

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