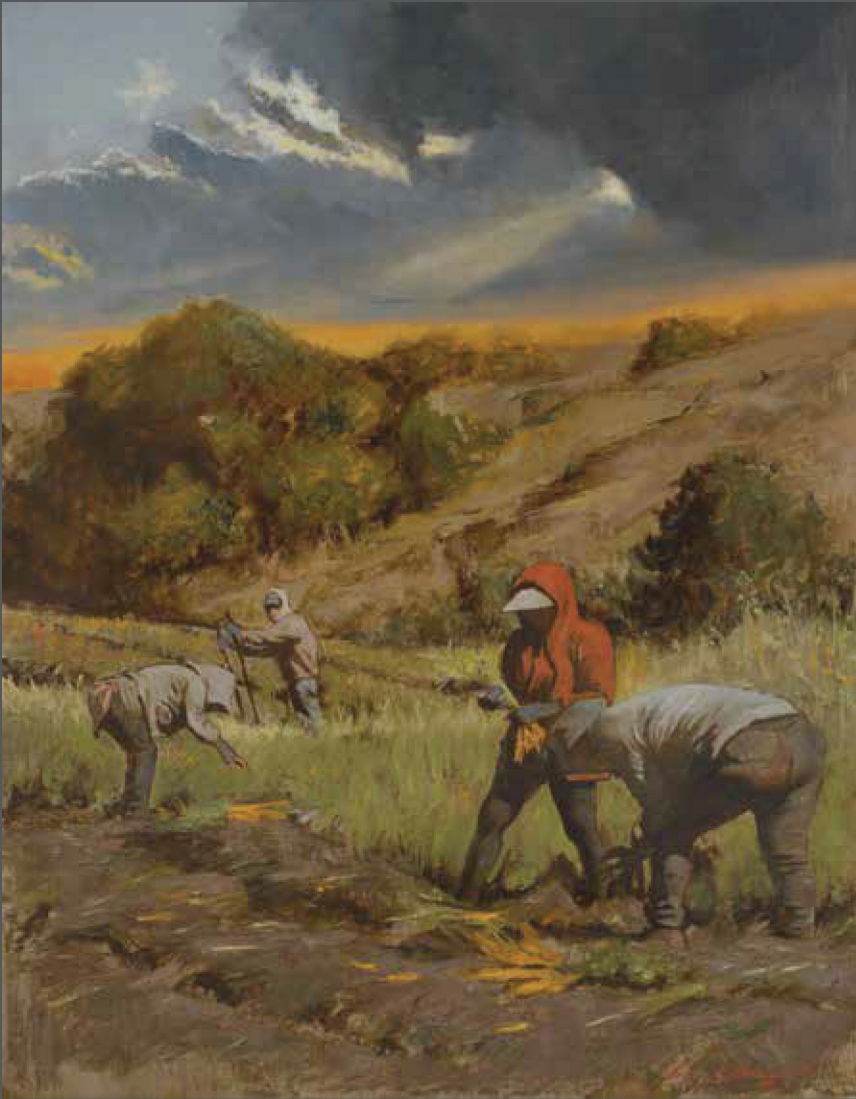




WARREN CHANG

DRAWN IN THE LIGHT



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Warren Chang is an artist with a good share of courage. He is drawn to a vision that rests uneasily within contemporary art trends. His representational figurative paintings are deeply rooted in ordinary life, and in the specific observations of his surroundings. These qualities may be rare in today's art, but they confirm Chang's paintings as authentic responses to the scope of life on the Monterey Peninsula and the adjacent Salinas Valley, where he was born, works, and still lives.

Long before our current political environment motivated many to a renewed engagement with social and cultural issues, Chang had developed these themes in his art. Both his choice of fieldworkers, and his direct approach to depicting them capture our attention; the clear-eyed, unsentimental honesty and elemental regard he imparts to his subjects is as rare as it is relevant.

Chang's paintings make him both a descendent and comrade of two nineteenth century French artists who joined social concerns to their creative endeavors. Two artists in particular created paintings that brought attention to people typically discounted or ignored by the ruling culture. By representing local villagers in a painting of heroic proportions (*Burial at Ormans*, 1849, 10 ft. 5 in. x 21 ft. 8 in.), French artist Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) overturned lifetimes of artistic convention. Never had ordinary citizens been granted such elevated status in art. Courbet's exact contemporary, Jean-François Millet (1814-1875), painted in a very different mode but broke similar ground. A farmer himself, he portrayed the daily routines of the rural poor with great attentiveness, even reverence. One of his most distinguished paintings, *The Gleaners*, 1857, depicts a visually exquisite yet unromanticized view of three women's





backbreaking efforts to gather a little grain from the leftovers of the harvest. The simple fact of their representation in a work of art created controversy.

The barriers broken by Courbet and Millet helped launch the Impressionists, as daily life became a worthy topic for artists. Yet despite this now familiar genre, Chang's series of portraits and figurative paintings still startle: we recognize the twenty-first century's own disenfranchised population. In depicting a group rarely represented in art—men, women, and children who live by working the fields, or those who live hand to mouth—he revitalizes and validates the form.

With a range of muted earth tones, Chang skillfully unfolds the iconic Central California landscape of golden fields, sunbaked hills, and gray, overcast skies. In his painting *Onion Field*, an anonymous collaboration of sweatshirt-clad workers bend to their backbreaking task in the afternoon light. Chang captures the concentrated nature of their efforts, and the exhausted energy of their bodies. On the other hand, in *The Good Earth*, just a few men stand tending to young plants. A singular figure confronts the viewer, while others hoe and weed behind him. More accurately seen as a portrait, this young man looks thoughtfully over the land, a complex expression of questioning concern on his features. Capturing

another familiar scenario in *Flower Girl*, his arresting portrayal of a young roadside flower seller, Chang conveys all the conflicting emotions of that precarious position, as hope and futility contend visibly within her. Chang does not let us off the hook in these remarkable works, and continually challenges our expectations. His painting, *Writing Home* is particularly notable as a courageous and unflinching portrait of homelessness. He does not blur the edges or sweeten the expression, nor on the other hand, does he moderate the pristine white sands and lovely wharf surroundings, but confronts these contradictions clearly. No judgment is passed, so the inherent reality of the circumstances of this solitary traveler and his companion dog quietly absorb us, and so find their mark.

By combining beautifully observed, light-filled realism with unorthodox subjects, Warren Chang has shaped a rare and deeply affecting body of work. He has directed his artist's eye to the margins of human experience in a manner reminiscent of another Central Coast artist, the renowned novelist John Steinbeck. Like Steinbeck, Chang draws attention to the reality of these all too often unrecognized lives, and so reveals their heroism and truth with a clear-eyed grace.

—Helaine Glick, Independent curator



Winfield Gallery

Warren Chang: Drawn in the Light
July 8-31, 2017

Reception: Saturday, July 8, 5-7pm

Cover:

The Good Earth, 2011-2017, oil on canvas, 40 x 28 inches

Inside Left:

Carrot Harvest, 2015, oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches

Onion Field, 2017, oil on canvas, 20 x 34 inches

Inside Right:

Flower Girl, 2012, oil on canvas, 30 x 36 inches

Back Cover:

Writing Home, 2017, oil on canvas, 32 x 34 inches

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