

## TRAVIS COLLINSON

*Upsidedown*, 2007-10  
Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 66 in



COURTESY ANGLIM GILBERT GALLERY

## ANDREA CARLISLE

### The Old Woman and the Boy

The Mother rushed out of the crowd, Boy in tow. She addressed the Old Woman, who sat on a bench reading a book. “I’m sorry,” she said, swiping her brow with the sleeve of her sweater, “I don’t know you, and this sounds like an odd request probably, but could you watch him just for a few minutes? We’re in that line over there.” She pointed to a long line for the Seattle train. “I have to use the restroom. The man in front of me is high on something or just a strange guy maybe, and he . . . I don’t know.” She glanced at her son, who looked back at the line he’d been pulled from and frowned. “Anyway, I don’t trust him, and the jerk behind me said yes, he’d hold my place but my son was old enough to watch himself, and I really . . . When I left my office I was in such a rush. I bolted down a burrito on my way to pick him up, and it’s just not agreeing with me or maybe I’m coming down with something. I hope not, but . . .”

“Mom,” the Boy interrupted, “you said you’d ask. I said okay. You don’t have to say why.”

Actually, thought the Old Woman, you really do need to say why. And why trust me, she wondered. I could be Jane the Ripper. I could traffic in children. She knew, however, she looked like harmlessness itself, with a soft gray bob framing a small face and the face itself a medley of wrinkles that surely, if the stereotype was correct, must have gotten there from a box of kindness she’d been drawing on year upon year, like an ever-renewable Kleenex supply. Her smile barely raised her jowls, but she offered it. After all, even though she’d never needed to use a bathroom in a public place with a child beside her, it must feel like an emergency. Once, you could leave children standing around without fear they’d be snatched away, but no more.

She took stock of the Boy. He may have been eight or nine, nattily dressed in a pair of brown cords and a white cable-knit sweater under a blue down jacket. He had pale skin and neatly combed flaxen hair. *A little man*, she thought.

“Go ahead,” she said, and the Mother rushed off, a cry of gratitude flying over her shoulder.

The Boy sat down on the bench and regarded his temporary guardian for a moment before meeting her eyes. “You wear funny clothes,” he said.

The Old Woman knew that most children felt they could say anything to an old person. She’d never had any