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Evidence of Interpersonal Relationship

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EVIDENCE OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP

By

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I have attempted to use the portrait to think about the person- to consider what is uniquely human about relationships, and in return, what about humanity is uniquely relational. I approached this personally by using portraiture to explore my own relationships. I recreated a study that was designed to generate interpersonal closeness. It consisted of 36 questions that were asked and answered by a participant and myself. In participating in the experiment, I became a subject. Immediately following the conversation, I painted a portrait of the other person and a portrait of myself as a response to the encounter. Seeking to be quick and reactive, they were painted in the time constraint of one hour. Would this connection affect the paintings? Would the relationship between the pair of portraits mirror the relationship that was formed in real life?

In my undergraduate degree I have majored in both studio art and psychology. My interdisciplinary interests were seen in this project. I began with a plan to create a series of portraits. I soon integrated the interpersonal study into the process. The questions from the study were arranged into three sets that increase in self disclosure. After having the idea, I tested it with a good friend. I continued interviewing, talking with, and painting people. It became increasingly apparent to me that my interest in portraiture was rooted in an interest in people. In my interests I find myself oscillating between the worlds of science and art, of calculation and expression, of studying and wondering. I came to an observation that was directed outward and then directed inward. I imagine that there is understanding sacrificed in excluding the self from the application of knowledge. This project was a way to transform theory into experience.
“Portraits represent serious efforts of some of the world’s best artists to study people (others or themselves). Hence, portraits might reasonably be thought to embody accumulated cultural wisdom about what it is to be human.”

My interest in the portrait comes from my interest in people, and these interests come from a general desire to understand. If portraits do embody wisdom about what it means to be human, than what does the modern portrait declare? The question of humanity is resting underneath the surface of my exploration- and this question is directed outward and then inward. Psychology studies the inner person, but this person is always related to other persons. The health of the inner person is manifested in their relation to other persons. It is my observation that the human experience is essentially relational. The inclinations that formed this project evidence my belief in this. I have used the portrait to think about the person, and through this, people in general. This endeavor seemed lofty, so I began with extraordinarily simple approach: I connected with and painted people near me.

I recreated a study titled The Experimental Generation of Interpersonal Closeness: A Procedure and Some Preliminary Findings by Arthur Aron et. al. This original study was designed to generate interpersonal closeness between strangers. It consisted of a series of questions that gradually increased in self disclosure. I modified this study to fit my project. I selected people that I had a previous connection with but were not in my inner circle of closest relationships. I went through the study’s questions with them hoping to connect further. In the original experiment the questions were asked and answered by both participants. In this experiment I placed myself in the seat of the second participant. In doing so, I became a subject.

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I attempted to keep the procedures standard. I invited a person over and we met on my porch. There they found an envelope that gave a description and explanation of the experiment. We went through the questions together, passing them back and forth, both answering them. I spaced out the conversations to give each encounter the energy and attention it deserved. I resolved to be honest and to engage with each person in whatever direction the conversation advanced. I chose an intentionally diverse group of people and the nature of the conversations varied as widely as their personalities. Some conversations left me feeling significantly closer to the other person. In certain conversations the pair of us connected more through humor, in others more through self disclosure. Some conversation were exciting, some were solemn. There were many things that could have influenced the depth of the connection. I think the depth of mutual self disclosure, the level of mutual interest, and similarity in personality may have been a few areas.

