apexart

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apexart © 2023 ISBN: 978-1-946416-56Cover Image: Sam Fein with Arilis Mroczek and Belle Lopes , A View from Inside, 2023, Polyester with printed banners, zip ties, and digital projection, 77 in. x 57 in. x 40 in.

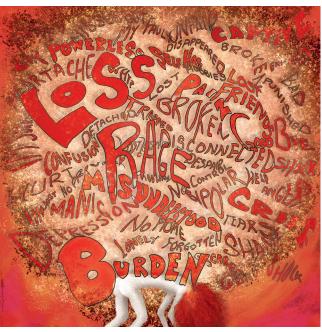


The Corrections

In the United States, there exists a multibillion dollar industry claiming to modify the undesirable behavior of adolescent girls. The Troubled Teen Industry (TTI) is a network of for-profit facilities including: boot camps, wilderness programs, therapeutic boarding schools, religious reform schools, and residential treatment centers. The estimated 100,000+ children confined in the TTI are held indefinitely at the program's discretion, often for years. Communication with the outside world is monitored, grossly restricted, or forbidden altogether. The industry operates outside public view, enabling the horrors within to go largely undetected.

The Corrections presents an interdisciplinary exhibition by a group of female artists who are TTI survivorsturned-activists. These artists draw upon their first-hand experiences to expose the inner workings of a shadowy industry and the lasting trauma that reverberates through adulthood. While each artist tells her own unique story, viewed collectively, they share overarching themes: community dislocation, identity erasure, loss of bodily autonomy, and the struggle to reintegrate in normative society after a prolonged period of captivity.

Young women enter the TTI through the school system, legal system, foster care system, or through direct placement by families. The "troubling" behavior used to





Belle Lopes, Exiled to the Depths of Her Own Heart, 2022-2023, Digital painting, 48 in. x 48 in.

justify TTI placement is arbitrary and reflects our country's legacy of institutionalizing female bodies for subverting traditional gender expectations. Websites for female TTI facilities list items like "older boyfriend" and "promiscuity" as behaviors that necessitate a structured institution. Defacto gay conversion therapy is a common experience for queer, transgender, and nonbinary adolescents.

The TTI relies on isolation, coercive control, and punishment to exact behavioral change. Widespread abuse, injury, and death of children within TTI programs have been reported for decades. TTI facilities have also faced controversy due to substandard schooling, forced labor, unsafe living conditions, inexperienced staff, and the use of bizarre pseudo-therapeutic techniques. Despite these practices, the industry is almost entirely unregulated and operates without federal oversight or accountability. When a program shuts down, it is common for owners to relocate and open a new facility under a different name.

The Corrections celebrates the resiliency of TTI survivors and their dedication to fight this carceral system in order to protect future generations. In recent years, survivors have been speaking out on social media using the hashtag #BreakingCodeSilence. Survivors are also organizing protests and lobbying for legislation to monitor TTI programs and curtail abuse. Through these survivor-led actions, lawmakers and the general public are starting to pay attention. **Belle Lopes** deconstructs how powerful messages transmitted by the TTI become embodied beliefs about oneself and one's place in the world. With diagrams reading like matter-of-fact instructional posters, Lopes charts the learnings that result from common TTI practices such as: physical restraint, forced sedation, and solitary confinement. In her digital painting *Messages Received*, large arrows point at the central figure. "You cannot be trusted" the arrows insist, "Best not to resist." In *Too Much to Hold Alone*, the figure is slumped over, no longer able to carry the weight of her emotional burdens.

TTI programs, like all carceral systems, are premised on the idea that removing someone from society will teach proper social functioning. Lopes' work highlights this incongruence and the impossible expectations it creates for survivors after being released. Flung back into the world, survivors are now supposedly prepared for adult life and its responsibilities. "So you want me to be an adult now?" the artist asks sardonically.

Arlis Mroczek's artwork combines text and imagery to explore themes of subjugation. Her mixed media collage *Immobilized* is a visual depiction of mechanical restraint.



