

FEATURE

A Note About the Cover Art

MYVIEWOFTHEWORLDISOBSCUREDBYSTEELBARSOFINCARCERATION

Artist: Anonymous

Acrylics on card

This artist's work is the product of a process he engaged in to develop a language to express himself as a means of coping with imprisonment. Aged in his mid-fifties and serving a sentence at the Midlands Prison, he engages with education and is determined that his first experience of prison will also be his last. He has adopted an approach regarding his sentence as an "art school" rather than a "prison" experience, and his development is supported by contact with teachers and participation in art classes and exhibitions. He works in his cell, often painting on the back of discarded cereal boxes, demonstrating a resourcefulness typical of prison artists; this approach might also be interpreted as acknowledging the environment in which he functions. He had little experience of making art prior to his imprisonment, now he intends to continue painting following his release.

Despite the bleak nature of the image, the painting contributes to an understanding of the role of education and the arts in prisons. The post-modern title supports an appreciation of the work as a cathartic expression of frustration and the artist's working methods are of interest. After completing a painting he experiments with the left-over paint, exploring effects and new approaches to image making, extending his reach and growing his confidence. The work reflects something of that learning process, also the value he places on the limited materials available to him and his concern not to waste either the materials or the opportunity they represent. The human figure, and by extension the human condition, are central to his work. A distorted head, with references to steel bars and doors illuminated by yellow artificial light, is contrasted against a dark blue night sky, evoking the loneliness, isolation and confinement of the prison experience. It is the image of an everyman, representative of prisoners as a type, and the narrative communicates an extreme physical and emotional experience with graphic impact.

This artist's development is a positive outcome of the structures for education within the Irish Prison Service. In each prison, a school staffed by qualified teachers delivers second-chance education tailored to meet individual needs. The service works on a partnership model informed by the recommendations of the Council of Europe on education in prisons and prisoners engage and attend by choice. A broad curriculum is offered and workshops, part-funded by the Arts Council of Ireland, are delivered by visiting artists and writers and a programme of exhibitions brings the creative work of prisoners to a wider audience in the community. The Irish Prison Education Service is adapting to meet the challenge of addressing the educational needs of people in custody within the restrictions imposed by Covid-19.

