



Laura Facey's Laboratory of the Ticking Heart

Laboratory of the Ticking Heart: Ticking Time Bomb, or Cultural Capital? ⋮



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SPEECH | LAURA FACEY'S LABORATORY OF THE TICKING HEART MAY 5, 2022

I am honored to be invited to be the guest speaker today at the new Laura Facey solo show, "The Laboratory of the Ticking Heart". This is a major art exhibition, by one of our preeminent Jamaican artists, installed in a little known, historical gem of a building in Rae Town, Downtown Kingston.

While scouting for locations in Downtown Kingston, Laura spotted Ormsby Memorial Hall, and saw that although the building was falling into disrepair, the light, the soaring columns and ceiling height created an ideal backdrop for her new show.



Over the years, Ormsby Hall has been the host of public meetings, debates and musical recitals, especially during the late 1930s. It sits adjacent to the St Michael and All Angels Anglican Church and it was the site of significant social and cultural events of the day. Poetry readings and performances could be seen and heard at Ormsby Hall. Up until 2010, it was the home of the Ormsby Primary School, and Jamaicans who have travelled the world performing theatre got their first taste of the arts as children on this very stage.

Why Locate this Exhibition Downtown?

Downtown Kingston has been home to numerous art galleries on Harbour Street, and further back in memory, it was host to the Great Exhibition of 1891. After receiving some 302,831 visitors, the attendance was estimated to be larger than that of any previous exhibition in Europe or America. Similar to the Venice Biennale, countries like Canada paid Jamaica to have pavilions in Kingston, where they displayed their cultural goods. America, England, Scotland, Sweden, Switzerland, Greece, France, Norway, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and even Russia all were represented, right here in Kingston. Its safe to say that Downtown is no stranger to art and culture.

And Laura Facey is no stranger to Downtown Kingston, nor to using her art for social transformation. She was one of the supportive figures behind Melinda Brown in the founding of Roktowa, the artist collective, residency space (and we could add “cultural movement”) that was located on Pechon Street, which created so many opportunities for grassroots artists from the community. Artists are natural activists, and we can see in the intentional siting of Facey's work in the ruins of a historical building, a bold statement on reclaiming our heritage, preserving our architecture, and re-membering the legacy and greatness of our old city.



This is Laura's first solo show since 2013. During these last nine years, Laura participated in group exhibitions and biennials. During the last two years she completed a body of work carved from guango, mahogany, lychee, cedar and lignum vitae. Laura and her team have created a trilogy of installations that visitors will explore, walk through and touch.

Guide Their Way Home is the Memorial part of the trilogy. It honours what has gone before while opening a path for present transformation. **Three Graces** are powerful, purposeful and unified, representing the gathering of women for these times. What kind of women were they? Artists? Activists? Healers? **Land of Look Behind**, the Sanctuary part of the trilogy, is Laura's tribute to the Cockpit Country. The work "represents a journey through a place that captures us with its impenetrable mass and offers sanctuary to whomever wishes to find it".



Kingston as Creative Capital of the Caribbean

Kingston Creative is a registered non-profit organisation whose big vision is that Kingston is the Creative Capital of the Caribbean. Our mission is to empower creative people and use art for social and economic transformation. As a country with a highly creative populace - and arguably the most cultural soft power per square mile - we believe that the arts can be a catalyst for attracting visitors, creating jobs and opportunities, achieving sustainable national development and transforming Downtown Kingston. **Ours is a mission centred around both people and place.**

And Downtown Kingston is *our* place. It is the oldest area of the capital city, with great bones, a musical history like none other and a special vibration that can only be experienced. It is also full of architectural treasures like Ormsby Hall that time has forgotten. Downtown is surrounded by marginalized communities with a reputation for political division, poverty and crime. This stigma is not the entirety of Kingston's story however; there is a *rich* cultural narrative and history in each community to be understood, embraced and shared. Sadly, many people, especially our youth, only know the dilapidated streets and the ever-present legacy of violence. They yearn to escape, and do not have an image of how Kingston started and developed, and as such, it is almost impossible for them to imagine what it can become.

