

Town Island, a Pre-Show Interview with Artist Benaiah Matheson

Our Visual Arts curator Dr Janine Sykes speaks to artist Benaiah Matheson ahead of his exhibition *Town Island* arriving in Huddersfield in January 2025. Benaiah's work explores the cultural and historical connections between Carriacou, Grenada, and Huddersfield, UK.

JS: Janine Sykes

BM: Benaiah Matheson

Some parts of the transcript have been altered for clarity

[00:00]

JS: Please describe, Benaiah, the processes, stages, and places of *Town Island*? Because it is quite nomadic, isn't it?

BM: Yes, the processes themselves are quite broad. There's like, the specific processes as to how the pieces were actually put together, but then there's the contextual process and understanding and connecting with that actually, like right, so the processes here is about... I wanted to build in the materiality of the two locations.

JS: Yes.

BM: The town and the island and when I looked into that side of things it felt really vague, 'cause I was trying to figure out like, what materials are specific to Huddersfield and specific to Carriacou and Grenada and I think that's where like the idea of scent came in. So, I worked with Ezra-Lloyd Jackson who is a scent artist to create a specific scent for the space because I knew that walking into the space and the immersive aspect of experiencing the work was like experiencing the physical work is one dimension, but then what about the space and the unsaid contextual space?

JS: Yes, it's the other, sensory...

BM: Yeah, and like food and scent is very important to Carriacou people and to Grenadian people cause everything you cook with has a fragrance and a scent and it's something that maybe I am anosmic to in Huddersfield that maybe people from other places that come to Huddersfield they'll be able to pick up on scents. Whether obviously if you go out into the Dales you're going to smell the animals but there'll be scents that are connected with Huddersfield, but I didn't know what to hold on to there.

JS: Engineering oil?

BS: Yes, yeah, yeah

JS: But then that's changed.

BM: That's a contextual thing in itself. If you're going into the mills, if you're going into engineering, then you'll connect to those scents but then, on the physical side of things, I knew that cotton was going to come into play and then there was light, and then there was wool, and wool and cotton are very similar and very different in their scents. I mean wool is definitely from Yorkshire. You've got all the sheep and that's where the wool is coming from.

JS: Yes, the textile industry.

BM: But then the connection between cotton and like er, I mean just landscape of the slave trade, the Atlantic slave trade, and the connection between well Britain, Yorkshire, and the Caribbean that's a material that is synonymous with that but then there's the water in between and the Atlantic. So, there's this travelling backwards and forwards and knowing that there's like this idea that these pieces that are going to get woven together to make some sort of sail, or sails, and that's the travelling backwards and forwards.

JS: Yeah.

BM: The wool was specific because the tufted pieces of *Town Island* were made using Yorkshire wool. They were made in Halifax at 'McAndrew's Textiles', and I know that in the 50s and 60s there would have been people from Carriacou working in the mills in Halifax, in Huddersfield, literally working with the wool.

JS: Kirklees, Cleckheaton..

BM: Yeah. One of my Great Aunts used to work at 'Gannex' in Halifax. Yes. They made, like, beautiful coats and jackets for the royal family. So, really beautiful pea coats and dresses and all kinds of stuff but she was based up in Halifax, but she lived in Huddersfield.

JS: There is still some quite high-end textiles and cloth still made here isn't there? There's contracts with Burberry and Savile Row?

[05:00]

BM: Yeah. I remember there's a mill called Pegasus, and they do all the swatches for the mills in Huddersfield.

JS: Right.

BM: And I remember early on in my relationship with them they were making a series of fabrics for Dior. So Ozwald Boateng, he's a Savile Row tailor, he's been spotted in Huddersfield coming to get fabric from here and if you go to Savile Row and you want a suit, the most expensive suits are the ones that have 'Made in Huddersfield' on the fabric. If it says 'made in Huddersfield' that's the top, top tier. So, it still is that. So, it was definitely the

materials in both places and the pieces of materials that connect both places was really important so the pieces that were made in Grenada, the inks that are used over there, I used pomegranate leaf, I used sorrel, which is a very erm cultural drink.

