

Life & Arts

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Through the prison walls: an exhibition goes behind bars

A show of artworks by the incarcerated exposes the realities they face every day

“Jan Dalley



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Most of the works are very small: it's almost the first thing you notice. With few exceptions, the majority of the paintings, drawings, collages in a long low exhibition room in London's Royal Festival Hall cover no more than an A4 sheet of paper. That's because there's not much room in a prison cell, especially if it measures 8ft by 12ft, and you share it with another large human being — for 23 hours a day.

These are the realities for many of the 84,000-plus prisoners, detainees and residents of secure psychiatric facilities in Britain, some of whose artworks are on show in *Inside*, an exhibition mounted by the Koestler Trust — a prison arts charity of more than 50 years standing — and curated each year by a leading artist. One on the outside, that is: this year, sculptor Antony Gormley.

Gormley set the theme, then took on the task of sorting through some 7,000 entries responding to the title's double meaning — the physical experience of being inside, and what is happening inside the artist's head, heart, soul. For many, clearly, it's a double incarceration: physically imprisoned, but also locked into a downward spiral of low self-worth and hopelessness. One work, entitled "Inside Frame of Mind 1", by "Brian" from HM Prison Hindley, is an intricately painted cardboard model of a human brain caged by bars formed of chicken bones roofed with barbed wire, the whole suspended as if weightlessly from an acrylic thread so that it turns, hovers, wavers pointlessly and uselessly.

Everything here speaks of similar despair. But also, often, of penetrating intelligence, self-knowledge. In these artists the sheer courage of exposing one's vulnerable self in a dangerous environment where self-protection is a daily necessity is extraordinary. This is why, perhaps, the more private literary realm flourishes: the recorded stories, memories, music, here on headphones, are profoundly powerful and touching.

Often too, there's a high sense of drama: one sequence of pictures is a comic-book-style story of the artist's adventures on the street with "Harry" (= heroin). The story did not end well.

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Drugs, illicit or prescribed, bubble under the surface of many works here. I talked to "Johnny", as we'll call him, an articulate, nicely dressed, clearly intelligent former musician who spoke of the devastation caused by drugs he'd seen throughout the prison system. During his own stay in a secure

psychiatric unit he was allowed paper but not a pen (you could harm yourself or someone else with that) so he made "a whole zoo" of origami animals. Displayed here is a tiny, super-neat, eloquently intense illustrated notebook, entitled "The Hole", that he'd made after his release, recreating the feelings and thoughts he was unable to write down.

The last year has revealed appalling statistics for Britain's prisons, and the show begins with a wall of shocking facts and figures: highest ever number of prison suicides; attacks on inmates and staff up by 40 per cent; overcrowding so extreme that some places are officially designated unsafe; the drug problem rampant. And, to the publicly expressed fury of the Chief Inspector of Prisons, Peter Clarke, the whole issue was dropped from the government programme at the Queen's Speech in June. Let them eat porridge.

The Koestler Trust, though, is clear that it is an arts not a campaigning organisation. The show, which Gormley describes as “a narrow breathing-tube” to the outside, has to speak for itself. So I took my chance to ask “Johnny” what he really thought about arts in prison. The rhetoric of art’s soft power comes easily enough: improved self-awareness and communication skills, a heightened sense of self-worth are the sorts of phrases used. Interestingly, Johnny’s reply was a version of the same thoughts. But, given that most inmates are in desperate need of more practical forms of help, can the value of art in the prison setting be compared to the value of, say, vocational training that will help with a new life on the outside?

Studies are inconclusive and cautious, to say the least. The [National Criminal Justice Arts Alliance report](#) declares that taking part in arts-based activities has “a clear link” with “a movement towards a long-term, non-offending future”. Hardly a very powerful statement. At least the previous Chief Inspector, Nick Hardwick, has delivered a more positive message, saying: “I have seen how great arts projects in prisons can play a crucial role in helping prisoners see a new crime-free future for themselves.” Gormley puts it differently, and far more forcefully. He believes that “an individual’s ability to change their context, in however small a way, is empowering on every level, that is its value. The gain is palpable.” Like most questions of value, this one will never have a simple answer. But the power and importance of this work is undeniable.

The writer is the FT’s arts editor. Janan Ganesh is on holiday

‘Inside’ is at London’s Royal Festival Hall until November 15

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