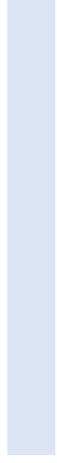


**INSIDER ART**  
**MATTHEW MEADOWS**

Foreword by Grayson Perry



# **Insider Art**





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**FOREWORD BY**

**Grayson Perry**

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Frontispiece image: Curtis Elton, *Hands*.  
Right: Curtis Elton, *Downtrodden* (detail).  
Cover: Paul Higgins, *Self-portrait*, acrylic.  
COURTESY OF KOESTLER TRUST.





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## Insider Art



Tyrone Brouder made these two pots in the art and craft workshop at HMP Parkhurst on the Isle of Wight. He says "I'm going always do art cos I love doing it. Its much better than doing drugs, 100 times better and there's no bad come down. Plus it gives me a natural high. I tend to meditate when I'm doing art, sometimes drifting off in thought, working without thinking in any way. It's like going into overdrive. That's probably what its like for artists with natural gifts. I think everyone has some sort of artist in them. But the real gift is loving the art and getting joy from it. Even better, someone else getting joy from my art. That truly makes me happy."



# Acknowledgements

I want to thank the many prisoner and ex-prisoner artists I visited and corresponded with whilst researching this book. Those still serving sentences are detained in various custodial settings across the UK's criminal justice system: prisons, special hospitals, mental health secure units and immigration retrieval centres. All my respondents were courteous and helpful, and keen for others to see and know about their art. Various restrictions prevented me from visiting many others whose work equally deserves a wider audience: time (for example, lengthy security clearance procedures for highest security prisons) and resources, but also Kafkaesque obfuscation – the head of Decency and Commissioning at a London women's prison refused access because 'essentially, there is insufficient evidence to support our aim for all research/ work to directly support the women and/or the establishment.' But apart from the odd point-blank refusal, prison staff were also welcoming (though not always to my camera) and I am grateful to those relevant Heads of Learning and Skills, Education Managers and most of all, the prison art tutors without whose commitment and encouragement much of this work would not exist; particularly Tunde Akiniranye, David Collins, Matthew Cort, Ivor

Jeffers and Jackie Newell.

Thanks to its Director Tim Robertson, this book has been sponsored by the Koestler Trust, the UK's best-known prison arts charity. I am very grateful for this, as well as for the Trust's expertise, office support and access to their unrivalled archive of art by prisoners and detainees. The kudos associated with their name and awards scheme across the criminal justice system has helped open doors. Thanks too to the Anne Peaker Centre, the national umbrella association supporting arts in criminal justice, who helped promote my research.

Particular thanks to the Arts Council of England (and my monitoring officer Sabine Unamun) who provided generous support for my research, in the belief that this art and its artists deserves a much wider audience.

Linda Lambert, my Editor at A & C Black, encouraged me, becoming herself a passionate advocate for prison art and artists. Finally, personal thanks for the support and enthusiasm of friends, particularly Jonathan Bloom, Sarah Butterworth, Kim Evans, Simon Henson, Matt Hilton, Lily Pizzichini, Dean Stalham and Robert Young. Most of all to my wife Susan, also selfishly writing books...



# Foreword

## by Grayson Perry

What I see when I look at the artwork of prisoners is a glimpse of the core spirit of art. What I see is the basic human desire to make something tangible out of thoughts and feelings. This spirit resides at the centre of my practice as an artist and at the centre of every art practice professional and amateur. What is particular about the work by prisoners shown and discussed in Matthew Meadows's book is that this core spirit, this well of art is somehow nearer the surface. This art is not cloaked in the intellectual fashions of high culture or swathed in hip references to art history. These works are to me, as a longtime naturalised citizen of the 'art world', a reminder of where I come from. There were points in my own youth where my life could have taken a darker turn but I chose a life in art and have never regretted it. Matthew Meadows takes us on an up-close and personal tour of the collective psyche of the inmates of British Prisons and secure hospitals. Men and women for whom art is metaphorically an escape and sometimes is literally, a life-saver.

