MOBILITY BLUES

by
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“There’s nothing worth taking pictures of here,” said a man I didn’t recognize while I was at the annual farm equipment auction in Broome County, New York. The event is held in Whitney Point, the rural town that I grew up in. The man was short — probably about 5’5”, with a ball cap, graying close-cropped hair, a weathered face, wearing dirty working clothes. He introduced himself as Scott Hall, and said he recognized me from high school; I felt bad that I didn’t remember him at all. He noticed that I had been taking pictures all day with a digital SLR camera. Contrary to his statement, I have found that the annual event is so rich with material that I made a trip just to document it. It’s rare to see so much machinery that spans several decades all in one place — showing the patina that comes from countless seasons of hard, sweaty work. It’s the provenance of the labor that has fed this nation for generations.

At the event, I hunt for textures, juxtapositions, faces, and moments. Though drawing and painting is frowned upon from many quarters, I believe there is a role for it. Sometimes, a perfect moment presents itself. If you don’t have a camera to document it, the moment disappears forever; they are often too fleeting to capture if sketching or painting en plein air. Then, the challenge is to make a painting based on that moment that uses the photograph as a point of departure for a painterly expression, rather than a time-consuming facsimile of a print. Painting from life helps an artist gain the skills to make that happen, and translate a static image into something extraordinary. In this way, each process can complement the other. Yet, too often, painting from life proves to be a luxury. With the rigors of academic studies and part-time work, it is beyond challenging to find the hours to paint studies and preliminary works from observation. This is an unavoidable handicap for someone from my socio-economic class. Using photography in a greater role for reference becomes a necessary compromise — until something gives.

A hunt for a moment won’t necessarily be successful. They are impossible to predict. You’re lucky if you can score a single one per outing. On this day, I got one while I was getting
coverage of textures. I was struck by the color interplay of a John Deere metal trailer (which is a rich shade of kelly green) and the triangular orange sign mounted to it, which is a symbol that indicates a slow moving vehicle. The color harmony and strong geometrics instantly made me think of it as a variation on Malevich’s Suprematist compositions — albeit much richer, and formed by happenstance. I started taking pictures of it from various vantage points. Then, serendipity arrived. People started walking right by the trailer, moving from one bidding location to another. It was the opportunity to get a figure in the frame with this already-interesting composition. I would only have a fraction of a second to capture someone as they walked by. Incredibly, after only a few shots, I got one that I knew was something precious. Without the aid of the camera, this fleeting moment simply could not have been captured for reference. I caught the profile of an older man in a royal blue ball cap and sunglasses at the lower right corner of the frame. In a painting, this would allude to several genres from art history: Suprematism, Realism, Impressionism, and classic portraiture. And, it is also subversive; while the origin of portraiture began with profiles of royalty and nobility — matching the images found on coinage — this image presents a laborer of the contemporary working class. Meanwhile, no prior knowledge of these art historical references is necessary for an audience to apprehend the image. The subtext is there, though is not required to evaluate its aesthetic merits.

