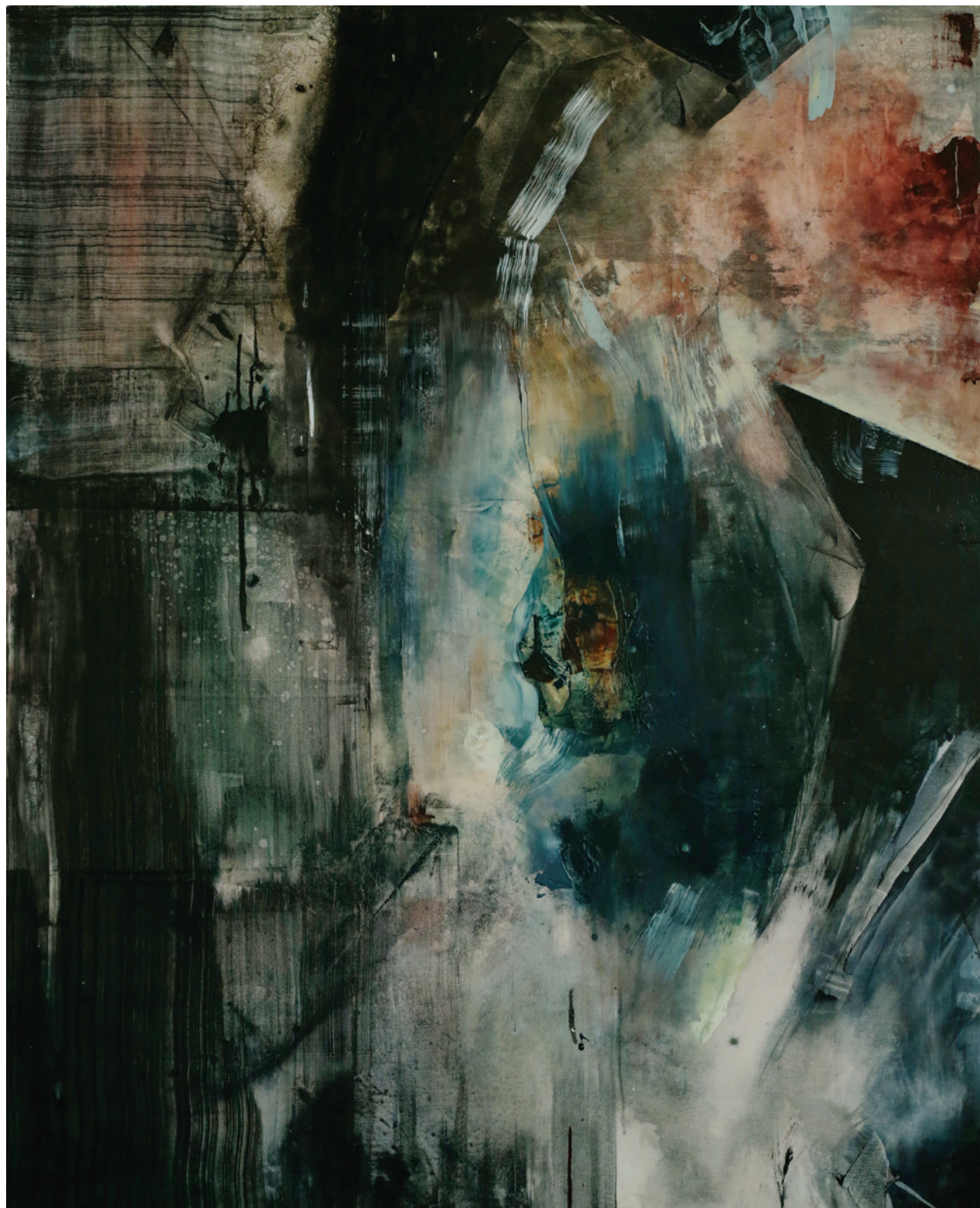


DANIELLE TORVIK-STAFFEN

Antithesis 10, 2017
Oil on canvas, 60 x 48 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST
PHOTO BY TRAN TRAN PHOTOGRAPHY

BRANDON LINGLE

East toward the Mountains

A Father's Collage
of Memories at
the Edge of War

2014

Before the Fourth of July sunrise, your three children ride into Bagram, Afghanistan, on a C-17 from Travis AFB, California. When the colonel told you to pick up some visitors from the passenger terminal you figured he'd sent you to fetch a media embed, but there in the middle of a pack of soldiers sporting boots, body armor, and machine guns sit your three children in t-shirts, shorts, and those Nikes you'd bought them at Sport Chalet last fall. A video about what to do during a rocket attack plays. The soldiers joke with each other and don't focus on the screen. The kids ignore the warnings as they thumb their iPhones. They smile when they see you, and you can't understand the situation. Joy. Panic. Kids aren't allowed in war zones.

You kneel and wrap them in your arms and ask: "What are you doing here?"

"We came to visit you," says your twelve-year-old daughter.

You keep a poker face as your mind whirls.

"Does Mom know you're here?"

"She brought us to the plane."

In the Afghan heat, surrounded by quick-walking soldiers, you shepherd your kids to Disney Boulevard, Bagram's main thoroughfare, named after a young Army specialist who died there in 2002. Many times while moving along that road, your thoughts drifted to family trips to the Magic Kingdom and how this place is the opposite. Late in the war now and Bagram, the main NATO base, swells with people as smaller outposts throughout the country close. The drawdown is drawing down. MRAP armored vehicles, trucks, and ragged SUVs kick up dust as they slow-roll past. You think of *Mad Max* as their massive wheels grind the gravel. Contractors eyeball you. A trio of bearded Special Forces guys grin at the kids. You hear a whisper-growl "Hooyah," as one gives one of your ten-year-old twin boys a high five and a patch with the *Punisher* skull. "Those guys do what you do in *Call of Duty: Black Ops*," you say. Your boy nods and quickly slides the patch into his pocket.

The aerostat—a ghost-white blimp—hangs above, pregnant with sensors and cameras, looking for Taliban. Consider the camera operators zooming in on the kids at that moment. Picture battle staffs analyzing the oddity of children strolling down Disney.