

Art in America

REAL WORK

By Rachel Wetzler September 1, 2020 1:30pm



Aliza Nisenbaum: *London Underground: Brixton Station and Victoria Line Staff*, 2019, oil on polyester, 74 ¾ by 142 ½ inches. COURTESY ART ON THE UNDERGROUND, LONDON, AND ANTON KERN GALLERY, NEW YORK.

The Realist movement begins in earnest with an image of work. In an 1849 letter to the critic Francis Wey, Gustave Courbet describes the painting he has just completed:

On one side is an old man of seventy, bent over his work, his sledgehammer raised, his skin parched by the sun, his head shaded by a straw hat; his trousers, of coarse material, are completely patched; and in his cracked sabots you can see his bare heels sticking out of socks that were once blue. On the other side is a young man with swarthy skin, his head covered with dust; his disgusting shirt all in tatters reveals his arms and parts of his back; a leather suspender holds up what is left of his trousers, and his mud-caked leather boots show gaping holes on every side. . . . Alas! In this class, this is how one begins, and that is how one ends.¹

Rendered on a scale conventionally reserved for history painting, *The Stonebreakers* depicts the lowliest of subjects in both senses of the term: in place of the grand battle, the classical allegory, the royal retinue, Courbet offers the everyday grind of labor—and not just any labor, but the kind performed only by the truly desperate. The two men eke out a living by breaking up stones into the gravel used to pave roads; they are, in a sense, the workers who make all other work possible.

Courbet tells Wey that he encountered the stonebreakers by chance on the side of the road and saw in them “the most complete expression of poverty.” But equally consequential is what he writes next: “I made a date to meet them in my studio the following morning.”²² As Courbet’s letter makes clear, he is concerned with specifics—the faded blue sock, the single suspender—in a way that compels him to paint these stonebreakers rather than an artist’s model in dress-up. Yet the end result is far from an exact transcription of appearances. Courbet doesn’t so much depict a scene of rough labor as convey the essence of roughness and laboriousness. “This is a painting whose subject is the material weight of things, the pressure of a bending back or the quarter-inch thickness of coarse cloth,” T.J. Clark writes in his 1973 study of Courbet, *Image of the People*. “Not the back’s posture or the forms of cloth in movement, but the back itself and the cloth in its own right.”²³ Painted amid the tumult of the 1848 Revolution and its aftermath, a moment when class hierarchies and alliances were in flux, Courbet’s stonebreakers appear at once as themselves—two men glimpsed on the side of the road—and as the social fissures of the Second Republic personified. At the same time, the depiction of work implicitly doubles as a proposition about the artist’s labor. Crudely applying paint to canvas with a palette knife, Courbet polemically casts himself as a manipulator of earthly matter, staging a provocative juxtaposition—if not implying an equivalence as such—between *the stonebreakers’* task and his own.

For Courbet and his fellow travelers in the nineteenth century, the unvarnished portrayal of labor was a fundamentally contemporary subject, one that telegraphed democratic allegiances, a commitment to empirical observation, and a desire to extrapolate from those observations some general picture of society as it existed during a period of profound transformation.

In their overwhelming focus on the rural peasantry, Realist painters captured the last gasps of a class on the verge of disappearance, registering the turbulent reordering of everyday life that accompanied industrialization, perhaps most evident in the mass migration of provincial peasants to urban centers: today’s stonebreaker, sower, or gleaner is tomorrow’s factory worker (an inevitability registered in the anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s comment that the arms of the older man in *The Stonebreakers* “rise and fall with the regularity of a lever”²⁴). Though Realism as a coherent movement ends in the late nineteenth century, the realist impulse persists, splintering off into a plurality of “realisms.” This



Gustave Courbet: *The Stonebreakers*, 1849, oil on canvas, 65 by 94 inches.



Jean-François Millet: *The Gleaners*, 1857, oil on canvas, 327/8 by 431/4 inches.

COURTESY MUSÉE D'ORSAY, PARIS

realist impulse would return most forcefully in the 1930s, another moment of dramatic instability, when the foundations of social and economic life were crumbling.

