

# The Decline Of The Middle Class Depicted In Yale Photo Exhibit



A man walks across an iron bridge with a building in the background that was once a mill and now is luxury condos: "Fifty years ago he might have worked in that mill, making a decent salary, a member of the burgeoning middle class," says the photographer. (Julian Fisher)



By **Susan Dunne**

FEBRUARY 8, 2018, 8:25 AM

**A**s an undergrad at Yale, Julian Fisher studied under Walker Evans, whose photographs in the 1941 James Agee book "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men" were a pivotal exploration of Depression-era poverty.

Foster later chose neurology as his profession. But he never let go of his love for the camera or for Evans' eye for visual indicators of social class.

A few years ago, Fisher started his own photojournalistic exploration of social class. He had a problem, though.

“The poor are an easy conceptual thing: people in real poverty, real distress, sharecroppers. When you start to talk about the middle class, I was trying to photograph ghosts,” he says. “There’s a whole range of middle class. They look healthy, prosperous, fit. They don’t have holes in their clothes and broken sofas and wrecks of cars.”

Fisher persisted out of worry for the steadily declining prospects of the backbone of the nation. His project, “Trapped in the Middle,” is on the walls now at Whitney Humanities Center in New Haven.

“I wanted metaphorical images of the stresses the whole range of the middle class is facing, how people are re-balancing their lives,” Fisher says. “I think treading water is the best image. You can only tread water so long before you get tired and drown.”

Fisher’s photographs and the wall-text stories are poignant and relatable to anyone who has seen their standard of living slip downward. People who can’t afford to fix their cars, who switch jobs for better insurance, who work two jobs to stay in their homes, who keep working into their senior years, who commute 1-1/2 hours by bus to save money.

Fisher’s subjects all live near Boston, where he practices neurology at Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital and teaches at Harvard Medical School. He approached many people to ask if he could tell their stories. Many declined out of humiliation.

“What they thought they would achieve they would never achieve and their children would never achieve. These were promises made and not kept,” Fisher says. “That causes embarrassment and on a deeper level, shame.”

Fisher’s project began in Lowell, Mass., where he spotted a man walking across a rusty old iron bridge with a building in the background that was once a mill and now is luxury condominiums.

“Fifty years ago he might have worked in that mill, making a decent salary, a member of the burgeoning middle class,” Fisher says. “Now that middle class is trapped in a society that works against them economically.”

He then sought people in the lower-, middle- and upper-middle class to tell a spectrum of stories of diminished dreams. They are postmen, nannies, soldiers, electricians, college professors, stablehands, gas-station managers, researchers, grocers, black and white, male and female, young and old, healthy and sick, immigrants and native-born. None live the lives they envisioned. All scrape by as best they can. The narrative text panels flesh out the images, turning the metaphorical into the specific.

Fisher’s photographs are all accompanied by wall text that explain what is happening in the photo, and the people represented by the images. The exhibit also is enhanced by educational charts and graphs, chosen by curator Mark Bauer, explaining the historical decline of the middle class.

Fisher cautions that his project is not a political statement.

“All these changes that have affected the middle class were occurring under Republican and Democratic regimes,” he says.

However, he cites the work of economist Joseph Stiglitz, who concluded that the greater the income inequality, the lower the growth in the gross domestic product, so the worsening scenario for the middle class is a danger to the stability of the whole nation.

“The ship of state is foundering and will continue to founder until something happens. People are racing toward oblivion,” Fisher says. “We need to do something different before we become solidly ensconced as a third-world country. We don’t need a revolution. We need an evolution, toward a future that is sustainable.”

**TRAPPED IN THE MIDDLE: PHOTOGRAPHS BY JULIAN FISHER** *is at Whitney Humanities Center at Yale University, 53 Wall St. in New Haven, through June 6. [yale.edu/gallery-whitney](http://yale.edu/gallery-whitney).*

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