Connection and Isolation

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Honors Thesis

Connection and Isolation

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Abstract

As one of the most recurrent subjects of visual art, the human form has been an important means of communicating human experiences and expressing the philosophical and scientific thoughts of a society. During the early 20th century, artists in Europe began distorting and abstracting the human figure in ways that were unprecedented and often times visually unsettling to emphasize its withdrawn and isolated condition while also suggesting a sense of fragility and vulnerability. Although there are various forms of isolation that can result from a number of different causes, my project explores the concept of social isolation brought about by an impermeability of boundaries, or a disconnection between the self and other identities through the creation of a body of work. It also examines theories of self-identity and formation by social theorists such as W.E.B. Du Bois and his notion of a double consciousness, defined as looking at one’s self through the eyes of the other. Finally, my creative project considers how vulnerability and the idea of an other-self entity can function as a means of relating or forming a connection with the other.
**Introduction**

In the past, artists have portrayed the human figure as a reflection of the changing tastes in philosophical ideas and fashion, to illustrate personal accounts of historical events and the condition of a society, and as records of an individual’s status and wealth. Wilhelm Lehmbruck and Alberto Giacometti were both artists who were strongly impacted by the tragedies of war, and they often created sculptural works that represented the human figure as a bare and isolated existence, reflecting the own artists’ state of mental anguish and despair caused by the loss of cherished friends and family members. One of Lehmbruck’s sculptures titled *Seated Youth* depicts a young man seated alone in a closed, reflective, and rather melancholic pose with his head bowed, limbs intertwined in a withdrawn gesture, and a reduced body anatomy to give the figure a slightly emaciated appearance—a stark contrast from the more dignified, powerful, and authoritative stance that is characteristic of many classical renaissance sculptures, including the famous *David* by Michaelangelo. Other works such as Giacometti’s *Piazza* present several elongated, skeleton-like figures arranged within a collective space, suggesting a gathering and a sense of communion with others; but upon closer examination, none of the figures are interacting and are little more than a group of isolated individuals, each residing within their own boundaries.

The works of Lehmbruck and Giacometti convey feelings of grief and hopelessness as well as a sense of loss and isolation, and observing these subtle yet powerful emotions in such a concrete and physical manner along with a developing interest in the contemporary human condition have prompted me to reflect on my personal experiences of isolation and disconnection as well as those of individuals that I care about deeply. While there are various forms of isolation, I am interested in focusing on the subject of social isolation caused by a disconnection
between the self and other identities. As a way of exploring this concept, I will be applying one of the most basic theories of human consciousness and identity, that of the self and other binary, in part to express the concept of vulnerability between disconnected selves in a series of representational portrait paintings that I will create as an artistic component of my project. I will also investigate the topic of human consciousness and identity as its own area of study by examining racial theorist W.E.B. Du Bois’ notion of a double consciousness and its role in the formation of the self, and the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud who treats the self as a split subject.

The Self, Other, and Other-Self

The binary of self versus other is a theory of human identity stating that the existence of an other, non-self entity allows for the recognition of the self (Sami Schalk 197). In short, an individual understands who he or she is in relation to the other. In most cases, the self is considered as dominant and superior to the other and possesses the power to determine what is the norm or what characteristics of the self are to be valued. The process of othering involves adopting a criterion under which individuals are classified into two opposing hierarchical groups. These groups are often constructed based on dichotomies between male and female, young and old, white and black, and religious and non-religious.

An alternate way of defining the relationship between the self and other is the notion of self as a split subject, which is divided between the conscious and unconscious. In Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis, the unconscious is the radical other of the self. It operates completely on the “pleasure principle”, seeking instant gratification and being completely opposed to all logic, in fact, to any limitations that reality imposes on the self (Terry Eagleton 157). However, the
unconscious other is kept in check by the more rational conscious self, repressing any guilty desires and subordinating the unconscious so that the self can be integrated successfully with the expectations of society.

