The Complexities of Intimacy

Brie Henderson
briehenderson@wustl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/samfox_art_etds

Part of the Art Practice Commons, Contemporary Art Commons, Development Studies Commons, Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Fine Arts Commons, Other Psychology Commons, Painting Commons, Poetry Commons, and the Theory and Criticism Commons

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the All Graduate School of Art Theses at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate School of Art Theses by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.
The Complexities of Intimacy

By

Brie Henderson

A thesis presented to the
Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts
Washington University in Saint Louis

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Thesis Advisor
Meghan Kirkwood

Primary Advisors
Meghan Kirkwood
Richard Krueger

Committee Members
Heather Bennett
Monika Weiss
Abstract

Through my research I have discovered there are many complexities that exist within the topic of intimacy. Of these complexities, I chose to explore the topics attachment and codependency in my final series. Attachment and codependency are deeply rooted in psychology, poetry, and many artist’s practices. The relationship between poetry and my work has become deeply intertwined. I combine poetry with my work as a way to document my feelings and to inspire the titles for my paintings. Through a series of intimate watercolor paintings, I reference bodies, intimate interactions and the ambiguity within the two. This ambiguity asks viewers to contemplate boundaries and the act of searching for a sense of self.
Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy: Frequently in Bed, Too Frequently, Not Frequently Enough</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment: Tell Me You’ll Never Leave</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codependency: It's So Hard for You to Have to Carry Someone</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poetry: Itching to Type</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy and Other Artists: Yet There is No One Person</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Work: Searching, Slowly Discovering, Always Craving More</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image Citations</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endnotes</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Introduction**

Intimacy denotes many things and ultimately a single definition is unobtainable, which is why the many facets of intimacy have become the thematic driver in my work and research. Love, closeness, self-disclosure, support, bonding, attachment and sexuality are all intertwined in intimacy. This concept is something we all have in common. I hope to explore it through the lens of my own personal experience in order for readers and viewers to connect with my work on a personal level. Drawing from psychology, literature, experience and the work of other artists, I have strengthened my understanding of intimacy, how it takes shape in my life, as well as the lives of others. Making work about the complexity of intimacy has proven challenging, because the ideas around the term are so fluid. My ideas and experiences could vary vastly from another person’s. I explore the complexities of this by referencing bodies in intimate interactions, by working in a series, using subtle changes of color palette, and through the use of poetic titles. During the process of making my work, I opened a dialogue of questions around boundaries, dependency and identity. The concepts involved with intimacy I have chosen to explore are attachment, codependency, love, sexuality and loss. Carefully curated, the series aims to depict tangents or aspects of roles that exist within my own intimate interactions with the hope that each piece will highlight these varying nuances of intimacy.

It took me a while to arrive at the premise of my work. Each time I made something new, I hoped it would be what I was looking for. However, that seemed impossible because I did not know what I was looking for. Instead, each painting I made told me what was not working.
I began my studies researching texts on feminism, the gaze and the fragmented body. I made work that referenced bodies without heads because I wanted to speak more abstractly about the use of bodily references in my work, and less about nude, female bodies. I liked the abstraction, but without the heads they became object-like, and the emotional qualities seemed to be stripped away (Figures 1, 2, and 3). These figures existed in a non-literal space, their backgrounds were simple compared to the figure, and this made me realize I was painting a mind or memory space in which the emotional aspect was more important. These paintings were missing a connection.

Through this discovery, I realized I had an attachment to memories and the people in them. I was recounting bodies that I knew intimately. I then decided to create my work by responding to these memories and the paintings as they unraveled. Thinking about what impact the memory source had on my work led me to explore the psychology around intimate interactions and question how to define the sexuality and other complexities within it.
In order to discuss the connection between bodies, mind/memory (the space they exist within), and emotional attachment, I will first introduce the topic of intimacy. During my research, I stumbled upon the book *The Psychology of Intimacy* written by Karen J. Prager, PhD, an Associate Professor who maintains her own private practice and is a leading researcher in intimacy. Her voice, among the many others I found, not only validated my thinking, but also brought insight to the many topics I was pursuing in my work.

According to Prager, "Intimacy is a 'natural' or 'fuzzy' concept, which means that it is characterized by a shifting template of features rather than by a clearly bound set." I found this to be true; each painting I made was a piece, or feature of the shifting template of the intimacy I had experienced.

