

# Urban Vessels

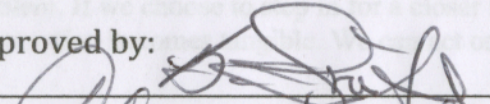
By  
Lea Bult

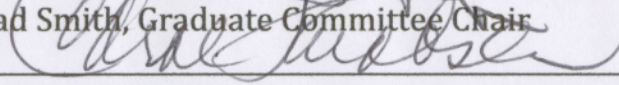
Bachelor of Fine Arts, Kendall College of Art and Design, 2005

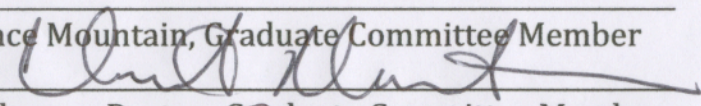
Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the  
Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

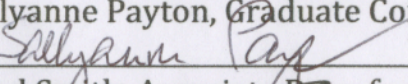
School of Art and Design  
University of Michigan  
Ann Arbor, Michigan  
April 16, 2012

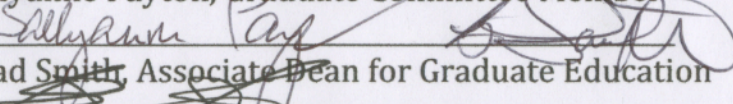
Approved by:

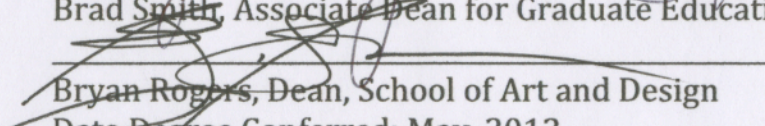
  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Brad Smith, Graduate Committee Chair

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Carol Jacobsen, Graduate Committee Member

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Vince Mountain, Graduate Committee Member

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Sallyanne Payton, Graduate Committee Member

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Brad Smith, Associate Dean for Graduate Education

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Bryan Rogers, Dean, School of Art and Design

Date Degree Conferred: May, 2012

## **Keywords**

Slavery, Human Trafficking, America, Sex Trafficking, Forced Labor, Present-Day

## **Abstract**

Slavery elicits an image of an antiquated era. When contemplating slavery, people look back at history with a feeling of repulsion for what was considered a barbaric and inhumane time. These thoughts are often followed with feelings of pride for the progress that has been made since those times. Unfortunately, American slavery still persists. Some victims are held captive in places like factories or homes while others are transported from location to location. Human trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery where people profit from the control and exploitation of others. Many of the objects we encounter in our daily lives were in some way touched by forced labor. People are enslaved for various reasons, throughout the world and within our own communities. Some are hidden from our gaze, and others are hiding in plain sight.

By integrating photography and collage techniques, I create paintings that appear opaque from a distance, yet hidden elements within the composition appear when the viewer steps in for a closer look. Hidden figures are placed within various urban vessels, set into seemingly mundane urban scenery. To create this effect, I paint onto Plexiglass, leaving strategic sections of the composition transparent. The figures are installed some distance behind the transparent sections; making them appear as if they are held within the containers they are placed in. In this process I physically mimic our complicity in this problem. If we choose to step in for a closer look, the opportunity for intervention becomes tangible. We can act or choose to look away.

**Table of Contents**

Introduction.....	3
Home Grown Slaves.....	3
Japanese Internment and the Legacy of American Slavery.....	6
Research.....	8
Visual Representation of Slavery in Art History.....	8
Materials and Methods.....	10
Contemporary Influences.....	17
Conclusion.....	24
Bibliography.....	25

## **Introduction**

Human trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery where people profit from the control and exploitation of others. As defined under U.S. federal law, victims of human trafficking include children involved in the sex trade, adults age 18 or over who are coerced or deceived into commercial sex acts, and anyone forced into different forms of "labor or services," such as domestic workers held in a home, or farm-workers forced to labor against their will (polarsproject.org). The factors that each of these situations have in common are elements of force, fraud, or coercion that are used to control people. Then, that control is tied to inducing someone into commercial sex acts, or labor or services. Every year, human traffickers generate billions of dollars in profits by victimizing millions of people around the world, and in the United States (Batstone, 6). Go behind the façade in any major town or city today and you are likely to find a thriving commerce in human beings. You may even find slavery in your own back yard. For example, not all slavery in America involves undocumented immigrants. Some victims are born and raised in the United States and find themselves pressed into slavery by deception or sheer violence (Batstone, 8).