I’ve decided to title this painting Mobility. It is on a large canvas mounted to large stretcher bars that I lucked into when scavenging my undergrad campus after fleet week in 2021 (otherwise, I simply can not
afford to work at this scale). It measures 70” high 70” wide, putting it in conversation with Dutch paintings from the 17th Century. Intimidated by the size, I decided to make two smaller study paintings to work out the colors and general approach. They were successful, in a looser style than I usually paint in. When I got to work on the large canvas in the studio, I ran into a dilemma that has consistently become part of my process: I start with an underpainting made with high-impact colors complementary to those of the planned final colors. What tends to happen is that these underpaintings will have some aesthetic merit, and often generate favorable responses from my peers and/or faculty. That makes it difficult to know how to proceed; to depart from the original plan by letting process steer the result, or to have faith in the original scheme and see it through. (It prompts an artist to reflect on Kandinsky’s principle of “Inner Necessity”; that the surface merits of a given work are not enough. It must also have a noteworthy effect on a person, driven by soulful forces within an artist. This establishes a conduit with a viewer. The response is what justifies the work’s existence and establishes its aesthetic merit.) For Mobility, the underpainting made me think twice, even though the study sketches were successful. Ultimately, I decided to stick with the original plan. Working at this large scale for the first time, I noticed how different it felt right away; using large synthetic filberts sized 20, 16, and 12, the marks were varied — probably in part due to the sheer mass of space to cover. I let my intuition into the process sooner than usual, resulting in marks that Andrew Woolbright noticed to be nearly calligraphic in form. When it came time to cover the underpainting with the final color scheme, I adapted a technique that I learned from Andrew.
Tischler in one of his tutorial videos. When mixing skin tones, he makes three gradients: Burnt Umber to Transparent Oxide Yellow, Burnt Umber to Quinacridone Magenta, and Burnt Sienna to Cadmium Lemon; under each string, a band of 50% Titanium White and 50% Cremnitz White is used to create a range of values from those gradients. From there, additional pigments can be added to create all sorts of variations on the hues. I used this technique (with other pigments replacing Burnt Umber and Burnt Sienna) for the flesh tones on the man in the painting — though I also adapted it for other elements. For the green masses that comprise much of the painting, I created two gradients: Phthalo Green to Permanent Green Light to Cobalt Teal, and Transparent Oxide Red to Sap Green to India Yellow, with a band of white next to each to make for a range of values. This technique created a wide array of greens, which helped establish greater visual interest in the large swaths of color — and invited intuition into the process once more. For the electric orange triangle that complements the green so well, I used a blend of Permanent Orange (which, surprisingly, is noticeably brighter than Cadmium Orange) and Cadmium Yellow. For the weathered red frame, I used Scarlet Lake instead of Cadmium Red Light (which I find to be overpowering to other pigments) and scumbled in a pale blend of Titanium White, Cobalt Teal, and Transparent Oxide Red, wet-into-wet. This created a satisfying interplay between saturated warm tones and subdued cool tones.

The story was different for Too Late Marlene, a tightly-composed portrait on a 32” wide x 56” high canvas. It is the first painting I’ve made under the influence of contemporary artist Casey Baugh; I tried techniques he uses, including drippy washes and flicking paint.
with large brushes. Unlike Baugh, I used an acidic transparent palette of lime greens, fuchsias, yellows, and violets. The result is something that one of my peers, Eileen Townsend, described as “sci-fi” in tone. The origin of this painting came from an experience I had with my friend named Marlena. It happened to be my birthday, on the final weekend of my seasonal gig at the New York Renaissance Faire as a face painter and henna artist. Marlena, also a worker at the Faire, came by to get some henna done so we would have time to visit. The sun was going down, so we were in the midst of the golden afternoon light of early autumn. She told me of how she was preparing to leave the area and her dead-end waitressing job to find her destiny in Nashville, and made indications of the personal demons that had been haunting her. When I was done with the henna, I took some photos of her. There was something in her eyes that seemed to carry the weight of all that we had spoken of, particularly the twin forces of excitement and fear of the unknown that were looming. It is from that conversation and photo that this painting eventually developed. Quite possibly the greatest birthday gift I’ve ever received.

My senior project from my undergraduate experience was titled Mud Bog. It focused on the social and economic realities that present-day Americans living in rural communities endure, and how circumstances beyond their control have prodded them toward narcissistic displays — which can often be troubling expressions of darkness and intolerance. My intent was to shed light on the conditions that have contributed to the current rancorous state of political and cultural division — as well as the forces that exacerbate and intensify that chasm. I feel uniquely qualified to take on this subject matter, since I grew up in exactly the kind of rural setting that I examine with this work. Yet, I have always felt alien to rural America — even as I was immersed in it. Writer Joseph O’Neill has identified status as an insider/outsider to be a favorable position for an artist; I certainly am that when it comes to the realm I am portraying in my work. The ambition behind Mud Bog was to promote a substantive conversation that would be accessible to people in the very demographic I was illustrating. I saw nothing to be gained by driving the already-deep wedge between social groups even further, or to preach to the converted. In Mud Bog, familiar figures and forms are presented in ways that are realistic, yet also markedly askew from what we are accustomed to. With often unexpected, semantic use of color, the paintings were composed to make the audience think twice — and keep thinking, long after viewing the paintings. Some of those formal and thematic elements remain in my current work, Mobility Blues, though some have shifted. When it comes to color, the heat vision inspired chromatic colors have given way to richer, more convincing treatments; the bright, unreal colors
have moved to the underpaintings, where they serve more complete, cohesive visual statements. Over time, I began to view the high-impact color treatment as a bit gimmicky — an unconscious concession to the forces at the Bard studio arts program to give the work an off-the-wall element. And, truthfully, I had yet to really learn command of color mixing and even some very basic skills related to oil painting.