I have long had an interest in so-called 'Outsider Art'. This is the most common term for art made away from the influence of established visual culture usually by artists who have not been to art school. In 1979 when I myself was at art college I saw the exhibition *Outsiders* at the Hayward gallery and was entranced by the work of artists such as Adolf Wolfli and Henry Darger. So when the Koestler Trust asked me to help curate its annual show in 2007, on the occasion it was staged at the Institute of Contemporary Art, I did not hesitate to become involved. Entering the Trust's headquarters outside Wormwood Scrubs and wandering round the rooms stacked floor to ceiling with thousand upon thousands of artworks submitted by prisoners is a powerful experience. What first struck me, along with the expected depictions of the brutality and boredom of prison life, were the recurring themes. Themes perhaps close to the hearts of people from sections of society that are under-represented in the visual art world. Beloved families, hometowns, landscapes are

tenderly rendered into cell wall talismans. Tigers and Eagles leap for freedom by the dozen, lascivious women lure men into trouble from all angles, coveted cars and motorcycles are worshipped in fanatical detail on every wall. I could feel immediately that this art was an unfiltered outpouring always authentic, often touching, sometimes disturbing.

We all suffer from time to time from a lack of controlling our impulses, for most of us the worst outcome is a hangover or a need to apologise in the morning. In this book are the visions, yearnings and cries of people who have not been able to deal with the deprivations and temptations life has delivered or offered to them. Lack of control may have got them into trouble in the outside world but in the world of art it is often a strong asset. Given a pen or a brush many of them find they have an ability to control a little bit of their chaotic universe. The hope is that they might take this feeling and apply it to the wider challenges of life outside.

John Carey, in his 2005 book *What Good are the Arts?*, came to the conclusion that the only demonstrable good that art does is for those who make it, particularly long-term prisoners and those suffering from depression. Though prison art is traded both inside and outside of gaol, the principle benefit of making art is not financial

gain but improved mental health. Making art is no mere distraction though it may usefully make the time pass quicker. Making art is perhaps working out who you are, what you want and how you relate to the world. To the sensitive eyes of the contemporary art lover, prison art can often seem mawkish, earnest and kitsch. I see these qualities as evidence that making art is a great help to these people. They are expressing heartfelt messages unselfconsciously to the world, to their fellow prisoners and perhaps most importantly of all to themselves. In putting something non-verbal on paper we often find out and reflect on what is happening, literally beyond words, in our heads.

What I hope this timely and fascinating book does is to take the reader beyond the lurid interest in art by society's outcasts, to discovering the hugely positive role art plays in prison life and the great work done by dedicated facilitators within Britain's gaols. I also hope they join me in celebrating some of the individual talents such as Clyde Thomas, Sebastian Wilbur or David Chartens, artists who surely deserve a wider audience. This is an important book for it puts forward a powerful case for a more compassionate prison system without passing judgement; it just says look, these people have made mistakes but they have made beautiful art as well.



Wolfie's cell.



# Introduction

*I'm an artist, and it's a passion which burns with me to the point that it hurts. I am self-taught through books and many a long night and a short pencil.*

This intense and melodramatic sentence is spoken by an inmate at HMP Wealstun. He and hundreds of other inmates in penal institutions across the UK have made art from troubled lives and imprisonment.

This book describes some of the ways in which art is being made now in custodial settings across the UK. In 2009 there were 90,000 men and women in custody, on remand, sentenced or detained, including 3,000 young people. They are held in 139 prisons, as well as many other kinds of 'closed' establishments: young offenders institutions, immigration retrieval centres, high security special hospitals and other secure mental health units. Why is there a growing audience for art made by men and women who became artists whilst imprisoned, and why are we interested in their work? Perhaps the risk taking and rule breaking which put some of them inside find expression in their art, and we respond to its conviction, originality and often compelling

content. These are also creative qualities associated with some of today's most innovative contemporary artists, and many of these find an affinity with this work. Some, like Jeremy Deller, have sought to challenge barriers of artistic inclusion by placing work like prison art into a wider, more popular context accessible to both the gallery-going and general public. But as well as the professional artistic community and its audience, the artwork in this book and the circumstances of its production will be of interest to those working in the criminal justice system, offenders and their families.