Through my involvement with a Japanese history project, the University of Michigan School of Law's human trafficking database, and an encounter with a truck stop prostitute, I have gained an awareness of present day slavery in America. These experiences have inspired me to further investigate this issue by utilizing research and my creative practice. Using this research as a means to inform my work, I have developed a series of paintings that explore human trafficking and slavery today, with an emphasis on recent human trafficking cases in the United States.

## **Home Grown Slaves**

My mother worked for many years as a social worker and educator in the inner city areas of Grand Rapids, Michigan. It was through her experiences and stories that I developed an understanding of those who are pushed to the fringes of society, and the unwarranted stigma and assumptions that are placed on these individuals. Often, my mother would go out of her way to help someone in need, whether it was buying clothes for one of her homeless students or helping a disabled adult with medical needs. She would share with me the details of her students' lives, and how they came to find themselves in the often heartbreaking situations associated with life on the edge. Because of this, I see that I was able to place these scenarios into a wider framework of social and cultural factors. This in turn helped me to interrogate assumptions surrounding the homeless, the drug addicted, or the sexually exploited, to name a few. Every now and then, my mother would work with a case that was truly shocking, exposing the unforeseen systems of exploitation that operate in our own communities. I am still haunted by these experiences. Yet, it is not the singular acts of abuse that are the most striking, but the emerging realization of the epidemic of exploitation and the camouflaged platform of systemic violence from which these tangible acts protrude.

Now retired, my parents live in Benton Harbor, Michigan. To visit them, I make the two-hour drive along I94 from Ann Arbor to the west side of the state. In addition to my mother's stories, this route has contributed to my interest in exploring human trafficking and the exploitation of the vulnerable. As I pass by the strip clubs and massage parlors that seem to congregate along this stretch of highway, I cannot help but feel a sense of anxiety. Something seems off kilter. I wonder about the women who find themselves in these situations. About 40 minutes into my drive I pass by a sign for one of these parlors highlighting the "friendly American staff" as a selling point for this particular establishment. If this place is unique in that it employs American staff, who might be working in the other ones? And where do they come from? On a warm spring day about three years ago, I met one of these women. I accidentally stumbled into her world, and what I encountered was not what I had expected.

My mother often spends her leisure time volunteering and on one particular day she was headed to a vacant lot to round up some feral cats to bring to the shelter. I offered to come along and help. The owner of the land had recently died and the property had fallen into disarray. The landowner's daughter Lisa met us there and we strategized ways of catching the cats. As we moved around the property placing traps we ran into Janice. She was sleeping under a bush towards the side of the lot, which is located next to a neighboring truck stop. She awoke and stared at us in fatigued confusion for a second, then recognizing Lisa, made a brief apology and quickly got up and walked towards the trucks. I looked at what appeared to be her "home," a tarp, a dirty blanket, fast food wrappers, and drug paraphernalia. Lisa informed us that this was Janice's lot and she had been living under that bush for quite a few years now. Lisa's family had gotten to know Janice and tried to intervene a number of times. Beginning in her mid teens, Janice was prostituted by her own family members. Lisa told us that this was still the case, although Janice was now in her late 20s. Throughout the years, she had been moved to massage parlors and truck stops around this area of Michigan. Now Janice claimed this lot as her "territory." Lisa informed us that most of the truck stops along I94 have designated prostitutes or "lot lizards" that claim that particular stop as their own. Often, they are introduced to "the life" as children and due to violence, deception and drug dependence many find it difficult to break free. Social workers had tried to help Janice in the past, but Janice kept returning to her lot.



Figure 1 - Janice's home.

I imagine girls like Janice being moved around to places that are so familiar to the American landscape, for the purpose of sexual exploitation. It seems as though current attitudes about human trafficking conjure up ideas of foreigners being moved into the country for the purpose of labor exploitation. While this is indeed the scenario for many cases, often times, human trafficking originates within our own communities. Similarly disturbing is the fact that family members also sell women to sex traffickers. In these cases it is often the woman's father, uncle, or husband who sells her to an organized crime network or local pimp. (Reiger, 3) Unfortunately, these victims have very little resources available to them. Although Janice has the means to leave her situation, the fact that she chooses not to highlights the complexity of modern slavery. Rather than receiving help from local authorities, the victims are often ignored or arrested.