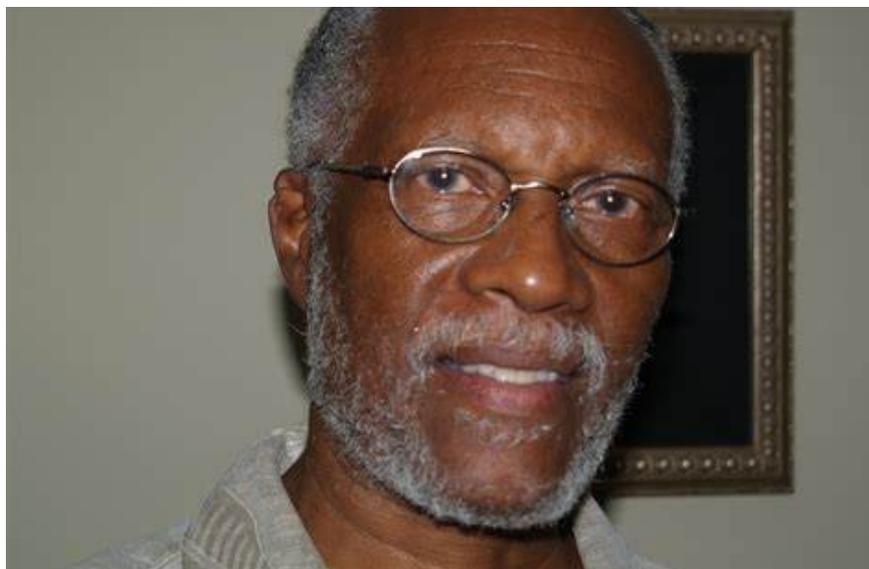


Downtown Dialogues

I remember clearly back in September 2019, when Kingston Creative convened the first “Downtown Dialogues” session, in order to find out more about Kingston. For Kingston Creative to hold this vision for balanced, inclusive development of the city, the team needed to learn more. We needed to understand both the positive and negative aspects of Kingston’s story. We believed that any future development path for Kingston couldn’t be imposed in a Master Plan. It should be crafted, ground up, from the most authentic place possible.

So we invited Herbie Miller, Professor Frederick Hickling, Trevor Douglas and Vivian Crawford to speak to our team. That day, we heard stories from these elders that had experienced life in Kingston first-hand and whose life and legacies are steeped in its history. Everyone sees Downtown Kingston through their own lens, and I will share a little slice of each their recollections of Downtown Kingston.

HERBIE MILLER



Herbie Miller, was born in and describes himself as a product of East Kingston, Bournemouth Gardens. He is a renowned musicologist, social analyst, song-writer, music producer and cultural historian. He is the Director of the Jamaica Music Museum, a Division of the Institute of Jamaica that reports to the Ministry of Culture, Gender, Entertainment and Sport. He sits on the Board of the Creative Cities Committee (now called Jamaica Creative), and was part of the team that made the successful bid to make Kingston a UNESCO Creative City of music. He is well known globally for his work in documenting and preserving the history of Jamaican music.

