A WORK IN PROCESS
PAINTINGS BY GUSTAVE BLACHE III

No thing is beautiful. But all things await the sensitive and imaginative mind that may be aroused to pleasurable emotion at sight of them. This is beauty.

Beauty — ever in the mind of the beholder — may be found even in images of the everyday toil of ordinary people, as demonstrated in *A Work in Process: Paintings by Gustave Blache III*. Blache’s painted scenes exude a sense of timelessness. They are contemporary, depicting real people engaged in such tasks as washing curtains, cooking meals, or scrape-cleaning paintings. Yet, the types of labor Blache chooses to depict represent age-old occupations performed by hand and, for the most part, conducted out of public view. Modest-sized and sometimes displayed within gilt frames, his paintings of laborers recall the art of American and European masters in history, from the laundresses of Impressionist Edgar Degas and the floor scrapers of Gustave Caillebotte to the urban laborers depicted by the Ashcan School.

Featuring nearly 60 paintings borrowed from public and private collections, *A Work in Process* includes selections from Blache’s four major series to date: The Curtain Cleaners (2001-03); The Mop Makers (2005-06); Leah Chase (2009-12), devoted to the famed New Orleans chef and restaurateur; and the debut of his most recently completed series, Simon Parkes Art Conservation (2008-17). A few paintings from early in Blache’s career are also included, providing insight into the development of the artist’s mature style and his chosen subject matter. The exhibition, curated for the Louisiana Art & Science Museum by Elizabeth Weinstein, Director of Art Interpretation, traces Blache’s career while revealing what goes on behind the scenes in some of the most enduring yet under-exposed professions.

Having spent his formative years in New Orleans, Gustave Blache III started out his career with an interest in painting the human figure. After beginning his studies at the School of Visual Arts in Savannah, Georgia, he found that the illustration program offered more opportunities to receive instruction in figurative painting. While there, he was introduced to the portraiture and writings of Robert Henri (1865-1925), an artist whose followers included a number of newspaper illustrators turned painters eventually known as the Ashcan School of American Realism. For
Henri, art was a form of visual journalism. He espoused that “art cannot be separated from life” and believed that what was real and true in the world was beautiful — and thus appropriate subject matter for art.

While still an undergraduate, Blache began to create likenesses of friends, classmates, and even of his own visage. Receiving recognition as a portrait artist, he also carried out a number of commissions soon after obtaining his degree in Illustration in 1998. Many of these early portraits bear a striking resemblance to those of Henri. The young artist adopted not only the loose brushwork associated with the American master but also the frontal poses and spare backgrounds seen in his portraiture. Blache also was taken with Henri’s interest in depicting people from diverse ethnicities, something he too emulated. Perhaps to show his appreciation, Blache painted a tribute to Henri as well as to New Orleans artist Richard Thomas, who had inspired him in his youth. The painting, which dates from 1997, is a life-sized depiction of Thomas’s son with his school books at his feet. The book on top — and the name of the painting — is The Art Spirit, Henri’s influential 1923 publication.

Blache began to move away from portraiture while working on his master’s degree at the School of Visual Arts in New York, but he remained interested in the concept of ordinary people as subject matter. He began to incorporate his depictions of people into interior environments. Around the same time, he started painting on modest-sized boards measuring less than 12 by 12 inches, a practice that has since become his hallmark. The first of these interior scenes was shown in 2001 at Island Weiss Gallery in New York’s Upper East Side. Held just one year after his graduation, this show constituted Blache’s first solo exhibition. A dealer in nineteenth and early twentieth century art, Weiss also was the first to recognize an affinity between Blache’s paintings and those of such luminaries as Edgar Degas and Pierre-Auguste Renoir. In 2000, Weiss had displayed some of Blache’s paintings amidst those of the Impressionists.