As with nineteenth-century Realism, social realist artists in the twentieth century take up the portrayal of labor as a central theme, but adapt the worker's depiction to the particular anxieties of the Great Depression era—and, in the United States, to the historical anomaly of New Deal government patronage. At the height of the Depression, when a quarter of the United States was unemployed and the continued viability of American industry—if not capitalism altogether—seemed genuinely open to question, Social Realist painters and documentary photographers valorized the worker, alternately positioned as a revolutionary driver of history, a martyr to economic inequity, and a stabilizing emblem of patriotic fortitude.

Thus it isn't surprising that the subject of work would return as a central preoccupation of contemporary artists after the 2008 financial crisis. If the recession drew the public's attention to the absurdist logic of financialization, it also accelerated a process set in motion in the 1970s and '80s: the reorganization of work around contingent, precarious, and "flexibilized" labor across the professional spectrum, from management consultants and start-up software engineers to Uber drivers and Amazon warehouse workers.⁵ As a result, the twenty-first-century worker is a figure of contradiction: work has come to colonize virtually all facets of life, to the extent that labor and leisure are often indistinguishable, while the concept of stable, full-time employment lurches toward obsolescence. For vast swaths of the population today, working life isn't a 9-to-5 job with benefits, but a collection of part-time positions, freelance gigs, and temporary contracts, punctuated by the unremunerated work of perpetual job hunting. The pandemic has only exaggerated the instability of contemporary work, imposing darkly ironic new bureaucratic categories: "essential" workers—including even minimum-wage, part-time grocery store cashiers—considered so societally necessary that they are virtually mandated to risk their lives for jobs that might not even give them health insurance; "inessential" workers, largely white-collar professionals capable of seamlessly transposing their offices to their homes, and already in some sense primed to do so by the normalization of perpetual availability enabled by smartphones and laptops; and the simply expendable, thrust into unemployment in the midst of a crisis with no end in sight.

Contemporary artists have adopted strikingly different approaches to contend with the instability of twenty-first-century economic life. Some have responded through a kind of abstraction of work itself, focusing instead on its evolving infrastructure: Liam Gillick's generically modernist plexiglass-and-aluminum structures that allude to the utopian aesthetics of de Stijl, the Bauhaus, and Constructivism as they trickle down into the bland placelessness of the service economy cubicle; Yuri Pattison's networked environments, like "user, space" at Chisenhale Gallery in 2016, a mock coworking space replete with slick minimalist office furniture, air-filtering plants, and computer-controlled smart lighting; Simon Denny's installations that mimic displays at tech industry conferences and trade shows.

Another response has been to reflexively engage with the precariousness of "artist" as a profession. In the practices that art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson describes as "occupational realism," artists unable to make a living in the field with which they professionally identify have recast the day jobs they take on out of necessity as artwork, emblemized by a project like Ben Kinmont's *Sometimes a nicer sculpture is being able to provide a living for your family* (1998–ongoing), in which Kinmont's actual, income-generating bookselling business doubles as a long-term endurance performance.⁶ For Bryan-Wilson, such works are "realist" in multiple senses: on the one hand, paid labor is really performed, not merely mimed or acted out; at the same time, these performances articulate the multiple, shifting identities and self-identifications characteristic of precarious workers in general.

Over the past several years, however, an increasingly prominent group of artists, including Aliza Nisenbaum, Jordan Casteel, LaToya Ruby Frazier, and Kevin Jerome Everson, have taken up the aesthetic conventions

and formal traditions of realism, returning, in various ways, to the quintessentially realist form of the worker portrait. Though they engage knowingly, and in many cases overtly, with the realisms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these portraits are far more ambivalent about the portrayal of labor than their predecessors, as if registering the shifting ground of work today.

The return of realist aesthetics is most evident in the resurgence of figurative painting over the past decade, accompanied by a renewed interest in the twentieth-century realist tradition: in the past several years alone, there have been major exhibitions devoted to Social Realists like Alice Neel and Charles White, Regionalists like Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton, the Weimarer *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and Mexican Muralism, figures and movements long disregarded by historians of the avant-garde as minor deviations, or worse, conservative retrenchments. Much has been written about how this new generation of painters, many of them artists of color, attends to subjects historically neglected in portraiture, responding to the overwhelming whiteness of the art historical canon. As critic David Geers wrote in a 2017 *frieze* essay, the return of the figure today reflects an “eagerness to engage with our political moment without forfeiting the sensuousness of the medium,” prompting “critical questions concerning which bodies we depict, for whom and to what end.”⁷



Charles White: *Untitled (Four Workers)*, 1940, tempera on paperboard, 20 by 30 inches.

