



## Bobby Benjamin

### Hearing from Artists

*Bobby Benjamin makes sculpture and painting reflecting on class, masculine identity and place. Having grown up in Redcar, he lives in Middlesbrough and initiates curatorial projects in the area. MIMA recently acquired his work for the Middlesbrough Collection through the Tees Valley Response Collecting scheme. He is in conversation with Elinor Morgan, Head of Programme, in September 2020.*

**EM:** When did you first realise you were an artist?

BB: I knew I was an artist long before I made any artwork but I never felt comfortable calling myself one until I'd found my medium – which took me a while. Growing up on a council estate in a deprived area, the arts were not readily accessible or seemingly viable to me. I would scribble poems into a notebook or write stories; I would form bands or shoot films with my friends using whatever low-cost, second hand equipment we could get our hands on. We produced content simply to entertain ourselves. I never went to an art exhibition until I was 26 years old – I enrolled in art school the following week. I'd found my medium. I still draw upon that adolescent, primal desire to create, unabashed and unabated, in my practice.

**EM:** Your work *Thick Artist*, 2019, has been acquired for the Middlesbrough Collection at MIMA through Tees Valley Response



Portrait of Bobby Benjamin, photograph by TUHUTZS, courtesy of the artist

**Collecting.** Can you describe this self portrait and the materials and references it holds?

BB: *Thick Artist* was from a series of works that looked to reflect society through the study of self. I was intrigued by the mutually voyeuristic and wholly dysfunctional relationship between the arts and the working class/underclass. I wanted to make something that was self deprecating but also defiant. I pitched myself as the willing consumer of landfill culture, surrounded by established brands such as Burger King, Madonna and Hulk Hogan to question the visual currency and cultural significance of certain motifs when contrasted with a traditional gallery setting. Maybe one person likes junk food, football and reality TV – there's a stigma attached to these things – and maybe another person likes Jackson Pollock and foie gras – is there really any difference? Is culture hierarchical? I don't intend to present an argument for either but rather poke fun at the hypocrisy.



*Sentence, 2019, courtesy of the artist*



*Thick Artist, 2019, courtesy of the artist*

It is a self portrait, so I put a lot of myself into it – my image, my humour, my principals and even my DNA (thickening the paint with my own hair). Certain motifs such as the wrestlers are reoccurring within my practice and represent my intrigue with contemporary masculinity. There's a term in wrestling – kayfabe – which means to present something false as something real, which could easily apply to our relationship with social media and our desire for validation.

**EM: How do you convey your own experiences of class and masculinity in your work?**

BB: There tends to be an autobiographical element to my work, however esoteric that may be. My personal circumstance is often referenced in the materials I use and how they are sourced. It's about creating a bridge between two environments; one in which I live and one in which I exhibit. I try to impart a duality upon my materials. I take a steel panel used to board a derelict house on my road and hang it beneath spot lights on a pristine white wall and it becomes bilingual.

Poverty has its own visual language and I'm interested in exploring this in an authentic way. While the arts and the media often see council estate life as something to be observed and documented or even appropriated, my focus is on presenting a more idiosyncratic response to my lived experiences. Within this, the heritage and conflicts of masculinity are of particular interest. Growing up in a working class family, the youngest of eight brothers, I was very aware of the perpetuation of traditional male roles and I am intrigued by the correspondence between the redefining of this role and the changing identity of our post-industrial area.

**EM: In recent years you have used a waste material from a plastics recycling plant which represents a relationship with industry, labour and toxicity. Why has it become such an important substance in your work?**

BB: As an artist who works predominantly with found objects, I place my trust in certain materials or artefacts to help deliver a narrative or provoke a dialogue. I came across



*Hot Off Depressed*, 2019, photograph by Cal Carey, courtesy of the artist

this particular material while working in a polymer recycling plant. These high density plastic forms are the result of a chemical recycling process. With a toxicity level too high for resale as food packaging, this is essentially the waste product of a waste product, spewed from the end of the production line as a molten pulp, and into cooling baths where they assume their final, Giger-esque form: swirling and surreal. My job was to maintain the order of the production line and the results were perfectly solidified moments of chaos. There's something interesting about taking a waste product and placing it on a pedestal, it's almost nonsensical. Aside from the aesthetic appeal of the polymer forms, there is a richness to them – a richness of history and of allegory – they speak both to the industrial lineage of our area and to our own relationship with heritage. There's nothing wrong with being proud of our historical significance but there is also a toxicity to nostalgia that I try to address in my practice and that this material speaks to. There's something about the process too: objects that had their purpose, were discarded – anything

from a beloved children's toy to an empty bottle of Coca-Cola – arrive at the plant and pass through the machinery, coming out the other side in uniform Blue-Tac-blue, but distorted and unique. I live in a place where poverty, poor health, mental illness and addiction are rife but you could walk half a mile and be in a different world completely. On a molecular level, we are the same but our experiences of existence are startlingly different and I think this material is emblematic of that.

**EM: How does your curatorial work with other artists connect with and fuel your artistic practices?**

BB: The connection between my visual and curatorial practice varies. Some of my best developmental experiences have come from working with other artists and I often look to work with artists I admire or to whose practice I feel a particular resonance. These exhibitions are a more personal, almost selfish, experience for me that I instigate to gain experience and develop my own



*Another Jumper, 2019, courtesy of the artist*

practice – and hopefully theirs too! I see these exhibitions as visual dialogues between artists and to have had these conversations, in exhibition form, with artists such as Annie O'Donnell or Phil Gatenby can only be of great benefit to my continued development as an artist.

I think of my body of work as being like a novel with over-riding themes, interweaving threads and reoccurring characters but I am also aware of the limits of my own perspective. If I'm talking about the effects of industrial decline on working class communities in the North then my gender, for example, becomes a caveat and it is important to both acknowledge and confront that or to engage with an alternate perspective and curating exhibitions affords me the opportunity to do this.

Sometimes I approach my curatorial practice as escapism – a relief from my personal practice. There is a wealth of emerging creative talent in this area and their voices are, and will be, ever more important. These artists

have a role to play in reshaping the identity of our area and I think it important to provide a platform for their work. I curate an event called Picasso Baby, for example, where we invite artists to come and spend time at a space, sharing materials and ideas and making original work directly onto the walls (and ceilings and floors) of the venue over the course of a week ahead of a public viewing. It's all about connecting with other creatives, sharing, and creating something organic and unique together. Personally, I find curating a Picasso Baby show a great way to blow off steam and disengage from my practice. I believe an artist's comfort zone is a perilous place to reside. When I was at primary school we'd do our exercises but before we would start the teacher would have us loosen up by shaking our arms and legs around wildly. I try and take a similar approach to my curatorial practice. Sometimes it's about getting serious and developing, sometimes it's about shaking my arms and legs around and reminding myself how much fun art can be.