

My Koestler Story: John

From a Young Offender Institution to the Venice Biennale

“Art’s the closest thing to magic for me. I really like how it can heal and how it can make me feel, because I’m not happy if I’m not making art.”

I first came across Koestler Arts ten years ago while awaiting sentencing in Feltham Young Offender Institution.

I got into art through graffiti. I always loved art but no-one in my family is artistic at all, and growing up it was kind of alien. You could paint graffiti though, that was acceptable.

When I first went to prison I was angry and messed up. I did a bit of art therapy and found that helped. I remember being in my cell the first time I wrote something like an actual poem. It was for my sanity, and it was a list of things that should and shouldn’t be happening. Like, ‘you shouldn’t be awaiting sentencing, you shouldn’t be banged up for 23 hours a day, you shouldn’t be in Costa del Feltham. You should be in your Central St Martins studio, you should be making artwork, you should be on your way to success’.

I signed and dated it and then, five years later, when I was in my Central St Martins’ studio, I found that letter and there I was!

The Koestler Awards helped me kickstart that journey. I submitted a poem and won a Commended Award. Having someone outside redeem your talents is crucial for artistic growth in such hopeless conditions.

I was encouraged to apply to a fine art course at Kensington & Chelsea College. The prison gave me leave to go to the interview, and once accepted I went each day to college and returned each evening to my prison cell. My final piece was an installation which included all the letters I’d written to my mum while inside.

After release I was accepted onto the Koestler Arts mentoring scheme, and paired with an inspirational character who convinced me that galleries WERE for me.

I started my BA at Central St Martins a few months after I got out of jail. It was quite an experience having just spent three years in an environment all about oppression, to now be in one all about expression.

I smashed my degree show and the very next day I got the phone call from Koestler Arts saying I’d got a job there as an arts worker, and then they said, ‘and do you want to come to the Venice Biennale with Jeremy Deller?’ Jeremy Deller was my favourite artist, he still is. I thought someone was pulling a really cruel joke on me but it turns out they weren’t!



The artwork I was privileged to see was constantly surprising, with feedback key to the process. When I looked at the art I wouldn't see an image, I would see healing through art. Something I'm still doing today.

It helps people address root issues and uncover the archaeology of their past behaviours that got them in to trouble. We all know this.

Koestler Arts has had such a profound effect on my life, and to look at the journey from prison cell to now has helped me realise just how much you can achieve with care and guidance.