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In Casteel and Nisenbaum’s paintings, labor is often conspicuous in its absence: both have often positioned sitters adjacent to work, which is implied, but not shown. Though framed by the workplace, they are depicted in moments of respite or nonwork, if not necessarily leisure: the emphasis isn’t on the job, but the people who perform it. But work here is also a more elastic category than in previous realisms. Casteel and Nisenbaum don’t depict the kinds of subjects quintessentially associated with the category of “worker”—industrial or manual laborers—but street vendors and security guards, students and volunteers.

During a residency at the Minneapolis Institute of Art in 2017, Nisenbaum painted three large-scale portraits, depicting, respectively, the security guards at the museum, the Somali immigrant women who tended a community garden, and the senior citizens in a painting class at the Centro Tyrone Guzman, a Latino community center. Nisenbaum describes these as paintings of local communities, but they are also groups of people who work together, whether through formal employment or voluntary collaboration. In *Nimo, Sumiya, and Bisharo harvesting flowers and vegetables at Hope Community Garden* (2017), three women pose casually in the painting’s middle ground, the foreground dominated by the vibrant patch of blooming flowers they tend together, while the group of amateur artists depicted in *Wise Elders Portraiture Class at Centro Tyrone Guzman with En Familia hay Fuerza, mural on the history of immigrant farm labor to the United States* (2017) proudly hold up their sketches. In both paintings, Nisenbaum emphasizes the tangible results of her subjects’ shared efforts. Social bonds and collaborative work are framed as interdependent, subtly emphasized in the backdrop of the latter work, a social realist mural depicting migrant workers in the Midwest. Nisenbaum’s painting of the MIA security staff does not depict the workers in the galleries, but during their morning briefing in the guards’ lounge, comfortably posing with cups of coffee. The decision to represent the museum via its security guards rather than, for instance, its curators, is a pointed one, calling attention to the museum workers who most regularly interact with visitors but who are rarely credited as the institution’s public

face. At the same time, Nisenbaum represents them in their own space, replete with personalizing touches like a wall of pet pictures.

In 2019, commissioned to create a mural for London's Brixton Station, Nisenbaum produced a monumental group portrait featuring fifteen members of the Victoria Line underground staff, who volunteered in an open call. She worked at the station for three months in a makeshift studio, first photographing the sitters together in the station, and then painting each one individually from life. In the resulting painting, an enlarged reproduction of which was installed at the station's entrance, the figures appear in uniform, organized into loose groupings across the length of the horizontal composition. Though the sitters are posed on the train platform, their arrangement has the relaxed manner of the break room: one figure leans against a wall, another sits backward in a chair. As in her portrait of the museum security guards, Nisenbaum captures a kind of interstitial moment between work and rest.

Nisenbaum's group portraits explicitly position individuals within institutions—and in turn represent institutions as a collection of individuals. By contrast, Casteel's portraits of street vendors and small-business owners in Harlem, which she began painting in 2015 during a residency at the Studio Museum, trace a more nebulous network of relationships, developed through casual everyday proximity. Casteel originally studied sociology before shifting her focus to art, and traces of that training are evident in her practice: though most of her portraits depict single sitters, they are always positioned in relation to the broader social, cultural, and physical context of Harlem, anchored by the distinct rhythms of its street life. As the scholar Sarah Lewis has noted, these paintings are "as much figurative portraits as they are composites of an often-invisible network of exchange," undergirded by Harlem's "fragile economies," both in the nature of the work they depict and the kind of interpersonal transactions that structure their making, a result of Casteel embedding herself within the social fabric of the neighborhood.⁸



Aliza Nisenbaum: *Morning Security Briefing at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Basement Door Open onto the Guard Lounge Pet Wall*, 2017, oil on linen, 75 by 95 inches.
COURTESY MINNEAPOLIS INSTITUTE OF ART AND ANTON KERN GALLERY, NEW YORK

Casteel paints from photographs, often taking a hundred or more pictures each of sitters in their environment to use as reference images. As a result, her paintings retain a sense of the observational quality of street photography, evident in slightly skewed compositions that hint at activity just outside the frame. In *James* (2015), her first Harlem portrait, a sharply dressed man selling CDs outside Sylvia's restaurant is comfortably perched on a stool on the sidewalk, framed by apartment blocks and passing cars, ambient neighborhood texture that firmly locates the portrait in a particular time and place.

