

*Web*

Plaster, nylon

This sculpture is about my relationship with intimacy as a concept. I decided to communicate this by creating a very personal moment between two people. Two plaster heads are set inches apart, forever frozen in the moment before a kiss, and connected by translucent nylon webbing. They are the only ones who can clearly see one another. I chose nylon to cover and connect the faces because it is such an intimate material, and I enjoyed the process of cutting, stretching, and sewing it over the heads. Seeing the piece develop as a work of art reminded me of the process of building a relationship. I have a personal connection with the fabric because it is something that I used to be very familiar with, but I now have become estranged from it. The flesh tones and web-like fabric create a powerful softness that captures the nature of strong emotional connections. Ghostly hands are embroidered on the heads in dark purple thread. Together, they create a space where the viewer may observe their relationship and understand the emotional push and pull of intimacy.

AJ

# The Pursuit of Intimacy

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*The development of intimate and meaningful relationships is crucial to human happiness, development, and well-being. From the moment a person is born, they crave connectivity with the people around them. However, there are significant risks involved in being intimate; this state of vulnerability creates an opportunity to be manipulated, misled, or emotionally damaged. As a result, many people put up barriers to protect themselves. I intend to explore the experience of someone wanting to be open and intimate with another person, while simultaneously wanting to protect themselves from getting hurt.*

I have a lot of difficulty keeping things to myself. Though I am good at protecting other people's secrets, I keep very little personal information private. I do not have a natural tendency to keep things secret. Since it has been difficult for me to gauge the right time to say things, I've been known to "overshare" and say more than I need to. I have become more aware of this characteristic over time and am getting better at keeping things private. Secrecy is valuable because it keeps one from disclosing information that isn't ready to be shared, and it also allows a person to be content on their own without the need to share every thought with another person. Independence and a healthy sense of privacy are very intertwined.

I sometimes struggle to understand people who process emotions differently than I do, and that has caused friction in my relationships in the past. Since it is usually easy for me to address issues directly, I expect others to do the same. I think a lack of empathy and social awareness on my part is largely responsible for my misunderstanding, and I hope that the research I'm doing and the process of creating the art piece will help me understand this topic more thoroughly.

Why do people put up barriers between themselves and their loved ones? I am curious about the dichotomy between myself and the more private people in my life, which led me to begin thinking about intimacy. I crave closeness and intensity in a lot of my relationships, and the only way to achieve this is by making myself known to the other person. I think this type of relationship is characterized by the two people having a complex understanding of each other and mutual emotional involvement. Some people sacrifice privacy for the sake of being understood, and some people sacrifice being understood for the sake of privacy. I am definitely the former, though exploring this has made me more interested in the psychology of the other type of person. Having a better-rounded view of intimacy and self-disclosure in general will help me not only better myself and my functioning in close relationships, but also further my understanding of others who are different from me.

In this conversation, intimacy is characterized by more than physical closeness. In fact, one may have an intimate relationship with another person without ever touching them at all. An online description for an intimacy-themed art show addresses the word, "It's one of those loaded words that can imply everything from meaningless sex to a revealing, heartfelt conversation. It can sound warm and inviting, but it can also awaken unsettling fears of risk and vulnerability" (*Huffington Post*).

Intimacy can be divided into three main types: emotional, intellectual, and physical. The first category is the main focus of my inquiry, but all three affect most relationships. Physical intimacy is probably the most obvious and easily observable form of closeness. Physical contact, especially that which is sensual or sexual in nature, is probably the most common association with the word "intimacy." However, it is also possible to be close with someone in this way without any emotional or intellectual attachment. For this reason, it is less complex, and therefore, less interesting to me. I will be addressing physical intimacy mostly only as it relates to the other two. . Harry Harlow, a 20<sup>th</sup> century psychologist, conducted a series of controversial experiments testing touch dependency in primates. His work emphasized the importance of physical contact from a young age, and his findings also apply to human development. (*Boston Globe*) Physical contact is an extremely important part of human growth and happiness, and I'm curious about the part that "skin hunger," or the desire to be touched, plays in the development of these kinds of relationships.

Intellectual intimacy is a closeness that comes from mutual respect and the open exchange of thoughts, opinions, and ideas (*Wikipedia*). This type of intimacy is common in

academic and professional relationships, but is also a key factor to success in romantic, platonic, and familial relationships as well. While it is entirely possible to love someone without being intimate with them in this way, it can strengthen and preserve a relationship. One famous example of this type of connection is the relationship between artists Mary Cassatt and Edgar Degas. Robin Oliviera, the author of a novel inspired by the painters, says in an interview, “Their relationship is a sort of an elevated, intellectual love affair that tied them to one another for the rest of their lives after they met” (*NPR*).

Emotional intimacy is displayed through the open sharing of feelings and desires, as well as a certain transparency regarding personal thoughts and emotional responses. This kind of relationship provides the greatest opportunity for developing a support system and meaningful connections, but also poses the greatest risk for getting hurt. This is because emotional intimacy calls for a certain vulnerability that isn’t as present in the other types. Telling secrets, sharing feelings, and being open and honest with another person gives them emotional power that they may abuse.

An important element of intimacy is that it is reciprocal. This is why people may share very personal details with a therapist, or confess to a priest, and still not have an intimate relationship with them. The psychologist Sidney M. Jourard says, “In ordinary social relationships, disclosure is a reciprocal phenomenon. Participants in dialogue disclose their thoughts, feelings, actions, etc., to the other and are disclosed to in return. I called this reciprocity the “dyadic effect”: disclosure begets disclosure” (66). By opening up, one invites the person they’re engaging with to do the same. They must be relatively equally vulnerable in the relationship to achieve healthy intimacy. Otherwise, it creates a power imbalance, which can be uncomfortable for both people involved. During a TED talk, writer and speaker Ash Beckham sums this idea up by saying, “If you want someone to be real with you, they have to know that you bleed too” (TED Radio Hour, *Keeping Secrets*).