In the nineteenth century, labor was a grave social issue. Industrialization had radically changed the nature of work. Faced with rural food
shortages, cities experienced the rapid increase of an unskilled urban workforce, or proletariat. The ensuing societal concern over the welfare of the poor laborer prompted many artists to address the topic in their paintings. One of the first to feature the urban working class was Gustave Caillebotte (1848-1894), who presented labor as a dignified and respectful pursuit, a stance that Blache has similarly adopted. Caillebotte’s painting titled *The Floor Scrapers (Les raboteurs de parquet)* from 1875 shows three strong men working on their hands and knees, repairing a wood floor. The setting has been identified as the artist’s Paris apartment.

Perhaps inspired by Caillebotte, Blache used his own living space in Brooklyn as the setting for his first major series, produced between 2001 and 2003. The artist asked female friends and fellow students to model as curtain cleaners, picturing them in the process of washing, ironing, folding and hanging curtains. The resultant portrayals, such as in *Adjusting Curtain (2003)* and *Ironing Curtain (2003)*, recall the laundresses and ironers painted by Edgar Degas (1834-1917), images that the young artist may certainly have been aware of. In Degas’s day, laundering was a burgeoning industry for working women. Although this under-appreciated type of work constituted hard, physical labor, their toil is presented by Degas — and later Blache — in a romanticized manner, devoid of social message. Caught seemingly unaware, the women are shown engrossed in their activities. This voyeuristic quality, coupled with the paintings’ small scale, reinforces the intimacy of the scenes described.

After completing The Curtain Cleaners, Blache devoted almost all of 2004 to the painting of still life subjects. Among the arrangements are an old-fashioned iron, pots, a watering can and drapery. The objects are set up in a traditional manner. Blache’s *Watering Can with Pears (2004)*, for instance, recalls the still lifes of Spanish master Francisco de Zubarán (1598-1664) and also those of the French artist Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699-1779). Resulting in about 24 paintings and numerous studies, these self-imposed exercises served to reinforce Blache’s observational and technical skills. Becoming gradually more interested in depicting figures within interior environments, and in the actions these individuals were performing, Blache rendered increasingly complex settings as he strove to convey a sense of place.
A turning point, Blache chose to depict a real-life workplace in action in 2005-06, focusing on the mop-making program of Lighthouse for the Blind. Renamed Lighthouse Louisiana, the organization provides disabled people with opportunities to succeed. In Blache’s paintings, the emphasis is not on the workers’ personal burdens, which are barely discernible, but instead is on the mop-making activity itself. To ensure an accurate accounting, the artist worked on the job site, taking photographs and making sketches that he later referred to while painting in the studio. Resulting in The Mop Makers series, the images convey the physicality and repetitive actions inherent to mop making, a process that has changed little since Thomas W. Steward patented the Deck Mop in 1893. The laborers are shown assembling yarn, sewing it together, and attaching mop heads to sticks. Unlike the minimal, pastel-colored environment of The Curtain Cleaners, The Mop Makers scenes are composed in tones of gray and include more detail. The factory environment with its fluorescent tube lighting, work stations, and yards and yards of mop thread is effectively captured, particularly in *The Mop Makers* (2006). When the series debuted in New Orleans at Cole Pratt Gallery in 2016, the seeing-impaired individuals pictured were graciously allowed to touch the paintings, enabling them to “see” their self-images.

After completing The Mop Makers, Blache chose to continue to pursue real-life subjects. Whereas the laborers in his earlier series were left anonymous and thus may be read as representations of *everyman*, or ordinary people everywhere, he now chose to focus on a specific individual. From 2009 through 2012, he produced 20 paintings of legendary New Orleans chef and restaurateur Leah Chase. Today in her 90s, Chase began working with her husband in the 1950s at her father-in-law’s street-corner stand which sold lottery ticket and homemade po-boys. Over time, she converted the stand into a renowned sit-down establishment. She is credited with not only updating the menu, which reflects her own family’s Creole recipes, but also with turning the dining room into one of the first African American art galleries in the city. Blache was given permission to follow the beloved chef around Dooky Chase’s Restaurant, recording her daily activities. Blache portrays the chef wearing her signature pink cap in her restaurant kitchen, pouring oysters, chopping vegetables, stirring pots and instructing staff, including her grandson Dooky Chase IV. In other works, she is pictured in the