At the same time, these works are resolutely paintings, invested with the monumentality the medium affords. This is partly, but not exclusively, an effect of scale: the portraits are life-size or larger, presenting figures often glimpsed in passing on the street in a way that commands the viewer's attention. But the works also make clear that the sitters have commanded Casteel's attention. We register Casteel's labor as a kind of concretized time, itself a proposition about value. Often, she leaves some areas of the composition loosely sketched, a tactic that more emphatically directs the viewer to the details that have been carefully reproduced, like the framed pictures

on the walls in *Benyam* (2018), a portrait of the eponymous Harlem Ethiopian restaurant's three sibling-owners, contrasting with the schematic rendering of the glassware stacked behind the bar.

In an interview with curator Massimiliano Gioni published in the catalogue of her recent New Museum solo show, "Within Reach," Casteel denies that she set out to depict street sellers in particular: "I didn't choose people based on their profession. I chose them for their energy, for the life they were giving."⁹ Casteel celebrates the ingenuity involved in the sellers' makeshift store fixtures—the way the sitter in *Charles* (2016) has turned a free-newspaper street-corner box into a sidewalk display rack for fur hats, or the colorful arrangement of glass objects that Glass Man Michael "curates," in Casteel's words,¹⁰ on his folding table, depicted in a 2016 painting—and the way that the merchants have carved out space for themselves on the streets, though economic reality hovers at the margins. Behind the Glass Man's table is a for-rent storefront boarded up with plywood; a graffitied message reads "Harlem not for sale, fight back," a reminder of the gentrification that threatens to push these vendors out of the neighborhood. While she resolutely rejects any sense of pity or plight, Casteel doesn't deny or efface the tenuousness of the lives they have constructed.

Intentionally or not, Nisenbaum and Casteel offer a representative picture of the working class as it exists today. As literary scholar Annie McClanahan put it in a recent essay:

If the exemplary (if nowhere near exclusive) representative of industrial work in the first half of the twentieth century was a white, male, unionized manufacturing worker, the exemplary representative of work in the age of deindustrialization is non-white and female, working in the sphere of reproductive labor (teaching, child care, elder care, or nursing) or in low-end service work, for low wages and with little protection either by unions or the state.¹¹ Neither artist explicitly discusses her work in these terms; Casteel has in fact pushed back on suggestions that she is specifically concerned with class.¹² Nevertheless, the specter of work, and the implications of its absence, is a constant presence in these paintings. Their sitters never seem bored or miserable; they are, instead, dignified, comfortable, and self-possessed, implicitly proud of the work they do—traces of which they display for the viewer—but not wholly identified with it. This negotiation of labor extends to the artists' own methods: Casteel and Nisenbaum employ distinct approaches, but both maintain that the practice of painting involves more than the production of an object. Foregrounding the reciprocal transaction between artist and sitter, they conceive of portraiture as a tangible record of a social interaction or encounter as much as a representation of a person's likeness.



Jordan Casteel: *James*, 2015, oil on canvas, 72 by 56 inches.
COURTESY CASEY KAPLAN, NEW YORK.

In "The Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law," a two-part essay published in *Art in America* in 1973, Linda Nochlin argues that the Greenbergian dogma of modernist medium-specificity belonged to a longer history of the antagonism between realism and abstraction, or lowly matter and the rarefied ideal. "Realism, with its mundane attachment to the here and now, to the specific detail, to all that is transient, shifty, and shapeless, with its tendency to transubstantiate the surface and the medium into the simulacrum of life itself, has been a villain—in the original sense of the term—for a long time." The original meaning of the term was serf: realism, in the general sense of unidealized representations of the particular and the everyday, had historically been reserved for depicting "the lower orders of humanity," an association taken up by Realist painters in the nineteenth century as a self-conscious program to give iconic form to lives lived at the margins of society.¹³