JS: Right.

BM: So, you have the flower, the sorrel flower, and we make this really beautiful drink with the flower itself. You boil the dried flower, or the fresh flower, and it makes this deep like magenta colour and then you add sugar and spices in there and it's really nice.

JS: ...and pretty, probably?

BM: Yeah. Beautiful, but also, if you spill that on your clothes it's not coming out. It's gonna stain. So, I knew this was something that would stain and then turmeric another one that is, another root, but er spice and connection material wise. We're using a lot of food, but again if you if you spill that on your fabric, on your clothes, it's not coming out.

JS: It is going to dye it.

BM: Yeah, so I used dry turmeric, I used fresh turmeric, I used sorrel and used pomegranate leaf, ink, and then on top of that, I use acrylics, but the majority of inks used in Grenada with TAMCC college over there and their workshops that was with natural pigments and some acrylics but then when I came back to Huddersfield and did the town aspect of the works, they, I, used mainly light and cotton as a material. So, I used light in the sense that there was a special ink called cyanotype type, and that is a light sensitive, light reactive paint. So, you have to coat it in the dark. Yeah, which is interesting in-itself, if you think about the dark and the unseen and like the context of how people perceive darkness, in the positive and the negative sense, but then when it's exposed to the light, then it changes the different shades of blue. So, the blue in the works is actually a light reaction to the cyanotype type, then there were the motifs that were made out of cotton stencils that Netherhall Learning Campus, and Conscious Youth and We Infront, the walking group, and other members, yeah.

JS: Three different places around Huddersfield. That's nice because you've gone nice and smoothly into the stages as well. Am I right in saying it was first in Huddersfield?

BM: Yes. Yep.

JS: Working co-creatively....

BM: So, some of the pieces were part of a previous body of work which was exploring the idea of a flag that represented the Carriacou community in Huddersfield.

JS: Yes

BM: And some of those pieces were woven into this as well because it made sense in terms of like the context of this of being a flag and sail.

JS: It's a visual banner isn't it, a flag?

BM: Yes.

JS: There's a massive collection of banners at Tolson [Museum]

BM: Is there? Really?

JS: Textile banners. A lot of them are to do with activism, with workers in Huddersfield.

BM: Okay.

JS: Campaigning for workers' rights and conditions, but it was also in the material and textile banners. Anyway. I don't want to divert too much, but it's connected.

BM: Okay but I'm going to have to come and have a look at those! Yeah, yeah, there's many different avenues. We'll, signpost that for another time.

JS: So, we've got, that's really clear about the processes. The stages - starting in Huddersfield, then going over to Grenada...

BM: Yes

JS: and then working with the College?

[10:00]

BM: Yeah T.A. Maryshow College which is short named as TAMCC

JS: and you worked with the community there, co creatively, making them together.

BM Yes.

JS: With the materials you described and the workshops. Did you do a series of workshops there?

BM: We only did one, but it was because the group wasn't a big enough group to do more than one, and it made sense to do. Yeah, so we did a workshop there. Did an installation at the National Museum in Grenada, and then after we did the installation, we did an exhibition in Grenada as well in a different art gallery.

JS: Right. So, it's already travelled from...well *Town Island* as a whole has travelled from Huddersfield to Grenada.

BM: Yes,

JS: ...and Grenada being the mainland Carriacou, Grenadine Island.

BM: Yeah.

JS: So, were there any workshops actually on Carriacou, or were they all in Grenada?

BM: No, it was all Grenada. I'd like to go back and do some, and continue the *Town Island* works, in Carriacou.

JS: But because of the nature of the Islands, that is kind of part of, it's not seen as separate, really.

BM: Yes, and there was some of the youth who made the pieces who were from Carriacou that made the pieces.... I should also say that once the work had come back to Huddersfield, is when the largest part of the works happened with 'Netherhall Learning Campus', and 'Conscious Youth' and 'We In Front'. So, there was an initial phase over here, and then a significant phase in Grenada and Carriacou, and then the main phase coming back and...