Although the self is physically and mentally separate from the other, the presence of the other can still have a psychological effect on the self. Described by Du Bois in his work *The Souls of Black Folk* as a type of double-consciousness, the act of looking at oneself through the eyes of the other involves thinking about how the other perceives the self and in response may cause the self to behave in a certain way, such as to fulfill or disprove commonly held stereotypes (Schalk 199). One example of how the self can be induced to act in a way that is unlike its typical self-behavior is when it is confronted with another individual whom it deeply admires. In order that the self may please this person and win his or her respect, the self may adopt the same interests and even certain mannerisms of the other in an attempt to feel more connected to the individual. Thus, the self may seem a stranger to itself and becomes a third type of entity, the other-self. Behaving as the other and becoming an other-self is one way in which the gap of alienness is shortened between the self and other. The other-self can also be manifested when the self is able to find common ground and identify with the other in some way, such as sharing similar life experiences. Consequently, the other-self entity functions as an intermediary within the traditional self/other binary, introducing a spectrum of relatedness between the self and other.

To develop the notion of the other-self further, Miroslav Volf, who is a professor of systematic theology at Yale University, states in his book *Exclusion and Embrace* that our identity is a result of being both distinct and related to the other. Referencing the creation
account in the Book of Genesis as involving both the act of separating and binding, Volf suggests that:

The human self is formed not through a simple rejection of the other—through a binary logic of opposition and negation—but through a complex process of ‘taking in’ and ‘keeping out.’ We are who we are not because we are separate from the others who are next to us, but because we are both separate and connected, both distinct and related; the boundaries that mark our identities are both barriers and bridges. (66)

Here, Volf emphasizes the importance of the other in the formation of our own identities. Boundaries, including differences in culture, geographical location, societal values, and religious views, help separate individuals and give them their discrete identities; however, our identity is also the result of an intricate process of internalizing our relationship with the other.

As a way of beginning this process of internalization, American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler proposes the concept of vulnerability, where the boundaries that differentiate the self from the other are not entirely impermeable and the self is impacted by the words, actions, and life experiences of the other, whether they be positive and life-enhancing or more violent and offensive (Schalk 200). It is this permeability of boundaries that allows for the other-self entity to occur, leading to a better understanding of the self and how it is formed as well as giving insight into the self’s intricate relationship with others.

The Gaze

Within the realm of philosophy, the ideas constituting the gaze correlate in many ways to the theory of the self/other binary. French philosopher and writer Jean Paul Sartre describes the gaze as a means for the self to define itself, where engaging in a gaze with a foreign other causes
the self to become aware of itself as subject. This gaze is beyond the direct control of the subject and results in a power dynamic between the viewer and viewed, where the self becomes objectified and enslaved by the gaze of the viewer who effectively robs the self of its freedom as subject (Reinhardt). Another French philosopher Michel Foucault expounds on this idea of the gaze as a medium for spreading domination by referencing English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham and his Panopticon, a design of a circular building with a single surveillance tower placed in the center. From this tower, the building’s occupants can be observed at all times and are kept in check by a ceaseless, overarching gaze. In this way, order is established by submission to an unknown and unseen omnipresent watchman.

Within the genre of portrait painting, the gaze of the subject can be used as a means of communicating pertinent information about the artwork. It was only towards the beginning of the 20th century when artists and art critics began considering the gaze as an important philosophical concept and aesthetic tool in transmitting certain ideas about the viewer and the art piece. For instance, in Michel Foucault’s analysis of the function of the gaze in Diego Veláquez’s painting *Las Meninas*, he describes the intriguing way in which the spectators themselves become subjects of the painting as soon as they are seized by the gaze of the painter, who can be seen staring out from the painting at the viewers. Foucault states, “‘observer and the observed take part in a ceaseless exchange. No gaze is stable…subject and object, spectator and model reverse their roles into infinity’” (qtd. in Reinhardt). Here, Foucault explains the gaze as a ceaseless exchange between the viewer and artist, who has painted himself into his own artwork. Because of the way in which the stares of both the painter and the viewer superimpose themselves upon one another as they cross, it is unclear whether the viewer is staring at the painter or vice versa, effectively blurring the line between reality and the realm of the artwork.
Technical and Conceptual Influences

