Saving Salvation
by Maddie Schwarz
Final Photo Project for JMS 495

For miles and miles, nothing rests upon the ground but rocks, dirt and a sprinkling of desert flora. The landscape is flat and hotter than hell, with a smog that hangs lazily in the air from distant factories. There’s something prehistoric and also dystopian about the area — to wander through the desolate terrain feels like taking a stroll through both the beginning and end of time. And then, the mountain appears.

In the belly of Imperial County lies Salvation Mountain, a psychedelic, man-made complex of clay, cement, straw and half a million gallons of latex paint, dedicated to the love of God. Like Dorothy entering a technicolor Oz, Salvation Mountain is the vibrant welcome from drab and dirt into Slab City, a community of squatters, artists and snowbirds from across the globe. Leonard Knight started construction of the mountain in 1984 as a testament to his faith. Knight worked on the mountain for 28 more years, until his deteriorating health prevented him from carrying paint buckets and debris to continue the site’s construction. The mountain is made largely of adobe clay and hay, with latex paint coated liberally on top as a protective layer from the elements. Underneath lies a sturdy structure of scraps from the dump — couches, tires, a refrigerator and more. Hundreds of messages and murals dedicated to the Christian gospel are painted over this striking complex of purely recycled material, covering the mountain in words of love and scripture.

After Knight’s death in 2014, the mission of Salvation Mountain’s caretakers changed from spreading Jesus’ word to preserving Knight’s legacy and work. These people are the next generation of the mountain’s defenders. Though rich in community values, Slab City is a temporary home for most. Save for the mountain’s current docent, Ronald Malinowski, known as Salvation Ron, and the mountain’s “watcher,” Ella Hare, the majority of caretakers are volunteers and short-term residents of Slab City, called “slabbers.” For many who spend an extended amount of time in Slab City, their stop is just that — a resting point before taking off on their next adventure through the life, a break to recharge through community love and outreach. Tomes Cadhi wandered into Slab City with her girlfriend, Jess, in October. With no place to stay and no plans to leave, Hare let the couple set up camp in her front yard, at the base of Salvation Mountain. Cadhi soon found herself immersed in a community of slabbers, with an ambition that she had lost in the outside world. “I was tired of not having a purpose,” Cadhi said of her time before discovering the mountain. “Here, instead of asking for one or waiting for one, you make one.”

This project is dedicated to Salvation Mountain’s many keepers, to show the labor and love that goes into preserving their eclectic monument with each brush stroke and dirty shovel. I aim to paint a broader picture of the mountain, and highlight the individuals who found themselves at the base of it — ready to save Salvation Mountain as it saved them.
Kasey, 11, above, was voted “Kid of the Year” in 2018 for attending every community service event at Salvation Mountain. Above right, Volunteers shovel dirt out from one of the mountain’s caves. The site’s walls are constantly crumbling, and the work is never done. Right, volunteer Tomes Cadhi laughs while wiping some of the mud off her hands between projects.

Ella Hare is known as the “watcher” of Salvation Mountain. Scanning the mountain expertly from her throne beneath a teetering wooden canopy at the base of the mountain, she’s no stranger to yelling at visitors who stray from the yellow brick road. “I’m the mad rabbit.” Hare joked. “but only