JS: ...it's got bigger. So, it's expansive...

BM, Yeah, and then it was all pieced together here.

JS: Got you...made in Huddersfield.

BM: Yes, but it was also pieced together with another artist, a friend of mine, Desiree Shaw, she is *Town Island* in her existence, cause she's dual heritage. So, her mum is from Huddersfield and her dad is from Carriacou. Which you get a lot of in this town.

JS: Yes.

BM: So, we and we're using the wool physically to bind the sections of fabrics together.

JS: So, it's working on a very, on different meta levels here. It has different metaphors working right the way through it.

BM: Yeah. So, she's actual *Town Island*. I'm *Town Island* in a very different way. Like, I'm born and raised here, but my ancestors and my heritage come from there, but I connect with both.... so that was the full-on process.

JS: Yeah. Thank you.

BM: Yeah. The initial start here, and then going over there and making the body of works with TAMCC, then coming back and working with the three organisations and schools and then making a larger sail and exposing it to, it was exposed to Huddersfield light. Do you know what I mean? The light in Huddersfield, in Yorkshire.

JS: Place-specific. That's important.

BM: So, the blue is Huddersfield blue, not because the tones in Huddersfield, because of the light of Yorkshire and Huddersfield.

JS: Fantastic. Thank you.

JS: Which communities co-created *Town Island* and why were they chosen? We've kind of covered the which. Perhaps clarify why? Why those particular communities?

BM: OK. The community in Grenada was chosen because I received funding with The Tetley [Now Yorkshire Contemporary] and The British Council to go over and connect with the community over there and the areas that their remit could facilitate was Grenada. So, it was really good to be able to go over and do that. TAMCC was chosen because it's the main college and art isn't really taught to a high level in a lot of areas in the Caribbean.

[15:00]

JS: Okay

BM: So, it was an opportunity to go and connect with art students over there and start the initial phase of being able to go back and help facilitate more workshops and more connective ways of maybe bringing more students from over there over here. So it was really good to build relationships with them over there. I had existing relationships with Netherhall Learning Campus by doing talks and workshops with them over the years.

JS: Just clarify, where Netherhall is?

BM: It's in Rawthorpe, Huddersfield. Yeah, it's not too far from Tolson [Museum], really.

JS: So, it's not far from the centre of Huddersfield?

BM: No, not at all. No, it's just the top of the valley, on the edge. So, the town is in the middle of the valley, and you've got these different areas that bank off.

JS: So, you've got, would you say, personal connections with the college and then there's new relationships....

BM: With Conscious Youth, which is a youth community group. They're based right in the in the middle of town.... they work with youths from eleven up to eighteen and it's I think it's six days a week that that youths, after school or college, go there they have different programmes on they've got loads of facilities and they do lots for that age range all over Huddersfield. So, and it's multicultural by default as well, because you find that in Huddersfield that most schools and colleges they have like a very wide array of ethnicities.

JS: Yeah, and also the music is very important to this town and multicultural music. A lot of history and legacy.

BM: Yeah. Which is also included in the work as well.

JS: What health benefits do you think co-creating the art in the moment with different communities has for the people within them?

BM: I think there's a core part of this which is by default being quite selfish but in the way that my own personal anxiety with knowing that this town is really multicultural.

[20:00]

BM: Yeah and seeing lots of people but not always knowing how to connect with different cultures here has become part of my practice.

JS: Okay.

BM: Where my connection with Carriacou and the Carriacou community in Huddersfield, actually means that I have to connect with all the other cultures in Huddersfield because everyone else is also in the same Town. So, like the work hasn't been sectioned into people specifically from Huddersfield and people specifically from Carriacou and Grenada. It's about those people who make up those places by default, so I, like, me knowing that that's something that I'm exploring through this and helps my maybe social anxiety or social awareness is healthy for me and I know that that should hopefully be helpful for other people that they get to learn about the other people within their community. Like them not knowing that most of the black people, or at least fifty to sixty percent of all the black people they see in this town are from this one specific place, and it's kind of like a twin.

