Ident: [bright synthesized electronic notes; indent spoken with echo] Serpentine Podcast: Intimacies.

[Sof ambient electronic tones rise from the silence and evolve slowly beneath the speech]

Hetain Patel: What I want to be to my family is the acknowledgement of what the history is, but also the strength and the power, or the audacity, even, to imagine beyond, I guess...

Helen Cammock: There is courage in reaching towards a sound in someone else or inside yourself. Make no mistake, there is bravery in sound.

[Music fades out, and picks up again, ambiguous and layered]

Gaylene Gould: Family. Such a small word, such big meanings and emotions for most of us. An intimate sanctuary or a space of challenge; a place of warmth, or of pain and loss. [Running water and bird song merges with the music] At different times throughout my own life, all of the above have applied. Family is the root to all our origin stories, the foundational set of relationships that creates a footprint of identity throughout our lives. They say blood is thicker than water, but many of us are forced or choose to create new intentional families with less emphasis on the nuclear.

I’m Gaylene Gould, and I’m an artist and explorer of ideas, and in this Serpentine Podcast series, we are digging into different forms of intimacies, exploring intricate and tangled webs of relationships, connections, and understandings through six different lenses. In the last episode, we started our Intimacies voyage with strangers, but today we are going to be looking a little closer to home. [Music fades out, running water continues]


[Running water fades to silence, soft ambient electronic tones return]

Gaylene Gould: So, in this episode, we’ll be gleaning from those artists who navigate the sensitive territory of making work about and even with their own families, whether they be blood or chosen. Hetain Patel is an artist who involves his family in his creations with wry, surprising and moving results. He welcomed us into his studio in Woolwich, southeast London.

[Sound of door squeaking and creaking as it opens and closes, voices echo in the space; music continues]

Hetain Patel: This one and the one next to it... [laughs]
Gaylene Gould: From the outside you wouldn't think it's artist studios.
Hetain Patel: So, what they've done, is...

[Chat fades out in the background; soft ambient electronic tones continue]

Gaylene Gould: Hetain is someone I know and have admired for a long time. He's from Bolton and grew up as part of a working class British Gujarati family. His playful works span photography, film performance and sculptures, and are often inspired by his experiences with his family as well as pop culture. Members of his family often appear in and help to make the works. In his film installation, The Jump, Hetain, dressed head to foot in a handmade Spider-Man costume, leaps in slow motion of his grandmother's sofa, watched on by seventeen members of his family. His father, a mechanic who used to convert cars into hearses, is a big inspiration to him. For his first sculpture piece, Hetain collaborated with him to convert Hetain's first car, a Ford Fiesta, into a life-size Transformer. Yes, a Transformer like in the movie! And in his film, Dance Like Your Dad, on one half of a split screen, we see Hetain's father being interviewed about his work by his son. In the other half, there's Hetain perfectly mimicking his father's voice and movement. I had to ask, what led him to feature his family in so much of his work?

Hetain Patel: I've not grown up like close with my family in the sense that maybe you see in the movies. We weren’t hugging each other, [Music fades to silence] we weren’t telling each other we loved each other or anything like that. It was, you know, working class families, just practical stuff really. And survival. And so, any idea of intimacy in my work or in my life, actually, cos they're the same thing, is something that I've had to figure out how to even do. And sometimes it doesn’t even involve another person. You know, even in my own head and heart, how to think about that intimacy or to kind of create it somehow. You know, it started probably with my Dad, and I didn’t quite know what I was doing. You know, he is kind of one of these guys who's just always at work. In the rare time he's at home, he's talking about work.

You know, he wasn’t a talkative guy and if you wanted to see him, go to work. You know, so that's what I did. I went to see him with a camera at his factory where he makes limousines and hearses for the funeral trade. And at the time I was like, 'okay, I'll tell you what, why don’t you give me a tour of your factory? I'll video it on my crappy camcorder and then we'll give it to a proper filmmaker. They can make a nice trailer type thing for your website, for the business.' And so I filmed him doing that. I guess it was a way to spend time with him. You know, and for him to talk about what he’s passionate about, you know? And so I made this video then never used it for the trailer in the end, because certain things happened with the business, then came across it sometime afterwards, and then, I guess, decided to make that work To Dance Like Your Dad, where I imitated him. And I didn’t tell him I was gonna do
it. It wasn't through dialogue between us about that work. I just did it. And then I invited him to the opening.