In the USA prison art has established a market for itself, served by galleries and websites, and prisoners not uncommonly sell work directly to collectors from their cells.<sup>1</sup> If not in the mainstream of contemporary art, it has found a natural place amongst the sub-genres of American folk and outsider art. Aficionados of untutored art forms in Europe have also provided a platform for 'insider art', and plans are afoot in Holland to establish a permanent collection of European prison art in a disused prison building.<sup>2</sup>

## Insider Art

In the UK, the widening audience for prison art is largely due to the work of prison arts charities, primarily The Koestler Trust, the biggest of these. The Trust was founded in 1962 by the writer and thinker Arthur Koestler, who had himself been imprisoned three times: by Franco's forces during the Spanish Civil War, subsequently by the French at the Le Vernet Detention Camp, and when he finally came to England as a refugee he was detained once more in HMP Pentonville as a foreign national. Recognising its transformative virtue, Arthur Koestler set out to reward creative achievement by inmates with cash prizes, and from its inception the Trust has organised an Awards scheme for art by prisoners held in UK penal institutions', as well as exhibiting and selling their work. Its scope has expanded steadily, and it now receives work from over 6,000 entrants covering 49 different art forms each year. Offenders supervised by the Probation Service as well as UK citizens imprisoned abroad are also eligible for entry, as are recently released ex-prisoners. The Award scheme enjoys considerable prestige amongst entering institutions, who take pride in successful entries, and entrants themselves provide numerous testimonials describing the sense of recognition and achievement a Koestler Award has given them. The Trust gives 10% of all sales to Victim Support, the UK charity which helps people affected by crime.

And what do victims of crime think of prison art? According to Kelly Flyn of Victim Support responses vary considerably:

*Victims' views are extremely diverse and range from lifelong anger to total disinterest and feelings are likely to change over time. Therefore it's just not possible to be able to say what victims might or might not think of prisoners' art – there would be those who'd think it outrageous that prisons provide art courses, those who have no view one way or another, and those who'd say it's a good idea.*

Accordingly Kelly Flyn suggests that victims' feelings about prison art reflect society's varying attitudes (and changing government policies) concerning the purpose of imprisonment, ranging from rehabilitation to punishment, and some, both victims of crime and public at large, will remain unhappy that prisoners should benefit from imprisonment by exhibiting and selling their artwork. Should any serving inmate be seen to profit or benefit from art made inside? The premise of this book is simply that the quality of the artwork demonstrates the value of the artists' creativity, irrespective of the crimes they have committed.

But for many there are crimes which place the artists who committed them beyond reparation. Early in 2009 the maker of a popular and previously anonymous piece of prison art which had recently been exhibited in London<sup>3</sup> was unmasked as both child murderer and sex-offender, serving a life sentence. Shortly afterwards an appeal lodged on his behalf succeeded in reducing his original sentence – a minimum of 30 years – by two years, and his creative activities were used in evidence of his

rehabilitation. The families of his victims were outraged by this and were further upset that a percentage of the artwork's sale price had gone to the artist. The Royal Festival Hall issued an apology to the families for the distress caused, removing the work from display. Many supported this action (including some arts journalists in liberal broadsheets), and the journalist who had 'outed' him has declared his intention to continue to identify other sex offenders exhibiting anonymous artwork.

Today sex offenders, particularly paedophiles, are seen as monsters and treated as pariahs. In the UK – as in most countries – these crimes mark a moral boundary, and nowhere is this more sharply observed than in prison, where traditional hostility to 'nonces' is well known. Roughly 10% of the total prison population, sex offenders are sometimes integrated with other prisoners but mostly isolated in sex offenders' prisons, Vulnerable Prisoners' Units, or high security special hospitals.<sup>4</sup>

Several of the artists discovered and published by early 20<sup>th</sup> century psychiatrist and art historian Hans Prinzhorn were sex offenders, detained indefinitely in Swiss mental asylums: a number of these now have blue-chip status in the art market.<sup>5</sup> Unlike artists from a similar background today, the nature of the crimes which got them locked up continues to draw little comment, and appears to give no offence.