Arlis Mrozcek, Sparkle and Shine for Safety!!!, 2022, Collage on paper, 6 in. x 8 in.



Arlis Mrozcek, A Hell of A Drug, 2023, Prescription bottles in lock box, Dimensions variable

The word "still" repeats throughout, referencing a common refrain from program staff to "stay still" while holding someone down. The concept of restraint is further explored in Mroczek's piece *Hell of a Drug*. Here the artist presents a locked box containing prescription bottles with customized labels. "Take one to not trust yourself" a label reads. "Take one to question nothing" reads another. TTI programs often employ powerful psychotropics as chemical restraint. While youth must literally swallow the pills they are given, the work is emblematic of institutional indoctrination. Young people must also swallow the bitter pill of the program itself, absorbing its ideology in order to survive.

Mroczek's work speaks of transcending trauma into purpose and renewal. In the self-portrait *A Farewell to the Place that Tried to Break Me*, the artist stands in front of a (now shuttered) residential program she attended as a teenager. She faces the camera with a defiant expression and holds her middle finger high in the air declaring: "What hurt me the most has become the thing I draw my values from... being a kinder person than those who tried to break me." While basking in the joy of her freedom, the artist fuels her pain into a better way of being.

The Corrections was born out of my work as a grassroots organizer, and the inclusion of my own artwork (Sam Fein) is intended as an act of solidarity. *Inflammatory Observations: Stupid Shit People Say to Survivors* is a text-based piece displaying common responses TTI survivors receive when describing their experiences. The responses are encased in plexiglass, suggesting the signage found on the walls of psychiatric hospitals. The piece speaks to a wider culture of victim-blaming and denial that allows systemic oppression to continue unchecked.

The dissonance between perception and reality is further

explored in *A View From Inside*, a piece I created with assistance from the exhibiting artists. An erected tent–a reference to wilderness programs where children sleep outdoors for months–displays a series of banners sourced from TTI advertisements. The banners flaunt picturesque campuses with beaming youth and uplifting messages. They are held up by zip ties, a tool used to restrain youth when they are being transported. Viewers are invited to zip themselves inside the tent, the space becoming a barrier that replicates confinement. A slideshow projects photographs of the artists when they were teenagers in the TTI, reminding us of how young adolescents truly are.

The Corrections is a form of creative activism and expands beyond the exhibition space with a protest at the Massachusetts State house. The Judge Rotenberg Center (JRC), located in Canton, Massachusetts, uses remotecontrolled devices to deliver painful electric shocks to disabled children as a form of behavioral conditioning. Activists are urging lawmakers to support bills that would ban the use of aversive practices that cause physical pain. The protest is a sobering reminder that the exhibit does not



Sam Fein, Inflammatory Observations: Stupid Shit People Say to Survivors, 2023, Ink on paper with plexiglass, Dimensions variable



Advertisement, WWASP, Date unknown, Ink on paper, 8 in. x 7 in.

reflect memories from a bygone era, but is grounded in present-day atrocities.

The Corrections confronts viewers with uncomfortable truths about society's ongoing use of surveillance and confinement to "correct" behavior. The exhibit challenges our assumptions about who is entitled to inhabit civil society and who "deserves" removal. It also empowers survivors to publicly share their truth and resist the institutions attempting to silence them. TTI programs go to great lengths to discredit survivors, dismissing allegations of mistreatment as "attention-seeking" or "exaggerated." The dominant narrative of the TTI has been constructed by the industry itself, not by the individuals who lived through it. Reclaiming one's narrative is an act of defiance, a bold declaration that we are here and no one else will tell our story for us.

Sam Fein ©**apexart** 2023 Open Call Exhibition

The Corrections is on view May 20 - June 17, 2023 at The Foundry, Point Gallery 101 Rogers St Cambridge, MA 02142 USA

Opening reception: May 20, 4-7 pm

Stop the Shock JRC protest will be held May 22, 12-5 pm on the Boston Common, across from Park Street Station