

## ANDREA JOHNSON

*Salinas Valley, 2013*  
acrylic on canvas, 24 x 36 in



courtesy: Winfield Gallery

## Living Steinbeck: Dan White in conversation with John Steinbeck scholar Susan Shillinglaw

**T**o mark the 75th anniversary of *The Grapes of Wrath*, I got back in touch with my former colleagues at San Jose State University, where I was a Steinbeck fellow in 2007–2008. Susan Shillinglaw is a scholar in residence of the National Steinbeck Center in Salinas, a recent President's Scholar Award honoree, and a professor of English and comparative literature at SJSU. She marked the anniversary with a new book, *On Reading The Grapes of Wrath*. We talked about the origins of *The Grapes of Wrath*, and the reasons it continues to enchant, infuriate, and inspire generations of readers.

—Dan White

**Dan White:** Any Californian who is reading *The Grapes of Wrath* on its seventy-fifth anniversary can't miss the parallels between the Dust Bowl and our nightmarish drought.

**Susan Shillinglaw:** Steinbeck writes about the uncertainty of moving west, the sense that anyone coming to the west confidence in success, anyone who doesn't take into account weather patterns and cycles of rain and drought, is foolish—like Joseph Wayne in *To a God Unknown*. For Steinbeck, water is part of the story of the West. While migrants are tremendously optimistic, the land doesn't always yield expectations placed upon it. The dreams and visions don't take into account the whole picture.

**DW:** I just finished reading your book about reading *Grapes*, and one new concept for me was the idea of the book having “five layers,” and how this seems to have come from his close friendship and professional relationship with the marine biologist Ed Ricketts. Did Steinbeck own up to that influence? Has he said there's this way of reading and interpreting the book that comes directly from observing the natural world?

**SS:** I'm theorizing a bit, but this idea is based on conversations they had throughout the thirties. Ed Ricketts was always looking, always cataloguing things: invertebrates, approaches to ecology, friends' personalities, poets. What they discussed together was a way of observing the world, which is not top down, not humans dominating