There were multiple observations that took place. I observed the other person and I also observed myself. I noticed my own willingness to connect, my degree of openness, and my interest in them. These observations happened after the fact. As we talked, I was not observing from a researchers point of view, was just engaging the conversation. The point of the conversation was not analysis, but the formation of a connection. This allowed me to become subject in the experiment. It was also fun for me. The process was conducted out of a light-hearted curiosity. Despite this, there was a degree of discomfort. I have struggled with the ability to self-disclose and this procedure forced me to self-disclose, for hours, with a variety of people. There were five female, five male, some I had known of since childhood, some I met weeks prior. I felt like I was treading on unmarked territory. The line between the project and my actual life was blurred. The line between formal and informal, between research and experience became indiscernible.
At the end of each conversation I gave the friend a card. On the front it said “Evidence of Interpersonal Relationship.” Underneath this it said that they were “declared a friend by science”, but that the friendship was a “revisable theory.” On the back of the card was a list of the levels of interpersonal relationships as noted by George Levinger. ² These levels catalogue the general stages of growth and deterioration in relationships. There was humor in this gesture. The scientific language is contrasted with something very simple: a friendship. This card played into the tensions I felt throughout the process and acknowledged the blurred line between the project and my normal relationships. The levels of relationships included on the back of the card are in small print. There is something unsettling in acknowledging these levels while you are in the mid-to-early stages of a friendship. The study states that its questions were designed to generate an experience of closeness, not an enduring relationship. The card acknowledges that this relationship is revised by real life interaction. It depends on our commitment to each other and is vulnerable to “boredom” “dissatisfaction”, “resentment”, “spatial separation”, and even “death”. These risks are the fine print, a disclaimer. At the same time they are nothing new. As people, we exist in constant fluctuation between these stages.

After the conversation I painted a portrait of the other person and a portrait of myself.

“The portrait artist is an alchemist who seeks to make inert physical material ‘live’ and to show us a person, an actual individual, whose physical embodiment reveals

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psychological awareness, consciousness, and inner emotional life. How can an artist ever succeed in this mysterious project?”

The task of creating a pair of portraits that catalogued the conversation seemed daunting, so I approached them as a part of the exploration. I began painting by responding. The paintings were intuitive and unplanned. The first portraits were painted from a reference photo. After the conversations I took photos with different lighting and positions. I chose a photo that felt the most relevant and used it as a reference image for the painting. I later moved from photo to life. I asked the person to sit for an hour after the conversation. Both sets of portraits are gestural and expressive. The portraits from life evolved into paintings with more sculptural and delicate qualities. This was done for formal and conceptual reasons. Painting from photo created a distance between myself and the other individual. Painting from life was an attempt to close in that distance, to extend the encounter into the painting of the portrait. I asked Courtney Johnson,

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3 Freeland, Portraits and Persons, 1.
a friend that participated in this project (Fig.2), what she thought of our interactions after sitting for me. She said “It’s so interesting being looked at. It feels unusual but it’s nice. It feels kind of loving. I think that most people don’t take the time to listen or be vulnerable with each other.” It was compelling to me that she felt the vulnerability of our conversation during the hour she sat for me. The conversation and the painting were two encounters. It was a different yet similar interaction, an activity of looking. Painting from life provided more visual information and also the added dynamic of the other person’s presence. The closeness experienced during the conversation overflowed into the artist-sitter interaction while the portrait was being painted. After I created the portrait of the friend I painted a self-portrait from a mirror. I created the portraits in pairs during the same sitting.

Would the relationship between the pair of portraits mirror the relationship that was formed in real life? I think this question cannot be fully answered. However, the process is seen in the final collection. The portraits have relationships with each other. This theme is preserved in a narrative that emerges from the pairings. The paintings are quick, emotive, and interactive. The collection of portraits exist in relation to each other and evidence people interacting with
people. There are multiple narratives that occur from a wide viewing. There is first a relational narrative within each pair. There is another narrative that extends throughout all of the portraits that provokes a curiosity in their differences. There is a third narrative that runs through the self portraits, ten paintings of one person, the artist, that are unusually different.

Grace Rivera, another participant seen in Fig.3. says:

“The project felt like the complete event of a relationship. You initially reaching out to me, us getting to know each other, and the portrait process afterwards. Relationships are invisible but seeing the portrait in the gallery felt like the whole process concluded in something physical. The portrait felt like a physical conclusion.”

The portraits vary stylistically. I enjoyed experimenting with unconventional color schemes and bold paint. The facial expressions, glances, and large marks of color form narrative variations. I worked from a square, black canvas. This allowed the person to be the only content. There were unique advantages in creating portraits from paint. Unlike photography, paint gives the artist room to construct an image from nothing with an expressive brush. The artist’s
The artist’s perspective replaces the photographic lens and their personal reactions are recorded. The artist’s perspective may deviate from visual realism, but it preserves an implicit reality that communicates emotion and individual insight.

