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An Analog Tether

Recent exhibitions reflect a desire for intimacy and art in the age of AI.

By Jennifer Piejko • April 6, 2026

THERE MAY BE NO three warmer words of affection now than "stay right there." A passenger-side view of someone's best angle or a reunion caught from across the dining table—you can see the photo before the phone comes out of the pocket, *so stay right there, just like that, and let me get it*. We then come together to look at the frames on the same phone—sharing a single screen is a true act of intimacy in 2026. *Here, I'll send it to you so you can post it.* The impulse to capture the likeness of someone you know well is a caring one, and it strikes when you see someone you know well looking most like themselves. While these kinds of deeply personal, spontaneous depictions may depart from the long history of portraiture in key ways—particularly in the networks in which they're circulated and assigned association—they share with this tradition a fundamental assumption: nothing is as captivating as a face, especially a recognizable one.

Artificial intelligence is working overtime to optimize image, message, medium, and emotional ties so that we might finally be able to let go of the bulky, awkward weights of the 3D world and plug into the next one, where we look and feel our best and are always understood and supported. We now have billboards and subway ads for the "wearable companion" Friend and Replika, "the AI companion who cares," giving hazy impressions that they will never disappoint or reject you or need anything from you in return. They're just curious about you. They want to be there for you. Meanwhile, artists such as Hito Steyerl, Ayoung Kim, and Trevor Paglen integrate AI in the imaging and making of their figures, worlds, and abstractions, often using the new tools with a sense of certitude rather than a source of scientific inspiration. Galleries and museums are now often accused of using ChatGPT to write their wall texts and press releases, dependably automating a neutral tone for saying less with more words.

Against this backdrop, a few recent exhibitions seemed driven by a sense of camaraderie or intimacy, made with an analog physicality and pulsing with sentimentality and texture. At the gallery upstairs at Michael's, the family-owned Santa Monica restaurant hosting artists since 1979, New York artist Ben Wolf Noam opened Dinner Party Drawings & Prints, a show including lithographs from his ongoing *Shabbat Drawing* series and one titled *Uncle Paul's Famous Thanksgiving Spreads*, in a mode he's honed from drawing family members and friends, along with New Objectivity–style café scenes in charcoal on cardboard and paper. Familial wisdom and insight, the kind that can only be disseminated at the dinner table, radiates from simple portraits. The elegant *Grandpa Wolf* (2017), enjoying a cigar and a cocktail with lots of ice cubes, hangs near *The Adlers* (2017), a study of his wife, Laura, and her two brothers, the three adults arranged with arms intertwined and squished into what looks like booth seating for two. Heartwarming drawings showing off the simple riches of each feast—centered on a plump challah and dotted by half-finished bottles of red wine, stray forkfuls of pasta, and swaying gravy boats—hung side by side between bright oil portraits of friends sitting around messy tables, heaving with a clutter of glasses and emptied plates in a hospitable mess.

Ben Wolf Noam, *The Adlers*, 2017. Charcoal on cardboard. 24 1/2 x 34 inches.

At LOMEX Gallery in New York, Los Angeles artist Joseph Geagan's exhibition *Pageantry* depicted friends and figures in a similarly early 20th-century manner. Evoking German expressionism as well as the more contemporary representational styles of Elizabeth Peyton and Chloe Wise, the cheeky tableaux offer up an old-fashioned game of (minor) Celebrity, where some of those faces are so familiar—from a party, or a friend's carousel of images from a night out, or an opening. Illustrating what the press release refers to as a "camp history," friends, Instagram stars, 1990s club kids, and sultry strangers meet at the bar in *Café Lovestory* (all works 2025) or come together in a crowd, under a pennant with the face of Edie Sedgwick, at the arch in Washington Square Park in *Dance for a Throng*. Cabaret dancers in *Sallatrix Aeterna* and *Whispers at the Bar* rest their pink feathers between shows, savoring the intermissions amid shifts of hedonistic pleasure. Both Noam's and Geagan's exhibitions call up what Kate Brown termed "hypersentimental painting"—a sensibility that is a product of algorithmic socialization and, at the same time, nostalgia for those nights when you've forgotten to look at your phone.

In October of last year, Los Angeles photographer Peter Tomka exhibited two bodies of work where the process of image-making was inseparable from sociality and intimacy. For his presentation *Motion Pictures* in the most recent edition of *Made in L.A.*, the Hammer Museum's biennial, he turned his apartment in the Gaylord Apartments in Koreatown (the same building in which Geagan runs the gallery Gaylord Fine Arts) into a kind of large living camera. He blacked out the windows and projected video he'd shot of friends and familiar settings, which he then exposed onto large sheets of silver gelatin paper, in turn developed in the bathtub.

At the gallery Bel Ami in Los Angeles's Chinatown, Tomka mounted *Exposition*, covering the walls, floors, and doorways with black tarp and laying down a row of Tom of Finland–branded "watersports sheets" (shallow vinyl inflatable pools) and plastic bins for darkroom chemicals. Transforming the gallery into a darkroom and portrait studio, Tomka, over the exhibition's run, filled the space with images of the visitors/sitters who stopped in, folding the project back onto itself, using the site of the display as the site of production. It became a social space, one where friends and strangers came by, whether to learn about photography or get in front of the camera. "I was running around, pouring people drinks, introducing people

around the room," he tells me, "in the theater of my darkroom, with different cameras and lenses, explaining the chemical process of silver gelatin printing, which we see as something of an alchemistic process, but it's not, really—we've just gotten so distanced from the physical world." The roles of both artist and subject were performed, not simply documented. "The prints in *Exposition* became an index of who came to the show and gave a locality to the photographs that were centered at Bel Ami," he says. "It was a constant triangulation of getting people together, introducing them to one another, and photographing them as much as the project triangulated between process, my personal life, and philosophical entity. Things reveal themselves in the photographs. *Exposition* became a social diagram."

Peter Tomka, Installation view: *Exposition*, 2025. Bel Ami, Los Angeles.

Walking into that room implicitly gave permission to let Tomka have his way with your image. The artist's sitters trusted him with their depiction and then watched him commit it to paper and put it out on display in a true *exposition*. He turned their time together in that room into an image and then turned that image into an object with its own sensory system and natural lifespan. The process of letting the image take on a material form, one particularly reactive to touch, is expressed in little slippages—of angle, focus, shadow, and blur. The prints, several feet tall and wide, were pinned to dry on clotheslines strung through the space above the watersports sheets. Artist and sitter were both actors in the experiential theater of shooting a portrait. "I imagine they are watching a film unfold and at the same time they are characters within that film," Tomka said as an introduction to the project. Walking through the resulting exhibition at the end of the weeks-long open studio provided the same sense of delight and discovery as when you get the photos back from a disposable camera. The slight curling-up of the hanging prints, adjusted focus points, and smears on the test prints are little reminders of the fragility of the image, and that a photograph is not so much documentation as it is something illusory and imprecise, like memory itself.

When setting up a profile so that Replika can get to know you, the app asks how, specifically, "your AI partner [should] support your well-being," and presents you with options such as "offering comfort in tough times," "helping me feel understood," and "providing a safe space to vent." The last, open-ended option is the most telling, though. Replika betrays itself by showing its own limits, knowing that it can't offer what you get by simply joining a group of people around a table. Likely no large language model ever will. Replika asks if you're looking for "something even more than that."