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Prisoner artwork exhibition sparks research

A Northumbria criminologist is researching the positive impacts that curating an exhibition of prisoner artwork can have on vulnerable young people in Gateshead.

Dr Charlotte Bilby, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, has worked with prison arts charity The Koestler Trust in a project that gives vulnerable youth the opportunity to curate a high quality exhibition of artwork at two regional venues.

Reflections – the first-ever Koestler Trust exhibition of art from prisons in the North East – is being jointly hosted at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art and The Gallery at Gateshead Central Library from October 19 until December 1.

More than 100 paintings, drawings and other artworks from prisons, secure hospitals, secure children's homes and probation services from across the region will be showcased.

Reflections has been curated by half a dozen young people, aged 14 to 15, who have all previously met challenges in their Gateshead school.

The works have been selected from over 300 entries from the North East for this year's Koestler Awards – a scheme which has been run for over 50 years by the UK's best known prison arts charity to promote artistic achievement in the criminal justice system and secure sectors.

Dr Bilby is currently researching the impact that curating the event has had on the vulnerable young people involved in the task. She said: "It's been a positive experience for them, and one that's given them some useful skills that they can use in other parts of their lives.

"There is not a great deal of research on the impact of arts activities in criminal justice systems, but what there is shows that taking part in something creative can have a positive impact on a person. It can reduce their levels of aggression and can help them maintain contact with family and friends outside the prison walls. Having strong family bonds is one of the indicators for a reduction in reoffending after release from prison.

"The criminal justice agencies in the North East have a long history of providing creative activities for prisoners and offenders to take part in. Having a regional exhibition at BALTIC and Gateshead Central library is testament to the positive work that goes on in the North East."

Gateshead Head Teacher, Steve Siddell, said: "The young people really enjoyed being part of this and have gained so much. The whole project exceeded my expectations. These young people have all had some difficulties in the past and working with artists and helping decide what went in the exhibition has helped build their self-esteem and confidence.

“The children knew they were part of something important, one even said it was the best experience of their life. They were a little daunted at first but it’s had a huge effect on them, and they all ended up a walking a little taller.”

Each year the Koestler Trust holds exhibitions across the UK. The annual Koestler Awards provide inmates with positive goals to strive towards, the chance to develop talents and acquire new skills, encourage involvement with the arts and education and provide an outlet for creative energy.

Tim Robertson, Koestler Trust Chief Executive, said: “We are extremely pleased to be holding our first ever exhibition in the North East, and it’s great that it is being hosted by two such prestigious venues.

“Each year our awards attract many entries from the North East of England and Reflections will be a chance for people from the area to see some of the high quality art, craft and creative writing being produced within the region’s prison and secure systems.”

The paintings and drawings in the exhibition cover a wide range of subject matter. Works will include entries from HM Prison Durham , HM Prison Northumberland at Morpeth, HM Prison Frankland in County Durham, HM Prison and Young Offender Institution Low Newton (women) near Durham, Northgate Hospital in Morpeth, and St Nicholas Hospital in Gosforth.

Ilaria Longhi, BALTIC Community Programmer, said: ‘This has been a fantastic opportunity to work with young curators. The group were extremely creative, enthusiastic and eager to work with BALTIC artists and curators, curators from the Koestler Trust and Gateshead Arts Team.

“The participants threw themselves into learning new skills and the end result is a credit to their hard work.”

Councillor Angela Douglas, Gateshead Council’s Cabinet member for Children and Young People, added: “Gateshead Council is extremely pleased to be working with BALTIC and the Koestler Trust to bring such a high profile exhibition to Gateshead. This has clearly been a tremendous opportunity for our young people, too, and I’m sure that the experience is one that will not only greatly benefit them but will stay with them for some time to come.”

Reflections is kindly supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Network for Social Change, with additional support from the Co-operative and the Barbour Foundation.

Reflections exhibition is open at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead Quays, from 19 October to 1 December daily between 10am-6pm except Tuesday 10,30am-6pm. For more details call 0191 478 1810 or email www.balticmill.com. The exhibition can also be seen at The Gallery, Gateshead Central Library, Prince Consort Road, Gateshead, from 19 October to 30 November on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday 9am-7pm, Wednesday 9am-5pm, Saturday 9am-1pm. Call 0191 433 8420 or email www.gateshead.gov.uk/whatson.

Entry to the exhibition is free at both venues.

A seminar linked to the exhibition, entitled Exhibiting and Celebrating Enrichment will take place on 15 November at Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art. See <http://www.koestlertrust.org.uk/index.html>

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