During the course of my creative project, many artists have influenced my technical process and the conceptual ideas behind my work. One artist is Hanneke Beaumont, whose sculptural figures reflect general concerns about humanity and existence. Her figures appear to be neither male nor female, neither young nor old; hence, they can be interpreted as representing universal ideas about human beings and their relation to others in the world. What first drew my attention to Beaumont’s sculptures were their introverted expressions, that of self-absorbed contemplation and meditation. Beaumont has often described her figures as dealing with separation, which is demonstrated in one of her works titled Connected-Disconnected. In this installation, three seemingly identical figures are seated in a triangle, with two of the figures looking toward a third, more resigned figure. One individual stands higher than the rest and holds in its outstretched hands a disorganized lump of clay, the raw material of their physical being.

Figure 1 Hanneke Beaumont, Connected-Disconnected, 2010.
In his essay *The Unfathomable Figure*, art critic Donald Kuspit describes Beaumont’s sculptures as symbolizing the postmodern human. He explains using the language of the self and other binary:

it is one figure looking at itself as well as at another figure in the world. It faces itself, even as it turns toward the world. Its encounter with itself is thus doubly strange, for the self is a stranger to itself because it is inhabited by the other even as it struggles to separate itself from the other. (Kuspit 3)

The juxtaposition and struggle of being both distinct and related to the other comes from allowing the self to become permeable enough so that it is able to see and receive the other into itself. Volf describes this as practicing double vision, which is a concept that proposes one should try to see the world both “from here” and “from there” in order to know the world more adequately. As he explains in *Exclusion and Embrace*, seeing in double vision means first stepping outside and distancing ourselves from our own values, interests, and perspectives. Second, we step into the world of the other and inhabit it temporarily, meaning we try to see the world from the other’s perspective. Finally, we take the other into our world by placing their perspective next to ours and comparing them (Volf 252).

Volf speaks in the context of forgiving and understanding those who have done you a grievous wrong, but I believe his idea of double vision outlines the kind of vulnerability that is required for the self to connect to the other in a more general sense as well.

Another artist who inspired me is Sophie Jodoin, who portrays people on the margins of society and what she calls “loners” in her drawings and paintings. Working primarily in monotone black and white, which gives a minimalist look to her work, there is a kind of darkness and melancholy in what Jodoin does. One of her collection of works titled *Drawing Shadows*;
portraits of my mother is a series of mixed media pieces depicting the artist’s mother, which, in a haunting way Jodoin sees as her own self-portraits. She considers them images of herself because they foreshadow how she will live in the world when she becomes aged and alone as her mother is, for loneliness along with aging and death are inevitable events in life that Jodoin fears and must eventually confront. Jodoin’s subjects often have a handicap of some sort, and her interest in choosing more unconventional subjects lies in her desire to know how people cope with their fragility. How Jodoin treats and portrays the vulnerability and loneliness of her subjects gave me direction for how to pursue those ideas in my own artwork.

Figure 2 Sophie Jodoin, Drawing Shadows: portraits of my mother 5, 2004. Charcoal, pastel, and acrylic on black stonehenge paper, 30x22in.

A classical artist whose work was important for informing both my concept and technical process is Rembrandt van Rijn, considered one of the greatest Dutch painters in 17th century Europe. His later work is characterized as depicting insight into the human condition of
mistune and sadness; in particular, Rembrandt’s series of self-portraits that he painted periodically throughout the duration of his life portray a growing sense of introspection and melancholy. When his wife Saskia died, Rembrandt became increasingly independent and isolated from others and painted portraits of himself more frequently. His self-portraits from the last years of his artistic career especially capture his degenerative condition: a fragile human being confronted by age and loneliness. Rembrandt’s portraits contain a melancholic moodiness that I want to portray in my own paintings, and his process of laying down a monochromatic underpainting first, then subsequent thinner layers of paint on top has also aided me in producing more realistic images.

The most recent artist to have influenced me is Christine Wu, a contemporary artist who works with transparent oil paints, which she layers over beautiful drawings that are shown through the sheerer layers of paint. She takes advantage of this transparent quality of the paint by layering multiple images over each other to create ghosts or memories of an individual. As someone who is fond of drawing, I was inspired by her technique in combining both drawing and painting to portray the aspect of vulnerability in my paintings.