Simon Parkes Art Conservation series: *Celia with Blade (Standing on Footstool)*, 2016, oil on wood, 21 x 12.5 in. Courtesy of the artist.
dining room wearing her red chef’s coat and entertaining guests, among them Jacques Morial, son of the first African American mayor of New Orleans, Ernest N. “Dutch” Morial. The series was exhibited amidst much fanfare in 2012 at the New Orleans Museum of Art. Two paintings from the series are now owned by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, in the collections of the National Portrait Gallery and the newly opened National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Continuing to portray real workplaces in action, Gustave Blache III devoted his most recent series to a vital yet unexposed aspect of the art world, the salvage and repair of damaged art. This time he chose to record the proceedings taking place within his own place of employment, that of Simon Parkes, a well-respected New York art conservation studio. Displaced from New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, Blache accepted the position of registrar there in September 2005. This position afforded him a unique vantage point from which to describe the proceedings of the conservation practice. Composed of 20 paintings, the series is aptly named Simon Parkes Art Conservation and documents the staff as they carry out many of the industry’s traditional methods and practices. As with the Leah Chase series, Blache honors his colleagues in the titles by indentifying not only what they are doing but who they are, for example Natalie Scrape Cleaning (2016) or Mark Cleaning Fill (2016). Simon Parkes himself is also pictured, such as in Simon Test Cleaning with Bonham’s (2014). Blache presents the studio as a hive of studious activity. Not only are the varied tools of the trade pictured, but an abundance of paintings are shown stored in racks, on easels, or laid out on tables and floors, evidence of an ample work load. Within this environment, the employees are shown performing myriad tasks while perched on ladders, crouched on the floor, or sitting at easels, all of which require a degree of physical as well as mental endurance. Collectively, the scenes document different stages in the process, ranging from examining and re-stretching to scraping and cleaning, and ultimately repainting. The series effectively conveys the meticulous nature of fine art conservation.

Working in journalistic fashion one series at a time, Blache continues to be inspired by the most banal aspect of modern life — work. Be it washing, ironing, cooking, or even cleaning, honest labor is presented as a dignified and worthy pursuit. By making labor the subject of his art, Gustave Blache III elevates the status of the common worker and sends the message that hard work — even in those occupations considered most humble — is worthy of recognition.

By Elizabeth Chubbuck Weinstein
DIRECTOR OF ART INTERPRETATION/MUSEUM CURATOR, LOUISIANA ART & SCIENCE MUSEUM

Gustave Blache III was born in San Bernardino, California, in 1977. In 1983, he moved with his mother back to her hometown of New Orleans. There, he attended the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts. He earned his Bachelor of Fine Arts in Illustration degree from the former School of Visual Arts in Savannah, Georgia, and later his Master of Fine Art in Illustration from the School of Visual Arts in New York. He was honored with his first solo exhibition at age 24 at Island Weiss Gallery, New York. In 2007, Blache appeared in the documentary film Colored Frames. A solo showing of his portraits of Leah Chase was presented at the New Orleans Museum of Art in 2012. Blache’s work has been exhibited in galleries across the country and is included in many private and public collections, including the Smithsonian Institution’s National Portrait Gallery and National Museum of African History and Culture, both in Washington, DC. A monograph on Blache’s career is due to be published in fall 2017.
A Work in Process: Paintings by Gustave Blache III