There are several experiences that seem to describe intimacy. It can take place when a kind of interaction, an emotion, tender physical contact, involvement of sharing private information or a kind of relationship, and sexual contact are experienced between two individuals. It has also been described by how well two people know each other, an interaction requiring no communication, or a description of how two people occupy space together. I reference these experiences in my work. In paintings such as *Crumpled together* (Figure 4), two bodies mimic each other in a sleeping position, occupying the same physical space and
simultaneously, they are occupying the same mental/emotional space. The two figures exist within a mutual intimate understanding. While there is no definition that encompasses all forms of intimacy, there are two basic categories in which intimacy occurs: intimate interactions and intimate relationships.³

_The Psychology of Intimacy_ includes a vast selection of sources which Prager uses to support her own definition of intimacy. One of these is Robert A. Hinde, a British psychologist:

Hinde has argued that interactions are dialogues between people and do not require the presence of a relationship to occur. Relationships, in contrast, imply "a series of interactions between two individuals known to each other." In the context of a relationship, an "interaction is affected by the past interactions [and] is likely to influence future ones." Intimate interactions, then, are dialogues between people that have certain specific characteristics, and intimate relationships involve multiple dialogues over time.⁴

For example, I took a photo of my youngest siblings, a set of boy/girl twins, as they fell asleep leaning on one another in the backseat of my car. They were nine at the time, but as babies they shared a crib, played together, took baths together and shared many intimate experiences. Their shared intimate experiences allowed them to form an attachment to each other and build the intimate relationship they have today. I was attracted to this photograph because of how my siblings’ limbs intertwined with one another, one sibling almost lost in the other. Now a painting, _Cargo_ (Figure 5) depicts just one intimate interaction between the two that speaks to their lifetime of intimate experiences.

Intimate experiences are better defined by a list of descriptions of intimate interactions.⁵ This means that while each of us may have experienced some interactions, they will be different from anyone else’s but can remain as a concept that is mutually understood. This is because the
common denominator of these experiences is the intimacy involved, which most of us can feel without expressing it in words. In order to understand other factors that play a role in which we experience levels of intimacy, we have to be aware of how we were raised to receive intimate experiences.

The way that we navigate our intimate interactions is based off our upbringing and the attachment style we learned. Brenda Schaeffer, a psychologist, discusses the impact events from our childhood have on us as adults in her book *Loving Me, Loving You*:

We have all suffered traumas as children. When important insights, experiences, and permissions were kept from us, we suffered traumas of omission. Or when significant things were done to us, things we did not ask for or deserve, we suffered traumas of commission. We carry the memories associated with these traumas of omission and commission into our adulthood…

Traumatic experiences are not the only experiences that continue to influence us throughout our adulthood. Our attachment styles are impacted by our collected experiences.
Attachment: *Tell Me You’ll Never Leave*

Attachment styles vary depending on the individual and the environment in which their ego, confidence and sense of self was fostered. These attachments, which begin to develop at infantile level, continue to exist within our psychological makeup as we mature into adults. As a result, they manifest into or affect how we interact with individuals in our personal lives, ultimately dictating the types and levels of intimacy we allow.

The definition of attachment theory as defined by John Bowlby, a twentieth century psychologist, is “a lasting psychological connectedness between human beings.” Attachment styles are developed when we are infants and are provoked by anxiety. The most verbatim examples are those experienced at infant level: stranger anxiety, separation anxiety and social referencing. The critical development period for attachment is within zero to five years of age and influences or informs everything in our lives afterward. The studies Bowlby discusses resonate with my own beliefs as well as the opinion of Brenda Schaeffer in *Loving Me, Loving you*. She argues:

…every life experience that you and I have had is recorded in the neurology of our body. Even so, we know only a small part of who we are. It has been said that we are lucky to recall one out of one thousand of those recorded experiences. Yet, the composite of our life experiences deeply influences
- who we think we are,
- the thoughts we have and don't have,
- the feelings we are free to express or not express,
- the actions we take and don't take,
- the people we select in our partnerships

The way that we navigate the world is from our experiences, meaning that our upbringing influences our self-confidence, interrelationship skills, physical attraction and chemistry and are all dependent upon how we learned to interact with love. Because we do not remember some of
the most informative years of our lives when this “programming” is taking place, our behavior is instinctive or second nature to us. It is engrained into us and becomes subconscious and therefore, we continue or continually behave in the same way without being self-aware.

Schaeffer defines the idea of a “learned self” and in doing so, she strengthens her argument that the effect that our childhood experiences have on the development of our attachments is immense. The learned self is aroused by our “unmet needs and deepest patterns.”

The learned self analyzes, intellectualizes, denies. It can be macho, passive, and dependent. Only rarely will it accept deep wounds, and it will use power plays to sustain denial. This self can be love addicted, so enmeshed in the lives of others that it has forgotten who it is. It loves to be loved. Its growth is stunted, it is incomplete, it resists change, it thinks only in absolute and concrete terms.

