

Soul Journey to Truth

Mon 17 May - Sun 6 Jun 2021

Curated by Lady Unchained

In partnership with HOME and Koestler Arts as a part of The Ripples of Hope Festival 2021.

Sponsored by Timpsons.

This exhibition shines a light on the creative talent within prisons, secure settings, and people on probation in the North West.

Content Warnings: Age Guidance: 12+. Some sections of the exhibition contain strong language and references to mental illness, sexual abuse, self-harm, suicide, and drug use.

How can the arts help us when we're at our lowest point?

While there are thousands of people incarcerated in the UK, the prison system is still largely invisible to the

average member of the British public. Likewise, art by prisoners or people in secure settings can easily go unseen without charities like Koestler Arts.

Soul Journey to Truth shares fragile and powerful stories through art that would otherwise go unheard. This exhibition shines a light on the creative talent within prisons, secure settings, and people on probation in the North West.

Lady Unchained has selected over 135 visual artworks across visual art, music and writing from entries to the 2020 Koestler Awards - an annual scheme which has been running for almost 60 years. The awards, run by the UK's leading prison arts charity Koestler Arts, promotes artistic achievement in the criminal justice system and secure sectors.

You do not have to have experience or knowledge of the criminal justice system to appreciate this exhibition. We invite you to come with an open mind and to reassess your perceptions of people who have spent time inside.

Curated in themes of A Moment of Self-reflection, Animals, Forest, Paths, Text, and a Black History Dedication, visitors can explore art that imagines hopeful futures and reflects diverse voices.

Soul Journey to Truth takes its title from the word Sojourner, meaning a person who resides temporarily in a place. It is also inspired by Sojourner Truth (b.1797 – 1883), a Black American abolitionist and women's rights activist who was born into slavery in New York and escaped to freedom 1826.

Visitors are welcome to listen to the *Soul Journey to Truth* playlist, accessible online. This exhibition soundtrack places specific emphasis upon the voices of women within the criminal justice system. [Click here to listen.](#)

Lady Unchained (Brenda Birungi) is the Founder and Creative Director of Unchained Poetry, an artistic platform for artists with lived experience of the criminal

justice system based in London. Her mission is to prove that there is life after prison and challenge the ex-offender label through creativity. She is also an acclaimed poet, performer, mentor, and artist manager.

For more information about Lady Unchained and Unchained Poetry click [here](#).

Koestler Arts

For almost 60 years, Koestler Arts, formerly Koestler Trust, has played a unique role in motivating people in the criminal justice system to use creativity and art to change their lives.

Through their annual awards and exhibitions, mentoring, employment and family engagement projects, Koestler Arts harnesses the transformative power of the arts. This gives individuals the chance to learn the skills and gain the confidence to live creative, positive, and productive lives.

For more information about Koestler Arts please click [here](#).

Ripples of Hope Festival

Ripples of Hope Festival celebrates the power of people to make human rights a reality for all. Launched in May 2021 with this exhibition, the festival takes place on 15-19 September 2021 at HOME and with Feasts of Hope in Greater Manchester. It is presented by Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights.

For more information about The Ripples of Hope Festival please click [here](#).

Exhibition sponsor: Timpsons

With support from: Paul Hamlyn Foundation, HM Prison & Probation Service, and Arts Council England.

The gallery is split into 6 sections:

- 1** A Moment for Self-reflection
- 2** Forest
- 3** Animals
- 4** Texts
- 5** Paths
- 6** Black History Dedication

Interview with Lady Unchained (Brenda Birungi) with HOME Curator, Bren O'Callaghan.

Who is Lady Unchained?

I am a poet, facilitator, mentor, broadcaster, radio host for National Prison Radio, advocate for life after prison, founder, and creative director of Unchained Poetry, which is an artistic platform for artists with lived experience of the criminal justice system.

All the things that I am, have come out of my being sentenced to two and a half years in prison at the age of 21, and realising that anybody can go to jail, regardless of if you've got an education or not. If you've planned for your future, if you've done everything to avoid prison, you can still end up in prison.

During my last arrest, I was in a police station, upset. There was a group of boys there, younger than me, and I remember thinking, "I wish I could help you, but how can I when I'm in a cell with you?" I think that was the wake-up call. Everybody I was seeing coming through the system was getting younger. I thought, I can't advise them while I'm in a cell with them - I have to advise them when I'm in a different position.

I became all these things to just make sure that other people from my background can see that they can build and be successful in whatever it is that they choose to do, especially if it's something through the creative arts.

What were your thoughts when Koestler Arts approached you with the suggestion that you curate an exhibition for HOME?

I'm not going to lie. I got emotional. People go to school, qualify and study for this role, and my experience comes from being in the darkest place that would have prevented me from ever feeling like I can do jobs like this.

I'm really honoured because everything I do, even when applying for jobs, I would always give 110%. Because if I go into a job, I have to declare that I have a conviction. I don't want somebody coming after me with a criminal conviction, going for the same job, and they're like, "Oh, well Brenda was here, and she was rubbish." I want them to say, "Well, we had Brenda, and Brenda was amazing, so yeah, we'll try you out, but you've got high standards to live up to."