Trafficking thrives in secret. And it can be easy to dismiss it as something that happens to someone else, somewhere else. But that is not the case. Trafficking is a crime that involves every nation on earth, and that includes our own (Bales and Soodalter, 3). Human trafficking not only exists throughout the world but it flourishes. With approximately twenty seven million people in bondage, it is thought to be the third most profitable criminal enterprise of our time, following drugs and guns (Bales and Soodalter, 6). In fact more than twice as many people are in bondage in the world today than were taken from Africa during the entire 350 years of the Atlantic slave trade (Bales and Soodalter, 7). Slavery is alive and more than well in the United States, often thriving in plain sight, and is practiced in many forms and places where one would least expect it.

America was born with the congenital disease of slavery, and, legal or illegal, it has never left us. Today, we are still conflicted about our slave-holding past and its ugly aftermath. We study it, lament it, and argue it as a haunting presence from our darker history. Yet, while we were looking the other way, slavery in America evolved into a whole new beast that lives in secret among us and feeds on ignorance and apathy. Only through our awareness and concern, and intervention, can it be driven out.

### **Japanese Internment and the Legacy of American Slavery**

In addition to my encounter with Janice, I have had other experiences involving modern slavery. Several years ago I became involved with Forth From Its Hinges, a non-profit arts organization aimed at creating exhibition and networking opportunities for emerging artists and musicians in the Ann Arbor area. Through this experience I met and befriended Zach Saginaw, the music events coordinator, and through him I had the opportunity to meet his grandmother May Watanabe.



Figure 2 - May Watanabe.

A Japanese American, May's humble and unassuming demeanor does not allude to the trauma that she has suffered as a Japanese internment survivor. I found out about her experiences through casual conversation, as she told me about the recent pilgrimage that she made back to the site of the camp where she was imprisoned. At this time, I had started graduate school and was enrolled in a history class. One of the assignments was to interview someone about their history. I asked her if she would be interested in recounting her ordeal on tape, and surprisingly she was happy to share her story with me.

We also compiled a book of images that she had from the relocation, internment, and aftermath. As I moved deeper into this dark chapter of American history, I could not help

but feel cheated. The internment was briefly mentioned in my high school history class and the gross injustice of this event was greatly minimized. Luckily, May was able to escape her internment after about a year in the camp when she was accepted to a university on the east coast. Her family, unfortunately, languished in the camp where they worked long hours doing physically taxing tasks. May showed me her family's camp identification photos. As I held them I realized that I was staring into the forlorn faces of slaves. This lesser known chapter of American slavery symbolizes the pervasive and often unexpected forms that contemporary slavery can take. History it seemed, had repeated itself in the 1940s and it will continue to do so in present times. At this point I felt an even greater sense of urgency to explore slavery in America today. Questions kept rolling through my head. How is this history repeating itself today? And why?



Figure 3 - Formal identification photos of May's family. May's father, at right, died soon after the photograph was taken from health complications that he developed in the camp at Tule Lake, California. Image courtesy May Watanabe.

I have spent the past year researching human trafficking and slavery cases that have occurred recently within the United States and one thing is certain: modern slavery manifests itself in many forms and affects many people for different reasons. There is no one "type" of modern slave. They are both international and domestic. They are old and young, male and female. Often, there are economic factors that make individuals more susceptible to trafficking, but not always. There are, however, industries that encounter higher rates of modern slavery than do others. These industries include agriculture, textile manufacturing, domestic services such as house keeping, the beauty industry (hair and nail salons) and the sex industry ([polarisproject.org](http://polarisproject.org)).



## Research

I have drawn research for my creative work from symposia, websites, and books. A recent trafficking symposium hosted by the University of Michigan, where former slaves were given the opportunity to share their experiences was particularly useful. The books *The Slave Next Door* by Kevin Bales and Ron Soodalter and *Not for Sale* by David Batstone provided information on advocacy against human slavery. The books maintained an objectivity of facts in great detail to bolster its assertions that slavery is much more common than most of us realize, and many of us see or are affected by it each day in the products we use and the culture we experience. The Polaris Project website also provided helpful data ([polarisproject.org](http://polarisproject.org)). The Polaris Project is an organization in the United States combating all forms of human trafficking and serving both U.S. citizens and foreign national victims, including men, women, and children. They provide legal services and operate the National Human Trafficking Resource Center. Much of the information from this Resource Center is on their website, which includes research and statistics related to slavery and human trafficking today.

