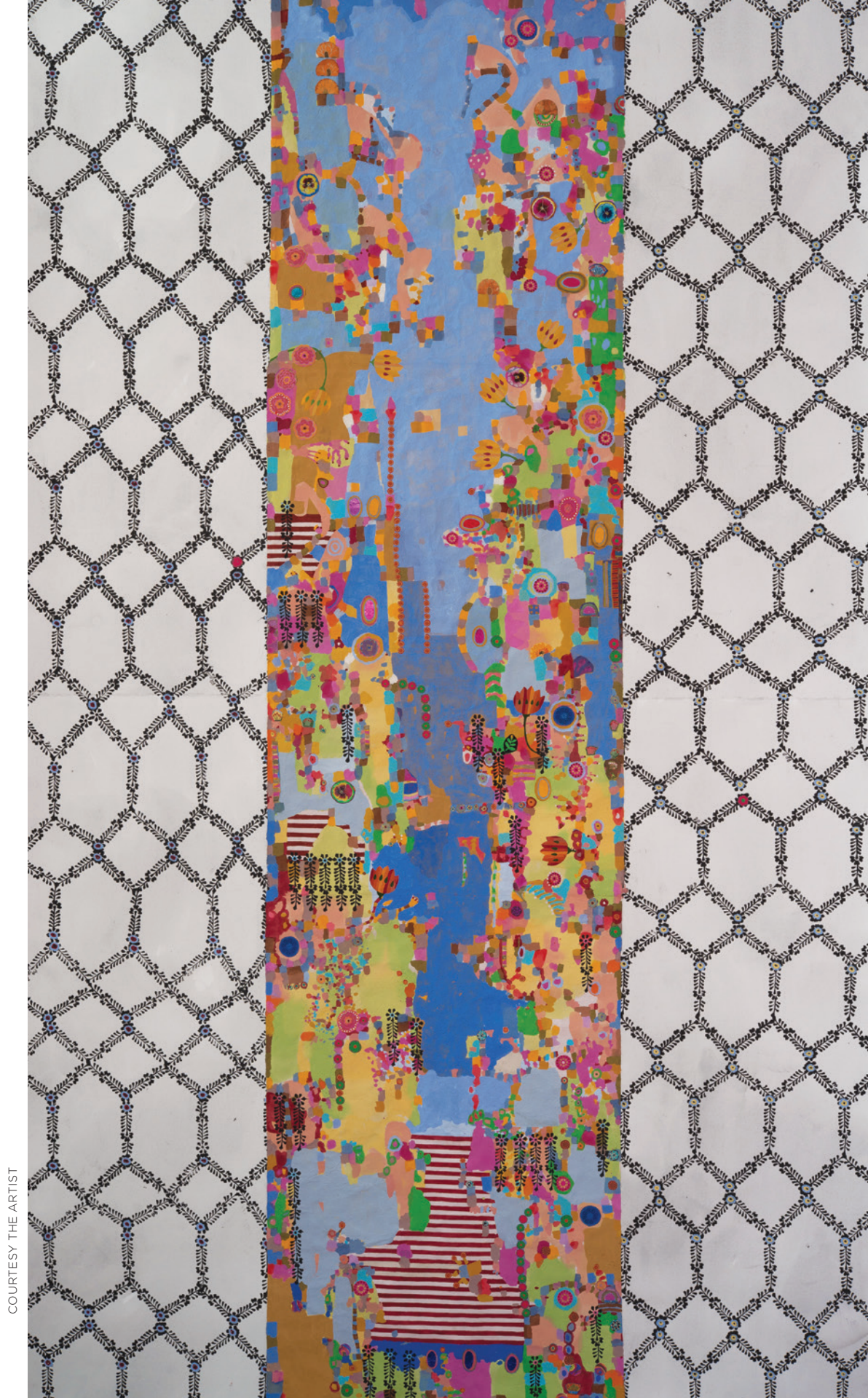


DIANE PIERI

*Wall Garden
Vista, 2015*

Gouache, Flashe
paint, casein, printing
blocks, inks, foil, gold
leaf on Lokta and
BFK Rives papers,
82 x 49 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

JIM RINGLEY

Up Close at the Westchester In-N-Out

A simple family routine
as a symbol for time,
mortality, and beauty

Draw a line mapping the elevation of a typical airplane flight and you will see a reasonable description of the human lifespan: the rapid, steep incline of youth, the long, mostly stable segment at cruising altitude followed by the descent, the distinct period that seems to want announcement that we're almost there. Depending on your relative position or perhaps the mood of your present outlook, life may appear as an arduous and tiresome slog or a fleeting miracle.