Few today share Greenberg's enthusiasm for an art of pure opticality, and both Casteel and Nisenbaum have achieved significant commercial and critical success. But the dichotomy Nochlin identified persists in other terms: both artists' paintings are often narrowly discussed in terms of a politics of representation, praised for their humanizing, tender views of marginalized groups, especially Black men in Casteel's case, and immigrants in Nisenbaum's. That is, praised as straightforward, easy, even a little feel-good. On the other hand, the practices of artists like Denny, Pattison, and Gillick, who thematize the sterile, optimized environments of twenty-first-century knowledge-work and their abstract flows of capital and information, are framed as complex engagements with present-day political economy. Realist works transcribe and humanize; abstract environments comment and theorize. But perhaps it's the other way around. It is easy to locate the features of the present that feel flimsy and unreal because they're all around us; moreover, the contradictions are on right on the surface. Denny recently made a series of sculptures based on a design, patented by Amazon in 2016, for a motorized cage to transport workers around the company's distribution centers, making clear, perhaps inadvertently, that there is hardly any exacerbation or exaggeration of workplace cruelty an artist could invent that hasn't already been thought up by a corporate R&D department. What is harder to do is account for actual lives, for people who must navigate the broken world as it exists, with all the contradictions, negotiations, and compromises that entails.

While Nisenbaum and Casteel's portraits focus on service workers and the precariously self-employed, photographer LaToya Ruby Frazier's series "The Last Cruze" focuses on deindustrialization and its aftershocks, illustrating what happens when the bottom finally falls out in a factory town—in this case, Lordstown, Ohio, whose economy had long revolved around a General Motors plant that most recently produced the compact Chevy Cruze. In November 2018, Dave Green, the president of Local 1112 of the United Auto Workers was informed by GM management that the Cruze line was being discontinued and the plant would be "unallocated," a bureaucratic workaround that allowed GM to effectively close the factory without violating its union contract: the plant would not technically shut down, it just wouldn't have anything to make, and thus no need for any workers.¹⁴ After the announcement went public that Lordstown and four other GM plants would be unallocated, the company's stock price immediately shot up; meanwhile, the employees were faced with the



LaToya Ruby Frazier: *Cindy Higinbotham and Monet Hostutler, best friends and banner carriers, in the Lordstown High School band room, 2019, gelatin silver print, 20 by 16 inches.*

COURTESY GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE, NEW YORK AND ROME

wrenching choice of accepting offers of relocation to other GM plants, often hundreds of miles away from their homes, or staying put and hoping for the best, giving up their pensions and benefits.

Frazier documented the weeks leading up to the final Chevy Cruze rolling off the line in March 2019 and regularly returned to Lordstown for several months after, taking portraits of the workers and their families. The photographs are paired with text panels drawn from interviews she conducted with the sitters, in which they discuss their histories with the company, their anger—or resignation—in response to the closure of the factory, their anxieties about leaving friends and family behind. Though a selection of the photographs and interviews was originally published in the *New York Times Magazine* in 2018,¹⁵ Frazier takes care to distinguish what she is doing from photojournalism, with the position of detached objectivity that designation implies: "The Last Cruze" is an expression of solidarity from someone who has seen firsthand the social and economic wreckage a factory closure leaves behind. Frazier was born and raised in the former steel town of Braddock, Pennsylvania; her first major series, *The Notion of Family* (2001–14), extrapolated from autobiography, using her own family as embodiments of disinvestment in the Rust Belt and its consequent postindustrial deterioration.

Frazier conceived "The Last Cruze" in part as a corrective to mainstream media coverage, which framed the story of plant closures like Lordstown's as evidence of Donald Trump's broken promises to industrial workers and the duped Rust Belt voters who had apparently bought into his populist vision rather than one about corporate greed and the declining power of the labor movement.¹⁶ But it also pushes against stereotypes of blue-collar jobs more generally. In place of the mythical "white working class," Frazier offers a portrait of labor that is multiracial, young and old, male and female. Many of the sitters are openly critical of Trump, most poignantly in an interview with union president Dave Green's daughter as she tries to make sense of the president's attacking her father by name on Twitter.

One narrative running through "The Last Cruze" concerns intergenerational ties, many of the subjects being second- or third-generation GM workers, including several whose parents had been in management but nevertheless encouraged them to work on the shop floor. In a few images, Frazier projects archival photographs of previous generations of the plant's employees on the sitters, positioning the present-day workers as a kind of living archive of Lordstown—and labor—history.