**Gaylene Gould**: You invited him to the opening!? As the first time... Wow!

**Hetain Patel**: Yeah. Of the exhibition, yeah, yeah. It was kind of a mind-blowing experience, you know, it was very emotional, probably for all of us, for me and my family. I don’t think it’s an understatement to say it changed our relationship and things changed from there. As a family, we don’t sit around talking about intergenerational love or migration trauma, or identity politics, all of those sort of things... But it felt like that artwork was a way that we were able to talk about it. Or able to connect, or able to understand each other in that realm in a way that we hadn’t before. And so the feeling of that, in my life, was massive.

But then also in terms of my artwork, generally it was huge. Because, you know, in the past, if I’m making stuff that has signifiers of Indian culture in it – powders, pigments – I was getting very exoticised. People were enjoying the works, but considered themselves different to me. And, and that... I felt odd. Whereas this show with me and my Dad, it was the first time that at the opening, no one talked to me about the art, but everyone told me a story about their Dad, or their kids, or their Mum. And it felt like the first time that this bridge had happened or this connection had happened that I’d been searching for. And it felt like the way it happened was by doing the thing I was most afraid of, which was getting as specific as possible. You know, I had the fear that if I make something really close to me and really culturally specific, then no one can relate to it, or it just becomes a thing about me. But, actually, it did the opposite. I would say that’s probably the turning point, when it started.

**Gaylene Gould**: And do you remember what your Dad’s response to you was, in that moment?

**Hetain Patel**: He cried. You know, he was in tears. As he gets older, he definitely wears his emotions on his sleeve. He’s much easier to tear up now. And, you know, and that felt like one of the early times I saw it. So yeah, it wasn’t a words thing really.

They didn’t get it to start with, you know, it is a strange thing to be making stuff and putting it in a gallery and having people look at it. How do you get paid, is this a job, you know, et cetera...

**Gaylene Gould**: The one question.

[Gaylene and Hetain laugh]
Hetain Patel: But in terms of the content, there was never a value judgment, I don't think. But then, as they get more and more involved, they love it. They're so proud. I make my work to make my life better. I can't do something just because I think it'll look good.

Although, you know, there is of course that, you have to allow yourself to be seduced into that. But I’m interested in making my relationships better and my life better. And for that to be the foundation of my practice. Because if I want to connect with the outside world about all of this stuff, then I have to be willing to do it in my own life. I really feel like the stuff ethically or what the work professes to do, it has to be in my life. Otherwise, it's just nonsense. Or who's it for? It's just pretending. And so, I think about how I can do that. And so, the language is different or the approach is different. It's not like if you're giving an artist talk and you talk conceptually, formally, all of those sort of things. With my family, it's more about doing.

So, you know, when I filmed them for the slow-motion Spidey jump, again, I didn't tell them much. I think it came from the fact that they trust me. Yes. You know, I do have a good relationship with my family. You know, when I first passed my driver's test, I was a taxi for my cousins and aunts and uncles, stuff like that around Bolton, and growing up as a polite people-pleaser, as many of us are... [laughs]

Gaylene Gould: [laughs] I'm really glad that that comes in handy! It's good there's a use for that...

Hetain Patel: Yeah! [Laughs] I know, right? Yeah, yeah. So, we like each other, [Laughs] you know, but I mean, some of those works couldn't happen until a certain point in my family. Our family hasn’t always been like this. It is a place that had violence in it, that had all of the other shit in it that can make families fracture or break or separate.

[10:00]

And then something happened in our family, which changed things, and we were able to rebuild into a new unit. And this is incredible. You know, there's more than thirty of us in this country, thirty-four, you know, and now it's in this place that's really different. And so, for example, with The Jump, what I did is asked everyone, whoever’s free on this particular weekend, can you just turn up to my Gran’s dressed to go to a wedding, and I'm gonna bring a camera crew, and that's it. It'll be fun. And they didn't ask for more. They were just up for it as a fun thing to do. And then just kind of went along with what the shoot was. And so, it's not that in that moment I'm talking about why I'm doing it. I think the why is in how we're interacting together, the why is in that place, in that moment.