We function from this foundation of our learned self; it is the filter through which we access our emotions and what we perceive to be our reality. If this learned self is not adequate or healthy and was fostered from a dysfunctional role model, our perceptions are skewed leading to problems within our relationship with ourselves (self-love) as well as within our relationships with friends and lovers. In my work *Untitled* (Figure 6) two figures lay rested on top of each other, both are the same color and mimic the same pose. The only boundary between the two appears to be the shoulder of the bottom figure, however, the ambiguous space between their heads is left open as if the two were morphing into one. This lack of boundary or exchange references the possibility of one individual using the other as a way to fulfill what they might think is inadequate
about themselves. I can conclude that the learned self harbors traits of codependent tendencies and has the ability to become codependent because of my own experiences.
After discovering the connections between attachment and the learned self, I became aware of how aspects of codependent tendencies were showing up in my work. Often, a painting would contain two figures but only one would be recognizable (Figure 7). I struggled to paint my own body; it did not inspire me like my partner’s body would. I found that I slowly concealed my identity in another person. I could not be validated by self-love, because I had lost what little self-love I had to begin with. The happiness of my partner replaced this and if she was happy, I was enough. I soon realized these were characteristics of codependency.

Codependency, as defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is a “psychological condition or a relationship in which a person is controlled or manipulated by another who is affected with a pathological condition (such as an addiction to alcohol or heroin).” However, not all of these relationships involve substance abuse. In these cases, Darlene Lancer, a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, characterizes codependency as “a person belonging to a dysfunctional, one-sided relationship where one person relies on the other for meeting nearly all of their emotional and self-esteem needs.” In a codependent relationship, one person is the codependent and the other, the manipulator. The manipulator antagonizes situations in order for their partner to continue feeling as though they cannot leave their manipulator. However, the codependent individual may often enable the manipulator because they are not aware of what a
healthy relationship looks like or the fact that their happiness will not be fulfilled by another human being.

My problems begin with my insecurities. D.J. Burr, a Licensed Mental Health Counselor writes: “A codependent finds it difficult to emotionally detach from others. Having not been able to develop their full identity as children, they find it difficult to distinguish where they end and another starts.”\(^\text{15}\) Much of what I received as a child were signals that I was not good enough or not worthy of receiving love and I continue to employ this way of thinking throughout my young adult life. Almost summoning the failure of each relationship, I continue to be emotionally immature, living as a child “in (an) adult body(ies)” and seeking out a relationship comparable to a parental figure. This act instilled my sense of value as a human being.\(^\text{16}\)

Regardless of the realities of an unhealthy, codependent relationship, I reflected kindly on what impact these experiences were having on my work. I found that the psychology around codependency is very accessible, you can find an abundance of articles online and books written about the topic. Almost all are written about in a scientific stance with links to get help and recovery provided at the end of every article. However, the poetics of the situation is what presents itself in my work and so, unique voices, voices of individuals who seem to have gone through the same, were needed in order to further describe or explain. In an article written by Victoria Bohley, a writer and poet, she writes:

One of the main problems with being a codependent is that you have no idea what you are doing to yourself, it is completely unconscious behaviour. It is usually so deeply ingrained into your personality due to the fact that the damage you received to your psyche happened as your personality was being formed when you were a child.\(^\text{17}\)
Codependency has a blindside. It starts with employing your happiness in something other than yourself, often by using other people to define your self-worth. Until it infiltrates your entire being. You are consumed by the thought that you might never be enough but somehow, if you loved someone with so much love, they would be happy and in turn, you would be happy. You feed this narrative until you cannot stop, you crave connection, validation from others. You become obsessed with it. You develop an infatuation with someone that only allows you to focus on how good or how beautiful or how lustful you are about that person. This focus does not allow you to see how much you are changing. How much you are not yourself, how much you have come to hate yourself because of the critiques, the rejection, the desire for perfection when perfection is not possible. You begin to doubt your adequacy as a person and feel the need to present yourself helpful, light, and out of the way. D. J. Burr provides an in-depth analysis of codependent personalities on his published website in which he describes a codependent’s relationships as an addiction. He writes:

A codependent person’s addiction to his or her relationships takes many forms. The codependent may come across as very caring, offering to help and or taking responsibility to solve the problems of other people. They may present themselves as martyrs; disclaiming any needs of their own, while acting as if their sole purpose in life is to serve others.18

I came across a poem written by a writer of the name Meadow who seemed to capture the echo of my own intrusive insecurities that feed my addiction. In their poem Codependency, Meadow writes:

I’ve cried till my face is dry and flaking.  
I cry cause of the stupidest things....   
like do I wait to finish our shows? How long would I wait?   
Do I watch them without you? Can I text you if something makes me smile today? Who am I going to have Thanksgiving with? Will you think of me then? Will I be a passing thought?19
Poetry