My work has made a progression to its present point — moving from the overtly topical to something much more subtle. I’m embarrassed to admit that my first ideas were a lot more mean-spirited, meant to lampoon and insult the kind of Trump-voting people that I grew up surrounded by. I’m sure there was an element of adolescent score-settling involved with that, along with the influence of the leftist academic bubble that I was immersed in at the time. However, when I started doing the field work, I noticed my conscience intervening. Even though I went in with the less-than-honorable intent of gathering evidence of collective ignorance and stupidity, the human moments intervened. This might best be encapsulated by a moment I captured at the Broome County Fair in the summer of 2018, and presented in my painting titled *Father & Son*. After a full day gathering material, the sun was going down — which meant I was losing light for photography. It was time to pack up and roll out. I did have the presence of mind to keep my camera on as I made my exit — just in case providence granted me more material in those final moments. As luck would have it, I spotted this guy wearing a confrontational nationalist t-shirt — and holding a young boy, most likely his son. I snapped a few shots, and came up with a winner. There’s something about adding kids to the mix that reveals complexities. I know my impression of the guy would have been different if he were not holding the child, obviously with a great deal of tenderness and affection. An image that would have been a poke at what I’d judged as an obnoxious sentiment became something that taught me something as I was recording it.

*Father & Son*, Oil on Canvas, 48”x37.5”, 2019
Other paintings have been more pointedly topical — referring explicitly to the proliferation of Confederate memorabilia, the 2017 Unite the Right Rally, and the Jussie Smollett controversy. These days, I find that there is little to be gained by presenting statements that add fuel to the already-blazing cultural fire we are currently enduring. Better to focus on moments that telegraph a common humanity, and can be interpreted as contemporary portals into the eternal.

The contemporary trend towards unconventional materials, shapes, dimensions, and mixing of media seems needlessly desperate and gimmicky to me. Oil painting is infinite — if you’re up to the challenge, and your work has purposiveness. With this in mind, I have kept this project on traditional stretched canvas, either square or rectangular. For the first time, however, I am working in large scale format; the smallest canvas will be 42” x 74”, and the largest will be 70”x80”. This is a progression and a challenge, as it demands different, more physical kinds of mark making; in addition to big brushes, I’m using rags, knives, trowels, wire brushes, wax paper and more to render, wipe, scrape, pounce, and spatter marks. I’m aiming for realism, poetry, variety, and texture.

The largest of the new paintings also had its genesis at the aforementioned Broome County Fair of 2018. I came across a carnival ride designed for young children, probably age 6 at the oldest. The theme of the ride and the aesthetics of its presentation struck me immediately. In arched capital marquee letters, it read “CONVOY” and featured a red freight truck emerging from an idyllic American landscape of too-perfect, too-brightly colored mountains and pine trees under a cyan blue sky with plastic white clouds. It worked as a piece of folk art itself. I knew there was something worthwhile there aesthetically, though I did not fully recognize the rich potential of the scene until much later. My grandfather was a lifelong truck driver with a sixth-grade education. I knew that vocation made for a hard-knock life that was tough on family relations. In addition, I’ve been familiar with several other people in that line of work over my lifetime. That job has cruel ironies baked into it. Truckers travel all over the country,
yet they never really get to see or experience the places they travel to; what they do experience is grueling hours behind the wheel, rolling on asphalt, and the labor of loading and unloading cargo at loading bays. Their efforts to provide a “good life” for their families is at the expense of family connection, with the road stealing precious time away from them. The concept behind this ride was an obvious attempt to appeal to the pride of truckers, to portray that vocation as an appealing, even fun, way to make a living. As in the cold reality, the vehicles in the ride travel in circles — never really going anywhere. Just an endless Sisyphean existence, made palatable to impressionable youth.

