

Warren Chang: IN PURSUIT OF TRUTH

by Molly Siple

AMONG THE MEMBERS OF THE CALIFORNIA ART CLUB, with its century-old tradition of landscape painting, are a growing number of artists highly skilled in figure drawing, portraiture, and multi-figure canvases that focus on daily life. Among these, **Warren Chang**, widely known for his compelling scenes of field workers labouring over the crops near Monterey and in the Salinas Valley, holds a unique place.

Chang came to this subject matter quite naturally having been raised in the area. When he moved back after schooling in the arts and a career in illustration, he realized that the everyday scenes offered subject matter of great substance. As Chang explains, “I’m painting the human condition. The individuals I portray are struggling for survival, working to take care of their family and put food on the table, their labour and purpose making life full and meaningful.”

Focusing on this theme, Chang joins **Jean-Francois Millet** (1814–1875), one of the founders of the Barbizon School of painting in rural France renowned for his dignified scenes of peasant farmers. Millet’s landmark painting, *The Gleaners*, offers up a view of three women scavenging bits of grain left in the fields following the harvest, a centuries-old right of poor women and children. The figures are rooted to the earth,

and the light and atmosphere connote the sacred in everyday life. Chang’s *Approaching Storm* and *Fall Tilling* are parallel in feeling.

In these scenes, Chang embraces realism, the practice of looking with a clear and steady eye that harks back to the founding of Realism, a movement in the mid-nineteenth century led by a contemporary of Millet, **Gustave Courbet** (1819–1877). Courbet was committed to painting familiar scenes of the life around him rather



Self Portrait at 51
Oil on canvas 29" × 19"
Collection of the Artist



Approaching Storm
Oil on canvas 30" × 40"
Private Collection

than grand history paintings, then a revolutionary idea that challenged academic conventions and the Romanticism current at the time. “Like Courbet, I want to paint the truth, the way things are, not an idealized version of reality,” says Chang. “Even when I paint a nude, if the model has some middle-age fat, I include it!”

Chang began painting such scenes because of his love of nineteenth-century art and because the story they tell is authentic. As he says, “I honour the labourers by painting them.” However, on occasion someone challenges Chang’s motivations. “There have been internet postings accusing me of exploiting the workers, making good money off the poor labourers, which of course is far from my intention. Even the field workers who have had a chance to view my paintings don’t see them this way. For my exhibit, *Monterey Now: Warren Chang*, at the Monterey Museum of Art, a schoolteacher organized a trip to the museum for the young children of the labourers and they loved the show. They

even wrote poems about it.” Later the parents themselves paid a visit and they also understood the work. Chang was thrilled to hear a woman tell him, “Your paintings look exactly the way it feels.”

This is Chang’s aim. He seeks “to paint a feeling and an emotion” and his limited palette is part of this. Controlling the tonality, which he learned by studying the Old Masters, contributes to the authenticity and is reminiscent of black and white photography. In addition, his lighting plays a role. He is drawn to the moody atmosphere of early morning and the end of day, when the light is low, warm, and creates long shadows.

Chang is fairly matter-of-fact about the paintings’ narrative content. However, it doesn’t take much to read all sorts of meaning into his imagery. His colour and light may be interpreted as a reference to the workers’ sombre lives and long days of labour. It’s also tempting to see hints of Chang himself in the faces of workers here and there or wonder if a figure looking straight at the viewer is meant to be confrontational. Such imaginings are fine with Chang, who is content when viewers add fresh meaning to his work. As he says, “Then seeing one of my paintings becomes a richer experience.”

CHANG’S LANDSCAPE BACKGROUNDS IN the scenes are accomplished enough to stand on their own but he feels the human form is essential. “A landscape without, for example, a little boy on a swing or someone walking a dog looks barren to me. The human element is missing.” The importance of the figure spans the arc of Chang’s artistic life; from the moment at age five when he saw the cover of a *Tarzan* paperback by master illustrator **Frank Frazetta (1927–2009)** and was riveted. “I remember loving his muscled barbarians and sensuous women, then juvenile fascinations, but there was also this power to his work, the controlled colour, and the design was so good. Later when I was twelve, my parents gave me a book on **Norman Rockwell (1894–1978)** and that was great fodder for my imagination.”

Chang enrolled in **Art Center College of Design** in Pasadena and graduated in 1981 with a B.F.A. with Honours. A two-decade career in illustration in New York and California followed with award-winning work. From 1986 to 1988, he studied at the **California Art Institute with Fred Fixler (1923–2010)**, who Chang credits with developing his understanding of painting the human form. As Chang explains, “This was extended study with a single expert, which allows a student to develop a far more sound ability than taking assorted three or five day workshops or even a six-week class. I think of workshops as crash courses, not substantial study.”



