



How women escape from prison

A CURSORY glance at the installations of dancing girls and a gold-trimmed house in the windows of Parkway's **Novas Gallery** this month might gull the casual passer-by, but the simple, colourful structures belie a host of painful truths.

On closer inspection the golden house is in fact a prison; the dancing girl just the wistful day-dream of a female inmate detained at Her Majesty's Pleasure.

Mind, Body and Soul: Girls Behind Bars showcases the work of 70 women – either currently in prison or former inmates – illustrating the feelings provoked by their incarceration and telling the stories of their lives through writing, painting, collage and sculpture.

Few stories are more poignant than Eve McDougall's, the exhibition's curator and a contributing artist.

An alcoholic by the age of nine, Eve was imprisoned when she was 15 for hungrily breaking a bakery window to steal a cake. The cake, it turned out, was not even real, but Eve's sentence certainly was.

Due to insufficient young offenders facilities, she was remanded in an adult prison. She turned to art as a way to cope, telling guards who tried to confiscate her paints that drawing "kept her sane". When there was nothing left to draw on she turned to the walls of her cell.

Richard Seymour, curator of the Novas Gallery, said this was the first time women's work has been taken out of the prisons and shown to the public. He adds: "Eve's been a real powerhouse behind this show. How

she has been able to overcome that and change her life is an inspiration."

Eve has broken free of the criminal justice system, successfully creating and curating art

based on her experiences, but many of the exhibition's voices are still caught in the loop. "I'd love to be out there," reads one piece, "sunbathing in the park... I need to get out, this ain't what my life's about."

Another displays the regulation prison dress of an infant girl born into

incarceration. It, like the exhibition, is a quiet, unassuming gesture that asks loud questions about the plight of Britain's female prisoners.

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■ *Mind, Body and Soul: Girls Behind Bars* is at the Novas Gallery, Parkway, until November 11. 020 7267 5641



Eve McDougall's Girls Behind Bars