Art by inmates imprisoned for murder also attracts less comment or notoriety in the UK: the moral outrage required to fuel a crusade to expose

'lifer' artists seems absent, both from victims, press and general public, and their artwork is regularly exhibited in general exhibitions of prison art, albeit anonymously. In America 'Serial Killer Art', part of the wider phenomenon of 'Murderabilia', has attracted an art market with exhibitions, auctions and collectors, many of whom acquire work directly from prisoners. Controversial exhibitions have drawn protest, notably about the inclusion of artwork by serial killer Arthur Shawcross in a state-sponsored exhibition in 2001. The sensational character of Murderabilia has led several American states to ban the direct sale of artwork and other artefacts by inmates.<sup>6</sup>

Nearly all of the artists interviewed and featured in this book have chosen to be identified by their real names. Some chose pseudonyms, one or two wanted to remain completely anonymous. With some exceptions – the graffiti artists for example – their crimes aren't identified, though when the length of some sentence tariffs has been stated this suggests the nature of their crime, as can the identity of the establishment, and these have mostly been named. Artists and their work presented here come from the full extent of the 'offending spectrum' and a wide range of establishments across the UK's criminal justice system.

Prisoners make art in many forms. Some of these are illustrated here, the work of artists I visited in prisons and other 'closed' settings in the UK. They responded to appeals placed in prison newspapers and magazines, and I went to interview them and document their work. This

## Insider Art

was not always possible: some of my correspondents were unexpectedly transferred, others were released, and I was unable to visit any of those who had written to me from high security 'Category A' prisons. But I have included ceramic work by some of the detainees held in these prisons under anti-terrorist legislation, thanks to the efforts of those who have represented them and exhibited their artwork, notably the solicitor Gareth Pierce and human rights organisations such as Cageprisoners.

I have also drawn on my own experiences of the criminal justice system, both as an artist working in prisons for arts trusts and community arts organisations, and as an art tutor teaching in prison art education departments. In addition I have had access to the archives of the Koestler Trust, who have generously made these available to me, as well as providing advice and expertise.

Whatever the scale of their creative ambitions and the varying circumstances of its production, for all these prisoners art has been a vital and nurturing resource. How and where do they make it? There are prisoners who have discovered creative vocations and have come to think of themselves as artists, but are less interested in qualifications and prefer to work in their cells, away from an art class in the Education Department. They get sufficient approval and acknowledgment of their creativity from family, other prisoners as well as officers on their wing or landing, and sometimes a regular income from portraits. In fact, within their

prison community they might seem to have more respect, recognition and prestige than many *bona fide* artists outside. However wider access to art education has certainly impacted on the production of cell-based art and is probably linked to a reduction in the number of approved postal suppliers favoured by prisoners for personal art or craftwork. Health and Safety directives as well as security issues have also affected materials previously permitted in cells such as oil paints, although these circumstances can vary greatly depending on the establishment. Art materials will be regarded very differently in a local prison with a high turnover of short-stay inmates on remand than in a category 'C' training prison.

Although its redemptive and rehabilitative benefits might seem self-evident, the evidence presented here suggests a complex and ambivalent picture of creative activity in the British criminal justice system. Those working in prisons such as managerial staff, art tutors and officers provide anecdotal evidence that inmates participate more effectively with sentence plans, behave less aggressively, improve self-esteem, develop their communication skills. Research both in the UK and USA supports this, and further evidence suggests recidivism rates being reduced.

And despite the challenges faced by artists, art education departments and arts organisations working in the UK's criminal justice system, few countries can match its diverse range of arts provision.

### NOTES

- 1 Much of this work is produced in prison cells, rather than prison art classes: Phyllis Kornfeld in her book *Cellblock Visions* (Harvard, 1997) describes the era before the recent Bush presidencies as a golden time for prison art, lamenting the subsequent closing down of many educational and cultural facilities across American penitentiaries as a result of conservative policies on crime and punishment.
- 2 This initiative comes from a group of Dutch artists/prison art teachers. See [www.artinprisons.nl](http://www.artinprisons.nl).
- 3 The Koestler Trust's 2008 annual Awards exhibition, held at the Royal Festival Hall, London. It was returned to the Koestler Trust and resold elsewhere.
- 4 It has been suggested that because of the growth of internet-related sex offences these could form the largest single category of custodial sentences by 2020.
- 5 This subject is explored further in the 'Outsider Art' chapter later in the book.
- 6 Although the Home Office prohibits convicted inmates in closed establishments in England and Wales from running a business or receiving financial profit from any activity, an exception is made for the sales of artwork through the Koestler and Burnbake prison arts trusts. This doesn't include successful entrants in the Scottish prison estate who can receive their Awards but not their percentage of cash sales. The prisons get to keep the money.