![Figure 3 Christine Wu, Oleander.](image-url)
Methods

For my portrait paintings, I used oil paint and semi-transparent glazes as my principal mediums as well as graphite pencil. Because I would be working primarily from reference photos, I wanted to ensure the quality of my images; for that reason, I took my own photos and used my friends as models for my portraits. The second step is building the actual supports or surfaces on which I paint. Based on past experience, I really enjoy painting on wood panels because of its sturdy surface, so I built my supports using birch or plywood rather than canvas.

As preparation before I begin painting, I typically sketch one or more drawings of the model in order to familiarize myself with the unique features of the subject’s face. If necessary, I also create several thumbnail sketches to figure out the cropping of my images and to help determine the overall composition of the painting. For example, in some of my paintings the models are positioned in the center of the panel with their upper body fading out into the background, thereby maximizing the amount of space surrounding them to give the impression that they are floating indefinitely in space while emphasizing their isolated condition. To enhance this effect, I apply a dark, neutral background coupled with low lighting across the figure as utilized in many of Rembrandt’s portraits, which lends a dark and almost mysterious mood to his subjects.

Once I’ve completed all of my sketches, I do a final, rather detailed drawing on the wood panel and seal it with a crystal acrylic spray to prevent the pencil lines from smudging as I am painting. I then lay down the first layer of oil paint called the underpainting using monochromatic earth brown tones. Once this layer is dried completely, I lay down full-colored layers of thin, semi-transparent oil paint using a glazing medium; this allows for the lower layers
of paint, including the underpainting, to be shown through the top layers, producing a three-dimensional effect while also giving an overall luminescent surface quality.

In most cases, the drawing and underpainting are considered mere foundational layers and are created in preparation for laying down full colors of paint later on; consequently, they often become covered or disappear altogether as more layers of paint are laid on top. One of the advantages of painting in multiple layers is that it allows me to create depth and give the illusion of a perceived amount of space even though the panel is a flat surface. While sculptures are more tangibly three-dimensional and can be experienced fully in-the-round, paintings are created on a two-dimensional surface which does not offer the same level of physicality; however, painting realistically produces the illusion of three-dimensionality and lends an aspect of being more palpable. One method of achieving this illusion is by altering the opacity of the paint; the application of thin glazes of paint tends to cause an area to have more depth and recede into the surface plane while thick, opaque layers of paint tend to cause an area to push forward. In order to illustrate the vulnerability of my figures, I used thinner glazes of paint in some areas of the portrait to allow the drawing and underpainting to show through, which causes the figure to look more transparent and faded. It also adds a ghost-like effect and suggests a kind of fragility to the figure. By allowing the viewer to see the exposed portions of the drawing and underpainting, there is a sense of intrusion on the part of the viewer but also a kind of openness to the figure.

Finally, I experimented with manipulating the gaze of the subject to suggest a more withdrawn, contemplative personality and also to create emotional distance between the viewer and the subject. By depicting the figures with averted or obstructed gazes, the viewer possesses the power to stare and potentially connect with the subject in the painting, but the subject can never return the viewer’s gaze and establish that connection. This unreciprocated stare conveys
the boundaries between the viewer and the subject as two discrete identities and demonstrates a sense of disconnect and isolation of the figure.

**Results and Analysis**

Currently, I have completed five portrait paintings with a sixth one in progress. In my most recent painting, I began experimenting with exposing some of the facial muscles to demonstrate both a literal and figurative vulnerability. As one of the human body’s largest organs, the skin is a crucial protective barrier that prevents pathogens from entering the body and causing infection. By removing the skin and revealing the more complex and delicate anatomy underneath, I hope to provide a more definite visual cue to the notion of becoming exposed to the other. I plan to layer transparent oil paint on top of the drawing as in some of my other paintings, or leave it exposed as a black and white under drawing. I discussed the use of transparent oil paint to achieve a sheerer layer of color over my drawing underneath, but even with the transparent quality of the paint, it covered up most of my graphite drawing in some of my other paintings so that it is hardly visible. If my goal is to illustrate both a disconnect from the other—which is achieved through the subject’s averted gaze and introversion—as well as the aspect of vulnerability, I want to make the image of a permeable self more apparent by creating a drawing that suggests the idea of exposure to a greater degree. As I have not applied any paint to the sixth painting, I do not yet know how my plan will turn out or if it will be successful, but I am excited to see the outcome.