Fall Tilling
Oil on canvas 34" × 40"
Private Collection



Jean-François Millet (1814–1875)
The Gleaners, 1857
Oil on canvas 33" × 44"
Collection of Musée d’Orsay

As Chang explains, “Studying with Fixler is where my training really sank in, and I still follow the principles I learned there. We learned about how light falls on form using a single light source. When you understand light you can apply it to anything. In New York an art director considered



Father and Son

Oil on canvas 24" × 36"

Private Collection

me an expert at painting horses although I didn't know animal anatomy and I have no interest in horses!" By the time Chang had finished his New York years, he estimates that he had painted just over 150 paperback covers, a sort of study drill of figurative art in itself.

In 2000 Chang decided to move on from illustration and commit himself full time to fine art. To ensure a regular income, in 2001 he also began teaching figurative art at San Francisco's **Academy of Art University**, and continues to do so. "Teaching has allowed me to paint what I want. Selling for me is only a by-product." For Chang, painting is about

creating art in the highest sense, something far beyond just making a picture. "While anything goes in the art world today, every artist must at least define what art is to them," says Chang. "I studied figure painting for a while with the great social realist **Max Ginsburg**. What I got out of the class was a feeling for what art is. He taught me that the two most important aspects of art are truth and sincerity. I think one of the reasons my art is recognized is that it embodies these qualities." A fine example is Chang's *Flower Girl*, in which a resigned young woman stands by the side of a busy highway, offering meagre flowers while cars pass her by.

DEVELOPING HIS ART AND HIS intellect started early for Chang. He was gifted with a father, **Namgui Chang**, now ninety-three, who had a Ph.D. in linguistics and was an off-hours artist in various media. As Chang recalls, "We often talked about art. He taught me that all philosophies and art are intertwined and that your work inevitably reflects how you live your life, as well as your morals." He continues, "Aside from painting, I spend a lot of time thinking and reading, and I derive as much inspiration from writers as I do from other artists. I've read over and over **Pearl Buck's** *The Good Earth*, and **John Steinbeck's** *The Grapes of Wrath* to immerse myself in their portrayals of those who work the land, which is also my subject matter. I also turn again and again to **Tolstoy's** *What Is Art?*, which confirms my own ideas about what true art is."

Since Chang began his fine art career, he has assembled a



The Demonstration

Oil on canvas 30" × 40"

Private Collection



Flower Girl

Oil on canvas 30" × 36"

Collection of the Artist

collection of work on a more personal theme as well—scenes from his daily life as a practicing artist—autobiographical reporting that for him is another way of producing truthful art. He documents his studio life in canvases such as *Father and Son* and in the self-portraits he produces every few years, showing himself maturing as a man and as an artist. In his painted classroom scenes, he invites the uninitiated into the world of figure painting with its theatrical conventions. In *Studio at Chestnut*, he places a well-endowed nude model at the focal point of the composition, in the titillating first place he knows most people will look, surrounded by serious art students concentrating on their work.

THE LIST OF CHANG'S AWARDS AND exhibitions is long, spanning both his illustration and fine art careers. Most recently the **Monterey Museum of Art** and the **Hilbert Museum of California Art at Chapman University** have acquired works by Chang for their permanent collections. Chang also has a painting in the current *Gold Medal Exhibition*, an opportunity the artist says he appreciates beyond words. "It's a place to exhibit subjects of my choosing to a knowledgeable audience and without pressure to sell. I have created some of my most important works for the Gold Medal and the subject of this year's painting, *Give Us Our Daily Bread*, is a subject I've wanted to paint for years."

More of the artist's work can be seen on his website, warrenchang.com, including sketches and step-by-step procedures, as well as a way to order his book, *Warren Chang: Narrative Paintings*. But of course, despite the predominance of such digital and print media in today's art world, as Chang says, "My paintings are meant to be seen in person. I try to create rich interesting texture on the surface of the canvas, using any technique that will do the job." The *Gold Medal Exhibition* is an excellent opportunity to take a close-up, detailed look at an original Warren Chang. ■

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Senior Editor **Molly Siple** studied painting and art history at the **University of California at Berkeley** and is an Artist Member of the **California Art Club**. She

has also taken formal training from master artists **Shuqiao Zhou, Jove Wang, and Ian Roberts**. Siple is a frequent contributor to numerous national art publications, and co-author of *Enchanted Isle, A History of Plein Air Painting in Santa Catalina Island; California Light, A Century of Landscapes: Paintings of the California Art Club; and Painting California, Seascapes and Beach Towns: Paintings of the California Art Club*.



Studio at Chestnut
Oil on canvas 30" × 40"
Collection of the Artist



Give Us Our Daily Bread
Oil on canvas 30" × 46"
Exhibited at Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County
107th Annual Gold Medal Exhibition