

GENE'S

***Escalator* by Jesse Benson**

September 19th to October 31st, 2026

When Jesse sent me his notes for this exhibition, the first thing he shared was, "This is a show for dark times." And when someone who is as cordial, compassionate, and complicated as Jesse sends you something as heavy as that, your initial response likely ought to be to sit with the statement, at least for a moment; I chose to sit with the accompanying images and objects, sit with his ideas, and then sit with my own ideas of what exactly I was looking at for quite some time.

This exhibition is titled *Escalator*. When one thinks of escalation, what most comes to mind? Currently, we – as a collective community – have to consistently contend with escalating global tensions and escalating personal anxieties. The former has been an ongoing, overwhelming fear for decades now, but we have been trained to compartmentalize it in a way that has seemingly made few folks in our daily lives get too worked up about it or distract them from their own minute-to-minute tasks. The same thing could be articulated about the latter, except now we have medications to help us out.

Escalators are the slow-motion steep inclines of commerce that symbolize upward mobility in all its corrupted glory. It's easy to be lazy and multi-task while riding on them; it's also easy to get harmed by the mechanics (and machinations) if you're not paying close enough attention. People talk about climbing the corporate ladder, but isn't being towed up past windowed floors on an ascending conveyor belt of stairs the more fitting capitalistic euphemism?

When thinking about escalators, I immediately think of malls. And when I think of Jesse's ideas and inspirations behind this show, I think about the fact that Jesse was born and raised in Orange County, a region with such a surplus of shopping malls that you can practically be drowning in commerce and capitalism, if you just pick a direction and drive for five or so miles. There are constant reminders of shallow desires everywhere you look when you're in most of the cities in that county. When attempting the balancing act of comprehending, and at times, combatting modern-day masculinity as a cis straight white man from the O.C. – a particularly peculiar part of Southern California, where the closer you get to the coast, the culture of pale people is dominated by plastic surgery and pettiness, and the deeper inland you roam, it shifts more to dirt bikes and deadbeats – many choose the common option of conformity. But for some, like Jesse, there is another path – a more sensitive one – that comes from a self-aware understanding of place and privilege, which can lead to a sense of guilt that can be either paralyzing or productive, depending on how one chooses to harness it.

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This sense of guilt can be experienced through his *Delicacy Paintings*, composed of Band-Aids on panels. I see in them a display of pain and vulnerability, as well as an eagerness to attempt to mend the fragility and suffering of others. They are deeply personal paintings, open and intimate in nature, but they are also rather direct and actually kind of banal – a far cry from his assiduously and exquisitely rendered conceptual hyper-realistic paintings, here exemplified by his *Compartmentalization Paintings*. There is a harmonious tension between the two bodies of work.

All of the pieces in this show are hardcore; they are on a spectrum of hardcore, but they are all hardcore. The paintings are all generous in their conception and execution. The sculptures all have such weighted implications that they make you feel like you're being filmed by multiple cameras, adding an unspecified number of metaphorical pounds; beyond that, they all imply us, which is obviously anxiety-inducing. But hey! Most celebrated Russian novelists depicted the realities of their era with truth and honesty; the originators of punk rock did the same – and when we're living in an era that has proven to be this goddamn dark, why not actually try to meet the moment?

- Keith J. Varadi, September 2026

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Compartmentalization Painting 13 (Jettison),
Oil and gesso on panel in aluminum frame, 17 x 11 inches, 2026

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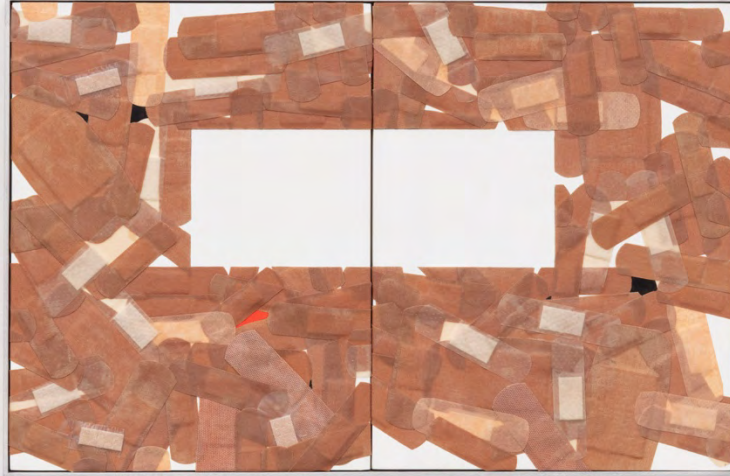


*Compartmentalization Painting 14 (World Traveler Plus), Oil and gesso
on panel in aluminum frame, 17 x 11 inches, 2026*

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Delicacy Painting 3 (In the Red), Oil, gesso, and flexible fabric and plastic bandages on panel in aluminum frame, 17 x 11 inches, 2026

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Delicacy Painting 6 (Facial Recognition), Oil, gesso, and flexible fabric and plastic bandages on panel in aluminum frame, 17 x 11 inches, 2026

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Delicacy Painting 4 (Bronze Plan), Oil, gesso, and flexible fabric and plastic bandages on panel in aluminum frame, 17 x 11 inches, 2026

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Delicacy Painting 5 (Shepard Tone), Oil, gesso, and flexible fabric and plastic bandages on panel in aluminum frame, 17 x 11 inches, 2026

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Survival Sculpture 10 (Ledge), Tempered glass, metal hanging brackets,
18 x 5 inches, 2026

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Survival Sculpture 11 (Child-Sized Target), Child's inflatable wrestling dummy, folded, 22 x 15 inches, 2026

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Survival Sculpture 8 (Slippery Slope), Escalator steps, powder-coated metal,
39.75 x 48 x 23 inches, 2026

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Survival Sculpture 9 (Split Decision), Die-cut, powder-coated sheet metal,
72 x 83.5 inches, 2026

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Artist Biography:

Jesse Benson (b. 1978) received his BFA from the California State University in Long Beach and his MFA from the Otis College of Art and Design. Benson has mounted solo exhibitions at Michael Benevento, Los Angeles, California; as-is.la, Los Angeles, California; and Campbell Hall Gallery, Los Angeles, California. Additionally, his work has been included in group shows at such venues as Leroy's, Los Angeles, California; Weatherproof, Chicago, Illinois; Ashes / Ashes, New York, New York; Galerie Balice Hertling, Paris, France; the Armory Center for the Arts, Pasadena, California; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California. He is the Emeritus Art Gallery Curator and an instructor at the Santa Monica College of Art and has been curating an expansive and evolving, itinerant and intermittent series of shows under the umbrella tag of *Delusionarium* since 2004.

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