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*The Art of Adolescence*

Installation

The Art of Adolescence is about the transitional phase that is teenhood. It is the lingering possessions of a child mixed with the realness of adulthood, a collage of life. In my research for my writing I came across a paper called *Teenagers and Their Bedrooms*, in this paper the author Kit Grauer talks about how adolescents express their emerging identity through their room. The paper references a series of photographs done by Adrienne Salinger called *In My Room* in which she took photos of various teenagers in their bedrooms.

This work is heavily inspired by my personal life. I wanted it to reflect the pieces of my childhood that are still left behind. I used crayons and colored pencils to draw graphic designs for posters, mediums that often represent childhood, but put themes more representative of teenagers on the posters to blend the two.

Creating an installation was difficult for me because it felt like working with something invisible leading up to installation. Because of this, my vision for the project went through many iterations of the same themes. Ultimately, I'm proud of how it came together because it is very unique and it communicated my thesis about the growth of the teenage identity how I intended it to.

Overall, the process of creating this piece changed how I view my identity and the idea of adolescence. I have become more comfortable with the idea of change and the chaos of unknowing.

The Art of Adolescence:  
Expression and Misrepresentation



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OS50

*Writers Note: Teenhood is a unique experience shaped by many things; friends, family, and the media. This paper looks at how adolescents are represented in media and explores my personal experience undergoing teenhood. My hope in writing this is to help other teenagers less isolated in their experiences and understand that it is normal for their life to not look the way it is shown in the movies.*

Nicole

We dance around each other. Toes tap the ground making a melody of movement. The sun and the moon, we hardly meet but will forever exist together. You called me the other day, I didn't pick up. Something always compels you to call at the worst times, we joke about it. I forget to call back.

For a while nothing made sense. You knew me at my true embodiment of angst. You saw me raw, you saw what I would spend my life working to erase. You stayed. I stayed. Maybe things still don't make much sense but I feel more ok with it. I'm sure we will never be as close as we were. We still dance around each other.

Nicole has been one of my closest friends since middle school. We became friends during lockdown, a text sent from an unknown number. Things were so uncertain and fast moving but I always knew I had her no matter what. Sticking with each other through the worst of it all. She moved towns a couple years into us being friends. We stopped seeing each other as much and grew apart. Still we have each other's back no matter what, no amount of time apart is able to dent us. Nicole has taught me about who I am deeply, seeing every part of me for so long.

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James

My siblings lived across the state. A five hour drive down I-90, we saw them every other weekend. James came from summer. We met at day camp. Splashing in lakes, touching bugs, sunscreen, we became siblings faster than my real ones. Before I knew him I saw him walk through town as a kid, he would make the trek to his mom's work in pajama pants every Wednesday. Before we even knew it we were growing up alongside each other. His parents became mine and mine became his.

The day before Halloween in 8th grade James cut his hair with craft scissors. I had never seen a haircut so bad. I spent the next day begging him to let me cut his hair. He was hesitant but agreed. That light under the floodlight in my backyard I fixed his haircut. This was one of the only nights our friends weren't fighting. Laughter filled the forest. Scaring the ghosts away. Our floodlight was motion activated on a timer so every few minutes we would chase each other through the yard. James is one of the most individual people I know. He is himself. My brother.

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Troy

You're a wreck, I don't blame you. Two teens, a twilight. As the sun fell flames danced between lighters. You sparked a fire in me, burning, aching, and angry, biting at my heels. The same flames that eat the Oregon Oaks on the coast. I always would ask you to go to the beach. I wanted to be free with you. Sand swept footprints. The tides cycle, rising and falling. Your breathing and mine. Cycles like you, the unstable love I grew so accustomed to. Sharing peaches, sticky dripping down my chin till it got uncomfortable still, I stayed through the discomfort. I

held your hand even when you held hers. Forgiveness felt foreign in the process of fleeing. I wanted to hurt you like you hurt me.

When I loved you I'd tuck your long hair behind your ears so I could stare into you. Your tired eyes met mine. I felt your world, the one you wouldn't let me see. The world I could only know through the sounds on late night calls. I'm not sure I have a clear sense of who you ever were. Your identity is remarkable. Hidden and fractured. Although it's passed I still feel the fears you gave to me. Always looking for the next change in tides.

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Maddie

Twins in a time of trial. We echoed through the night, our voices reverberating off the empty walls. Buildings abandoned, stuck in a state of limbo. It was real magic, stars under our eyes lit the path. You took me to a room and told me to walk into the darkness. The stars showed a room on the other side. Careful steps. Lines. I look back and you're gone. The rot from the walls started to take a toll. I tried to run back to you but fell to the ground. The stars fell off. Lungs drained of air. Eaten by the decay. I look back and there is no room. We yell out for each other. Our voices reverberated off the empty walls yet never reached each other. Ever since then a cloud has been stuck between us. Twins torn apart.