JS: Yeah.

BM: There are both hilly green places that are smaller, and a lot of people have not heard of, but they've been part of each other, for almost 80 years now.

JS: But why don't we know that or why? Why? Why is it?

BM: The more you know about people around you the less ignorance there is the more connection there is because there's understanding there.

JS: Yes. Yes.

BM: So that is the core of the work, but it's also really healthy for everyone involved. When I was speaking at the schools and colleges and the walking groups and the community group. Speaking to them about the dynamic of what the work is about and the geographical, the cultural, the multicultural landscape of the work, but then also wanting to find out where everyone else is also from, helps everyone to understand that this is like a wonderful soup.

JS: Yes. Yeah, yeah. And we're all part of it.

BM: we're all ingredients in the same soup.

JS: Thinking back to the actual acts of making. How is that, it's like communal making, how is that different to [individuals' making], and good for people?

BM: Well, they all know that they've had a hand in this. When they see the work physically. It's not a work where, like it could have been done in a completely different way where I go around and I speak to people, I get the ideas, I record, take pictures, and then I go away and I physically go and make some work. But that's, it didn't feel right to go about it like that. They can see very little of themselves in it. Whereas this way, they physically can see "Oh, I made that piece", or "we made these areas", and so they physically have their own energy in the pieces, but then in the making of each individual piece they got to actually...

JS: ...It's side by side isn't it? Shoulder to shoulder. It's making *with* other people. Is that healthy? Is that kind of good? Do you think it's good for people to make things together?

BM: Yeah. It made me break out of my comfort zone. Because I'm used to creating for a lot of my years I was creating by myself. I'm in my bedroom or I'm in the studio and I'm creating by myself, but actually for all of this work, like 95% of it, was made by being around other people, explaining, connecting and then they're making a work, and I don't physically know exactly what's going to come out, but it's not about that, it's about our connection together and what they've made.

JS: So, it's they're conversations that were naturally, organically happening with people. Is that good for people?

BM: Yeah, it is. It's really good for them...

JS: Social bonding.

BM: Yeah. They all know that they've made this work. They've all connected at the same time, and they can go away remembering, not remembering, until it's reignited again that "oh actually I was part of this".

JS: Yeah. Do you think it's blurring also the kind of artist/audience a little bit? They're taking part in the art so they're part of owing the art.

[25:00]

BM: Yeah. They're taking part in the art, but then they're also part of something that they might not have experienced before. They might not have been to galleries before. If they have, they might not have felt comfortable in those spaces. Or if they did feel comfortable then they might have only experienced it once or twice before, but it builds their connection with the idea of the art so that it's not something that...

JS: ..someone else does?

BM: yeah yeah that they can be part of it

JS: Fantastic.

JS: There is a legacy of oral history recordings in Kirklees with the diaspora communities in Huddersfield. What benefits could the spoken-form art in Town Island have for the people of Huddersfield today?

JS: We found [previous] projects aimed to raise self-esteem. That was one from an earlier one in the 1980s. I think the phrase was 'the self-esteem of the elderly in the community', to record their lived experience, because it's valuable. So, that was written down in the newspaper cutting we found [in the archives].

BM: So that's multi-layered, as well, like the impact that the audio could have on people of Huddersfield today and in the future because it helps those who are from Huddersfield and Carriacou, who are of dual heritage like myself, or they're biracial. That they can actually hear the words of someone who is from their communities speaking about their existence, their experiences, after the fact, so you don't know until you hear about these things. So, it's planting seeds for the future that people could connect with, and not just in a book, they can actually sit and hear these things. It's like audible, oral stories. They connect in a different way because before and not too long ago there was no way of recording sounds and recording audio it was all oral [door slams]. So, by recording the audio, it really helps solidify that for future generations. It also, in the same respects as the empowering the confidence in in elder generations, I don't see it as something that is only for the younger generations. It's for anyone who experiences it. It helps. It helps to recontextualise the landscape of how people perceive Huddersfield. Having been born and raised in Huddersfield, from whatever background you're in, you're actually understanding the layers of this because you could be listening to someone who is 100% from Yorkshire, or part Ukrainian, or part Polish, or 'cause there's an old Polish and Ukrainian community here going back to like the 1800s.