There is an importance or advantage of using poetry in one’s own practice because it serves as a literal form of expression. It activates the emotional dialogue around the artwork itself. Poetry should come naturally to creators who think romantically because even their thoughts run through their mind as a line in a poem. Gertrude Stein, a well-known queer writer used poetry in the most avant garde fashion and other poets such as Lynn Melnick and Audre Lorde, use poetry to capture the emotive qualities of a moment. As I have developed my research and my thoughts about my work poetry has become a helpful tool. Using poetry to express in language is similar to using a paintbrush on canvas or paper. I have increasingly discussed my work using romantic language and I believe poetry has served my paintings better as a way to embrace both visual artwork and language and fully articulate the context of the work. So, I began writing poems as another form of expression in hopes that it would help me put the feelings that drive my paintings into words. They served as diary entries, coded messages that said everything I felt without saying much at all.

Gertrude Stein uses word play with ordinary objects to give them a new context and lead readers to interpret these objects differently in the same way that I play with abstracted bodies in my work such as Not so much anymore (Figure 8). In doing so, Stein interrupts the reader’s assumptions about her poetry and challenges them to create a new space for contemplation.
Taking descriptions and pairing them down so abstractly, Stein uses poems such as “A Mounted Umbrella” much in the same way artists use abstraction to describe people, places or things.

“A Mounted Umbrella”

What was the use of not leaving it there where it would hang what was the use if there was no chance of ever seeing it come there and show that it was handsome and right in the way it showed it. The lesson is to learn that it does show it, that it shows it and that nothing, that there is nothing, that there is no more to do about it and just so much more is there plenty of reason for making an exchange.21

“A Mounted Umbrella” is just one of many poems in Stein’s book *Tender Buttons*, which consists of three sections: “Objects,” “Food,” and “Rooms.” Over the course of the three sections, the poems become increasingly intimate. The book ends with the last poem “Rooms,” which is twelve pages long.22 Stein invites readers to humor her ways with experimentation of words.

Stein’s way of writing demands that the reader stay in the present. Instead of typical stanzas, she writes in paragraph form and also utilizes repetition. The use of prose style is another experimental aspect of her work. Because normal everyday speech, thinking, and writing are in prose form, the writing feels approachable and allows for readers to create an intimate connection with the writing.23 By using words in a way that they were not intended, her poetry begins to emphasize the sounding of the words for example in the poem “EATING,”

…Eel us eel us with no no pea no pea cool, no pea cool cooler, no pea cooler with a land a land cost in, with a land cost in stretches. Eating he heat eating he heat it eating, he heat it heat eating. He heat eating.24

Often the flow or interaction of her words seems sensual and other times it seems rough or abrupt.
With my recent infatuation with poetry I have written and analyzed my thoughts from times in my relationship. The poem *Lying awake in bed* comes from the revisiting of these old feelings.

Lying awake in bed  
Can’t sleep without my med…

It’s sinful, to think about how you’ve touched me  
Itching to type my thoughts out to get lost in the notes on my phone

But I’m scared to wake you with the slightest touch on the home button  
With the slightest light from the screen  
Because that’s one of the things you hate most about me

You’re so sensitive to everything that isn’t what I feel  
Who I am  
Why I react

But it wasn’t like this at first

Love lies,  
Vicariously through time  
Frequently in bed, too frequently, not frequently enough

Lies mostly in my head after thinking back to the beginning  
Lies in lies in lies in lies in lies  
Torn deciding what lies more  
Your mouth on my lips…my brain these days barely functioning…maybe  
It never functioned at all

Surely, I can’t sleep because it’s 3:28am and my thoughts go back to you and him  
Can’t sleep without my medicine

Influenced by Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, I began to play around with words as well as the sounding of words and the transition between words and lines. The poems I wrote served as a reflection on the codependent and unhealthy aspects of my relationships. Not only do the poems explore the same themes as my paintings, but they also explore topics such as confidence, judgement, shame, etc. The poems present inquiries about where love might exist, where meaning is in a relationship, and how people show love. Like describing arguments had between two individuals as a fight over the mundane, the poems allude to the fact that the argument is much deeper than it seems; it is about how we feel, the spiritual intimacy that exists within the
relationship and is disrupted when opinions differ. The poetry and paintings are used to reach the depths, simple on the surface and important underneath or in the content.

My lover, curious, asked me if she could hear some of them. I was afraid of reading them to her because I felt like my feelings were too raw in the midst of the rebuilding of our relationship. I had been thinking about old hurts a lot, and so, I told her that the poems were about old feelings of mine, a reflection of how our relationship used to make me feel, how she used to make me feel.

