronting the reality of their situation.

The flip side of a life lived outside the mainstream brings the gift of a special kind of camaraderie within its narrowed parameters. Chang captures this experience well in *Cards* (2023), with a group that sits together in a patch of sunlit grass for a card game. Glittering light filters through surrounding trees setting the amiable mood, highlighted by the shared smiles just visible under





Man with Dog, 2022
18 x 24 in
Oil on Canvas

hat brims. Another painting, *Workers on Break* (2023), captures a different aspect of fellowship in the small group who sit conversing together on the ground. Chang has added a bit of humor in his red-capped smiling bus driver whose eye directly engages the viewer. An unusual motif for him, it breaks up the painting's otherwise somber tone with a bit of light-hearted brightness.

Chang begins every painting with a small preparatory study, although not all of these will become finished works. The loose brushstrokes he uses to work out the basics of composition and color give them a liveliness that many appreciate. Several are included in the exhibition, along with *Worker in Profile* (2020), a two-hour portrait painted from a live model. Even with minimal detail and a simplified color palette it's a powerful character study. Chang brings the young subject to life, catching his emotional landscape in a clenched brow and an inward gaze that speaks of memories past. Select dabs of white at the forehead, cheek, and nose hint at a light source, and together with the background swash of

color, ground him in space. Chang has religiously maintained a thirty year, bi-weekly practice of painting from life. He compares it to an athlete who regularly works out at the gym. He says, "if I want to sharpen my skills, I have to keep painting from live models."

There is a long and distinguished history of artists who have gravitated toward suppressed or unacknowledged histories, or the underrepresented, ill-treated, or oppressed of society. Nineteenth century artist Jean-François Millet dignified peasants working the land as never before in his groundbreaking paintings of sowers and gleaners, while Pablo Picasso's masterwork *Guernica* calls out Spain's complicity in the German bombing of Spanish civilians. Warren Chang's narrative paintings of farmworkers and the displaced set him among such honorable companions. Human life is the source and inspiration for his art, and he paints the stories of individuals in tender and empathetic strokes, as he shines a light on the whole of our beautiful and terrible plight.



Cards, 2023, 26 x 32 in, Oil on Canvas

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The Diggers, 2022, 30 x 40 in, Oil on Canvas



My works though inspired by the paintings and subjects of the past are however contemporary records of our times. I depict the farmworker honestly without idealization with an understanding of their plight. In a way I see the farmworker as a tragic figure, a metaphor for the all humanity. (*Warren Chang*)

Workers on Break, 2023, 24 x 30 in, Oil on Canvas (above)

Invisible People, 2021, 29 x 35 in, Oil on Canvas (cover)

Worker in Profile, 2020, 11 x 14 in, Oil on Canvas (inside, left)

Essay by Helaine Glick, *Independent Curator*

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