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‘My Intimate Partner’ art exhibit in Oceanside examines violence in relationships

“Inaudible, 2017” by Lisa Bryson, is a triptych mixed media piece on paper and is part of the “My Intimate Partner” exhibition at the Oceanside Museum of Art Oct. 5, 2024 to March 16, 2025. (Photo courtesy of Oceanside Museum of Art)

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Smadar Samson met a group of women who had become homeless after leaving abusive relationships, while she was doing volunteer work in homelessness outreach. Some had children in tow, others had whatever they could toss into a plastic bag on

their way out. She was leading a therapeutic art project at the shelter where the women were staying and listened closely as they shared their heartbreaking stories. “I was deeply moved by their resilience and by the vital support the shelter provided them and their children. The project fostered a sense of empowerment and represented their journey toward independence,” she says. “Inspired by the project, I designed an installation that reflected this hopeful narrative, but I was unsure how to present it to the public. I then conducted extensive research, collaborating with the San Diego Family Justice Center, shelters, prevention organizations, psychotherapists, trauma experts, and more survivors, all of whom shaped my curatorial proposal, which I later presented to the Oceanside Museum of Art.”

The result is “My Intimate Partner,” a multimedia exhibition on display at the Oceanside Museum of Art through March 16, 2025, which she curated and designed. It features a dance film by The Roisin Box Project Dance Studio, stop-motion animation by Hugo Crosthwaite, and 2- and 3-dimensional works by Carlos Castro Arias, Mely Barragan, Patrick N. Brown, Lisa Bryson, Fatima Jamil Franks, Trinh Mai, Marco Miranda, Tatiana Oritz-Rubio, Irma Sofia Poeter and Valya. The exhibition opened earlier this month, which is also Domestic Violence Awareness Month. This month, survivors, their loved ones, and advocates the community mourn those who’ve lost their lives, celebrate the progress to end this violence, and raise awareness and action to continue change. According to the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence, 40% of women in the state experience intimate partner violence; and, according to the San Diego County District Attorney’s Office, intimate partner homicides in 2023 decreased by half from the previous year (to a total of five, the lowest number recorded in the county in 30 years).
Samson, an independent curator and designer whose work combines social justice, art and design, has a background in therapeutic art and inclusive design. She previously led the master’s program for design for disability at London Metropolitan University, and also designs and curates exhibitions at the Mingei International Museum, Cecut, Mesa College Art Gallery and other locations. She took some time to talk about this current exhibition, her research into intimate partner violence, and why it’s necessary to help people understand it more broadly. (This email interview has been edited for length and clarity.)

Q: Why did you want to be involved in something that focused on domestic violence?
A: I remember reading Centers for Disease Control and Prevention statistics stating that half of all female homicide victims in the United States are killed by a current or former partner. That stunned me. Half of the women in this country are shot, stabbed or strangled by the very person they chose as their soul mate — their closest intimate partner, who was supposed to love and protect them. What does that say about the society we live in? How can we hope to address issues like gun violence and mass shootings if we don’t confront the violence that exists within our intimate relationships? I later joined expert organizations that prefer the term “intimate partner violence” (IPV) over “domestic violence” because “domesticating” violence implies a softening, a

lesser degree of harm, as if assaulting a family member is a private dispute and somehow less severe than violence against a stranger.

Q: This exhibition features multiple styles of artwork and examines “the intersection between intimacy, power, and control which leads to intimate partner violence.” Can you talk about how you imagine, or define, intimacy, power and control separately?

A: Intimacy is the foundation of relationships. It refers to the physical, emotional or sexual connection between partners, built on trust, respect and vulnerability. Power in a relationship is the ability of one person to influence or exert control over the other. It involves how responsibilities and decision-making are shared between partners, and it can manifest in both positive and negative ways. Control, on the other hand, arises from a power imbalance within the relationship. It occurs when one partner attempts to dominate the other’s actions, behaviors, thoughts or decisions. Driven by fear, insecurity, or a need to maintain dominance, control can manifest emotionally, psychologically, physically or financially.

Q: And then, what is your perspective on how they each come together in ways that lead to this kind of violence?

A: When one person holds significantly more power than the other, it creates an imbalance in the relationship. This dynamic often leads to tension and may result in manipulation, emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, and coercive control. In such cases, trust is broken and intimacy is damaged. The extent of coercive control, as well as how and how often it manifests, is highly individual. However, increasing awareness of these dynamics can pave the way for healthier relationships.

Q: On the museum’s website, you’re quoted as saying that this exhibition “broadens the perception of intimate partner violence beyond a women’s issue…” Why is it necessary, in your opinion, to expand people’s understanding of domestic violence in this way? What do you think that kind of expansion helps accomplish?

A: For too long, intimate partner violence has been viewed as a private issue affecting women, rather than a serious societal concern. This perspective has limited the responsibility of others in contributing to prevention efforts. IPV impacts entire communities, families and social systems, intersecting with issues like race, social and gender inequality, sexual orientation and immigration status. There is a growing consensus among experts and organizations that IPV is preventable, but prevention requires understanding. People must confront what IPV looks like and what it means in order to take steps to protect themselves, support others, and, ideally, prevent it from happening in the first place. As James Baldwin said, “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

Q: Can you talk about your approach to curating this exhibit? What were you thinking about in terms of the kind of work you wanted to see and include for display? What were you looking for in the artists you selected?

