



Koestler Associates Newsletter - January 2024

Happy New Year!

Hello and Happy New Year from all of us at Koestler Arts. In this Associates newsletter we're sharing the information and paperwork you'll need to enter the 2024 Koestler Awards, and some inspiration for your creative work this year.

2024 Koestler Awards

As a Koestler Associate, we hope you'll be excited to enter our Awards this year and to encourage others to do so. Thank you so much for helping us spread the word about our work, we really appreciate your continued support, and can't wait to start receiving your entries in the coming months!

If those you encourage to enter would like to become Associates too, they can tick the relevant box on their entry form and will be added to our mailing list.

Entrants can send visual artwork, writing and music to us from now until the deadline on **Friday 12 April 2024**. It is important that every entry is sent with a completed entry form that has been signed by a member of establishment or probation staff.

Enclosed with this newsletter are:

- **Guidance notes** explaining the terms and conditions of entering the Awards: what you can enter, how to enter, our artform categories, and the Awards cycle timeline.
- **Entry forms:** Each entrant can enter up to five pieces of work, in any of our artform categories. If you don't want to enter five pieces, you can always pass some of these forms on to someone else to use.
- **Poster:** We would be really grateful if you could help us to promote this year's Awards by displaying this on your wing, in your education department, or at your probation office, and telling someone who doesn't know about Koestler how to get involved.

These materials are also being sent to education departments and libraries in establishments, so you can suggest to others who are interested in entering to get entry forms from there, or to write to us to be sent them directly.

Reminder

Please note that to remain an Associate you must enter the 2024 Koestler Awards. If for any reason you are unable to enter, or don't wish to this year, but would like to remain an Associate, please write to us and let us know by the end of 2024. Please also let us know changes to your address or contact details, so we can ensure future newsletters, certificates, feedback, Awards and sales money, and returned artwork reach you!

For this or any other queries, you can always:

- write to us for free at: FREEPOST Koestler Arts
- email: info@koestlerarts.org.uk
- call: 020 8740 0333

Taking a Shot, HM Young Offender Institution Feltham, Prometheus Bronze Award for Portrait, 2023



Judges' Tips

We invite different arts professionals to judge the Koestler Awards each year, and in total nearly 100 people judge the 52 artform categories. We also invite different individuals or groups to curate each of our exhibitions. There is therefore no specific formula when it comes to winning Koestler Awards or having work selected for display - different things stand out to each judge and curator.

When we asked our 2023 judges and curators what made them choose works to Award or for display, we did find common themes, and wanted to share these with you as things to consider when making or selecting your entries for the 2024 Koestler Awards.

1. Technical skill is not the only or most important thing: Don't be put off from entering a piece because you don't think it's perfect or think others will display more technical skill. Concept, personality, humour, striking use of colour or phrase can all make a piece stand out, and entrants often tell us they are surprised by which of their works receive Awards!



My Broken Arm (Painted With My Broken Arm!), HM Young Offender Institution Feltham, Arts Society Chiswick Platinum Award for Painting, 2019

'Some things technically might not be perfect, coming from a fine art perspective, but they're perfect in concept and force.'
- Joelle Taylor, *IN CASE OF EMERGENCY* exhibition curator

'Sometimes it doesn't really matter if the standard of painting is really expert. We're looking for a sort of ingredient that you can't name that is there in every single painting we have chosen.'
- Jenny Eclair, Painting judge

'Don't think that the judges only look at the very technical artworks because that is just a small part of what we were looking for.'

- Gary Mansfield, Themed Category judge

'Your writing doesn't have to be perfect. You just need to write and believe in the words you have written.'

- Chelsea McDonagh, Non-Fiction, Blog, Essay, Article and Review judge



Nearly Went in the Bin, HM Prison Lewes, First-Time Entrant Award for Painting, 2020

2. Use your individual voice: Judges across all categories agree that works with a unique, authentic voice or perspective stand out. Make work that is true to you, that you enjoy making and care about, rather than trying to emulate anyone else.

‘Really work on trying to sound like yourself and no one else. If it feels like a familiar cliché, avoid it and invent something new.’