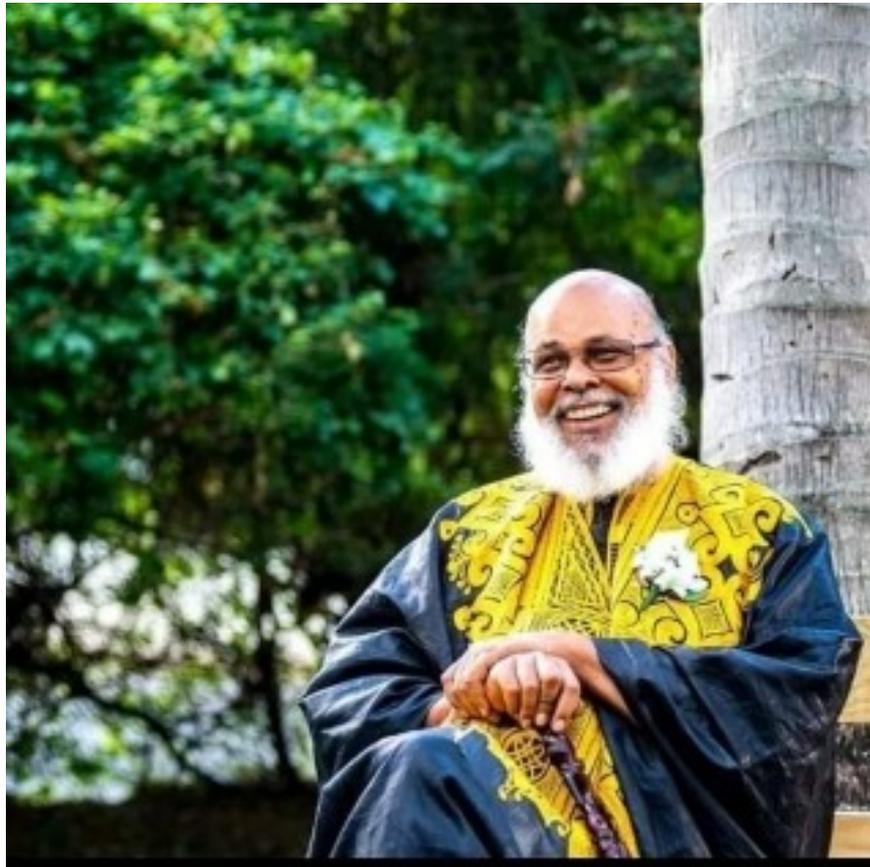
Herbie shared that there was significant cultural infrastructure in Downtown Kingston. Almost every singer came from West Kingston, but most of the instrumentalists came from East Kingston. The Royal Jamaica Yacht Club was in East Kingston along with a host of live music venues; Club Adastra Posh, Club Havana (Rockfort), the Latin Quarter, Wickie Wackie Beach Club, Copa Cabana, Gold Coast Beach Club. At the famous Ronnie's Bap Shop – located across from Manley Meadows - one could order fritters, dumpling, pudding, pone, liver and callaloo. All night food and entertainment was available in Downtown Kingston. He mentioned the famous "Sport" houses like Strolly's and Miss Dear Whore House. From East Street to the Railway there were wharves along the coast and these brothels would be full of foreign sailors.

"Pearl Harbour" was not a place, but a famous Madam – it is said that she could flip a cigarette with fire inside her mouth and not get burned. Other cultural locations were Fairburn Road, the Old Yacht Club, Barnett Beach, Sigourney's beach, at the corner of Sea Breeze Avenue and Bournemouth Gardens. Along the streets, the houses used to have names, not numbers, and the names of the home would be carved on slate. Lindsay's Bournemouth Bath was a gift to the people of Kingston, but only for white members. This was the era of the Big Bands - Eric Deans. Greatest dance floor this side of the Americas was at Ormsby Hall. The Bournemouth Club featured Gerald Roach Junior, Mr. Olympia and it had a salt water pool. The harbour was active with water-skiing, yachting and dolphins that swam up and down in the clear water. There was a Cross Harbour Swim race where swimmers would cross the harbour across to Gunboat Beach.

People shopped at Nathans, at North Parade women were selling flowers, candy, American apples and grapes. King Street had expensive stores selling the latest fashion - "El Cortes Ingles" (the English Cut). On Barry Street and West of King Street was Chinatown, where the Buddhist temple still sits, three stories above the city. There were real characters on the street – a one man band. A blind lady playing Adina Edwards, who sang like Mahaila Jackson. Colourful characters - "Saboo and Brammy", Bag o

Skattelites featuring the famous Don Drummond played.

DR. FREDERICK HICKLING



Frederick W. Hickling grew up in Kingston at his family home, Connolly House, which still stands near Heroes' Circle. He was educated in medicine and psychiatry and helped to establish a unique community psychiatric service which pioneered cultural therapy in Jamaica in the 1970's. In the 1980's he established a private psychiatric research and clinical service in Kingston, and in the 1990's he was instrumental in helping to shape policy for African Caribbean Mental Health in the United Kingdom. He was a Professor of Psychiatry, University of the West Indies, Mona, and Executive Director of the UWI Caribbean Institute of Mental health and Substance Abuse (CARIMENSA).

Dr. Hickling described Kingston as the biggest slave market in the Caribbean. Coronation Market, Craft Market and the Waterfront is where the slaves were originally brought in from Africa. Ships would dock in the harbour and the slave-owners, both the brokers and the buyers, lived around the area. A series of five-star hotels surrounded the waterfront, for slaveowners that had plantations in the rural areas to travel in, select and purchase the slaves coming off the ship.

Jamaica had the first railroad in the Americas and the road system was designed to transport the property; slaves back to the plantations and the export goods back into "town". Kingston was also much smaller then - in 1957, everything above North Street was "bush" – acres of undeveloped arable land.