The portraits invite the viewer into my exploration, and through this, the conversations. Glances are exchanged between the portraits and the viewer. By inviting the viewer into this dialogue, the dialogue is expanded to include three people. The questions I am asking in my own exploration are directed toward the viewer as they watch me ask them. What do the portraits say about the people in them, and through this, people in general?

Carson Jordan, a participant seen in Fig. 4, comments on the exhibition opening:

“I think I felt how I imagine you feeling on that day. You did all of these paintings, allowing yourself to be vulnerable and on display, but your work included other people. I would stand there and see people staring at my portrait, thinking about our conversation, and it felt odd. Not like I was the artist, but a similar vulnerability.”
Art historian Jerrold Seigal defines the portrait in three parts: the bodily, the reflective, and the relational.\textsuperscript{4} The bodily dimension requires the likeness of a physical body. The reflective dimension requires an endowed consciousness, psychological, or mental state. The relational dimension requires an inclusion of the person’s membership to others. This definition identifies the portrait as something that is alive, embodying human qualities. Portraits require a physical presence, a self, and an other. These three dimensions reveal a unique truth: that portraits, like people, are relational.

After finishing these portraits I decided to create two more pieces. The first piece was a 12x12 mirror that was the same size and format of the portraits (Fig. 5). I created a stencil of affect categories and their expressions derived from affect theory. I sprayed this chart onto the mirror with flesh-toned paint. Affect theory organizes subjective emotions into categories and

\footnote{Freeland, \textit{Portraits and Persons}, 81.}
connects them to their response or facial expression. This chart was painted on the mirror. If the viewer approaches the chart to read it, they are forced to look at themselves. I had the idea of creating this mirror awhile ago when I first read the categories. I wanted to do it for fun. After thinking about it, I realized that found it funny because I actually operate that way. Affect theory is a scientific approach to emotional understanding. It seeks to understand something personal through a detached analysis that strips it of its emotional potency. This piece is connected to the larger themes of this project through its interest in inward observation. The viewer is included in my observation, and in the mirror, observes themselves. They exist as a final live and changing portrait. The final question of the artist statement was repeated next to the mirror in the gallery. Would the relationship between the portraits mirror the relationship that was formed in real life? Would the relationship between the two portraits (the viewer and their emotionally categorized reflection) cause the viewer to consider their own relationships?

The final piece was a large two-part abstract painting. The canvas hung on a wall, unstretched with exposed edges. It was an action painting inspired by the work of Helen Franken-
thaler. I poured acrylic paint onto raw canvas to create washes of color. I moved the paint around with sponges and my hands. It was a final act of exploration, a final inward consideration, a painting about process. The two canvases were intended to be separate paintings but I ended up merging them into one. It was gestural and reactive. It was painted in one hour. It was a response to an experience. The left edge of the right canvas ends with arms of paint extending toward the left canvas, almost touching it. The two canvases were hung next to each other with a small margin between. The paintings reach for each other. Reaching was created during a time of frustration and exists as a final self portrait. This painting is a document of my own process and attempt to understand. How does the admission of this desire expose us? Toward what, or toward whom, are we reaching?

Sam Bartz, who attended the opening reception of this exhibition, says:

“I connected with it personally because I often avoid intimacy with others. The exhibition clearly called that behavior into question by highlighting the impact of relationship building. The show asked its guests to consider how relationships are built, sustained and ended while also calling their own attitudes toward relationship building into question. It was abstract but not inaccessible.”

This project began out of a desire to explore my interests independently. It did not begin or end with a lofty aim. I understood the project as it progressed. I used the freedom of independent research to follow my curiosity, and through this, explored themes of interpersonal closeness by applying scientific theory to myself. I have attempted to use the portrait to think about the person. What about relationships are mysteriously human? To be known is essential to our humanity. I have found validation of this relational desire within myself and look to the paintings as evidence - the portraits of the very people with whom I have connected.