

Inua Ellams, poet and playwright, curates the next Koestler Arts exhibition of art by people in criminal justice settings to open at the Southbank Centre on 31 October

This autumn, Koestler Arts, the arts charity known for its work within the criminal justice system, presents its 18th annual exhibition. Approximately 200 works have been selected by multidisciplinary artist Inua Ellams from over 7,500 sent for consideration from all over the UK and British prisoners abroad. The exhibition, alongside a programme of events, is presented in partnership with the Southbank Centre.

During curation, Ellams was struck by the many depictions of owls and what they might represent to people in these settings. 'To me, these night birds are symbolic of what it means to be behind bars, looking out, thinking and searching for clarity that often only comes at night,' he says. He hopes to challenge the public's preconception of the kind of artworks they'd expect to see from people within prisons and other secure settings by including a range of styles and themes. Humour and colour sit alongside sadness and monochromatic designs, while portraits and landscapes sit alongside figurative and abstract work.

Night Owls and Abstractions
Curated by Inua Ellams

31 October - 14 December 2025
Southbank Centre, Royal Festival Hall



Night Owl, HM Prison Lowdham Grange, Themed Category: Wings

Opening on 31 October, *Night Owls and Abstractions* is a free exhibition and will feature a selection of music, writing, fine art, craft and design by individuals in prisons, secure hospitals, young offender institutions and immigration removal centres, as well as people on community sentences and probation. The artworks on display were entered into the 2025 Koestler Awards, the only annual UK-wide arts competition for people in the UK's criminal justice system. This year, Inua Ellams has selected around 200 artworks from over 7,500 entries to be on display, highlighting the talent and creativity within secure settings.

During curation, Ellams was struck by the many depictions of owls and what they might represent to people in these settings. Ellams considered how nighttime has 'the ability to amplify the imagination' and this concept, based on the limitlessness of the imagination, is seen throughout the artworks on display.

Encouraging people to explore their own creativity in response to the exhibition was key to Ellams, who plans to work in collaboration with other organisations to fulfil this. One example is a music event, in partnership with the Irene Taylor Trust, taking place at the Southbank Centre on 30 November. It will celebrate the creation of music in secure settings, and beyond, with live performances and a Q&A. A new musical composition will be performed on the night, directly inspired by some of the artworks on display in the exhibition, bringing to life Ellams' desire for people to connect with the exhibition and be creatively inspired beyond its run.

As a poet, Ellams highlights the written word through the design of the exhibition, while also aiming to show the importance of softness in hard places, by including a variety of textile works.

Ellams hopes to challenge the public's preconception of the kind of artworks they'd expect to see from people within the criminal justice system by including a range of styles and themes - humour and colour sit alongside sadness and monochromatic designs, while portraits and landscapes sit alongside figurative and abstract work.

Ultimately, Ellams hopes that the exhibition will encourage people to stop, think and be inspired to explore the limitlessness of their own imagination.

'I hope those that come, come expecting to have their minds blown a little bit, not just by the range of artwork on show, but also the structure, the narrative journey we're building, from how you enter to how you leave,' says Ellams.

Some of the artworks on display will be available to purchase through the Koestler Arts website. There will also be opportunities for visitors to write feedback on their favourite pieces in the exhibition space, which will be sent directly to the exhibited artists. Free exhibition tours will be available for the public at set times of the day on Wednesdays, Fridays and weekends by tour guides, some of whom have personal experience of the criminal justice system and can speak about the important role creativity plays in these settings. Please see Koestler Arts' website for times and more information.

Fiona Curran, CEO of Koestler Arts, comments:

“Koestler Arts is proud to present this exhibition with Inua Ellams and the Southbank Centre. The beautifully curated exhibition is a special chance for audiences to hear voices that are rarely heard, and it will encourage thousands of people to build confidence, learn new skills, and find hope through creativity.”

Mark Ball, Artistic Director of the Southbank Centre, comments:

"I began my career in the arts working in prison and probation settings, so the annual Koestler Arts Exhibition - which shines a light on the therapeutic value of creativity for some of the most vulnerable in society - has always had a special place in my heart. I've also been a long-time fan of Inua Ellams, so we're thrilled he is curating the Koestler Arts Exhibition. Over the years he has brought his outstanding rhythm, poetry and prose to our site. As an institution that champions cultural democracy, we're proud to support organisations such as Koestler, who are committed to inspiring participation in the arts."

For more information visit:
www.koestlerarts.org.uk or @koestlerarts

Koestler Arts Press Enquiries
Lisa Baker Associates Limited
Email: lisa@lisabakerltd.com
Tel: + 44 (0)776 8310 038

INUA ELLAMS:

Inua Ellams is a Nigerian-born British poet, playwright, and performer. Known for *Barber Shop Chronicles* and *The Half-God of Rainfall*, Inua's work spans poetry, theatre, graphic art, and live events. His acclaimed works have been staged at the Edinburgh International Festival, the National Theatre, and the Royal Opera House. Most recently, he joined the *Doctor Who* writing team for the Fifteenth Doctor's second season. Ellams' work often explores identity, migration, and displacement - themes that strongly resonate with the work of Koestler Arts. In 2024, he volunteered as a Poetry judge for the Koestler Awards and took part in a prison visit with the staff team to inspire participation.

ABOUT KOESTLER ARTS:

Koestler Arts is a renowned prison arts charity known for its impactful work within the criminal justice system. The charity's vision is that the power of the arts unlocks hope, talent and potential in the lives of people in the criminal justice system.

Koestler Arts provides an annual art awards programme – the Koestler Awards – open to people in prisons, secure mental health hospitals, immigration removal centres, and more, across the whole of the UK. It also offers a post-release arts mentoring scheme, arts membership for people in prison, family engagement opportunities, and a programme of exhibitions, events and publications.

To deliver its mission, Koestler Arts works in partnership with other organisations, art world experts, and people with lived experience of the criminal justice system; past curators have included Ai Weiwei, Jeremy Deller and John Costi, Camille Walala, Antony Gormley, Benjamin Zephaniah, Speech Debelle, Sarah Lucas, Grayson Perry, the families of prisoners, victims of crime, serving female prisoners and graduates of the Koestler Arts mentoring programme.

ABOUT THE SOUTHBANK CENTRE:

The Southbank Centre is the UK's largest arts centre, occupying 11 acres along the river and its 4 venues anchor London's most vibrant cultural quarter on the South Bank of the Thames. We exist to present great cultural experiences that bring people together and we achieve this by providing the space for artists to create and present their best work and by creating a place where as many people as possible can come together to experience bold, unusual and eye-opening work. The site has an extraordinary creative and architectural history stretching back to the 1951 Festival of Britain. Southbank Centre is made up of the Royal Festival Hall, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room and Hayward Gallery as well as being home to the National Poetry Library and the Arts Council Collection. It is also home to six Resident Orchestras (Aurora Orchestra, Chineke! Orchestra, London Philharmonic Orchestra, London Sinfonietta, Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and Philharmonia Orchestra). www.southbankcentre.co.uk