- Rishi Dastidar, Anthology judge

‘Try not to just emulate things you’ve seen. Bring something personal to the process of creating your work.’

- Robert Taylor, Photography judge



Together and Diverse the Better, HM Prison Full Sutton, Unilink Gold Award for Mixed Media, 2021

light blue sky, warmth of sun
 cold beer, the clink of ice in mum’s spiced rum
 barbeque smoke mixing with skunk
 tapping of feet to *Fools Gold Funk*
 children laugh splashing without a care
 daisies and bluebells in their hair

 but no-one mentions that empty chair

‘Write what you feel most passionately about and write in your own voice.’

- Paul Coomey, Flash Fiction and Short Story judge

Empty Chair, HM Prison Shotts, Silver Award for Poem, 2016

‘Be as unique as possible and try and create works that are personal to you. Even a portrait of an unknown figure is interesting and stands out maybe more than a celebrity.’

- Alayo Akinkugbe, Portrait judge



Self Portrait, Vinney Green Secure Children’s Home, Charlotte McNally Silver Award for Portrait, 2019

‘This competition is about getting something down that says something about you, it’s about the individual. This year the judges chose lots of very different artworks for prizes, the one thing they all had in common was their individuality.’

- Jenny Eclair, Painting judge

3. Titles: Unusual, witty or surprising titles can bolster or transform the meaning of a piece of artwork and make it really memorable.

‘Think about the title of your work, it is a bridge between you and the viewer and can help tell your story.’

- Gary Mansfield, Themed Category judge



To Hull and Back, The Humber Centre for Forensic Psychiatry, Painting, 2023



A Little Bit of Personal Space, HM Prison Isle of Wight (Albany), Painting, 2022



Cold Tomato Soup, HM Prison Woodhill, Bronze Award for Portrait, 2022

4. Think outside the box: Especially in categories that receive high numbers of entries, unusual works often stand out - try using different materials or techniques, or approaching a subject from a new perspective or scale. Judges know access to arts materials can be very limited and are always impressed by ingenuity and resourcefulness.

‘Experiment just a little bit more. Try things a little bit differently, try and think outside the box.’

- Terence Lambert, Drawing judge

‘Think of a different way to interpret something that you’ve seen, something that maybe is unusual.’

- Jeremy Deller, Watercolour and Gouache judge



Captive, Worthing Probation, Platinum Award for Watercolour and Gouache, 2021



Carved Crayons, HM Prison Lewes, Sotheby’s Platinum Award for Sculpture, 2019

‘Write about what you want to write, not what you think you should write.’

- Charlotte Hamblin, Screenplay judge

Initial Impressions of a Variety of Mugshots in Four Words, HM Prison Littlehey, Eric McGraw Memorial Silver Award for Poem, 2022

Initial Impressions of a Variety of Mugshots in Four Words

Calm	pensive	and	thoughtful
Very	embarrassed	and	ashamed
Looks	like	mainly	indifference
Don't	mess	with	me
Covid	mask	under	chin
I	shouldn't	be	here
Deer	in	the	headlights
Is	that	a	smirk?
Rock	star	in	training
Feeling	sorry	for	himself
Quite	impressive	facial	hair
Laughing	his	head	off
Is	that	a	tear?

5. Supporting documents: Particularly for some of our craft and design categories, judges can find it useful to have extra information about the creative process and construction of your work. If there are details about how your piece was made that aren't apparent from looking at the finished piece or photograph of it you submit, consider sending a **separate document** with notes, photos or sketches to give judges more information. And if you use unusual materials that may not be obvious, let us know!

‘It's useful to see some photos of the construction rather than just the finished piece. Especially if there's some intricate joinery or anything like that, anything you're particularly proud of.’

- Mark Whaley, Furniture judge



‘If you want to, include sketches because it helps us to understand how you went about your work and maybe things we didn't really notice.’

- Lorna Hamilton-Brown, Needlecraft judge

‘Murals are inherently public works. Please show photos of the work in context if possible.’