JS: Specifically, to Huddersfield?

BM: Specifically, to Huddersfield Yeah. So, you're just hearing the voices of people here and you can't place a skin-tone on that. You can read the transcript or the description of the person and their heritage after the fact or before the fact, and then you understand where they're from and their place, but anyone can listen to and understand that I'm from Huddersfield and this is someone from Huddersfield and these are the layers that have made this place that I'm from.

JS: How do you think a greater knowledge and understanding of identity and sense of belonging, achieved through co-creativity, can impact people's well-being?

[30:00]

BM: You know what I think? The greater knowledge is seen in how people treat each other and the greater the knowledge, the less room there is for people to have any ignorance or fear within their own personal dynamic, their own personal character and perspective. Because if you understand the landscape and the multiculturalism and the layers of the community that you live in, then then you're just connecting with all of that, as opposed to seeing a person, not knowing anything about them, It's easy to stay away from them and form your own opinions. But you form your own opinions in a vacuum. You need to understand the people around you; it is healthy when you do do that and a lot of methods in society don't actually want you to do that or aren't targeted in a way where it allows you to do that. So, by going out speaking to people it helps everyone to understand a lot more.

JS: Yeah, and that impacts on your well-being if there's less fear.

BM: Yeah. Then you just see neighbours as kin... you have more empathy for people.

JS: So that will change how you self-identify 'cause it's about self and how you connect with other people. So that's definitely going to impact on your wellbeing.

BM: And it's also quite interesting in that Huddersfield has a very strong identity and Carriacou has a very strong identity away from Grenada. Grenada has a strong identity, Carriacou has a strong identity. So, you have two places that have strong identities but are twins and they should understand each other much more. So, by default the hope of the work is to help each place form even more of its own identity but together.

JS: This moves quite nicely into “what are the health benefits of sharing knowledge about the unique cultural identity”?

BM: The legacy is quite fragile actually its understanding something that is not guaranteed to continue forever which is- so much can be lost if it's not held on to and understood and moving forwards the relationship between each place could actually get further and further away they could drift apart and by doing so it does a disservice to both places and it could affect – well it will affect each place but no one can say in what way. By doing as much now it means there is at least a body, a source, of work that will help with the future.

JS: There'll always be the kind of ancestry but the bonds to that ancestry could, if not looked after and cared for....

BM: ...it could dissipate. And even leaving less and less ingredients behind, and people are clutching onto fragments in order to form relationships with themselves and their dynamic. Huddersfield is a place of many many cultures is a microclimate in itself where it's best off with all ingredients knowing and being together as opposed to separated off into different areas. So, it's really really healthy for the future I'd say it's quite imperative for the people of Huddersfield.

[35:00]

JS: Someone once said to me something like studying or understanding history it's not about the past it's actually about the future and I think it's something like that isn't it about the wellbeing of the future that you understand the history really well.

BM: Yeah. Because the now is the past and it is the future whenever that is. In ten years' time will be the now then, and in order to understand the now then then they have to be thinking about the future and to understand the future then you have to understand the past to really understand what the now means It means less work for future generations really. If they learn about these things when they're two three years' old and they're forming words and they're eating foods from people from Lahore, or Nairobi, or Ghana, or Carriacou, or Skipton. You know they might be eating fish and chips that's got some garam masala on it and some hot sauce or something and that might just be normal in Huddersfield but only in Huddersfield do you get this multicultural fish and chips.

JS: It's [Huddersfield] quite a big town actually.