**EARLY WORK**
  Collection of Eleanor Farnsworth
- Anabelle and Karonah (Graduate Studio Lounge), 2000, 9.75 x 18 in.
  Courtesy of the artist
- Lillian Lilly, 2000, 7 x 5 in.
  Collection of Richard C. Colton Jr.
- Self Portrait with Hat, 2000, 7 x 5 in.
  Courtesy of the artist
- Between the Head and the Hand, 2001, 7 x 5 in.
  Collection of Mahnaz Sherzai and George V. Schonover III
- The Silk Weavers, 2002, 7 x 11 in.
  Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Hollinger
- Watering Can with Pears (Alternate title Still Life with Iron and Watering Can), 2004
  4 x 11 in.
  Collection of Kathryn Wiedom

**THE CURTAIN CLEANERS SERIES, 2001-2003**
- Adjusting Curtain, 2003, 11 x 5 in.
  Collection of Richard C. Colton Jr.
- At Rest, 2003
  4 x 7 in.
  Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Larry Pullman
- Descending, 2003
  7 x 4 in.
  Collection of Mrs. Donald Hoffman
- Ironing Curtain, 2003, 9 x 5 in.
  Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Skip O'Conner
- Peering Through Window, Seated, 2003
  8 x 6 in.
  Collection of Richard C. Colton Jr.
- Seated Folding Curtains, 2003
  8 x 6 in.
  Dr. Dwight and Beverly Stanton McKenna Collection, courtesy of The McKenna Museums, New Orleans
- Sweeping, 2003
  4 x 10 in.
  Collection of Richard C. Colton Jr.
- Two Curtain Cleaners, 2003
  13 x 9 in.
  Collection of Loraine and Frank Accardo

**Natalie Scrape Cleaning**
- (Graduate Studio Lounge), 2014, oil on wood, 10 x 8 in.
  Courtesy of the artist

**THE MOP MAKERS SERIES, 2005-2006**
- The Mop Makers, 2006
  12 x 16 in.
  Collection of Richard C. Colton Jr.
- John Attaching Mop Handle, 2006
  5 x 4 in.
  Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Hollinger
- John Holding Mop Thread, 2006
  12 x 8.5 in.
  Dr. Dwight and Beverly Stanton McKenna Collection, courtesy of The McKenna Museums, New Orleans
- Man Behind Machine (Frontal View), 2006
  4 x 5 in.
  Collection of Kelly and Robert Thibeaux
- Mop Machine (Close-up), 2006
  8 x 5 in.
  Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John Rowan Jr.
- Sewing (Factory Interior), 2006
  13 x 9 in.
  Dr. Dwight and Beverly Stanton McKenna Collection, courtesy of The McKenna Museums, New Orleans
- Sewing Machine, 2006
  3 x 6 in.
  Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Stall
- Sewing the Mop, 2006
  5 x 4 in.
  Collection of Richard C. Colton Jr.
- Spinning Mop Thread, 2006
  12 x 8.5 in.
  Courtesy of the artist

**LEAH CHASE SERIES, 2009-2012**
- Holding Mixing Bowl Pot (Washing Cherry Tomato), 2010
  10.25 x 7.25 in.
  Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Bruno
- Leah Instructing Dook, 2010
  10.5 x 8 in.
  Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Bruno
- Leah Seated Red Coat, 2010
  13 x 10 in.
  Collection of Michael Wilkinson

**SIMON PARKES ART CONSERVATION SERIES, 2008-2017**
- Boris Seated (View of Stretchers and Mylar), 2008
  13 x 17.6 in.
  Collection of Richard C. Colton Jr.
- Mark Cleaning Fill, 2013
  10 x 8 in.
  Courtesy of the artist
- The Canvas Scrapers, 2013
  12.6 x 21 in.
  Collection of Richard C. Colton Jr.
- Natalie Scrape Cleaning; 2014
  10 x 8 in.
  Courtesy of the artist

**Exhibition Checklist**

- This exhibition is sponsored in part by Richard C. Colton Jr.

- It is also made possible in part through the generous support of the East Baton Rouge City-Parish Government and the members of Louisiana Art & Science Museum, and is supported in part by a grant from the Louisiana Division of the Arts, Office of Cultural Development, Department of Culture, Recreation & Tourism, in cooperation with the Louisiana State Arts Council, and the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency.