

## WARREN CHANG

*Lunch Break, 2014*  
oil on canvas, 24 x 40 in



courtesy: Winfield Gallery

## OCTAVIO SOLIS

# On the Mother Road

Last October, I rode with the Joad family across the country to California. Yes, it was a virtual trip that we all undertake when we read John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. But it was also a literal journey. As part of an extraordinary venture put together by the National Steinbeck Center to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the publication of his seminal novel of the great "Okie" migration, I was invited to join their staff and two other artists, Patricia Wakida and P.J. Palmer, on a ten-day road trip tracking the Joad family's fictional exodus from Sallisaw, Oklahoma, to Bakersfield, California. Eleven of us took an RV and a van and rode through most of what remains of Route 66 across five states, gathering stories and documenting impressions of our new America.

Each day yielded new adventures. All along the way, our community partners set us up with people to talk to for our oral history segments, and we conducted over seventy interviews through the west. We documented first-hand experiences with the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, but we also heard more contemporary stories of hard times, addiction, homelessness, isolation, and disenfranchisement that made deep impressions on us all. We also conducted our own workshops for the communities we visited: Ms. Wakida held a few sessions in linoleum printmaking; Mr. Palmer and his crew executed a fascinating series of exercises in film- and video-making; and I taught a one-day writing workshop. We also participated in myriad other events—from aiding a balloon crew at the Albuquerque Hot Air Balloon Festival, to singing campfire songs in Palo Duro Canyon while the coyotes yipped in the distance, to milking goats and mucking horse stalls at the Flip Flop Ranch in the Mojave Desert. It was truly a remarkable trip.

But the point of the whole experience was to form an artistic response both to the novel and to the journey itself. For a few weeks, I was at a loss about what to do. I couldn't form a single notion around where to frame a new play. Then I recalled an interview we had on our last day, with a young man whom we met on the grounds of the Sunset Camp in Weedpatch, California. It was the same federally run camp that the Joads would find safe haven in, only this time the residents were all Mexican migrants with guest-worker visas. The young man, Jorge, had been one of them earlier in his life. He spoke about his time on

the campo, how it had changed so much since he'd been there last, and how he'd met and lost his girlfriend there; and he recited some of his beautiful spoken-word pieces for us. But the most striking thing he said was that he was the new Tom Joad. He knew the novel well and admired its vision and deeply rooted humanism, and considered all the migrant workers today to be the true heirs to that "Okie" legacy. It was then I knew what my work would be about.

What if Tom Joad's true blood relative is a dark-skinned American like the young man I met? What if there is a farm in Oklahoma that calls this Joad Chicano back? What if an old dying Joad who never followed the original family out of Oklahoma has to ride with and come to terms with this new Joad and the changing world he carries in his eyes? What if the journey this time traces the Joad trip backwards from Bakersfield to Sallisaw on sleek interstate freeways lined with Ramada Inns and Radisson Hotels, IHOPs and Denny's restaurants? Paradigms shift, tipping points tip, and people absorb the changes that seem to race by like traffic, or they get left behind. I felt my story taking the shape of the Mother Road, and I chose to title it so.

But on this Mother Road, there are instances where the past comes in contact with the present and in this palimpsest between Steinbeck's novel and my play, I hope some inkling of the future is revealed, some message of our common brotherhood and our evolving stewardship of the land. I don't pretend to match Steinbeck's towering literary prowess, but I do feel a responsibility to his vision of a more compassionate society responsive to the times. And that's the ride I take with him.

**Octavio Solis** is a playwright and director living in San Francisco. His works *Se Llama Cristina* (an NNPN Rolling World Premiere), *Cloudlands* (with Adam Gwon, composer), John Steinbeck's *The Pastures of Heaven*, *Ghosts of the River*, *Quixote*, *Lydia*, *June in a Box*, *Lethe*, *Marfa Lights*, *Gibraltar*, *The Ballad of Pancho and Lucy*, *The 7 Visions of Encarnación*, *Bethlehem*, *Dreamlandia*, *El Otro*, *Man of the Flesh*, *Prospect*, *El Paso Blue*, *Santos & Santos*, and *La Posada Mágica* have been mounted at theatres across the country. He is the recipient of a National Theatre Artists Residency Grant from TCG and the Pew Charitable Trusts, and has also just been awarded a United States Artists Fellowship for 2012. Solis is a Thornton Wilder Fellow for the MacDowell Colony, a New Dramatists alum, and a member of the Dramatists Guild. His new anthology, *The River Plays*, has been published by NoPassport Press. He is currently working on commissions for the Magic Theatre in San Francisco and the Yale Repertory Theatre.

## from Mother Road

*(Two old men standing in the middle  
of the Sunset Migrant Camp.)*

ROGER: You're not gonna like it.

WILLIAM: I'm not liking much these days. Where is he?

ROGER: He's on his way.

WILLIAM: How is it so damned hot? I didn't figure California got this hot. Grass is all yellow.

ROGER: They stayed in this camp, you know. Back then. 'Course it's different people now. The place is all changed, houses razed and rebuilt. But this is where your Joads lived a spell.

WILLIAM: You don't have to tell me that.

ROGER: Anyway, I figured you should come down and meet him personally.

WILLIAM: Why?

ROGER: 'Cause it's a big deal and you may not like it.

WILLIAM: I just need to know it's him.

ROGER: I'm pretty sure it is.

WILLIAM: So why did you need me to come down—

ROGER: Dammit, I'm tellin' you—

WILLIAM: —So tell me. Is it him!

ROGER: Look, you hire me to do a job, I do it. I come west with nothin' but a pile of pictures and some rumors. I go up and down the Central Valley asking the last remaining tag ends of our Okie brethren, do you know him, have you seen him, do you know what become of him? Some say, oh he long dead. Died at the hands of union busters. Some say he did time in Soledad. So I go to the Department of Corrections but Thomas Joad ain't in any of their