Even now it still feels like I'm dreaming. Until I see it in the space, and it all happens, I won't believe it, and I probably will cry (laughs).

What do you want visitors to experience as they encounter the different categories within the exhibition – from A Moment for Self-reflection to Forest, Animals, Paths and Black History Dedication?

I want to tell the story of what it takes to be creative in prison, in a facility where your freedom has been taken away. What it takes to be artistic in those places. I had to show everything. You can see the pain, the reflection, that somebody in jail goes through to put this piece of artwork out.

Every single piece of artwork, if I could have put it in there, I would have. Because I've been to jail and I know how much it takes to put your name on. I know that this is a piece of your heart that you've given to some random person who doesn't even know you. I had to approach it like creating a piece of poetry. What

parts go together? What parts flow really well together and tell the story I need it to tell?

Tell us more about the Black History Dedication section.

When we started thinking about themes, I definitely wanted to do something dedicated to Black people. Black History Month is like saying that we're only allowed as Black people one month to celebrate ourselves. So, let's call it 'Black History Dedication', because I am Black every single day.

I figured that if I didn't have Black History Dedication in talking about the prison or criminal justice system, I'd be lying, because the prison system is made up of so many Black people. I think for me when I was in jail, there were a lot of people I looked up to, like Maya Angelou and Nelson Mandela. Maybe there's somebody in jail that is still confused, and they just need to be reminded of the Black people that have overcome some of these things.

Is there any particular work in the show that resonates strongly with your own experience?

Before I went to jail, I only saw myself as the Black British girl. Everybody knew I was African, I knew I was African, but I wouldn't really talk about Africa. I wouldn't explore that. When I went to prison, I was forced to embrace my African roots because I was threatened with deportation.

There is a picture in the exhibition that shows a woman holding her baby on her back with a wrap, which for me used to represent poverty. But in this image the woman looks happy, her clothes are not torn, the baby is secure. It got to me, because when I used to see images like that, it brought up my younger side, when I would stick my nose up and look down at stuff like Comic Relief.

I would think, why do they do that? Why don't they hold their baby properly? So, I really wanted that image, because I thought what if there's a little Black

girl that's growing up, and the only things that she's seen about Africa is the negative side? That picture, from the moment I saw it, I wanted it in the show. It's for me.

Speaking from personal experience and your knowledge of others, what it is that creative expression can achieve that studying maths or English or another qualification doesn't bring, or nourish?

When it comes to talking about criminal justice, my criminal conviction, or my time in prison, I don't know if I will be able to just tell my story normally. With poetry I had the power to explore all my emotions before I even performed for others. Whereas usually you don't get that opportunity. If you're asked a question and you answer straight away, you don't get the option to think it through.

With creative writing or drawing, you can explore things that your mouth or your mind might not have the words to say.

Art, poetry and creativity gives you an outlet that you didn't know you needed until you start doing it. You're healing yourself, without even knowing it. I think it's so important to have this in places like prisons and exclusion centres. Places where young people are there because of some form of abuse that they will never express. I've found from Prison Radio and my show Free Flow, I've had young people write in sharing things that, had they shared a few years ago, maybe they wouldn't be in jail. But now they're sharing it with me, on a radio show, because it's the only way that they can express it, because they're now being told that they're allowed to express it.

Let's try and help people be able to express these feelings and explore these emotions before a conviction, or being sectioned, so that they can try and understand why they feel the way they feel. I wish I'd known all of this before jail, but luckily, I know it now, I can just pass it on.

How might a visitor to the gallery at HOME be a better ally for artists in the show?

I want to open people's eyes to prisons, but also the people in prison.

I need people to understand that there are people just like me and them in jail. We are all one step away from a prison sentence, one step. You can make a mistake tomorrow that can end up with you in jail. You might have not planned to make that mistake. You might have just trusted the wrong person.

I need them to understand that people behind bars are human, they have a soul, they have a beating heart. They have guilt. A lot of people are in jail because they trusted the wrong person, or went through something, say for example, a form of abuse that went unreported. Yet when they're in front of a judge, they're not going to bring that up and say, "Oh, by the way, I was abused at this age, and then from then I started using drugs."

To read the full interview please click [here](#)

COMING SOON

Poet Slash Artist

Fri 2 Jul – Mon 30 Aug 2021

FREE – booking required

Commissioned and produced by Manchester International Festival and HOME. Curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist & Lemn Sissay.

From gallery walls to city streets, poets and visual artists connect words and images in this multifaceted group show.

Poet Slash Artist is an exploration of poets who work with visual art and visual artists who work with poetry. Throughout the history of art and literature today there

are more words and images passing between us than ever.

Poet Slash Artist is an expansive exhibition of cultures, continents, languages, and generations, blurring the lines of received opinion. The streets of Manchester will become the art gallery featuring specially commissioned new work (check back in June for locations and a map) and the heart of the exhibition will be at HOME because home is where the art is.

There'll also be a day of spoken word and music at Homeground, HOME's summer-long open-air stage, and a film season at HOME featuring artists whose work overlaps the worlds of poetry and visual art. Details of both will be announced in the coming weeks.

To find out more about Poet Slash Artist, please click [here](#).