It's reflected in the fact that I'm not sitting there and barking orders. We're still a family. And for me, the completion of that work or the big part of that work is when they see it in a gallery, witnessed by other people. And to get specific with that, when they, as immigrants to the UK, witness white middle class audiences standing and witnessing and loving seeing...
them on the big screen in slow motion. It’s them, you know, it’s a portrait. And they’re not just watching it. They’re sitting down and watching it repeatedly.

[Music begins with inquisitive electronic notes, rising up the scale and repeating under the speech]

You know, not just seeing themselves in it, but you might be a different ethnicity, you might be a different gender, you might be a different nationality, whatever, but still see something in, in the humanity of that. I guess, that’s important to me. You know, it’s important that it doesn’t just exist as an exercise in aesthetics, which is still a valid part of art, obviously, but I need it to do something.

Gaylene Gould: Listening again, I’m struck by the acts of generosity in Hetain’s work and how for him, it seems the most important audience for his work is his own family. Meaning that the transformation he wishes his work to facilitate is their transformation, while also transforming the way a family is seen by others. We’ll hear more from Hetain later on in the episode. But joining me now in the studio to unpack these familial feelings, is Serpentine’s Associate Civic Curator, Lizzie Graham. Hi Lizzie!

Lizzie Graham: Hi Gaylene. Thanks for having me.

Gaylene Gould: So great to have you here. You facilitate lots of group work and this often moves into quite intimate territories. So, can you explain a bit what you do.

Lizzie Graham: Yeah, so I work at Serpentine in a team with two other curators called Amal Khalaf and Layla Gatens. And I suppose for me, I started doing this work a very long time ago through youth work. So, I’ve always been interested in how people change and how systems change and what kinds of relationships are needed in order to resource and shape these changes. So, as a curator and a facilitator, I found myself specifically interested in the role of art and creativity in processes of social and personal transformation. And in the Civic team, we often talk about convening spaces to rehearse and practice the futures that we long for.

Gaylene Gould: That’s beautiful. I love that

Lizzie Graham: [laughs] Yeah. We’re always thinking about how does this work of change happen collectively and also with the people most affected by the experiences and stories and struggles, and also the people who have been producers of culture since day one, but that hasn’t been kind of recognised or valued or platformed. So, we work a lot with grassroots groups, a lot of organisations, and also within civic structures. And today it’s interesting to be invited to speak about the work in this context of intimacy as family. And, and I think for me, I felt instantly a lot of discomfort or unsettled.
Gaylene Gould: Yes, me too.

Lizzie Graham: [laughs] Yeah, yeah. Having to speak about something that’s obviously quite personal. I mean, maybe the only way I can describe the feeling is that, you know, when a seabed becomes unsettled, [rising electronic notes dissolve into deep ambient tones that evolve more slowly, reflective in mood] churned up and stirred up. And I’m sort of aware that some of the things that we might share today might touch on or resonate with our own experiences and journeys and for those people that are also listening. And so I thought like it’s important to listen to that information that my body gave me and tend to that. And so I wanted to begin our conversation with a breathing exercise.

Gaylene Gould: Oh, I’d love that.

Lizzie Graham: This invitation is from adrienne maree brown’s Holding Change opening, which we use and adapt when facilitating groups. Let’s begin by closing our eyes or keeping them open with a soft focus, whichever is more comfortable. Start to become more conscious of your breath and take a few deep breaths in and out, keeping the breath low in the belly. Now imagine that in front of you is a ball of energy. It is yours, an extension of you, it hovers in the air shifting with your attention. [Pauses between sentences] Breathe out, while pushing this invisible ball of energy away from you. Breathe in, bringing the energy into and all around you. Breathe out, and move the ball around your head, creating a beautiful umbrella above you. Breathe in, bring it back to the centre, and hold it there. Breathe out, and take it down through your bones to the floor. Breathe in, rolling back up and bringing the energy back into your heart. Keep breathing. And when you’re ready, open your eyes slowly and return from being with self to being with self and other.

[Pause; gentle ambient tones continue]

Gaylene Gould: Lizzie, thank you so much. I really needed that grounding and the energy. And I think you’re right. I think this is a stirring conversation, right? I’ve been approaching these intimacy episodes with a very different energy, I think from last series, I am much more trepidatious. It’s really interesting. You were saying a bit about how it’s churning for you. What does family mean to you? What’s your relationship to this idea of family?