There is significant risk involving the development of intimacy in a relationship. To become very emotionally involved with another person is to give them the power to cause emotional damage, and many people are fearful of this risk. Giving up control of one’s emotional state can be a very frightening thing, and often stops people from reaching a certain level of intimacy in a relationship. The fear of intimacy is so common that there is even a word for it—“Aphenphosmophobia” (*FearOf*).

Rejection, betrayal, and manipulation all stand out as frightening possibilities as well. If a person has a history of these happening in their past, they are more likely to struggle in the development of new relationships. Trust is a crucial factor in intimacy, but it is very difficult for some people to gain.

As a result of these risks, people often up barriers as a form of protection. They prevent others from becoming close enough that they may have some power to hurt them. This is done mostly through secrecy and the withholding of information. It may also manifest through dishonesty and lies of omission, or intentionally misleading the other person to think things that are inaccurate. A truly intimate connection cannot be made without some degree of confessional self-disclosure. By choosing not to share feelings and personal details, one may stop a relationship from developing into something that could put their emotional safety at risk. (*The Power of Vulnerability*)

Unintentional barriers can also arise for people with trust and intimacy issues. Their insecurities may prevent them from being fully open and honest with the other person, and this will make it so that the other person cannot fully understand them. If someone is out of touch

with themselves, they will not be able to be truthful with another person either. This lack of self-awareness can be a hindrance because they will be unable to communicate who they really are. People who struggle to put their thoughts and feelings into words are also at a disadvantage. Friends and partners can only know what they are told and what they can infer, which is often incorrect. (*PsychAlive*)

Many may wonder if it is even worth developing an emotionally intimate relationship. Though it can be a difficult process, it also can be extremely rewarding. It takes a long time to build up trust between two people, but once that has been done, it is very healthy to have another person to depend on. It is difficult to deal with problems and emotional distress completely independently, so having someone to be open and intimate with in this way provides an opportunity for support and assistance. Being able to talk through problems without reservation is also valuable. These are all very practical reasons for intimacy, but the desire to make emotional connections runs deeper than that.

It is a basic human desire to be understood by others. One may be surrounded by family and friends and still feel lonely if they do not feel like these people see them for whom they are. It's this craving to be known that pushes people past their personal boundaries and makes them take the risk of becoming emotionally intimate with someone else. Being able to share thoughts, feelings, and experiences is a way to invite another person into one's headspace, making them both feel less alone. There's also a search for acceptance and validation that only comes with self-disclosure. Even very confident, independent people search for this closeness and seek to be understood. It is also commonly believed that you cannot truly love someone unless you have a solid understanding of them.

Another widely accepted belief is that it is impossible for two people to truly know and understand each other. No matter how much time they spend together, how openly they communicate, and how often they talk, they will never know what it is like to be in the other one's head. Some things, such as emotions, are difficult to express and put into words. This is often what motivates people to begin trying to express themselves in other ways, such as through music or art. But even then, there's no guarantee that the viewer or listener will understand. It's also difficult then someone can't identify their own feelings. If they don't even understand themselves, they have no chance of being able to accurately express themselves to another person.

Though this invincible barrier between people is a common idea, opinions on it differ. Many will say that although it is impossible to know someone as well as they know themselves, one should still try to get as close as they can get to that ideal. Truly intimate and involved relationships can only be born from people who strive to understand each other to the best of their abilities. To feel as if there's no one who knows you well is a very lonely existence for most people. Others may argue that this invisible wall is a good thing, and that there is beauty in it. They enjoy the process of getting to know someone, but think that it's better to not *completely* know someone. This gap keeps people interested and in love. They argue that being too close with another person would only make one feel lonely again. It is important to know yourself better than anyone else, and be able to choose what parts of you that you share.

My personal belief is that there must be a balance- two people must attempt to know and understand one another while still keeping some things to themselves to preserve security, privacy, and mystery. This barrier is bittersweet. Though it sounds unfortunate that two people cannot truly understand one another, there's something sacred and beautiful about the process of trying to do just that.

I am fascinated by this desperate, voluntary vulnerability where people expose the most fragile parts of themselves just so they have a chance of being understood and feeling less alone. The opportunity to truly form a close connection with someone else is alluring and terrifying, and I'm very interested in this dynamic- fear combined with desire. I also want to explore the futility of this endeavor. It is impossible to completely understand someone in their entirety, but that doesn't stop people from trying. I especially want to explore the barriers that prevent intimacy from coming to be, such as communication issues and insecurities.

There is an internal conflict that takes place when one is opening up to another person for the first time. I want to explore one's struggle to preserve their privacy and overcome insecurities while still being open and intimate with the other person. I believe that I can learn a lot about myself through this line of inquiry, as well as about others and the human psyche in general. There are so many obstacles in the way of developing an intimate relationship, yet people put forth the effort to overcome them all the time. This shows that there is something extremely valuable in being close to another person, even if it means being vulnerable and risking heartbreak. I want to get to the bottom of the decision that people make to be seen when they know that it could have potentially negative outcomes. I hope to capture this complex inner emotional dialogue in my piece, as well as express my opinion that intimacy is ultimately worth taking the risk.

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