Reflections on Ryan Spaulding’s Super Taco

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Ryan Spaulding’s Super Taco occupies a place in a long line of socially conscious artworks dating back to nineteenth-century paintings like Work, Ford Madox Brown’s magisterial 1865 depiction of Victorian class strata. It makes sense alongside the works of other contemporary artists who use art to consider the inequities of work in a post-Fordist economy, from Francis Alÿs to Santiago Sierra to Guillermo Gomez-Peña. Like these artists, Spaulding uses his medium to invite viewers to think about the networks of privilege and opportunity that structure their lives, connecting people across boundaries of class, race, ethnicity and culture.

Spaulding’s painting depicts work - specifically, work in a contemporary fast food kitchen. This is blue collar, service-industry work: the only form of work that is readily available for hundreds of thousands of twenty-first century Americans. It is neither glamorized nor sensationalized in this context.

Simply by choosing to depict contemporary work in this realistic way, Spaulding sheds light on a social space that is simultaneously prosaic and mysterious. The industrial kitchen he painted looks just like similar spaces operated nationwide by fast food franchisers in every American city, truck stop, and small town. Yet despite the ubiquity of such workplaces, fast food restaurant kitchens and the workers who labor there remain largely invisible in our culture. For the most part they labor behind the scenes.

Many of us know family members and friends who have worked in fast food, either on a temporary basis or for a longer duration. At one time or another, we’ve all eaten the food that gets assembled in fast food kitchens like the one Spaulding depicts. We’ve placed our orders with the disembodied voice coming out of the drive-through speakers. We’ve requested fries with that. In other words, we’ve all benefited from the labor of those mostly invisible workers. Spaulding’s painting invites us to contemplate the way invisibility contributes to the convenience of that relationship.

When we look at Super Taco, we learn some things about what it might be like to work a fast food job. The painting places emphasis on the intimate, claustrophobic spaces of the fast food kitchen, the fast paced nature of the work and the power relationships between workers: note the way Spaulding’s fluent brushwork calls attention to the rapport between the shift manager shouting orders in the foreground and the workers on the line responding to his commands. This painting challenges us to think about who works in such places, and why. The workers in Spaulding’s painting are Latino: other groups disproportionately represented in the fast food sector include the young, the old, recent immigrants, and the poor. How do we feel about the distribution of
economic opportunity in relationship to gender, race and class? Are we comfortable seeing these dignified people assemble our tacos and cheeseburgers? If not, why not?

Fast food labor is not a politically neutral subject. The movement for justice for fast food workers has gained momentum in recent years. This year, groups working at the community and national levels have organized significant numbers of people to demonstrate in support of raising the national minimum wage. This would radically improve life circumstances for fast food workers, and for those laboring in other low-wage service industries. However, the proposition remains politically divisive. On December 5, 2013, fast food workers in more than 100 cities nationwide walked off the job to call attention to the movement for the right to unionize and receive a $15 an hour standard rate of pay. This would represent a significant increase from the current industry median of $8.81, making it possible for many of the workers who labor in this colossally profitable industry to rise above the poverty line.

Spaulding’s painting may come across as disconcerting because it challenges us to ask ourselves where we stand on issues like these. Furthermore, it reveals the uncomfortable truth that we are all complicit in the economic system it depicts. Here is the labor that makes it possible for American consumers to “have it our way” when it comes to cheap, convenient food. Do we feel good asserting that the economic system structuring the lives of the workers depicted here is, indeed, our way? If not, what alternative ways might we conceive? Like any powerful realist work, Spalding’s humanist picture holds a mirror up to an aspect of society. In so doing, it spurs us to wonder about how society might be changed for the better.