



In 1986, when she first entered a Sydney jail and offered her services as a mural painter, Angela Findlay felt fearless. She took it as a sign that her gut instinct about wanting to work creatively with prisoners was correct.

Twenty-five years on and Angela's is a unique and rather extraordinary story. She started out as a mural artist, a vocation she settled on despite never having even "painted a wall white".

She had always been interested in prisons, devouring books and films on the subject and even visiting jails in South America. It was while working as a stage set painter in Sydney that she pitched her idea to paint the "endless, grey, ugly walls" in the city's Long Bay Jail – with the help of its inmates. "They put me in a group with two Brazilian coke smugglers, a bank robber and a murderer," she recalls.

Angela decided to train in artistic therapy at the Tobias School of Art & Therapy in Sussex, before teaching art in a Cologne prison for the Masstab Trust. Her art therapy sessions

would begin by asking students to create a picture in four minutes, using only yellow paint. "At this stage, they think you are barking mad," she admits.

The exercise would then be repeated in blue and red paint. This gives rise to discussions about the 'characteristics' of these colours: if yellow was a person, what would they be like? She says the groups will begin to realise they are coming up with a general consensus. Angela then asks the group to paint in

A silent dialogue

Continuing our 2012 courses special, tutor **Angela Findlay** reveals how art can help prisoners learn to interact in a more positive manner

WORDS: MARTHA ALEXANDER

pairs and then later as a larger group, each person using a different colour to the other. "They begin to notice that they could mix shades of orange or green without obliterating each other's colour."

"It was a silent dialogue," she continues. "It's such a powerful exercise because you began to see who's the leader, the saboteur, the quite one – they got a real reflection of their behaviour and what impact it had."

The prisoners would also start to make their own paintings, focusing on

TOP, FROM LEFT Angela's Colour Boundaries course; mural painting at HMYOI Feltham; Angela at the Koestler Trust in 2006

BELOW Angela Findlay, *Dreamer's Chair*, mixed media with oil, 30x30cm

After six years in Germany, Angela returned to the UK, where she founded the Koestler Trust's Learning to Learn Through the Arts scheme. Today she continues to host workshops and talks, as well as focusing on her own artwork – mixed media paintings of interiors. "Prison-related work serves as a contrast to what I now do in my art," she says. "It fulfils my need to contribute to society so when I come to my own painting, I feel a freedom to explore the more obscure or lighter aspects of life." www.angelafindlay.com

"Seeing grown men with tears in their eyes, unable to believe what they had achieved – that was the reward"

self-expression rather than the finished product. "I went in hoping that I could change the world and everyone would come out smiling and never go back to crime," she says. "That was youthful idealism and very quickly I realised that there are a lot of complex issues and one little project is not going to change that. However, seeing grown men with tears in their eyes, unable to believe what they had achieved in four weeks – that was the reward."