Another vital source in the creation of this project was the University of Michigan School of Law's Human Trafficking Database (<http://www.law.umich.edu/clinical/HuTrafficCases>). The aim of this database is to record every human trafficking and slavery legal case in the United States. Although the database was launched in February of 2011, as of March 2012, there are several hundred cases detailing recent American slavery incidents. I found the database overwhelming at first, as it illustrates the pervasiveness of this issue. The database's key word search capability informed many of the visual elements of my paintings. The search option was a useful tool, as it allowed me to identify in detail the circumstances surrounding each case, such as the industry involved, location, and the number, age and gender of the victims. For some of my paintings, I used the database first, and then gathered images that were similar to the scenarios described. For others, I selected images first, then searched for cases that were similar to my chosen imagery. These images came from websites or stock photography databases or were photographs that I took myself. Due to the breadth of cases, I found it surprisingly easy to match cases to the images selected. Often the incidents reported in the database occurred in familiar settings, such as strip malls, truck stops, factories, or suburban homes. Each painting is a re-enactment of an actual case.

The title of this thesis, *Urban Vessels*, alludes to the idea that these settings contain or conceal something that is hidden. The title was also selected to avoid revealing too much information to the viewer. I have chosen to depict both the means of transportation as well as buildings in order to highlight the fact that trafficking and stationary enslavement are both forms of involuntary servitude. The titles of my works are taken directly from the database as well.

## Visual Representation of Slavery in Art History

When depicting difficult issues such as the enslavement of humans, a "soft" sell can be more effective than a "hard" one. When the viewer is given the opportunity to discover the formal and conceptual elements for themselves, the impact of a piece can often have a

lingering effect. I remember the first time I encountered Turner's *Slave Ship*. From afar, the painting appears similar to other impressionist works from that era. The bold colors and compositional elements dominate the piece. Yet, when given closer inspection, the hidden story is revealed. Only when given a closer look do the slaves appear, as they sink to their deaths in an unforgiving sea. What is extraordinary about this piece is that it uses painting techniques that were popular at that time to present an issue that needed to be exposed to a wider audience. The discretion utilized in the painting allows the viewer to "discover" the issue on their own. Although the piece was considered controversial at the time, it reinforced the necessary groundwork that was needed for subsequent abolitionist movements.