When they were of kindergarten age, I took my son and daughter on occasion to park just beyond the cyclone fencing at our local one-gate airport. I would pack sandwiches and juice boxes, pick the kids up at school around noon, and we'd spend an hour or so watching for planes from the car or just outside on the weedy shoulder of the road. Little two-seater prop planes came and went, doing who knows what, passing low enough overhead that we harkened to the soft muttering of their engines, the whispering slip of air around the wings and tail. The kids would eat and stare intently out the windows while I watched white-tailed kites treading the air over a dry, brushy-looking pasture at the end of the runway. No one had to say anything. It gave us time to think. Once in a while noisier turboprop commuter planes buzzed in rushed and businesslike from Los Angeles or San Francisco but the airplane we came to see was the one big jet that flew in and out of our airport twice daily. By local standards the airplane is large, and instead of propellers, it flies with two jets near the tail. While the birds searched the field for rodents, we scanned the sky over an adjacent vineyard for a twinkling of bright white, a glimpse of the faraway landing light that told us the big plane was coming in. Often one of the kids spotted it first.

The arrival of the big plane was the highlight of our outing, the way it swooped in loud and twice as big as any of the other aircraft. Little kids love that kind of magic. They live close to wonder. After the big plane touched down, we'd buckle up again and head home.

After some time went by, I realized we hadn't been to our lookout in a long while. Moreover, I knew we wouldn't be going back. The worn, sun-bleached car seats had gone to a thrift store and the kids had grown through a couple of shoe sizes and into longer school days. Our small-town air traffic didn't impress them anymore. Their interest shifted from airplanes and fire engines to

My children are growing so fast they upset my perception of time.

pet rats, a rented trombone, and karate uniforms. I, on the other hand, whether I am waiting at a red light or pushing a grocery cart across a parking lot, still look up to watch when I hear jet engines overhead. I see the same sight each time, basically: a winged rocket loaded with people climbing through the sky with nothing to hold it but invisible air and nothing but more emptiness to reach for. I'm compelled to watch again and again. Sometimes, even in the middle of conversation, I look, as if seeing it once more would explain the impossible spectacle. Other times, I am reminded of my grandmother, who was a little girl before the Wright brothers flew at Kitty Hawk but still alive and smoking Winstons when astronauts came home with chunks of moon in their pockets. These days, though it is brief as the winking of a star, one person's lifetime can bookend a dizzying reach of human achievements.

My children are growing so fast they upset my perception of time. Except for an extra fifteen pounds, stray gray in my hair, and plenty of wrinkles, my body has been pretty much the same for thirty years. But in the past three years alone, my daughter has grown eight inches in height. She is thirteen years old. She slips demure bras in the laundry hamper now, the orthodontist has lassoed her teeth, and she discusses algebra and sleepover plans with her classmates via text message. Her demeanor and presence in our house is that of a young woman, which is all normal, of course, still not unremarkable. What throws me is the *speed* of her changing, as if Time has suddenly hit its groove and is running away full throttle. I am not the only parent whose head spins.

In hindsight, their toddlerhood was too short, or my attention was in too many places during those years. One

of the dangers in our culture is becoming too busy, getting swept up in the too-muchness that chews away at our time. In addition to working, shopping, cooking, and cleaning, the computer sucks me in twice daily for rounds of agreeing, deleting, confirming, paying, declining, and logging out, bug-eyed. Weeks can be swallowed up before you know it, and suddenly you can realize it was actually years that vanished, not weeks. It scares me to think my life could evaporate while I chase after endless clutter.

Last spring a hunch began to rise in me that the kids and I had unfinished business with airplanes. Once or twice a year we drive past LAX and the Santa Monica Freeway's grinding stop-and-go traffic gives us a chance to rubberneck at jumbo airliners coming in to land. I've always thought, if we could just find a place to get off and watch . . . As it turns out, one of the best locations in Southern California for plane spotting is the Westchester In-N-Out burger joint because there is a lawn next to it that is situated directly under the final approach for two runways.