When "The Last Cruze" debuted at the Renaissance Society in Chicago in 2019, Frazier displayed the photographs and text panels on a red armature that ran down the center of the gallery, illuminated by embedded fluorescent lights. Based on the form of the Lordstown plant's assembly-line carriers, with the photographs and texts suspended vertically between segments, the structure symbolizes the factory's role as the backbone of the community, both anchoring the town's economy and organizing the rhythms of its residents' lives. But the display structure, which Frazier considers integral to the work, also determines the viewer's encounter with the portraits, dictating a path through the photographs and preventing a detached, distanced approach; the panels are hung at intervals of roughly 40 inches, with the portraits placed at eye level, so the viewer must face them up close, head on.



View of Frazier's exhibition "The Last Cruze," 2019, at the Renaissance Society, University of Chicago. Photo Useful Art Services.

Because Frazier was barred from setting foot inside the Lordstown plant by GM management, none of the photographs in "The Last Cruze" depict work. But she turns this logistical obstruction into an advantage: shooting in the union hall, private homes, and public spaces, Frazier focuses less on the job itself than on a community confronting its imminent dissolution. At the same time, the broader economic and political context never recedes from view: "The Last Cruze" doesn't capture the plight of the poor disenfranchised worker so much as drive home the human cost of GM's corporate imperative to deliver returns to shareholders. Like Casteel and Nisenbaum, Frazier often portrays moments of intimacy, familiarity, and rest rather than toil, but her aims are more overtly agitational. This is a documentary about Lordstown, its community members, and her encounters with them, but it is also very consciously about the history and necessity of organized labor, a pedagogical project with an explicitly partisan angle.

Nothing much happens in Kevin Jerome Everson's film *Park Lanes* (2015). Or, more precisely, lots of things happen, but they never cohere into anything resembling a narrative arc. Instead, the film's structuring logic comes from without: the 8 hours of the factory shift. The film presents what appears to be an entire workday at a manufacturer of bowling alley equipment, unfolding in real time and uneventful in the manner of most workdays. Its monumental length compounds a sense of mundanity, at times even drudgery, rather than heroizing the workers on the factory floor. But it also expresses a sense of fundamental respect for the work being performed.

Everson has made more than one hundred films, so it is difficult to generalize about his practice. But a significant subset of his films are portraits of the Black working class as they work. A theme that emerges from them is the fallacy of "unskilled labor": he frames each job, no matter how ostensibly menial, as requiring its own particular technical expertise. Everson favors the long take, so we often see the same task performed repeatedly: one scene in *Quality Control* (2011), filmed at a dry cleaning shop in Alabama, for instance, lingers for several minutes on a woman sorting shirts with a kind of balletic precision; the short *Sound That* (2014) shows municipal workers in Cleveland listening for leaks in underground pipes. But whereas the repetitive nature of factory work and other forms of manual labor is often represented as soulless or deadening, it serves, in these films, as a means of emphasizing method or craft.

Though the aesthetic of Everson's films is largely observational, they are not straightforwardly documentary. He often scripts or stages scenes as he's shooting; several films have employed trompe l'oeil sculptural props—an iron, for instance, or a pair of binoculars—that he fabricates himself and that are, to the untrained eye, virtually indistinguishable from the real thing. However, the most quietly radical thing about Everson's films is that they never reveal the full context of the specific actions shown on-screen. We see the work in its granular particularity, but without elaboration: by the end of *Park Lanes*, the viewer has learned very little about how bowling equipment is made, let alone the people who make it.



LaToya Ruby Frazier: *Louis Robinson, Jr., UAW Local 1714, Recording Secretary, at UAW Local 1112 Reuther Scandy Alli union hall, (34 years in at GM Lordstown Complex, die setter), Lordstown, OH, 2019, gelatin silver print, 20 by 16 inches.*

COURTESY GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE, NEW YORK AND ROME

What characterizes these films is a kind of withholding: while Casteel, Frazier, and Nisenbaum elide labor in favor of portrayals of working people that capture something of their nonworking selves, Everson rarely offers any insight into the lives and identities of the people he films, even their names: there are no interviews or voiceovers in *Park Lanes*, *Sound That*, or *Quality Control*, only occasional snippets of workplace chatter, for which the viewer is given little in the way of context. Sometimes, the sound and image intentionally fall out of sync, so the viewer can see dialogue happening without being able to hear it, a formal gesture that starkly reminds us that we are being left out. What Everson shows, in other words, is all work, virtually nothing of the worker. But he doesn't depict these people as anonymized drones, flattened caricatures of labor: he doesn't deny the specificity, individuality, or texture of their lives, only our access to them. *Park Lanes* is structured by the work shift, but also bracketed by it: Everson cleaves the mechanics of the job from the worker's life or self, refusing the idea that they are inextricable. We might take it as a subtle, but significant, kind of resistance against the regimes of work today.



