

VAS VISUAL ART eNEWSLETTER

June 25, 2026

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Ayin Es, “Relative Strangers”

by Jody Zellen

Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica, CA, May 16 - July 4, 2026



Ayin Es, “West Valley Fiction,” 2025, oil on birchwood, 24 x 24”



Ayin Es, “Check the Pulse,” 2023, oil on gesso board, 16 x 16”

The paintings in Ayin Es’ “Relative Strangers” exhibition highlight infrequently seen components of their work. Perhaps this signals a new aesthetic direction, but they shake things up, at least, in terms of style and media. Using vintage family photographs as a point of departure, they look beneath the surface to challenge the depicted narratives. Es is open about their transition, disability and feelings about gender politics. Through this series of works, they delve deeper into their own family-associated traumas. The images are unsettling studies of estrangement within a social dynamic. In a previous exhibition “On the Mend” (Compound Gallery, Yucca Valley), Es explored their gender-affirming surgery and struggles with mental illness through paintings and cartoon-like self-portraits with dog ears and a jagged red line across their chest, as well as hand-sewn illustrations of pill jars. They also created an ‘ironic’ sculpture made with smiling stuffed animals. Es’s work, though generally serious and to the point, is not without humor.

For Es, art and life are interconnected, that is central to the artist’s aesthetic foundation. In paintings, drawings and installations, they integrate and expound on aspects of their personal life. In the late 1990s, Es shifted from a career in music to that of full-time artist. Since making the change, they have shown their work regularly in galleries and museums in Southern California and beyond. Both their artwork and their gender identity are matters of public record.

“Relative Strangers” consists of loosely rendered, realistic but not realist paintings on paper, panel and canvas. After their parents’ death, Es came upon a tattered suitcase at the back of a closet full of family photographs. These served as source material. Es imagines what life might have been like if their ‘trans’ identity were represented in these decades old analog snapshots, and how a different family dynamic might have resulted. What would those images look like? To provide context, Es includes an album of the snapshots in the show.

The painting “Disorderly Conduct” (2022) is based on a 1975 photograph depicting Ayin with their mother and grandmother. In the photograph, the young “Ayin” is depicted holding up a garment of bright red taffeta fabric, smiling as she poses for the camera. Their mother and grandmother recline on a large bed in the background, paying little attention to the antics of the little girl. Changes from the photograph include bulging eyes and clown-like smiles on the mother and grandmother, who direct their gaze at the girl. Their mother’s hand is transformed into a large cartoony white glove that points at the young girl’s chest to reveal a long horizontal red scar.

In the watercolor “Young Exemplaries” (2025), Es uses a photograph from 1969 as a point of departure. The original depicts a family of four on a sidewalk standing in front of a large tree with a 1960’s-era car and the hint of an apartment building in the background. It is an image of a so-called ‘traditional’ family. Es is cradled in their mother’s arms, while their father rests his hands on the older brother’s shoulders. In the snapshot, the boy appears to be happy and laughing, whereas in the painted image his expression more closely resembles fear or horror. The baby Es looks out at us, rather than gazing into their mother’s eyes as in the original photo. Es’s painting challenges the complacency of the moment.

Many of the other paintings provide similarly emphatic alternatives to the photographs they are based upon. Es reinterprets these snapshots as they would ‘like’ to remember them. In works such as “Sucker” (2025), “A Dangerous Frisbee Cake” (2026) and “Check the Pulse” (2023), a younger Es has blackened eyes and a distorted mouth. “Check the Pulse” (2023) features a teenaged Es and an older woman who could be their grandmother, seated on a bed looking at official looking printed documents. Above the grandmother, who wears an expression of shock, is a cloud pouring down rain. In contrast, a rainbow emerges out of Es’ head. Es is depicted post ‘top’ surgery, with their chest covered by a long red scar. One eye is a blur of black and their mouth is a distorted red line.

“A Dangerous Frisbee Cake” (2026) is another disconcerting image. Here, thick goopy black tears cascade down from the young girl’s eyes as she rests her head on her mother’s shoulder. The two are seated on yellow chairs at a table in front of flowered wallpaper. Placed matter-of-factly on the table is a handgun alongside an uncut cake.

Es portrays their childhood as anguished and unsettling. The innocence and joy associated with family photographs has been extracted from the images and replaced with darker scenarios that allude to Es’s childhood unhappiness and discomfort. The comfort of middle-class Southern California is subverted and the figures are distorted, given multiple eyes and bleeding mouths. In the images of the young Es, they call attention to her future surgery. What injustices may have occurred are never explicitly detailed; however, Es repeatedly alludes to the fact that the moments captured within the family photos are not happy memories. Through their painting, Es extracts a history more aligned with contemporary reality.

Jody Zellen is a LA based writer and artist who creates interactive installations, mobile apps, net art, animations, drawings, paintings, photographs, public art, and artist’s books. Zellen received a BA from Wesleyan University (1983), a MFA from CalArts (1989) and a MPS from NYU’s Interactive Telecommunications Program (2009). She has exhibited nationally and internationally since 1989. For more information please visit www.jodyzellen.com