The kids and I felt overdue for some adventure and as soon as they were out for summer vacation, we headed south from our sleepy airspace, driving four hours to where the sunlight is citrusy, the air clear and midseventies warm. The In-N-Out itself is a sunny arrangement of bright red and yellow signage, clean white stucco, and shiny plate glass. Families sit alongside the building at round tables, munching two-fisted on burgers and sheaves of fries. Cooked beef, onion, and grease flavor the summer air. Abutting the Westchester In-N-Out, well kept and planted with a few small trees, is the more or less triangular lawn that looks like a miniature park; I see a few picnic blankets, two small tents, and a scattering of people with soda cups and straws. They diddle with their phones or lounge on the grass propped on their elbows; a little boy toddles in the shade, wagging a plastic bat. We pick a spot on the lawn and face the sky in the direction everyone else is turned.

The blue as it nears the horizon fades such that beyond the metal fences surrounding the cars in Lot A, beyond the billboards, light poles, and even past the shaggy palms, the color low to the Earth gets more flat and chalky gray, like aluminum glazed with robin's egg. Soon the eye catches the spot where that pale screen is pricked by a speck of diamond glint, a glimmer in the rippling atmosphere that swells and shivers. There it is. The cars on Sepulveda

Boulevard bump with music and young men drive with their elbows out the windows, their gaze never higher than the next green light. Meanwhile, our eyes fix on that glint in the distance until an airplane shape begins to form around it. The body of the plane grows until we can see the wheels down, flaps down, the four engines hung on the wings like gaping black lanterns. The vision appears soundless for another few moments until the jet engines begin to split from the constancy of hoarse freeway traffic and the growling engine noise is joined by a high *twee* like a ringing in the ears. The two sounds rise together in pitch as the plane looms lower, closer, bright, and unstoppable. The profile enlarges against the backdrop of sky, its round, white face filling out, the wings lengthening, their shadowed undersides spreading wide like a dark cape. To things of the grounded world, the airplane's nearness seems a mistake. Buildings and cars are dwarfed by its enormity. They shrink from it. We shrink too, even as our pulses throb and our nerves light up. We scream that it's coming and when the shiny belly of the plane sweeps directly above us, a cruciform shadow slashes the lawn and flicks across our faces. We scream again into the roar. My son flings out his arms and turns a cartwheel on the grass as a rolling wave of thunder tumbles over us. His sister pans her cell phone camera in an arc, laughing and shouting, "Oh my god!"

When it comes in like this, the Boeing 747 streaks just overhead at 160 miles an hour with up to 660 passengers inside and weighing 650,000 pounds. I do not take this lightly. My guess is that it's a hundred feet above us, based on the light poles, and dropping steeply even as it passes. I notice a wisp of white like a strand of yarn trailing from each wingtip and then four sounds at once: the howling quartet of turbofan engines sucking up air; the roar of the same air compressed and thrust behind; another rough noise, breathy and low, which sounds like air rushing around the wings and body of the plane; and finally, a high thin whine, nearly a whistle, that I associate with the ghostly threads unspooling from the wingtips. We pivot to see the tires scorch the runway behind us and gradually the nose of the plane levels in.

The stream of large airliners that flows into LAX seems infinite. No sooner have you absorbed the staggering impact of one plane than landing lights appear like another Bethlehem star in the distance. What passes for ordinary

now is outlandish, which is why we came. I wanted to show the kids and to see for myself the nature of this everyday marvel we take for granted. The experience leaves me thrilled and highly alert, but feeling terribly small and impermanent, too. I suppose a graph of an airplane's flight can describe a lifetime well from a distance, but what if one is being swept away in its slipstream of raucous, break-neck, always-happening history? From this endpoint the whole trip appears foreshortened. In the carnival atmosphere of the Westchester In-N-Out, I can only judge our time to be undoubtedly the fleeting miracle and when the next white-hot pinprick of light burns out of the low shimmering haze, I stare at it, fascinated, as one might stare at the nearing of a spark through vapors of gasoline.

Jim Ringley is a painter and portrait artist in San Luis Obispo, California. His essays have appeared in *The Sun*, *The Threepenny Review*, and others. He is the recipient of a Residency Fellowship from the Millay Colony for the Arts.