This painting, titled Convoy, needed more than just the scene from the photograph — though I didn’t know what to add. The answer came in the fall of 2020, when I took American Art as part of this program, with Kerry Carso (now an external advisor for this project). Among the stimulating, accomplished art surveyed in this course was an 1860 landscape by Frederic Church titled Twilight in the Wilderness. It features shades of red and blue accenting dark, foreboding altocumulus clouds. Flanking each end of the painting are twisted, partially-stripped trees. The statement is a reflection of the political rancor of the time; the Civil War would begin the next year. It struck me to quote that painting as a recognition of the parallel to current events. I wasn’t yet consciously aware that Church’s dour landscape would serve as an effective counterpoint to the naïve synthetic aesthetic of the carnival ride artwork; that realization came much later. Having never painted a landscape before, I was terrified at the prospect. I knew I needed to do a color study so that I would know what I was in for when I started the large canvas. The sketch was a success, and gave me the confidence I needed to proceed. It was only when I was well into the work of the painting that I
realized I was making an homage not only to Church, though also to the unknown painter of that carnival ride (unexpectedly, this segment of the image was also the most difficult to paint). This discovery is yet another example of class issues being present in my work — Church, a man of privilege who went on to make extraordinary works that are still of renown, and this anonymous painter of this traveling amusement show, likely a hired gun now forgotten. On the advice of Robin Arnold, I dug deeper to see if I could find more evidence of the art that went along with the Convoy ride. As it happens, I found about a half-dozen other variations of the ride; yet, only the one I encountered featured the synthetic landscape that was such an effective mirror image to Church’s *Twilight in the Wilderness*.

In the years since I encountered that ride in 2018, the notion of a convoy has taken on more meanings. For me, it also has a layer of nostalgia; as a kid, I loved the novelty hit “Convoy” by C.W. McCall from the 1970s CB radio craze. The new developments are, sadly, less lighthearted. Leading up to the 2020 Presidential election, supporters of Donald Trump formed convoys of pickup trucks all around the country, decked with patriotic and partisan flags, making a show of themselves on streets and highways. Some of them would cruise the streets near precincts on Election Day, blaring their horns as they passed by at low speeds.
From their point of view, it was a patriotic display of support for the then-President. To their political opposition, it read as an act of intimidation. And, of course, there was the subsequent “Freedom Convoy” controversy of early 2022, in which some truckers protested laws requiring drivers hauling goods between Canada and the United States to be vaccinated against COVID-19. The focus of the movement quickly expanded to include opposition to all restrictions related to the pandemic. I knew that these political associations would be relatively fresh on the minds of the audience when the show would be mounted, and that they potentially add other layers of meaning. That said, the genesis of the painting took hold long before any of those events happened.

Why are present-day Americans so bitterly divided on the basis of politics, class, and identity? How is art pursued and perceived by different socio-economic classes? Who is art for? Who gets to be an artist? I grew up in a house located between two dairy farms in rural New York State — and struggled as an introverted creative type. After this formative experience, and then spending decades in dead-end jobs, I witnessed what most Americans are going through, and how they cope. In recent years, I started my college education at a rust-belt community college that reflected the learned helplessness of the population. Then, thanks to a large scholarship, I transferred to an elite private liberal arts college, where ¾ of the student body came from extraordinarily wealthy families. It was an experience that marked a sharp contrast to everything I had previously known. Having been immersed in both extremes of our divided population, I believe I have a unique and valuable perspective. Of the people across the socio-economic spectrum, each has their virtues, their faults, and their foibles. We need to learn to communicate with each other.

Even though this project is about other people on the surface, I’ve discovered that I am also working out my own personal baggage in the process. As part of my research, I made several trips to the small town where I grew up. I strategically visited during events that would have an abundance of visual signifiers, as well as large representative crowds: farm equipment auctions and county fairs. I also did interviews with people in that community, including a pivotal conversation with a childhood neighbor who grew up as a tenant farmer. In addition, I always kept my eyes open for other potential material in the environment to document and serve as points of departure for paintings. This subject matter also allows a clear pathway for memory, experience, and observations.
With the archive I drew upon for this project — plus my own observations — I have arrived at a place of recognizing the coagulation of the sum of my experiences and the common threads of the art that moves me. I’ve realized that, even when approaching the topical, there is an element of the timeless and sublime that I am reaching for. This creates an imperative for me to find ways of aesthetically reconciling these disparate influences. In a tangible way, I am also declaring that my background and personal observations are worthy of being represented as works of art — even though the culture depicted is largely ignored or derided by the institution.