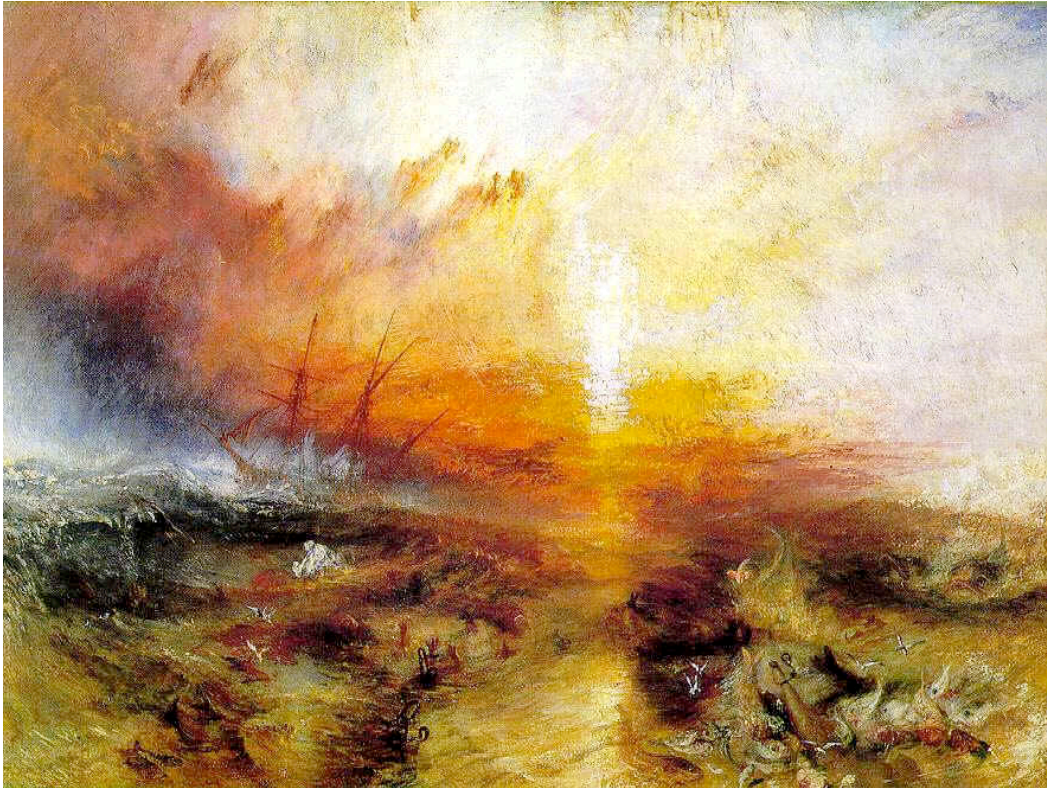


Figure 4 - Turner's *Slave Ship*.

Image Credit: <http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/turner>

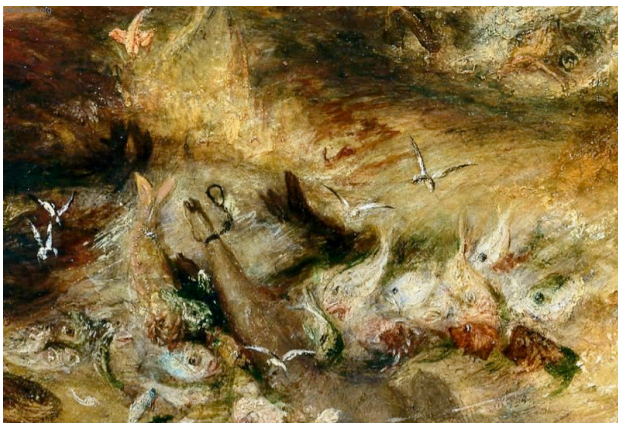


Figure 5 - Turner's *Slave Ship* – detail.

## Materials and Methods

Drawing inspiration from the *Slave Ship*, it was my intent to create a body of work that employed a similar viewer interaction. Like Turner, I wanted to integrate the figures of slaves as discreet forms, placed within a seemingly familiar setting. I selected a method that physically mimics the illusive aspect of human trafficking. I situate victims just beyond our gaze, hidden from view in environments that would not otherwise allude to the appalling conditions in which these individuals exist. I have also chosen to include a variety of victim types. This is meant to counter assumptions about trafficking victims, and beliefs that trafficking victims are either foreign women or Mexican migrants. I also employed this method in order to physically mimic our complicity in this circumstance. If we choose to step in for a closer look, the opportunity for intervention becomes tangible.

To mimic the illusive aspect of human trafficking, I transferred photographs onto the Plexiglass via gloss medium. This technique makes the image appear transparent, but with enough remaining detail so that I could use the image as a guide for my painting. Next, I painted with oil onto the transfer, leaving strategic areas of the composition slightly transparent. Figures of the slaves were installed behind the Plexiglass in alignment with these transparent sections. This effect makes the painting appear entirely opaque from a distance, yet the slaves emerge when given a closer look. I decided to utilize photo-realistic painting techniques, to make these scenarios easily recognizable, and thus more believable.

Each painting is a visual re-enactment of a trafficking case that has occurred in the United States within the past decade. Using the trafficking database to inform the visual elements of my paintings, I created the scenarios and settings surrounding these cases based on the details provided. I found that some cases were more descriptive than others. With the cases that were less descriptive, I chose to fill in missing details by visualizing what the settings may have looked like given the location and means of transport.

The painting, *Truck Stop Near La Presa California* (fig. 8) depicts a truck stop area, or perhaps a border checkpoint. When given a closer look, the contents of the truck become apparent. However, in this case, the cargo is people. This piece was inspired by an image I found while researching recent trafficking cases (fig. 7). I also found similar cases on the database involving situations such as this. It is common for traffickers to try to smuggle people into the states from Mexico. Sometimes the trafficked people are detected via X-ray, and sometimes they are able to pass through the border undetected.