He stated that Kingston evolved into a racially segregated city. John Wolmer bequeathed the Wolmer's School to the "sons of Jamaica", but the reality is that it was an exclusively white school. In Kingston at the time, every institution - banks, schools, government - was run by white people. The war meant that many of the white people went away to fight and this was an opportunity for educated black people in Kingston to become upwardly mobile and occupy some of the top jobs that were now vacant. The Boys and Girls school was where the children of military personnel were educated – at

TREVOR DOUGLAS



Trevor Douglas, known as “Leggo” or “Leggobeast” was born at the Jubilee Hospital, and attended Regent Street School and St. Aloysius on Duke Street. He grew up living between Rema Gardens and Jones Town. He states that it would have been better if England was still ruling Jamaica because the JLP and PN have created a civil war in Downtown.

His mother’s name was Matty – she used to take in washing for ships, and his cousin painted ships. Leggo now represents Sounds and Pressure, an NGO seeking to preserve the musical history of Beat Street (Upper Orange Street) home of Small World Studios, VP Records and Rockers International vinyl record store.

In Leggo’s recollection, Kingston was a port city that was rife with gambling houses and crime. The piers were called Number 1, 2, 3, Myers, South Street, East Street Royal Mail, Molasses, South Street (used for shipping lumber). The railway would run into the wharves (known as “finger wharf”). The area was known for con men and as a place where you could buy obeah.

‘Ackee Walk’ was the Almshouse Catholic burial ground for the impoverished. Boys Town, Trench Town, Ghost Town (Arnett) all existed in West Kingston. Trevor would go to the Ward theatre on a Wednesday for the matinee show. People would buy a Star and put it in their back pocket to show “status” (i.e. that they could read). Carib, State and Duluth were the popular cinemas, of which only one now remains.

He would hop on the train to go to Spanish Town and come back. However, he couldn’t go into the Victoria Pier, as that was exclusively for white people. As a young black boy, he describes how he would dive for the coins that white people would throw off the pier and come up with it in his teeth for their amusement. He says, “*Kingston did nice, until the politicians came in to garrisonize it*”.

VIVIAN CRAWFORD



Vivian Crawford was born in Portland and educated at the Mico College. He currently is the Chairman of the Institute of Jamaica, where many of the relics from the Great Exhibition still reside. His role as he describes it, is "drawing long bench" for Kingston, which means encouraging people to stay a long time in order to talk, as *"the true story of this city hasn't yet been told"*.

His family came from Mooretown and Charlestown, famous for their Maroon heritage. His first memory of Kingston was when higglers invited him to travel to Kingston on a market truck. He left in the wee hours of the morning and arrived at Depot, Darling Street. In Kingston, to his surprise, people spoke standard English, not patois.

He describes the history and founding of Kingston. In 1692 the Great Earthquake destroyed most of Port Royal and sank it under the waves. The residents of Port Royal came across by boat and captured land called 'Colonel Barry's Hog Crawle'. Lands were then purchased from William Beeston, the governor at the time, to build the city. The Kingston Parish Church was established and in 1699, the church saw its first burial. The church clock was very significant, as it told everyone the time and curfew – hence the phrase, "born under the clock" came to be part of the Kingston vernacular.

Admiral John Benbow died in Port Royal and was buried in the church. He was a British soldier who famously fought the French. John Wolmer lived in Port Royal, and founded the school located beside Kingston Parish Church. They actually moved the boundary of the city, so that he would be formally buried in Kingston.

Mr. Crawford describes the Great Exhibition held in 1891 where Jamaica was the epicentre of trade, art and culture across the world. It was based on the 1821 British Exhibition and artifacts from Jamaica's Great Exhibition still remain in the basement of the IOJ over 130 years later. It is well known that the founding collection for the British Museum came from Jamaica. In particular, he mentions a valuable Taino sculpture which the British Museum now has - and Jamaica has a replica in its national museum. The joke goes that the Institute of Jamaica on East Street is built on a "slack foundation"; not because of any structural issues, but because the IOJ building was originally a whore house.

He points out that Arts education started right here in Downtown Kingston. The four creative schools—Drama, Music, Dance, and Visual Arts—started out at different locations. Two of the Schools, namely the School of Art and the School of Music, are historic because of their establishment in 1951 and 1961 respectively, before the island gained its independence from Britain in 1962. In 1976, all four schools were brought together and became a full-time tertiary institution called the Cultural Training Centre, an arm of the Institute of Jamaica, located in Downtown Kingston. This all well predates the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts, currently the only art school in the English speaking Caribbean.