BM: Yeah. Everyone in Huddersfield thinks that it's the biggest town in the UK as well. I did until a few years ago. It's not. It's like number 10 or 11 in the country. I had it tattooed on my chest at uni that it was the biggest town in the UK, if not Europe. I used to preach that so strong. Like "where you from?", "Huddersfield" "what Huddersfield?" "It's the biggest town in Europe, biggest town in the UK", "really??" . There was no Google to check off your phone straight away to tell you you were wrong.... Unfortunately, it's not but we still have a strong presence. Anywhere I go in the world I always meet somewhere who's either from Huddersfield or connected to Huddersfield. Don't matter where I go.

JS: What are the potential healing properties of the visual and the sensual elements within Town Island for the visitors to the forthcoming exhibition?

BM: I think that's the hope. That's part of the goal and the hope is that there is a healing to this in that people feel connected to the work in a way they want to engage with it during their time there. During the time at the exhibition and after the exhibition, that they actually engage with the work in reality. Of all ages, that it draws people in to engage with the work the drawing in is engagement in itself, the arrival is engagement, the engagement with the work itself, the time with it is engagement, that it really is a fully holistic experience.

[40:00]

JS: You've got all the senses isn't it: the visual, the sound, the aroma.

BM: And the guiding through this as well because a lot of the times when I said about like the smells in Huddersfield if -when you said 'engine oil' I smell engine oil, but that's how the brain works, so then there'll have to be some sort of guiding through the works to allow people to actually be aware of their senses because in a lot of ways we are quite desensitised so to remind people when they're coming in to be aware of the smells and to be aware of the sounds and to take time with the sounds. Because we hear stuff all the time it's quite easy to switch things off but to actually say no "this area is arranged for sounds",

“this area is arranged for visual”, and to actually make people aware of that, specifically and on the subtle layers.

JS: The last question. Have you any plans to build on the *Town Island* project? So, with more creative work perhaps with the communities of Huddersfield?

BM: Yeah. I think that from when we've gone to see the archives it's really highlighted that the archives need a lot of investment by the Carriacou community, not just the Carriacou community but the communities that connect with Carriacou, so like you could have a whole area in the archive which is people talking about the Carriacou community but culturally being outside the community. So someone whose either their best friend is from there but they're white European. Their descriptions of their experience either going round to their friend's parents' houses growing up there that's all very important. I think more work with other schools and colleges, educational institutes, in Huddersfield is really important and it all feels like research and study. To go into an area of study that's more official that actually brings even more weight and significance to the continual work of *Town Island* cause it's not just a body work that's now finished there's so many layers and conversations that I wanna explore through there. It's a continually evolving conversation so the work is essentially you could describe as something that is never going to stop.

JS: Yeah, it's part of the ecology and the ecology of Huddersfield and that's what the departments in the School of Humanities at Huddersfield would call that, the ecologies of culture,

BM: okay.

JS: The Carriacouan and Huddersfield cultures can be part, very much a strong part, of that. Along with the others perhaps there is perhaps your *Town Island* can help to reveal this form ... so more research needs to be done and like you say your work in the archive has revealed that and maybe the categories and the way that it's collected you can promote that as well?

BM: Some people look at the categorisation in archives and museums as something that is um historically quite negative. I don't know maybe it's just the way my brain works but I feel that there's actual positives to that categorisation because if you're wanting to then go into a body of research and you wanna find out specific areas the categories help you to go into and know where you're gonna find things.

JS: You can go towards the Caribbean and then you go towards the particular islands.

BM: Potentially yes

JS: You need the broader categories too, without being offensive

[45:00]

BM: No no not at all

JS: It's just a signpost maybe...

BM: Without the signpost you're just going to take the work... and then just... I mean there's the glossary in a book but then you can turn the pages to wherever you want to. So, to be able to just go into the archives and say "I'm going to go into here ", great, but if you actually want to find specific things, specific names, specific practice, or culture, or detail, then that needs to be put there. It also helps with the collecting of things as well. It helps other people understand what they're contributing towards. Like "Okay if we sit down and speak the audio of this will go in the audio archives and will be stored there". So, you can tell anyone in your family or friends or the future that's where my interview is. I contributed towards that.

JS: Thank you very much that's all the eight questions. Thank you very much for contributing to the Cultures of Creative Health.

[46:10]