Lizzie Graham: I think about family in a way where I think about all the people that have shaped me, and all the people that I carry with me, and the people that have guided me and taught me how to relate to and be with others. [Music fades to silence] I think the reason it also stirred for me is that I have an understanding of how family can be this place of care and nurture and love, but it can also be a place of grief, pain, harm, you know, where we inherit things that don’t necessarily belong to us or serve us anymore. And it can be a real process in
order to understand what those things might be. And I was thinking a lot recently, I was lucky enough to be in New York at this gathering of abolitionist organisers, and it was called Beyond the Bars: Seeding Justice, and it was focused on looking at Indigenous approaches to harm. And I was in a peacemaking circle that was being led by Navajo Nation leaders. A question that they asked all of us was to begin by sharing a value that someone had given us. And I suppose today, I wanted to sort of share a value that my sister gave me as a way of speaking about family or what family means to me. And she has this real ability to really move between deep sincerity, but also laughter, and to hold joy and pain in one conversation. And I think that really relates to the type of work that I do. I think creating those spaces where we can both feel pleasure and feel good, but we can also feel distress or pain, and how can we hold that together. I think in general, my siblings are kind of very important to me and who I am. And I think they’ve really shown me ways in which we can observe each other, or witness each other, and give each other permission to do that together. That’s kind of what family means to me.

Gaylene Gould: It’s a powerful, energetic idea of what family can bring to each of us. So, I’m curious in terms of what Hetain was talking about in terms of his relationship with his own family and his work, what stood out for you?

Lizzie Graham: I think it really stood out to me this idea of transformation through relationships and how people will always bring with them their social context and what they’re shaped by. And that can be our family context, our community context, and the environments that we live in. But it all starts with a process of listening. And I think, like I said about my family or my experience with my siblings of this loving observation, I think there’s something in that conversation with his Dad of this desire to... How do we get to know someone? But also, how do we live alongside the things that we don’t know about someone?

Gaylene Gould: And also, the idea of love being a verb, right? It’s an act of doing. For someone who's verbose, likes talking, likes these kind of spaces, you know.... I can take that energy back into my family house and they’re looking at me like, what are you talking about? You know, the act of doing, the act of being together, the act of cooking together, the act of gardening together becomes the ways in which relationships are built. And Hetain really has that understanding, doesn’t he, in his work?

[20:00]

Lizzie Graham: Yeah, that desire to connect, I think, is really also spoken about in the way that he talks about where and how do we meet the world. And I think the ways in which we meet the world is in relationship to each other, you know, also to the natural world. And I
think that really stayed with me, this exchange about spending time and actually understanding that everybody has something to offer. Everybody has something that they’re passionate about. Everybody has things that they want to share and be understood.

[Soft synthetic electronic notes begin, layering chords that evolve beneath speech]

Gaylene Gould: Yes. So, you’ve brought something with you today, Lizzie.

Lizzie Graham: Yeah, today I’ve brought with me a recording of a song from a project with Helen Cammock called Bass Notes and SightLines: The Voice as a Site of Resistance and the Body as a Site of Resilience. And the piece was made in collaboration with a group of women who were both facilitators on a programme called Pause, but also women who were on the programme. Pause practitioners are a group of facilitators, care workers who actually left statutory social care because they wanted to find a different way in order to support people who were experiencing – or specifically women who were coming into contact with – the social care system. And it’s probably one of the most transformative processes that I’ve been a part of where I feel like there’s a lifetime of reflections in this work that will really sustain me for the rest of my life.

I think similar to Hetain describing the ways in which the work that they do feeds back into that understanding of how to build relationships in their personal life, I think for me, this project really gave me a new understanding of how families can experience a lot of fracture and a lot of fragmentation, but we can still find ways of being together and healing together that allow us to connect even in moments where we think that’s not possible. Also, when we were performing and when we were rehearsing, my brother and my sister were in the room, I just looked over and he just started crying. He won’t mind me saying, but like, sobbing. And I think that whilst I was performing this work, a song that has been collectively written by, you know, women who are experiencing a lot of separation and a lot of endings where they’ve had no choice, I was witnessing my brother feel that, but also feel that from his own context, from his own experiences of separation and endings within our family. And it was really difficult to both perform and also be watching him. And I think there’s such a level of bravery in this project. [Music fades to silence]

