



INSIDE VIEW OF PRISONERS' ART

ARTIST PUTS FOCUS ON EXPRESSION BEHIND BARS, WRITES **SARAH WALTERS**

AS well as being recognised for having one of the sharpest senses of humour in the contemporary text art world, artist Bob Smith – or Bob and Roberta Smith, as he's known professionally – has long been interested in the social value of artistic expression.

It was a gift for the artist, then, to be approached by the Koestler Trust – a prison arts charity – to create a show with Manchester's Castlefield Gallery bringing together art, music and literary work

created by people in prisons, secure hospitals and children's homes, and on probation in the region.

This resulting collaboration, Snail Porridge, is an exhibition of two halves: a traditional gallery show displaying work selected from the Koestler Trust's extensive archive of submissions, and a recreated section of the Koestler Trust offices – the first sight of which bowled Bob over.

"I was just so impressed with this huge Victorian building at Wormwood Scrubs (London) – in the old prison officers'

buildings," says Bob.

"Every surface is covered in prisoner art from all over the country.

"We're trying to give a feel of what the trust is like as an organisation – you might think this is just prisoners' art that's just appeared here, but I wanted to flag up the process it takes and the incredible work done by a dedicated people that it takes to make this happen."

For the show, Bob has created a new painting – Trip To The Koestler Trust, 2014 – telling the story of the physical and mental support it offers to the many groups it works with. "Prisoners can work

on something and get credit for it at the end of the journey," Bob explains. "It provides something to work towards, which is very important psychologically.

"The trust tells people, 'You can think of yourselves not as someone who did something stupid or terrible, but you can redefine yourself. That's amazing.'"

As well as paintings and music, Snail Porridge also features a section on how art finds its way into more conventional skills acquisition behind bars, such as building, and it

looks at the recurring themes in the work.

"There's a vein of prisoners' art that is psychedelic, very influenced by surrealism," Bob reflects. "It's quite zany, and also influenced by computer gaming technology. I've tried to show the various themes in the work; there's one theme that's quite sad reflecting on places, remembered landscapes from childhood or before prison, and that's another favourite area of mine."

● **Castlefield Gallery, Hewitt St, until June 15, free (Wed-Sun, 1pm-6pm) W: castlefieldgallery.co.uk**