A: From the start, I knew this exhibition wouldn’t be created by women for women, nor would it focus on victimhood, regardless of how artistically compelling it was presented. My vision was to reveal a multifaceted view of intimate partner violence as a complex societal issue, and to engage the community in reflection and action toward its elimination. In my research, I discovered that thousands of organizations in the United States are working to address issues of violence and safety. From the

Department of Justice's workshops to local community groups running impactful educational programs, many initiatives aim to influence and shift social norms. These programs are held in schools, church halls, community centers, sports clubs, and workplaces. My approach to examining intimate partner violence through an art exhibition was rooted in the belief that the broader community-including those directly or indirectly affected by IPV-might feel more comfortable engaging with the subject in a museum, a space they enjoy and choose to visit. In this setting, they can connect with the topic in a more visceral way than in traditional or non-traditional educational settings. This is where the power of art truly lies: it can reach deeper into our consciousness than words alone. As a result, the artworks chosen for the exhibition reflect the sensitivity and responsibility required to address such a serious issue. The selected artworks serve not only as catalysts to engage visitors in examining their own relationship to power and control but also as a platform for the social service organizations I collaborated with during my research. These organizations will conduct their educational training programs at the exhibition, using the art as a way to initiate dialogues that might otherwise be too difficult or uncomfortable to approach. Despite the powerful impact of the #MeToo movement and other successful women's organizations, I believe that meaningful cultural change around violence cannot happen without the honest intention and involvement of men. That's why I invited talented male artists to take a creative stand in breaking stereotypes and to help shift the focus from an exhibition created by women for women to one centered on social justice.

Since IPV does not discriminate and can affect anyone regardless of gender, class, religion, or socioeconomic status, I wanted the artists to reflect this diverse spectrum in both their identities and their art forms. The artists include heterosexual and LGBTQ+ members, survivors, bystanders and advocates who are all deeply committed to ending IPV. Above all, they are superb artists. Their skills and artistic vigor allow them to distill their experiences and engage visitors on multiple levels through a variety of media.

Q: Let's also talk about the design of this exhibition. In your work, you are noted for a focus on social justice, inclusion, and therapeutic uses for art. First, how would you describe what the design of the exhibition space looks like, physically?
A: The exhibition space consists of five interconnected white-wall galleries of varying sizes. The first, a small gallery, is titled "Intimacy," followed by "Power and Control," with the largest gallery titled "Fallout." This is followed by "Dark Sound" and finally "Transformation." Given the imposing nature of many artworks, ample white space has been introduced between them to allow for breathing room.
Q: What was your process for conceptualizing the design of the exhibition space? What informed the design choices that you made? Why did you make specific choices?
A: The exhibition space was conceptualized as a constellation of various factors, agents, and consequences, informed by the socio-ecological model used in health care for prevention. This model considers the interactions between individual,

relationship, community, and societal factors that affect both individual and population health. In translating the constellation concept into the museum space, I identified key agents-victim, perpetrator, relatives, and society-and explored their roles within the consequences of violence, trauma, and intergenerational abuse. Each of these elements is represented through specific artists, assigned to different galleries. Each gallery follows a distinct theme, with artworks exploring varied aspects of that theme. Every piece is meant to be viewed from three perspectives: the victim, the perpetrator, and the bystander-whether a family member or a community member.
The five galleries – “Intimacy,” “Power and Control,” “Fallout,” “Dark Sound,” and “Transformation” – are arranged in a circular configuration. This layout leads visitors through a compelling journey, reflecting the cyclical nature of violence. While “My Intimate Partner” is not a restful exhibition, the art is positioned in a way that creates a breathing space, allowing visitors time to process each piece. These empty spaces are alluding to the process of recovery and healing projected through them. Healing is not only portrayed in the art or the space around it; I also incorporated a concrete reminder to members of the community by juxtaposing segments from testimonies of survivors from a nearby shelter that evidently highlight the prolonged, yet empowering, path to recovery and healing. Additionally, accessible resources are available throughout the exhibition to provide further support.

Q: What did you want viewers to see or experience through the design elements you chose?
A: First, I wanted viewers to recognize behavioral patterns that might resonate within their own relationships or those of others around them. Second, as visitors navigate the themes of intimacy, power and control, I aimed for them to feel as if they are actively interrupting the pathways that can lead to intimate partner violence. While some art and design elements are bold and direct, the goal is not to sensationalize, desensitize, or numb visitors with despair, but rather to inspire action. Finally, I want viewers to realize that easily accessible resources are available-from a counselor present at the museum to local organizations nearby, offering free professional services to anyone in our community experiencing abuse.
Q: Can you talk about a couple of pieces in this exhibition that help people question what we think we know about domestic violence?
A: All the artworks in the exhibition challenge what we think we know about intimate partner violence, but a few installations stand out as, to my knowledge, entirely unique in concept. The “Dark Sound” installation is a 24 foot-by-12 foot dark room where visitors walk on eggshells, literally feeling their fragile bumps beneath their feet. Overhead, they eavesdrop on a couple’s conversation-there’s no screaming, no flying dishes-just an insidious dialogue that reminds visitors how violence often begins long before physical abuse. Another work in “Dark Sound” is a gripping dance performance video titled “Free,” portraying a same-sex intimate partner relationship, performed by The Rosin Box Project.
In the “Transformation” gallery, the final installation, “Invitation” by Irma Sofia Poeter, is a 10 foot-by-10 foot cocoon-like textile structure. It invites survivors, abusers, bystanders and the community into a space of tenderness and acceptance. As light

gently filters through the ornamented fabrics that form the cocoon, it reveals intricate paths of underlying experiences, allowing patterns to emerge. Within the safety of this caring environment, recognizing coercive behaviors can lead to holding a partner accountable. Accountability, developed over time rather than in a single event, acknowledges the harm and its impact, while inner work fosters healing and lasting change. Some of the materials in this piece are the same ones Poeter used in “Leggs,” an unsettling artwork from the “Fallout” gallery, now transformed into a symbol of new beginnings.