After attending the annual Farm Equipment Auction in 2021, I was driving on Route 79 from my former hometown of Lisle, NY to Ithaca, NY. It was a scenic Americana drive that I knew well, though I kept my eyes open. I’m glad I did. When passing the Lisle Fire Station, I noticed mounds of worn-out tires at the end of the large parking lot. Sensing something interesting, I doubled back to take pictures. In one heap, there was a single large tire standing straight up in the midst of the other tires — as if someone placed it that way, which was quite unlikely. Even the Michelin branding was upright, as if on display to read. The tire was clearly bigger than that for a passenger vehicle, most likely the size for an 18-wheeler. Conveniendly, this tied the composition to Convoy, and compounded its theme. All that comes from those endless miles are worn-out, wasteful circular remnants — as empty as the center of a spent tire. This one is titled Mileage, and measures 60” wide x 55” high.
By using field sketches and location photos, I have the ingredients to compose blueprints for larger works on canvas with oil paints. I adapt those raw materials by remixing them with thumbnail sketches or using Photoshop to make adjustments. The goal is to have a solid point of departure to make a satisfying composition. Once a satisfactory blueprint is ready, that allows for the spirit to once again enter the room. Intuition and feeling are free to intervene. With the language of paint, I am allowed to depart from the script. The element of chance can be introduced, yet never allowed to completely take over. It is a dance of Yin and Yang, of the conscious and unconscious, of the rational mind and the dreaming mind.

The paintings in this project share common thematic and aesthetic threads, though each work comes from a different angle. The mark making, palette, and relative scale will announce them as being of the same hand. The variety in compositions, points of view, and focal points will allow for a stimulating juxtaposition of images — inviting a close reading from the viewer to find the common threads.

My project is in a traditional form, with no special or gimmicky stunts regarding presentation. As long as the work is competently hung and lit (which I have no doubt of), the merit of the paintings will speak to the viewer.
I am proud that my work to date has been well-received equally by the layman as well as by academics. This is something I take as a sign of success. If a viewer is educated in art history, they will find allusions in my work. However, those connections are not necessary to apprehend and appreciate the work. A key part of my ethos is making art accessible to all audiences (not just the wealthy and the privileged) — without compromising aesthetic ambition. So, with all due respect to Scott Hall, who I ran into at the 2021 Annual Farm Equipment Auction, there was something worth taking pictures of there — and also things well worth making paintings of.
Books/Articles/Databases


*Bravura: Virtuosity and Ambition in Early Modern European Painting* - Nicola Suthor, Princeton University Press, 2021

*Traditional Oil Painting* - Virgil Elliott, Echo Point. 2019

*ARh+* - H.R. Giger, Taschen, 1997

*The War of Art* - Steven Pressfield, Black Irish Entertainment, 2011

*The Mission of Art* - Alex Grey, Shambhala, 2018

*Concerning the Spiritual in Art* - Vasily Kandinsky, Dover, 2012


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*Steal Like An Artist* - Austin Kleon, Workman Publishing, 2012

*Art & Fear* - David Bayles and Ted Orland, Image Continuum Press, 2001


*Art and the Sublime: Terror, Torment, and Transcendence* - Christine Riding, Tate Britain, 2010

*Painting People: Figure Painting Today* - Charlotte Mullins, Distributed Art Publications, 2006

*The Rebirth of Painting in the Late 20th Century* - Donald Kuspit, Cambridge University Press, 2000

“Back to the Drawing Board”, Leah Ollman, Los Angeles Times, March 6, 2005

“I Don’t Go to Crisis Just Yet: Four Painters Discuss the Rise of Figurative Painting”,
Jason Stopa, Momus, April 30, 2021

Meditation for Artists - The Automatic Drawing Technique,
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