Our relationship had shaped so much of who I thought I was and how much I was worth that it toppled over into a mess of screaming, hatred, almost unforgiveable violence. Reflecting on this past brought up my still softly felt feelings of resentment and blame for how I felt about myself. It reminds me of the series of paintings I created during this time of anxiety, *We weren’t supposed to leave, but I’m stuck tracing the you that loved me for me*, 2019. Soft, somber, melancholiac colors breathing against confined bodily forms depicting the traces of her body left in my memory (Figures 9 and 10). I contemplated what I missed about her, what I loved about her. I thought
maybe it was all a lie, one sided. At the time the visual work was carrying the weight of it all and I had hardly put words to my emotions. Poetry helped me creatively express my feelings with words.

I reflected on what writing poetry meant for my work and found that the poems were important because they mimicked the ambiguity in my work, and I decided that using fragments of the poems as titles complimented my paintings. Titles such as *Drowns everything it seeps* and *That looks like me *chuckles* that’s why I watched it* provided an insight or a way of seeing another aspect of the narratives in the work by alluding to actions or conversations that took place and gave context to the body of work.
Intimacy and other artists: Yet There is No One Person

The conversation around intimacy that I have been pursuing has turned out to be a conversation others have had in different ways, and by many artists, writers, or theorists. When authors have written about the topic, it is described to be a term with a fluid definition incapable of encompassing its meaning fully. When artists have made intimate work, it often becomes overtly sexual or is painted in a style that does not resonate with my own. Additionally, theorists focus on the psychological and behavioral. Immersing myself in this literature, I started to get lost in other vocabulary that was appropriate for the work at times, but did not feel as though it was encompassing the work fully. Work made about themes of codependency often focused on domestic violence. For me, any mention of sexual acts derailed the conversation and limited the concept of my work to the realm of sexual themes. Even finding artists whose work went beyond a sexual nature and talked about intimacy the same way I was proved to be a challenge. Artists such as Cecily Brown is an example of someone whose work is overtly sexual.

Cecily Brown is well known for her sexually charged and promiscuous imagery of sexual acts. In *Untitled*, 2002 (Figure 11), Brown places a depiction of a phallus almost in the center of the canvas. Sharp brushstrokes and scraping elevate the

Figure 11
energy in the piece, along with a color palette akin to bodily fluids, which helps indicate a scene of tangled bodies.

While I found her work too illicitly sexual, erotic, and in a style that almost resembles too closely masculine abstraction, I discovered that her paintings seem to give hints or clues to a story, sometimes lost in abstraction and sometimes present in the manifestation of a part of a figure. This is a tension that can also be found in works of mine such as Not so much anymore (Figure 8). I liked the traces of narrative I found in Cecily Brown’s work and found this to be a similarity in the work of Tracey Emin who is another artist who explores themes of intimacy in her work.

Tracey Emin expresses her work through a variety of mediums including painting, embroidery, drawing, installation, and sculpture. The personal nature of her work provides an intimacy that reveals details of her life. She uses storytelling to recount her personal and intimate life-events. She often includes references to her relationship with lovers, friends and family in her work. Vulnerability is an important piece to Emin’s work. She repeatedly shares intimate phrases of text in the same raw space with painted bodies who are exposed both physically and emotionally. These spaces set the tone for the dialogue between the viewer and the artist. In many of her paintings areas of the canvas are left unpainted while other areas are painted, covered up and overflow as drips onto the rest of the canvas. Influenced by Edvard Munch and Egon Schiele, she uses emotion in a sincere way that makes viewers linger and form their own relationship with the story she is telling. Her

Figure 12
Tracey Emin, You Held My Face, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 59.8x72 inches.
expression of sexuality ranges and can be bold from time to time, often bluntly sexual. In works such as *You Held My Face* (Figure 12) the pose of the nude figure distracts you from any sense of sex. She explores themes of sex, death, and identity. Personal and symbolically charged items such as a bed play on these themes. Occasionally her pieces enter a sexually provocative attitude but retains their immediacy.26

While my work depicts sexual acts in some of the imagery, it has never been only about sex. My work also sought to reveal and explore themes of longing, codependency, platonic interactions between two individuals and many other things. I found similar themes in the work of Nan Goldin, a photographer who captures moments of intimacy, loss, sexuality and even themes of death in photos such as *Piotr with his aids medication* (Figure 13). Goldin uses her photos to present exchanges, filled with longing, and to document moments in time.27 This is similar to what I was trying to do in *We weren’t supposed to leave, but I’m stuck tracing the you that loved me for me* (Figures 9 and 10).