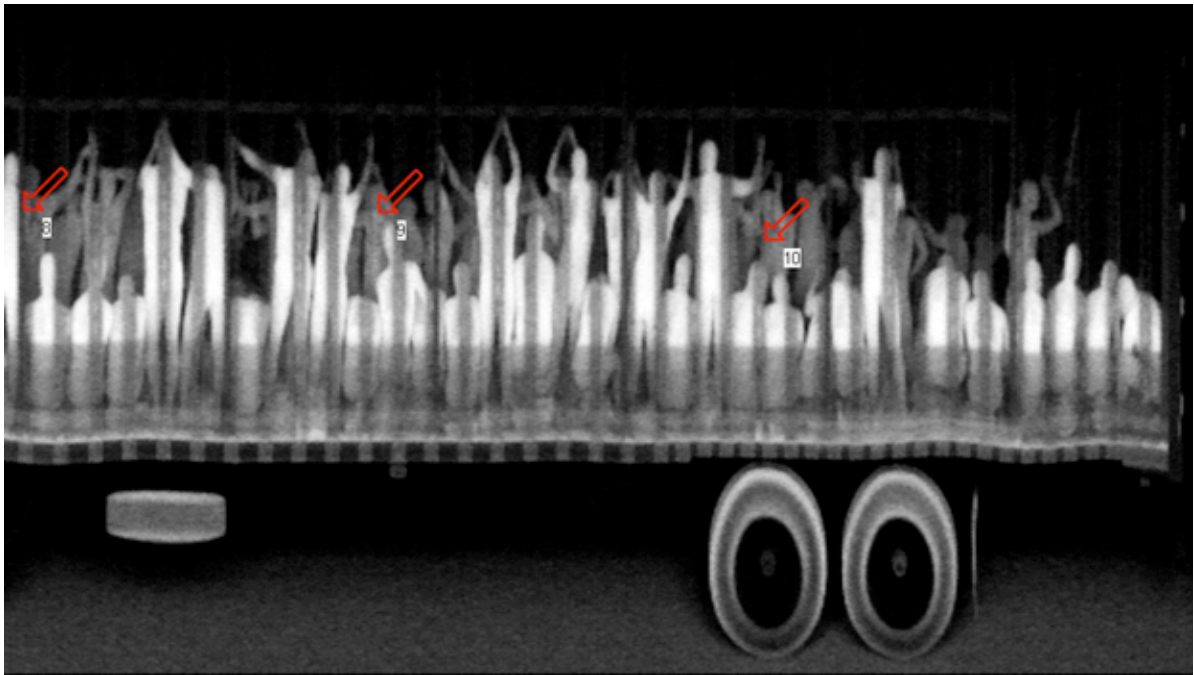


Figure 6 – X-ray image taken at a check point on the US – Mexico border.  
Image Credit: [www.matt.org](http://www.matt.org)



Figure 7 - *Truck Stop Near La Presa, California.*



Figure 8 - *Truck Stop Near La Presa, California – detail.*



Figure 9 - *Truck Stop. Green Valley, Arizona.*  
Similar to *Truck Stop Near La Presa, California*, this painting is also derived from the database and the X-ray images.



Fig 10 - *Truck Stop. Green Valley, Arizona* – detail.

After completing the truck paintings, I wanted to continue working with other modes of transport. This was meant to counter assumptions that US trafficking only occurs via truck or car. Although this method is common, given the United State's dependence on land transport, other means of human trafficking occur as well, such as by train or boat. (polarisproject.org)

The painting *Marina. Seattle, Washington* is an illustration of a case involving the actual shipment of humans via boat and the painting *Railway, White Plains, New York* is an example of a trafficking situation involving rail transport. These are examples of cases where the details given in the database were somewhat vague. I situated my compositions by visualizing what the settings may have looked like based on details given in the database.



Figure 11 - *Marina. Seattle, Washington*.



Figure 12 - *Marina. Seattle, Washington* – detail.





Figure 13 – *Railway. White Plains, New York.*



Figure 14 – *Railway. White Plains, New York* – detail.

## Contemporary Influences

This project has also been influenced by the creative work of others. Two organizations, Amnesty International and Osocio often develop advertising or public awareness campaigns to draw attention to social issues related to human rights. Osocio in particular, creates advertising and marketing for social causes that are striking and visually clever. Unlike my work, which is paint based, these ad campaigns utilize mostly photography and graphic design. Although these campaigns read as “fine art,” they have had a great influence on the way in which I approach my work.



