

ART AT HMP GRENDON SHOWCASE

Text by 'B' (C wing community) who curated this exhibition

The work we are exhibiting here represents a multitude of talent, ranging from beginners to experienced artists, including a vast range of techniques learned and developed in the Marie-Louise von Motesiczky Studio at HMP Grendon.

The theme of this exhibition is personal growth. Although the actual artwork itself, in some cases, might not represent the particulars of the theme, it most certainly showcases the vulnerability the men have expressed in the act of sharing work – many for the first time – with the wider world.

Having spent the vast majority of my life as a recidivistic, destructive and chaotic individual, I've first-hand knowledge of the constructive process creativity can offer. As a learning tool nothing else comes close to teaching us the benefits and value of adding, rather than subtracting, from society. For those of us who have felt the acute coldness of isolation and ostracisation, being offered the opportunity to share our individual and collective voices is the very essence of rehabilitation. Allowing us to share our truth, pain and angst through our artwork helps to facilitate the transition into becoming better neighbours and more productive members of society.

Having the opportunity of spending a few hours a week removed from the tedium of our regular institutional regime is a very welcome break indeed. But it pales in comparison when measured against the potential of utilising a fully equipped art studio.

With the therapeutic value of the arts becoming a distant memory in the British penal system, our project at Grendon really is something to write home about. The project is funded by the Marie-Louise von Motesiczky Charitable Trust and facilitated by Ikon who are currently showcasing their second artist residency with the third due to commence in 2024. We not only have the professional guidance in learning how to build a body of work but the materials and equipment with which to do so.

You'll notice I referred to this being 'our' project. Over the last 4-5 years I've never once felt excluded. Our Artist in Residence Dean Kelland and Producer James Latunji-Cockbill have involved us at every turn of the page. Be it representatives of our individual wings, ordering materials, or putting together exhibitions, events and meeting members of the public who visit the prison. Even being afforded the opportunity in taking the lead in what we exhibit or which project we will embark on next.

For men who are used to being told what to do and when to do it this is something quite novel. It is the norm for things to happen to us in the prison system, never with us.

I could list all the skills our professionals have taught us over the years – the techniques and methods, the multitude of approaches and directions they've encouraged us to try. I can even testify to how much I've been influenced by watching and working alongside Dean over the years and the impact it's had upon my own work. Again, these things do not compare to what has been instilled by way of responsibility, commitment, discipline, accountability, productivity and so much more.

It's often noted in the tabloid press that prisons should be tougher. Well, speaking as one who has been there (beaten, brutalised, segregated and banged up in cells 23 hours a day until you become stir-crazy), how do you imagine that particular take on rehabilitation pans out? Would you like to have me living next door to you after 10, 20 or even 30 years of that brutality? I doubt it.

Projects like this, where I've learned the benefits of being part of something bigger than the individual, taking responsibility and being encouraged to be the best version of ourselves go a long way in challenging a man's core beliefs. Working alongside these professionals has instilled a sense of self-worth I have never previously known within my years of incarceration. No longer the feral individual you wouldn't want as a neighbour, I am now a man with hope in my future.

Text by 'A' (D wing community)

Husk

Acrylic on canvas, portrait of a bearded figure. The head is attached to a clenched fist making the shape of a bullet.

Those who knew me best have only my masks to eulogise. Have they protected me from the world, or the world from me? Were they a suit of armour, holding in what was precious and standing firm against the storm, or a coffin within which I rotted as life outside blossomed? Did my light shine through, or did my darkness leak out? Have I, at last, become a truer expression of my inner being? No matter. There is no one left behind the mask.

Text by 'B' (C wing community)

Blue Boy One

The years I spent in therapy invoked many nights of internal angst. It became my practice to keep a pencil near to hand, and even whilst in bed I needed only to reach out in order to either write or sketch out an idea. This particular piece began life as an ink drawing titled *It's an Inside Job*. Alongside the work our Artist in Residence was doing in relation to masks and toxic masculinity, I was thinking about how much of my life consisted of avoiding what lies beneath the multitude of masks I have felt the need to wear. Am I brave enough to not only scrutinise but to actually share with the wider world the scared little boy who has spent a lifetime incarcerated? Even as I look upon the image whilst writing this I feel a host of emotions, ranging from sadness and shame to anger and resentment. The difference today is that I'm no longer beholden to the core belief that I should not feel this way and certainly must not let anyone know I might experience emotions.

I feel what I feel and that's ok with me. Embracing vulnerability has given me a new-found strength in both my life and my artwork

Text by 'S' (D wing community)

Deconstruction and Reconstruction

This is a handmade canvas, created using an upcycled frame with a prison bed sheet stretched over it. I love using what I have around me to express myself. The deconstruction and reconstruction of what is exhibited in my painting, directly links into my own experience of therapy in a prison environment. To tear apart my very own self and let people into every space, has been one of the toughest things I've ever done. The magic that happens in the reconstruction process is a completely unique experience, and one which I consider to be a privilege. Bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people. Wherever we find ourselves in life, if we are true to ourselves, then personal growth should always be in the forefront of our lives.

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Ikon would like to thank the community members at HMP Grendon who have made this showcase possible.