Goldin is best known for one of her first bodies of work, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, a collection of her images that highlights a narrative of “being” that exists of the self, the private, and at times, the public.28 Her photographs capture her friends, family, and lovers as if she had written about them in her diary; they become an entrance for viewers to see the intimate and private
moments of her life but are also at times mundane. Amongst them she captures images of physical violence in *Heart Shaped Bruise* and *One Month After Being Battered* (Figures 14 and 15).

I realized that artists such as Nan Goldin were working with intimacy similarly in that each photograph Goldin took was rooted in intimacy but showed various aspects, including references to marriage, homosexual affection, and even codependency. The images of bruises and physical violence were the extreme reality of codependency, an expression of an abusive relationship that left bruises on skin and emotionally. However, in my work I want to talk more about the mental strain of an unhealthy relationship, the silent or hidden toll that codependency took on me. For me, a codependent relationship did not feel toxic all the time; it also had the potential to make me feel most alive. It influenced whether I felt connected to my partner or any person I was close to. I struggled to tell myself that I did not deserve to feel unloved. Goldin records the “struggle for intimacy and understanding” that goes beyond the bedroom and includes relations between friends, family, and lovers.29 I was trying to record this, too.

After recognizing the significance of codependency as one of the themes in my paintings I was able to validate some of the inner arguments I was having with myself and steer my research in the right direction. A lack of boundaries occurs in a codependent relationship, in which the
boundary of one person’s identity is blurred into the other’s and I found myself wondering how a relationship can evolve into an unhealthy coexistence of two people.
Most of my research takes place through the act of making and observing. I decided that it was important to make paintings from a place of intuition and that each painting needed to exist as my initial reaction. In order to do this, I chose watercolor as my main medium and worked quickly, making several paintings within a few hours. Working quickly prevented me from overworking the paint, limited my control and allowed me to make the paintings feel like drawings: quick, intuitive, and gestural. Putting these works on paper, instead of canvas, they began to exist as such. They do not seem permanent, although they are archival. The watercolor proved to hold its own and its subtleties keep a viewers’ attention where my articulation of the medium is absent.

There are a few traditional methods of using watercolor and I used wet on wet and wet on dry processes. When using the method of wet on wet, watercolor acts as a dye, seeping into the paper, staining it and becoming more permanent. This staining allows for color tones and atmospheric effects to be achieved. I use staining and allow pools of paint to dry, leaving behind what looks like an essence or imprint; *Untitled* (Figure 16) is an example of this. The medium has the potential to be layered, allowing for depth, but also speaks more to the movement of forms or bodies. In these instances, the watercolor bleeds across the paper, creating an analogy between the paint and the idea of how one person can become engulfed in another person. In most cases, relationships encourage or embrace the action of becoming reliant on another person for life. This
is shown through the bleeding of the watercolor. Shapes of color begin as one shape but as it seeps over the paper, it has the potential to take on a new color or new character of line/shape.

Watercolor is a medium that one has to be acquainted with, it takes time to get to know how the medium will react. So, it seems appropriate that it is used as a language to explore intimacy because intimacy begins with becoming familiar with another person. There are a lot of nuances of intimacy that exist in relationships, whether these nuances existed before the two individuals involved had intertwined or they developed after the connection. It takes time for intricacies to become familiar between one person and another. One of the most sensitive and complex mediums, the watercolor pigment can capture nuances, can change, and is influenced very easily, even the color and type of paper changes the outcome of the work. Much like the fluidity of intimacy, the watercolor mimicked the way two intimate individuals might act in different environments together, or the way that one individual might influence another in an intimate environment.

One of my favorite juxtapositions of watercolor and one theme I explore in my work is the ability of the medium to not be controlled, causing unintentional happenings such as: how one fragile line might work against the softness of a stained organic shape, and how that can be related to the amount of time and perspective it takes to realize how we have changed as an individual. I equate the journey of understanding changes within oneself to the pursuit of learning and knowing oneself and for me, my self-identity is inextricable from or influenced by my partners identity and the identity that our relationship takes on. This fluidity of identity begins to take place the more you get to know the other person.
Trial and error have taught me what concepts were present in my work. When I would make a painting that did not feel right, I sat with it for a bit before putting it aside and making more work. I looked at the work in groups and found commonalities between them and would then pursue those to make more paintings with that same energy. Each painting brought me closer to the underlying topics that were on my subconscious mind. At first, I was not sure what my goal was for each painting, because I was so immersed in ideas of codependency, I was eager to reference that in the interactions of the bodily forms I painted. At times I would be painting myself, another person, and a combination of the two. The boundary between my own identity and my lover’s became lost. I looked for a way to suggest this loss visually, letting one form meld into the next, two identities becoming consumed into one as seen in the painting *That looks like me* (Figure 17). Two figures embrace each other, one with heated lines of red and the suggestion of an open mouth, the other nuzzled into the shoulder or breast of the first figure. Both seem to be breathing the same air, and coincidentally, they form the shape of a heart. The intermingling forms lose their edges as they dissolve into the other. The push and pull of abstraction or partiality with clearer depictions of bodily forms acts as a necessary aspect for a

Figure 17
*That looks like me* *chuckles* that’s why I watched it, 2019. Watercolor on paper, 15x11 inches.
dialogue about intimacy. The imagery attempts to mimic the idea of losing parts of yourself as you begin to become dependent on others to fill in the empty spaces, your empty spaces.