Helen Cammock: [Helen’s voice reads clearly, with slight echo] To understand touch, we must remember how it feels to breathe. Without a breath, the lungs don’t move. Without movement, our systems close down. To reach is to activate movement. To reach inside the body is to activate movement. This space enables us to exist or survive. If an event of extreme or even non-extreme distress happens, we might be left without sound. We might be left in vacuumed silence. Not with the calm of quiet, but with the vibration of silence. Vibrations felt through the impulses and agitations of a silent hum. This does exist. You know it, if
you’ve heard it, you will know it, if you take time to listen. It is one thing to be alone. It is another to feel alone. If I could show you what I mean, I would. If I could tell you what I mean, I would. It is one thing to speak. It is another to move. There is courage in reaching towards a sound, in someone else or inside yourself. Make no mistake. There is bravery in sound.

[Acoustic guitar begins, accompanied by heartfelt alto singing] Cos there’s something about you. I’m listening in your silence, I’m listening in your silence, I sing, I sleep, I feel the rain, sometimes it doesn’t come again, I hurt, I cry, I rise, and around me, always skies... I breathe.... I breathe....

**Choir:** [Group of younger voices join in harmony with the acoustic guitar and singing voice; sung with sense of collective, redemptive purpose] Cos there’s something about you. I’m listening in your silence. I’m listening in your silence. I sing, I sleep. I feel the rain. Sometimes it doesn’t come again. I hurt, I cry, I rise, and around me always, skies, I breathe... I breathe... And you say you don’t feel like it, and you say you don’t feel it anymore. And you say you can’t feel like it, and that you are quite different from before... Before... Before... And you say you don’t feel like it, and you say you don’t feel it anymore, and you say you can’t feel like it, and that you are quite different from before... Before... Before... Because there’s something about you, I’m listening in your silence, I’m listening in your silence. I sing, I sleep, I feel the rain. Sometimes it doesn’t come again. I hurt, I cry, I rise, and around me always, skies, I breathe... I breathe... And you say you don’t feel like it and you say you don’t feel it anymore, and you say you can’t feel like it, and that you are quite different from before... Before... Before... [Choir and Helen sing more quietly] And you say you don’t feel like it and you say you don’t feel it anymore, and you say you can’t feel like it, and that you’re quite different from before... Before... Before... [Voices grow in strength and sing more loudly; Helen’s guitar drops out and the choir finishes the song in a cappella crescendo] Because there’s something about you, we’re listening in your silence, we’re listening in your silence, you sing, you sleep, you feel the rain. Sometimes it doesn’t come again. You hurt, you cry, you rise and around you always, skies. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe... [Song finishes]

**Helen Cammock:** [Reading clearly with slight echo] My question remained unanswered, unsettled, wobbly, thirsty. I level myself, an inside-out landing a constellation of stars. I change where I’m stood.

[Gentle ambient electronic tones return]

**Gaylene Gould:** [Breathes out, audibly moved] Hmm. I, um, yeah... I’m... every time I hear this, I feel this such a strong emotion. It’s welling... And I, and I think listening to it this time, I think I realise why. There’s something about the intergenerational voice. You know,
there's something about when the young women's voices come in, and there's this sort of dialogue between the two... That I just, it really does encapsulate something around family and healing somehow. You know, it's incredible.

**Lizzie Graham:** There's this lyric in the song, well, it's called 'Listening in Your Silence'. And I always love singing the bridge part, which is the part where we are saying, I don't feel like it anymore. And there's a part that we say, which is about being different from before. My brother and also my sister have witnessed me changing over a period of time. And I think that what was so beautiful about that conversation between me and my brother while I was performing and they were watching was that it could be unspoken.

**Gaylene Gould:** And I think there's something in that that speaks, I think, to family and the importance even growing up within a family, we have to keep reclaiming our voice. We have to keep finding it again. So, thank you. Thank you for the project, thank you for bringing it. So, this all connects to Hetain's work. As we heard earlier, a lot of his work centres around family, and his studio reflects that with family mementos dotted around. So, he gave me a bit of a tour.

[Graceful ambient electronic tones continue]

**Hetain Patel:** ...And then over here we've got a bunch of stuff, which I've inherited from my Gran, including her industrial sewing machine, the record player that was at my grandmother's home, and the speakers and the music-playing kit and the radio from the seventies. [Music fades to silence] You know, I guess I consider myself a temporary custodian of these things. I don't feel like I necessarily own them. They sort of belong to the family, but I'm probably gonna use them in works. I like the idea of some of my performance works where I speak or sing, for example... I'm interested for that sound to come out of these speakers. You know, the only thing that's ever come out of these speakers is seventies Bollywood records. And so, yeah, it feels like it's gonna feel really satisfying to get to reactivate these things in a different way, I guess.