I'm not sure we will ever be the same, we got too close to each other. I only began to see what you did wrong. I'm in a constant battle with myself on how I should feel about you. Still when I return we will be in the same class, seated next to each other. Expected for things to return as to how they once were.

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Caden

I'd never felt the pull of another's soul before I met you. The cave of your body was warm and alive. I wanted to climb in. To know what it felt like to be you, our hands as one. You took me out of my cave and showed me the night air. The breeze was soft and speaking, a whisper of nightide. The tide that ties me to your arms, thin and pale, a crescent moon. The same moon that lights your face as we lay together under the sky. Big and blue, the vastness overwhelmed. You picked up my hand with yours. Our hands as one.

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Moments like these I cherish. Knowing I will adore them as memories yet learning to live in now. I am clay, molded by the hands that change, yet forever clay. Pieces of who I am are taken from others, the fruit from their trees to grow my own orchard. I become the world around me.

I came here to Oxbow in search of furthering my sense of identity. Before coming here I was full of ideas of how I wanted this experience to shape me. But, no amount of premeditating and imagining how it would go could truly prepare me for how this would change me. It was not glorious like how I imagined it to be. At many points I was ready to give up and go home or sink myself deeper into my feelings of dread. But going through so much pain while in these very unique circumstances has drastically changed me. I'm glad I didn't give up.

## I. Discovery of Being an Adolescent

For the past years, I've been inevitably stuck in the state of discovering my identity. Although confusing, it's part of life. Something I didn't understand for a while. I thought I was going through a round of finding my identity that no one had ever gone through before. It seemed to be so clear for others to find theirs and yet something I could never quite fit into. If someone asked me what it meant to be a teenager, I'm sure I would have some different answers at different points in time. Generally speaking though, I think being a teenager is about discovery. Although it is awkward and confined at times, being a teenager is the process of experimenting with who you are and what it means to be you. Marked by not yet being an adult but not being a child, teenagers are in a weird sort of limbo with a skewed and distorted place in society.

*“The process of creating and expressing personal identity is the core work of adolescence”* (Kit Grauer).

I spoke with my friends about how they viewed being a teenager. Some of their answers were somber and cold while others were filled with acceptance and excitement, and that's ok. Every teenager goes through this process a little differently, experiencing different things at different times. But it's important to know that it will be ok, things will feel very big in the moment but remember this too shall pass. Something I often struggle to realize and frequently have to remind myself of.

*“Once you become a teenager you start having your own opinions on things and your own values, you lose a lot of the self confidence you had as a kid but compensate for it by doing other things like dressing nice or changing your hairstyle” (C.E.).*

*“Finding out who you are as a person and the kind of people who make you happy” (J.C.).*

*“All the adults around me have some sort of input on my life. They are telling me their aspect of the world and saying what I should and shouldn't do and telling me what I can and can't do”(N.M.).*

*“You come into teenhood new and are learning so many things so rapidly but your view becomes so distorted and altered by others” (C.E.).*

These are some quotes from the friends I spoke to that stood out to me. Generally they all described struggle, expression, and change as big parts of their teenage years.

*The effect of the media on the search for identity was the central theme of another aspect of the exploration developed by a preservice teacher (Black, 1997). The students were asked to define what teen culture meant to them and to the media and whether these definitions were mutually exclusive. **Adolescents are surrounded by images from the media about teenagers.** Although they had examined magazine and book images, the discussion progressed to include movie, television and the ubiquitous rock video images. (Kit Grauer)*



## II. Representation of Teens in Pop Culture

Adolescents have become a wildly misrepresented group in popular culture. Modern film and television have turned the years of self discovery into an exaggerated and sensationalized mess. The teenage identity is exploited for its unique experience and position in society. Being a teenager is a challenging time full of self discovery, energy, and opportunities. It is also a time of big and often consuming emotions. So, when people grow up and have a more detached perspective they often use shows like these to look back on that part of their life. The same can be said for how the shows are made. The misrepresentation lies within the fact that most teen films are made under the assumption that the experiences and observations of the adults who created them were enough to paint an accurate picture of adolescence. Heavy topics are often used for shock value, teens are oversexualized. Audiences are only being shown examples of rebellious, irresponsible teens, who often engage in violent or illegal behavior. Which is a reality for some teens but not all. Although representation of struggle is deeply important, these topics are being abused and causing teenagers to be misunderstood and melodramatized.

The constant portrayal of teens in this way can cause teens who don't engage in this behavior to feel abnormal or even push themselves to pursue lives more similar to the ones shown on tv. *“While some of these events, such as doing drugs, falling in love and sending nudes can be realistic individually, all of these happening simultaneously makes the show's depiction of students' lives overwhelmingly exaggerated”* (Stella Huang).