The compositions of every painting I made seemed consistent in the fact that each existed on the inner parts of the page, did not touch the edge of the paper and would never fill the whole page (Figures 18 and 19). Despite the exploration of ideas of codependency, the paintings never felt claustrophobic, they always had room to breathe. My perception of my intimate reality was skewed, deceitful and eventually the paintings began to feel the same. They were fragile, warm, sometimes inviting and unaware of the consequences of this codependency. It is almost as if you are blinded by the warmth that invites you in, it seems fulfilling but ultimately leaves you empty and searching. Searching for what lies in the ambiguity of the painted bodily forms. For me, the search was for my sense of self.
Making my work has always fueled my self-confidence but I lost the confidence I had left during my studies in graduate school. Before that, most of my confidence and sense of self was depleted over the course of my three-year long relationship. Shortly after the end of this relationship, I found myself reflecting on countless hours of therapy, considering every insight I had gained from those sessions, and I began to count them as studio research. I tried to explore this in my paintings, and they continued to become more about the person I loved. In any painting I painted of myself, the form was left incomplete much like the painting *Barely functioning* (Figure 20). I had become aware that I had no idea how to value myself, other than through the success of my paintings. I have never had a conversation with another human about how they are kind and loving to themselves but if I did, my answer to them would be through my work. My therapist asked me at the end of some sessions, “How are you going to be gentle with yourself today?” and I would laugh, sometimes rolling my eyes. There was and is no space for self-love in my world as it is consumed by my work, initially my experience with intimacy, and eventually my experience with codependency.

So, leaving your self-worth in what you make, your success, and your relationship causes it to vary. The evaluation of your worth would fluctuate, for example, with each success, you would feel better about yourself. With each failure, you would feel worthless. As I dug deeper into self-worth and codependency as concepts that seemed to be hidden in my work it became easier for me to embrace my vulnerability and easier to digest the codependency issues within myself.
Codependency was not the main theme in my work but after exploring it, I realized it was an important aspect and was able to make the connection between codependency and intimacy. In order for a codependent relationship to develop, an intimate relationship must precede it. When an intimate relationship is formed, two individuals become invested in one another, their identities become interlaced and often the boundary between their identities is blurred. This is the dangerous line. Often the dynamics of the relationship can shift leaving one person depending more on the other. I began to depend on my partner for interaction and attention, and eventually, I was depending on them for happiness. I lost sight of who I was, slowly over time, almost seductively.

Just as my codependent tendencies seduce me, the paintings seduce the viewers, through ambiguity and warm hues of color my work persuades the viewer to look slowly and to spend more time looking. In *Barely functioning* (Figure 20) my body was left incomplete, only my torso and my thighs depicted for the viewer to complete. Even though areas of the form are left open, such as the top of the breast, the figure seems closed off, partially unfulfilled yet complete at the same time. Evidence of technical skill and compositional complexity lie underneath the sophisticated and pleasing color palette and aim to be discovered. This is the lens; the imagery is deceivingly beautiful, harmless, and inviting. This seduction allowed an entry point for the maker and the viewer to access the work. In my work I encourage the viewer to lose themselves in the painting just as I have lost myself in the moments that I depict.

In the image *Untitled* (Figure 21) the imagery is purposeful, taking on more specific roles. These roles generate suggestions of bodies that relate to femininity, and the female form. They speak about similarities within my experience and the person I paint, but also differences, because ultimately the work is a translation or recreation of a moment. Of course, these recreations are interpretations rather than a recording of that. In figures 22 and 23, *Trace the places* exists as an
echo of *Places my hands have*, the form is diluted to one hue and it describes less of the environment that exists in *Places my hands have*.