Figure 15 - Public awareness ad from Amnesty International.  
Image Credit: <http://www.amnesty.org.uk>



Figure 16 - Image from Osocio’s online blog. This campaign was created by the Salvation Army. The print reads, “SALE. 4 to 6 year olds, 7 to 10 year olds, 11 to 14 year olds. Human trafficking is a serious crime”.  
Image Credit: [http://osocio.org/category/womens\\_issues](http://osocio.org/category/womens_issues)



Figure 17 – Human Trafficking Poster from Osocio.  
Image Credit: [http://osocio.org/category/womens\\_issues](http://osocio.org/category/womens_issues)

This poster from Osocio was particularly striking to me because the stark contrast reminded me of the X-ray photos. I used this image as an inspiration for the paintings *Massage Parlor, Aurora, Illinois, Truck Stop, and Parking Lot, Jackson, Michigan*. These paintings illustrate situations in which female victims were exploited in the sex industry.



Figure 18 – *Massage Parlor. Aurora, Illinois.*



Figure 19 – *Massage Parlor. Aurora, Illinois – detail.*



Figure 20 – *Truck Stop. Park City, Kansas.*



Figure 21 – *Truck Stop. Park City, Kansas – detail.*



Figure 22 – *Parking Lot. Jackson, Michigan.*

The painting in figure 22 is derived from a case involving several eastern European women who were offered job prospects in the US. Upon arrival to the states, their passports were confiscated and the “prospects” ended up being forced into prostitution. Their pimp used violence and deception to keep them submissive. These women were trafficked to various locations in Michigan and Ohio for the purposes of sexual exploitation.



Figure 23 – *Parking Lot. Jackson, Michigan – detail.*

The paintings *Factory. Fort Wayne, Indiana* and *Storage Unit. Mentor, Ohio* emphasize the places to which trafficked individuals end up, as opposed to the means of transport. *Factory. Fort Wayne, Indiana* was based on a case involving persons trafficked from Central America. These individuals were held captive and forced to work in a factory.



Figure 24 - *Factory. Fort Wayne, Indiana*.



Figure 25 - *Factory. Fort Wayne, Indiana* – detail.



Figure 26 - *Storage Unit. Mentor, Ohio.*



Figure 27 - *Storage Unit. Mentor, Ohio – detail.*



## **Conclusion**

The development of this project has given me the opportunity to research a contemporary social problem that needs further attention. It is an issue that I have a personal interest in and the modes of research utilized for this series have granted me a wider understanding of the factors that contribute to slavery in America today. I do not see the completion of this project as an end, but rather as a platform for the continuation of further creative work based around this concept. I envision visiting some of these locations in person in order to compile more documentary research for this work. Through my experience researching human trafficking, I now know that this problem is more complicated than it often appears. There is no one type of victim, nor is there a type of perpetrator. People find themselves in this elusive world for various reasons.

From the antebellum abolitionist movement, to the legal recognition of the rights of women, to the civil rights movement, the demand for change came first from the people, not the politicians. It is within our own grasp to eliminate slavery, but each of us has to reach for it. As citizens, we need to recognize that this problem still persists, and we need to recognize the ways in which human trafficking takes form in our own communities. It is my hope that this body of work will inspire others to become aware of the pervasiveness of this issue. Once we understand that a problem exists, it is easier to take the necessary steps to intervene.

## **Bibliography**

Bales, Kevin and Soodalter, Ron. *The Slave Next Door, Human Trafficking and Slavery in America Today*. Berkely: University of California Press, 2009.

Batstone, David. *Not for Sale, The Return of the Global Slave Trade*. New York: Harper Collins, 2007.

"Human Trafficking." *Polarisproject.org*, Polaris Project, n.d. Web.  
<http://www.polarisproject.org/human-trafficking/overview>

*Human Trafficking Database*. University of Michigan. Web. 2011.  
<http://www.law.umich.edu/clinical/HuTrafficCases/Pages/searchdatabase.aspx>

Reiger, April. *"Missing the Mark: Why the Trafficking Victims Protection Act Fails to Protect Sex Trafficking Victims in the United States."* Harvard Journal of Law and Gender. 30 Harv. J.L. & Gender 231. 2007

*"Successes and Failures in International Human Trafficking Law."* University of Michigan School of Law, Ann Arbor, February 2011. Unpublished conference proceedings.