For my earlier paintings, my initial goal was to demonstrate the impact that social media and technology had on face-to-face relationships and how technology allowed for individuals to become relatively close to yet remain distant from the people they network with. As my
paintings did not demonstrate this concept at all, I had to reassess my work and modify my ideas by really looking at what choices I was making in creating my paintings and why. For instance, one constant throughout all of my portraits is the depiction of a male figure with an averted gaze. The difficulty came in thinking about why I was drawn to this particular subject matter, and then analyzing how my methods and techniques in creating the artwork could demonstrate the idea of disconnection and vulnerability between the self and other.

Because of the multiple revisions to my concept, I would like to think of my series of paintings as representing a progress towards achieving my goal of illustrating the dichotomy between a disconnected and transparent self. For me, depicting primarily Asian males in a withdrawn and contemplative manner has been a chance to express the social isolation experienced by people in my personal life, particularly my father. As someone diagnosed with the mental illness schizophrenia, he has always struggled to discern what is reality and what is a manipulation of his mind. The stigma of mental illnesses especially within the more traditional Korean culture often influences individuals to think shamefully of their illness, which can be viewed as a result of their weak character. Thus, people with mental illnesses often try to deal with it themselves and are usually isolated from society, including family members. The isolation, cognitive struggle, and negative sense of self-worth that my father endured from having to deal with his illness is something that I wanted to illustrate in my paintings in an ambiguous way through the more abstract theory of the self/other binary.
Conclusion

Working on a series of paintings exploring a single theme has been both a challenge and a good learning experience. Part of the challenge came from keeping consistently interested and focused on the ideas that I was working with. For instance, throughout the duration of the project, new ideas came up that I wanted to explore, but I was not completely sure how to incorporate them into my current concept. During a painting critique, one my classmates suggested overlaying drawings of different facial expressions to show the multiple facets of a person’s identity or mentality, which, when combined with transparent oil paint, can produce an
interesting ephemeral and ghost-like picture that can represent different realities or perspectives. As an extension to my current project, I am interested in exploring different media and supports to pursue the same idea, or exploring different subject matter by focusing on other groups of individuals that live on the margins of society.

My goal was to illustrate the concept of social isolation due to barriers or a disconnection between the self and other identities, and I attempted to demonstrate this barrier by averting the subjects’ gaze to create an emotional distance between the viewer and the subject. But I also wanted to portray the possibility of permeable barriers and how that would lead to a better connection between the self and other, where relatedness between the two at first seemed unlikely. At first, I struggled in demonstrating my concept as clearly as I would like, such as the issue of how to display both the isolated and vulnerable condition of an individual, but I am happy with how they turned out aesthetically and hope to create more portrait paintings that explore a similar theme using other materials and experimenting more with combining different media.

I believe that many individuals, including myself, genuinely desire to connect with others in order to form meaningful relationships, being affirmed of our value and achieving happiness as well as establishing a stable support system; however, this desire can be hindered by various obstacles, including a fear of becoming subject to the other’s judgment, or harboring misplaced feelings of hatred towards the other. My wish is that viewers who see my artwork will be prompted to think of whom they consider as the other in their lives and allow themselves to become permeable enough to both accept and be accepted by the other. This statement may seem unrealistic and even impossible. But in the words of Volf, “The modest goal we can reach…is to acquire ‘a common language, common human understanding, which would allow both us and
them undistortively to be’—an understanding that will, we hope, in some way approximate the way the all-knowing God, who views things from everywhere, sees both us and them” (Volf 253).

As individuals created equal under God who teaches His followers to show the same love and compassion as He does to every human being, it will be my personal goal to be brave, bold, and earnest in understanding and embracing all the different people I encounter in my life, and I hope that others will be inspired to do the same.
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