### **III. Adult Actors**

When watching most films about teens, you'll witness the fact that not many of them look like teenagers. That's simply because they are not. Labor laws highly restrict the number of hours in which minors can be on set. To avoid these restrictions, adults are cast to play the roles of teenagers. This, in hindsight, is not sinister. The problem comes from the fact that most of the time these are very conventionally attractive adults with adult bodies. Euphoria can be used as an example, all of the actors are very attractive and in their older twenties. This can create problems for the teens and preteens watching who oftentimes are comparing themselves to these fully grown adult actors. When the only teens shown in the media are ones who don't look or act like teens, it can give the impression that real teenagers don't look or act the way they should. In many of these shows the actors are constantly elegant, even while undergoing troubling experiences. Barbara Greenberg, a clinical psychologist and teen and family expert says, "It can give the message that they're supposed to look good all the time... That leads to all kinds of body-image and social comparison issues, and we know that social comparison can be a thief of joy." Real people do not constantly look good so the portrayal of life in such a constantly glamorous way can lead to disappointment when met with the real world.

This is a very avoidable problem. The critique does not come from the fact that the actors are not adolescense. The issue is that there is hardly ever attention given to the teenagers expressing themselves and experimenting with their identity like real teenagers. This circles back to my point that the teenage identity is exploited in tv and film. Oftentimes the accuracy of these characters is overlooked for the sake of making a sensationalized attention grabbing plot. When the "teenagers" they try to represent only look and act like adults it gives the impression to

teenagers that they should look and act like adults themselves. The lack of accurate representations of teenagers can lead to a phenomenon called symbolic annihilation. Symbolic annihilation describes situations of absence, misrepresentations, and disapproval of minorities in media. When this media is consumed it has effects on the identities of these minority groups and affects the perception of these groups. Often symbolic annihilation can lead to assumptions and contribute to social disempowerment.

#### **IV. Sex and risky behavior**

A hot topic in teen films and tv shows is sex. Most teen dramas are tailored for adult consumption. Because of this, oversexualisation and glamorisation of sex are problems that often occur in these shows and movies. This is deeply problematic as teens are a very large part of the audience of teen dramas and often take what they see as the truth.

Oftentimes, teenagers' expectations for sex are informed by these shows. With a lack of proper sex education in the United States many teens turn to what they see on tv as a guide. But disappointingly are met with unrealistic and harmful examples in the media they consume. Sex is often depicted in graphic, voyeuristic, and glamorized ways. Many teen shows with explicit scenes fail to address aspects of sex that are important for teenagers to know such as consent, sti information, contraception, dysfunction, anxiety, and trauma. There are common problems faced by teenagers but hardly receive any representation.

These shows also make it seem like it is extremely common to engage in these acts but in America, the majority of students are not having sex. The centers for disease control and

prevention's youth risk behavior survey found that in 2021, the percentage of high school students who'd had intercourse was less than half, around 30 percent. (CDC BRFSS) Yet in these shows and films, it is made to seem much more common. It is important to show different narratives when it comes to these topics, both sides are perfectly normal and fine but when only one is represented it can lead to the other group feeling abnormal.

*“Many high schoolers, who are already weighed down by classwork and extracurricular activities, may push themselves to enter a relationship for the “normal” high school experience. The pressure to form premature relationships may lead to teens involved to feel emotionally overwhelmed” (Stella Huang).*

Although it is not abnormal for teenagers to have these experiences, it becomes harmful when every character in every teen tv show is shown drinking, partying, doing drugs, and having sex, it creates a sense that this is the norm. This can make a lot of very normal high schoolers feel very abnormal. When these narratives are pushed as the “normal teen experience,” it desensitizes us to the fact that these are very real and problematic issues that should not be something we are desensitized to. The risks of these behaviors are simply glanced over all for further plot development. Take chronic cannabis use in adolescents. Shows like Euphoria show it as extremely common and use it almost as a prop but fail to highlight the effects of it. Chronic cannabis use in adolescents causes a magnitude of problems ranging from cognitive problems, such as problems with attention, concentration, problem-solving, learning, and memory, to lower life satisfaction, increased risks of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. (Lauren Geoffrion) This side of things is rarely shown.

*“Other types of mental disorders, such as depression or suicide, have been glorified in TV shows such as “13 Reasons Why,” which only twists teenagers’ views of their society and school even more... Depicting suicide as an action that brings acknowledgement, escape and revenge is not only unrealistic, but also dangerous” (Stella Huang).*

## **V. Conclusion**

Creating more realistic depictions of teenagers is vitally important to the safety and mental well being of the real teenagers who are inevitably watching these shows. It's important we educate on the risks of the behaviors that are shown and stop glamorizing and oversimplifying major life problems all for the sake of plot. Being in a time of

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