Part of what I'm interested in now is also making propositions. So, if one important part is the history, the deference, the remembrance, the carrying of the trauma, what's next? How do we do the next thing? I would be immensely frustrated to stay in that first place all the time. Don't get me wrong, I go back to it, and I still carry a lot of deep anger. However, ultimately, in each moment I do want to get to this place of making propositions for how we go forward. That's where a lot of metaphorical leaps happen in my work. Whether it's the leap of Spidey across that living room, which is the potential leap of migration, or a desire for the leap of my generation to wanna leave that household and to be here and integrated here, or the films that I make that are kind of highly stylised and Hollywood, again, are leaps.
They’re making propositions to have ourselves in places that we as a society have told ourselves are important, and to put ourselves in there, not in a daily *EastEnders* kind of way, but in *Avengers*, now *Black Panther*, now *Top of the World*, in ways we haven’t seen ourselves before. I feel like part of my job is being one of many people who do it to imagine ourselves in ways that we’ve not been imagined before. Or at least that we’ve not been allowed to imagine ourselves on those platforms before. So, I feel like that’s another thing that feels important for me in terms of what I wanna be to my family. The strength and the power to imagine... or the audacity, even, to imagine beyond, I guess.

**Gaylene Gould:** Yeah. It always reminds me of something that in my teenage plus angst years, [Hetain laughs] which lasted a long time, probably still going on. And my Mum was just saying, ‘I just want you to be happy’. You know, and there’s something about that desire of that generation, and they came here to make us happier, you know?

**Hetain Patel:** Mm, yeah! That’s right! That’s right! So, you’ve gotta be careful that we don’t take that away. I am immensely grateful for it. And I feel like part of having my family in the work is to celebrate that. The reason *Transformers* come up a lot in my work is its metaphor for transformation. This idea of transforming ourselves. It’s not that I wanna put a specific on what that transformation is. It can be different for all of us, right? It is about that. I’m immensely proud of what my family are and what they’ve come from and what they’ve continued to get past. As you know, it’s not smooth. It comes with lots of steps back and it comes with family turmoil, separations and factions and coming back together and, you know, all of the messy stuff. It’s not like sunshine and lollipops.

**Gaylene Gould:** Yes. Your work couldn’t take place without that two-way deep engagement – that is what you would call it, right, if you were doing it within communities, it’s like a real trust. It also reminds me of that idea that love is a verb, you know? When you keep saying it’s an act of doing. It’s not the conversations you have. You do something together. And that’s kind of how you share love in that way. Yeah. It’s really lovely.

[Gentle ambient electronic tones return]

**Hetain Patel:** It’s important to me, what’s important to people! You know, in that exchange, it is important to me that, you know, I want to do this, but I don’t just do it because I need this image, or I need this film. Part of that still has to be taken into consideration, what’s important to you.

**Gaylene Gould:** Where Hetain takes us, the leap, the concept of the proposition, is so fresh and exciting, isn’t it? Because families are where we are forged. We can spend a lot of time thinking about the past and not much time thinking about the future. It’s really exciting, isn’t it, to hear him?
Lizzie Graham: Yeah, I think what really stayed with me is this desire not to be lived by the traumas of the past generation, but to also understand that we do carry them with us, but we don’t want them to continue to make decisions for us without agency or without freedom. And that we can feel into our intuition and kind of discern between what is happening to us in any given moment. Especially, you know, within a family structure where there’s, like you say, so much that has taken place, and how do we then move from a place where we’re really deciding what it is that feels good for us.

Gaylene Gould: It’s a nice link actually to another gift that we’ve been offered this series. We’ve invited a range of artists and musicians to create for us special sound pieces using intimacy as a starting point. And so, for this Family episode, we were thrilled to invite the American filmmaker and interdisciplinary artist, Angelo Madsen Minax. His work is often deeply personal and reflects on trans intimacies and structures of kinship, personal stories of queerness, friendships, romances, chosen family, and family of origin. His 2021 film North by Current followed his family over many years, after the loss of his young niece, documenting and exploring grief and relationships in the wake of tragedy. We invited Angelo to create a sound piece reflecting on intimacy in family. And here he is to introduce it.

