



Impact Statement

Lingying Shi, Grade 10

Saturated, 2026

Acrylic on canvas board, 20 x 16 inches

Lakeside School, Bellevue, WA

Unsung Hero: Margaret Bourke-White

To saturate yourself in the world is to see it through—and no one understood that more than Margaret Bourke-White. I always wondered what it took to be a war correspondent, how someone could operate in the center of conflict with purpose and composure. This is what immediately drew my interest as I stumbled across Margaret Bourke-White. Then, a quick Google Search of her works had turned into an hour of scrolling through her photography. I was fascinated by the geometric patterns she found in industrial structures and the dramatic lighting she drew out of tragedy. Her documentation of the siege of Moscow was especially unforgettable to me; the kind of images that make you feel the weight of what was happening.

Born in New York City in 1904, Margaret Bourke-White came of age during a time both industry and women's ambitions were just beginning to stretch toward new heights. She studied photography at Columbia University under Clarence White, and what followed was a career that defied every boundary placed before her. She became one of the first four photographers hired by LIFE magazine, one of the first Western photographers permitted into the Soviet Union, and the first female war correspondent to work in active combat zones during World War II. She photographed the liberation of Buchenwald. She documented Gandhi spinning cloth hours before his assassination. She balanced on the ledges of New York's tallest skyscrapers, a difficult and dangerous feat few people would dare. Her battle with Parkinson's disease eventually resulted in the end of her career, but not before she had pressed the shutter on some of the most defining moments of the twentieth century. Her impact was not only in what she captured but in the people that she made visible. Her images from Buchenwald are among the earliest visual records of the Holocaust's atrocities and remain some of the most important photographs in modern history. As a woman who succeeded in a dangerous and uncommon field, and as someone who went to extraordinary lengths to bring the realities of war to the rest of the world, her story had a profound impact on me. Whether in her own career or in the events unfolding around her, Margaret Bourke-White was someone who saw things through.

Bourke-White once said, "Saturate yourself with your subject and the camera will all but take you by the hand." That belief laid the foundation to my painting.

The industrial architecture looming behind her: cranes, buildings, ladders and steel skeletons, represent the machinery of industrialization that often consumed the people caught inside it. These structures converge toward a single point: the beam of light escaping Margaret's lens,

the camera light bouncing off the faces and structures next to it, showing how she did not just observe the world from a distance but immersed herself in it.

Rendered in the same muted colors as the walls and girders surrounding them, the dissolved faces are workers, soldiers, and civilians Margaret had photographed, whose realities exist as permanently and solidly as the architecture surrounding them. They are blended into the background as a reminder of how close to invisible they were to the public, but as proof of Margaret's recognition. She saturated herself in their lives, their suffering, their dignity, until her photographs were able to tell their stories. Amidst all of this, Margaret herself is rendered in full color, rosy and concentrated. In a world that often muted women, she persisted in full color, driven by ambition and a sense of purpose.

Learning about Margaret Bourke-White challenges me to pursue the world through my own lens with that same intensity. Her courage in war zones and her determination to put human faces on historical tragedies reminds me to seek the truth in what I consume and what I create, even when it is uncomfortable. As a female wrestler, I know what it means to enter a male-dominated field, to create your own path rather than follow one. The same relentlessness it takes to step into a room where the odds are not in your favor is the same relentlessness Margaret brought to every overseas assignment she sought. She has shown me that full presence is a commitment, and that is something I want to bring into my own sport, craft, and daily life. I hope that sharing this painting gives others a reason to seek out her work and sit with the faces she refused to let disappear. To be saturated in the subjects you love is, I think, the most courageous way to live.

References:

<https://www.cwhf.org/inductees/margaret-bourkewhite>

<https://www.life.com/history/behind-the-picture-the-liberation-of-buchenwald-april-1945/>

<https://www.moma.org/artists/712-margaret-bourke-white>