The Way Forward

So you see, those four perspectives of Kingston shows that our city's history involves complex interconnected issues of art, race, history, culture, gentrification, colonialism, community and nation-building. For us to move forward, everyone needs to be aligned around the possibility of what Kingston was, what it already is, and what we want it to become in the future. Do we want it to return to being a segregated city with first and second class citizens? Do we want the vibrant cultural life that our elders describe? Do we want opportunities for just a few to build wealth or do we want to create opportunities for everyone?

Kingston Creative is using culture and art as a lever for the balanced, inclusive transformation of the city, and the development of the country. As an artist-led organisation, we feel that we can no longer sit on the sidelines and bemoan the state of the city - ***we have to use what we have to build what we want to see.***



Over the past five years, we have been quietly and methodically reaching out to the communities, training and empowering creatives, developing the murals and infrastructure for an Art District, launching a Creative Hub and enrolling the business community/property owners into partnerships for the city's development.

Our vision for Downtown includes safety, commerce, beauty, restoration, good governance and infrastructure. With the support of our partners TEF, IDB, DBJ, Diaspora donors and others from the local private and public sector, we develop murals that strategically connect two iconic arts institutions - the National Gallery of Jamaica with the Museums. We host Artwalk street festivals that bring life to the streets and visitors to the bars, restaurants, communities and new hotels in Downtown. Our vision includes tours of cultural communities, tours led not by huge companies, but by people from the communities; it includes employment, growth and entrepreneurship opportunities for talented artists and creatives - especially those from the Downtown Kingston community.

We view making Kingston the Creative Capital of the Caribbean as **a process, not a project**. We are committed to a multi-year process of collaboration, advocacy, engagement, learning, research, investment, social entrepreneurship, and supporting the necessary state coordination and policy development as we work to realize the vision.



Artists Leading the Way

It is worth stating that Artists are at the very forefront of this movement; performing and enlivening the streets for the Artwalk, storytelling our new narratives on the corners, painting new possibilities on the cracked and crumbling walls of the narrow lanes, and choosing to stage their exhibitions in historic Downtown spaces like Ormsby Hall.

But more of us need to get on board. The property owners and business owners need to renovate, but protect the heritage facade of their buildings to maintain the integrity of the streetscape and the collective value of the Art District. If we lease buildings to artists and creatives for studios, galleries, performance and retail spaces this will bring the cultural life back into the city. We have to intentionally unlock the potential trapped in the blocks of abandoned warehouses, historic buildings and commercial properties.

Lastly, our government needs to **bet on Kingston**, and facilitate these civil society and private sector efforts. They can lead by putting in place the necessary infrastructure, civil works, policies, regulatory frameworks and financial incentives to make this all possible, and most importantly, *sustainable* in the long term.

This exhibition is exactly the type of artist-led activism that we need to see from the creative community to bring the vision of a vibrant Downtown Kingston Art District into sharp focus. If you come to Rae Town and experience this exhibition, you will be one step closer to seeing new possibilities for what a transformed Downtown Kingston could really be.



The title of this show, "Laboratory of the Ticking Heart", is taken from the opening line from Laura's grandmother's poem, "September Song", which suggests that human feeling can indeed be a laboratory, a powerful re-shaper of our environment when we choose - and are responsible for - how we express our feelings. For me, Laboratory of the Ticking Heart is a powerful metaphor for the place in which we now stand. Downtown Kingston - is it the beating cultural heart of the capital city? Or a ticking time bomb? We get to choose.

In this fight for our city, we all are cause.

Thank you.

-ADC

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Diane Browne

3d ...

Yes indeed, powerful! And as I read it, I kept thinking this is so fantastic; there is so much of what I call 'near history', that is, there are people alive or have family members who experienced/interacted with some of this. I think what Andrea and the Kingston Creative are doing is so outstanding. My mother and her mother's family would mention Ormsby Hall. The family house was at the corner of East Street and North Street (now a parking lot). The Chinese Benevolent Society (I think that's what it was called) was opposite the house on the East Street side. I remember the excitement of the American apples at Parade. Most of my father's family had migrated by then, but I recall us visiting somebody he called 'aunt' in Rae Town, which had its lovely little houses and the sea gently lapping at the shore at the end of one of the streets. I am so thankful that there is the Kingston Creative.

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Richard Nattoo

Powerful article Andrea

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