The bodily forms created help to relate the imagery to the viewer and to their own bodily experience both physically and mentally. Although the viewer might not identify the form as a specific or recognizable object, when the form is familiar enough it allows for comparisons to be made and sets up an entry point into both the content and concept of my work. The paintings are made quickly, intuitively, and emotionally and mimic how instances in life occur. For example, I reference the process of making decisions or reacting to a problem involves saturated emotions that can become overwhelming at times.
References to bodily forms, lush, pink, and bodily colors, as well as interior spaces are all employed to represent my perception of reality (feelings, memories, thoughts) as well as my projected dreams, desires and longing (all related to theories of attachment). My memory of self-encounters with intimate interactions morph, become recounted and embrace a physicality as their painted forms bleed from a burnt sienna to a magenta hue in *Untitled* (Figure 24).

Often the paintings capture a sense of motion and seem to be breathing. The forms tumble, encompass and roll into one another talking about the complexities of a relationship, they reference boundaries becoming blurred between one person and another as the intimacy develops between the two. This is amplified by working in a series where each painting contributes to the conversation with nuanced differences in color palette and different levels of tension between abstraction and recognition.

The use of light and shadow, or lack thereof, can seek to define entities existing in an interior space, the viewer is often unsure of whether they are looking at a gestured line that defines a sheet, the edge of a bed or a delineation between the essence one individual and another. The artist acts as a translator through painting and poetry, providing the visual bridge between the inside (identity) and out (visual appearance or representation shown as painting) available for the viewer. Somewhat ungendered, these scenes do not offer fixed narratives, but loose scenarios that invite us to imagine other ways their components can be combined.
Conclusion

My research helped me discover that the way that I explore concepts of intimacy is unique and different. I found that I have something new to say, and that while there is already a conversation about intimacy taking place amongst others, I am adding to the conversation. With each new painting, my series of works changed and made me realize which intimate interactions led to my personal definition of intimacy. In turn, I found other individuals and artists talking about the same interactions and I was able to develop an awareness of their own vocabulary of intimacy. While these findings answered some of my questions, I am still left wondering whether intimacy differs in heterosexual and homosexual relationships, how to display my work on the same level of intimacy that exists within it, and how to share my findings in hopes to encourage the same discussions about intimacy in other artists.
Image Citations

Figure 1. Henderson, Brie. *Transition One*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 9x12 inches.

Figure 2. Henderson, Brie. *Transition Two*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 12x9 inches.

Figure 3. Henderson, Brie. *Transition Three*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 9x12 inches.

Figure 4. Henderson, Brie. *Crumpled together*, 2019. Watercolor on paper, 15x11 inches.

Figure 5. Henderson, Brie. *Untitled*, 2019. Watercolor on paper, 15x11 inches.

Figure 6. Henderson, Brie. *Cargo*, 2019. Mixed media on paper, 7x5 inches.

Figure 7. Henderson, Brie. *Yours or mine*, 2019. Watercolor on paper, 15x11 inches.

Figure 8. Henderson, Brie. *Untitled*, 2019. Watercolor on paper, 15x11 inches.

Figure 9. Henderson, Brie. From the series: *We weren't supposed to leave, but I'm stuck tracing the you that loved me for me*, 2019. Mixed media on paper, 24x18 inches.

Figure 10. Henderson, Brie. From the series* We weren't supposed to leave, but I'm stuck tracing the you that loved me for me*, 2019. Mixed media on paper, 18x24 inches.


Figure 17. Henderson, Brie. *That looks like me *chuckles* that's why I watched it, 2019. Watercolor on paper, 15x11 inches.


Figure 19. Henderson, Brie. *Trace the places*, 2019. Watercolor on paper, 15x11 inches.

Figure 20. Henderson, Brie. *Barely functioning*, 2019. Watercolor on paper, 15x11 inches.

Figure 21. Henderson, Brie. *Figure 19 Untitled*, 2020. Watercolor on paper, 15x11 inches.

Figure 22. Henderson, Brie. *Places my hands have*, 2019. Watercolor on paper, 15x11 inches.

Figure 23. Henderson, Brie. *Trace the places*, 2019. Watercolor on paper, 15x11 inches.

Figure 24. Henderson, Brie. *Untitled*, 2019. Watercolor on paper, 15x11 inches.
3 Prager, Karen J. *The Psychology of Intimacy*, 18.
5 Prager, Karen J. *The Psychology of Intimacy*, 22.
7 Bowlby 1969, 194.
22 Fischer, Jillian. 2013. ""The Sister Was Not a Mister": Gender and Sexuality in the Writings of Gertrude Stein and Virginia Wolf,” 5.
23 Fischer, Jillian. 2013. ""The Sister Was Not a Mister": Gender and Sexuality in the Writings of Gertrude Stein and Virginia Wolf,” 5.
Bibliography


Fischer, Jillian. 2013. ""The Sister Was Not a Mister": Gender and Sexuality in the Writings of Gertrude Stein and Virginia Wolf." https://lux.lawrence.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1048&context=luhp.