Kevin Jerome Everson: *Park Lanes*, 2015, video, 8 hours.

COURTESY TRILOBITE-ARTS DAC AND PICTURE PALACE PICTURES.

But there is another dynamic at play in Everson's films: anyone unfamiliar with the specific jobs being performed—which is to say, most art world and film festival audiences—will spend much of the film unsure what, exactly, is happening. (The only reason I know *Sound That* depicts municipal workers listening for leaks is that the marketing copy says so; I certainly couldn't tell that the acoustic device they employ is a replica.) His aim, Everson says, is for the subjects of the films to be "smarter than the viewer. The people on-screen know what they're doing and you—the viewer—have to catch up."¹⁷ This kind of friction between the people depicted and the audience to whom they are presented is an unavoidable feature of all these works, perhaps most of all the paintings: if Casteel and Nisenbaum prize the moment when their sitters see themselves on the wall of a museum, in the role historically reserved for those who wield power, there is something decidedly uncomfortable about the idea that these same portraits might today hang on the wall of some multimillionaire collector's second or third home. This is a tension at the heart of realism from the outset: Courbet's *Stonebreakers* was made for the bourgeois salon, not the working-class tavern. But placing the monumental image of the provincial worker in front of the urban salon-goer was a means of staging a confrontation, demanding not only that the bourgeois audience see the harsh conditions of laborers' lives, but also recognize that those lives and their own were not worlds apart, but interconnected elements of a single society. The stonebreakers toiling in the sun made the bourgeois city dweller's pleasures possible. It isn't coincidental that the timeline of UAW history that Frazier assembled to accompany "The Last Cruze" includes the unionization of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The gamble today's realists take is that the potential for exploitation, objectification, and liberal self-congratulation inherent in an art world audience's encounter with working-class subjects is outweighed by the possibility of forging new kinds of solidarity.

- 1 Gustave Courbet, as quoted in Albert Boime, *Art in an Age of Civil Struggle*, 1848–1871, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2007, pp. 158–59.
- 2 Ibid., p. 158.
- 3 T.J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1999, p. 79.
- 4 As quoted in Boime, p. 164. See also Alex Potts, "Social Theory and the Realist Impulse in Nineteenth-Century Art," *Nonsite*, Feb. 11, 2019, nonsite.org.
- 5 See Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott, London and New York, Verso, 2005; Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2011; David Harvey, "From Fordism to Flexible Accumulation," in his *Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Cambridge, Mass., and Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1990, pp. 141–88; and Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn*, 1945–2005, London and New York, Verso, 2006.
- 6 Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Occupational Realism," *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol. 56, no. 4, Winter 2012, pp. 32–48.
- 7 David Geers, "Acts of Recognition," *frieze*, Oct. 16, 2017, frieze.com
- 8 Sarah Lewis, "Jordan Casteel: Informal Economies," in *Tenses: Artists in Residence 2015/16*, New York, the Studio Museum in Harlem, 2015, exhibition brochure, pp. 3–4.
- 9 "Many Are Called," Jordan Casteel in conversation with Massimiliano Gioni, in *Jordan Casteel: Within Reach*, New York, New Museum, 2020, p. 24.
- 10 Ibid., p. 21.
- 11 Annie McClanahan, "Introduction: The Spirit of Capital in an Age of Deindustrialization," *Post45*, Jan. 10, 2019, post45.org.
- 12 "Many Are Called," *Jordan Casteel: Within Reach*, p. 21.
- 13 Linda Nochlin, "The Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law," *Art in America*, Sept.–Oct. 1973, pp. 54–61, and Nov.–Dec. 1973, pp. 97–103.
- 14 In November 2019, the Lordstown plant was sold to Lordstown Motors, a new investment group formed by the electric truck start-up Workhorse.
- 15 LaToya Ruby Frazier, "The Last Cruze," with text by Dan Kaufman, *New York Times Magazine*, May 5, 2019, pp. 36–53.
- 16 "Conversation: LaToya Ruby Frazier and David Harvey," in *LaToya Ruby Frazier: The Last Cruze*, Chicago, Renaissance Society, 2020, p. 322.
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