- Elizabeth Ferguson, Mural and Wall Hanging judge

The Wasteful Taste of Consumerism, HM Prison Bronzefield, Clare Askew Platinum Award for Themed Category: Taste, 2022

2023 Awards Feedback

Ahead of sending out additional feedback on 2023 Koestler Awards entries in February, the Koestler Arts Centre has been busy with volunteers over the past few months. Over 9 feedback days, almost 1000 pieces of extra feedback have been written by volunteers with a range of specialist arts expertise: artists, writers, art and art history students, literature professors, prison charity workers, government employees, and graphic designers.

Here are some insights from our volunteers about why they come to write feedback for our entrants:

‘The amount of skill people have that they may not have ever done or thought of doing before being ‘inside’ is really inspiring and I feel privileged to see it’.

‘I think people in prison deserve to know that their imaginations matter beyond their own minds and interests and walls, and that other people share their interests and care about their abilities.’

‘When writing feedback for the paintings, I feel like I’m in the world the artists create. I stay for a while, observe it, and write down what I can and how I feel.’

‘I come from a very working class, high crime rate background and have witnessed firsthand how art can be an escape or pathway of hope.’

‘I would like the entrants to feel safe and valued and that their work is appreciated.’

‘I feel that it’s important that these artists continue to use art as an expression of themselves and providing positive and meaningful feedback is part of giving them the confidence to keep doing so.’



Feedback volunteers at the Koestler Arts Centre

- Feedback volunteers

Benjamin Zephaniah 1958-2023

All of us at Koestler were deeply saddened to hear of the death of poet Benjamin Zephaniah in December. Benjamin was a long-time supporter of Koestler Arts, having curated our 2016 national exhibition *We Are All Human* and written the foreword to our first poetry anthology *Koestler Voices: New Poetry from Prisons, Volume 1* in 2017.

Benjamin’s writing often directly responded to historical and current events and was heavily influenced by Jamaican music and poetry. Having experienced discrimination and spent time in prison himself, he was a passionate campaigner against racism and injustice, and for animal rights.

He was a hugely inspiring person to work alongside, full of energy and stories. We know many Koestler entrants are also admirers of his work and hope you’ll continue to be inspired by him.

‘When I got released, he sent me a letter and a kind and supportive message about my poetry, and his writing was a big influence in trying always to be clear about who you were writing for and what you were writing against.’



Benjamin at the opening of *We Are All Human*, 2016

- Former Koestler mentee

Dis Poetry

Dis poetry is like a riddim dat drops
De tongue fires a riddim dat shoots like shots
Dis poetry is designed fe rantin
Dance hall style, big mouth chanting,
Dis poetry nar put yu to sleep
Preaching follow me
Like yu is blind sheep,
Dis poetry is not Party Political
Not designed fe dose who are critical.
Dis poetry is wid me when I gu to me bed
It gets into me dreadlocks
It lingers around me head
Dis poetry goes wid me as I pedal me bike
I've tried Shakespeare, respect due dere
But dis is de stuff I like.

Dis poetry is not afraid of going ina book
Still dis poetry need ears fe hear an eyes fe hav a look
Dis poetry is Verbal Riddim, no big words involved
An if I hav a problem de riddim gets it solved,
I've tried to be more romantic, it does nu good for me
So I tek a Reggae Riddim an build me poetry,
I could try be more personal
But you've heard it all before,
Pages of written words not needed
Brain has many words in store,
Yu could call dis poetry Dub Ranting
De tongue plays a beat
De body starts skanking,
Dis poetry is quick an childish
Dis poetry is fe de wise an foolish,
Anybody can do it fe free,
Dis poetry is fe yu an me,
Don't stretch yu imagination
Dis poetry is fe de good of de Nation,
Chant,
In de morning
I chant
In de night
I chant
In de darkness
An under de spotlight,
I pass thru University
I pass thru Sociology
An den I got a dread degree
In Dreadfull Ghattology.

Dis poetry stays wid me when I run or walk
An when I am talking to meself in poetry I talk,
Dis poetry is wid me,
Below me an above,
Dis poetry's from inside me
It goes to yu
WID LUV.



Benjamin curating at the
Koestler Arts Centre, 2016

Who's Who

I used to think nurses
Were women,
I used to think police
Were men,
I used to think poets
Were boring,
Until I became one of them.

Benjamin Zephaniah



Benjamin at *We Are All Human*, 2016