Angelo Madsen Minax: [with slight echo] A lot of my roots are actually really as a musician, as a songwriter. [Music fades to silence; Long electric guitar tone extends under speech] And I love to bring the sort of lineage of folk music and storytelling traditions to some of my projects. And I don’t always get to do it as literally as I’ve got to do it in this piece. I work a lot with my chosen family and my biological family in my other projects also. So, this didn’t feel like a stretch at all and I really enjoy getting to integrate some of my interests in repetition and decay and stasis and refrain within this sort of, almost folk song kind of form.

[Layered guitar melody continues as drone fades out and returns; reverb returns on Angelo’s voice] If I come home now, there won’t be no readings... [Layered guitars dissolve to a single
guitar and Angelo’s voice becomes clear again] From here, anything’s good news... And Mamma, I’m starving, for a new kind of story... Where we don’t end in jail, or dead... If we outlive this, if we outlive this, if we outlive, if we live... [Angelo’s voice softens in melancholy and defiance as the song comes to an end, guitar slowly fading to silence]

Gaylene Gould: Mmm. [Gentle ambient electronic tones return with sense of warmth] So powerful, and heartrending, the mournful folk song is such a good genre for family, isn’t it? It captures so much of that feeling.

Lizzie Graham: Yeah, I grew up in a house with music and my Dad was a musician, [Ambient tones become more reflective] and this really reminded me of some of the songs that he would play. And going back to what music and song can offer us, I had a quite complex relationship with my Dad, and we found it very difficult to find common ground or find connection. One of the ways we did connect was through sharing music. And I think one of my most precious possessions is that he would burn me CDs off his PC [laughs] and these have his handwriting on. And I definitely think the folk song or the idea of the ballad is about, how we publicly tell stories of grief and mourning. And I think what I really love about this piece is its washes of sound. It gives you a lot of space and I feel like I’m sort of swimming when I’m listening to it and gives you time to interpret what Angelo is saying.

Gaylene Gould: Yeah, and also, you know, the ballad, this ringing with yearning, you know, that sense of oozing loss and regret. The line of, I was so busy, she was left alone, you know, really struck home for me thinking about my own parent, my mother. So, Angelo, thank you. It’s such a generous offer for us. And Lizzie, I think you’ve brought us one last piece of audio.

Lizzie Graham: It’s a clip from a project called *Everything Worthwhile is Done with Other People*, with the artist Rehana Zaman. The project takes up conversations and experiences of a group of women affected by the carceral state as encountered through the UK government’s hostile environment policy and the prison system. It began as a series of workshops with an organisation called Hibiscus Initiatives. It’s been running for about six years, so it’s also one of the longest projects that I’ve worked on. The group became sort of independent of the organisation. We were sort of really looking at, I suppose, the ways in which the state inscribes itself onto the body through incarceration. And the reason I wanted to share it today is that, in spite of these conditions, similarly to in *Bass Notes and SightLines*, solidarity and love can and does prevail.

And I think I specifically chose this clip because as I said, it’s one of the longest projects that I’ve worked on and has a very special place in my heart for many reasons. But on a really personal level, the project began in the aftermath of my Dad’s death. And during the process of the project, I also lost a very close chosen family member and precious friend, Emma. So,
as much as I held and facilitated, I was also held, comforted, fed, cared for, and witnessed, and was continually reminded of what Saidiya Hartman says that care will always be the antidote to violence. So, in this clip, we hear Becky, another member of the group singing at the end of her birthday party in 2019. And I think what I really love about this clip is not only her amazing voice, but also the sounds of everybody celebrating her, which really speaks to so much of my experience of being in the group. [Music fades out]

Becky: [Singing powerfully in a raw, soulful tone, recorded in an open space] I’m grateful for your love, I’m grateful for your love. I just wanna say thank you! Thank you, thank you! Thank you, yeah... [Speaking] Thank you, everyone!
[Audience applauds, screams and laughs wildly – a voice in the audience says, ‘you should apply for X-Factor!’]
[Music fades out]

Gaylene Gould: Go Becky! [Laughs] And go, Lizzie. Thank you so much Lizzie, for being with us today and sharing so many personal stories and stories from your gorgeous work. Is there any final thought on intimacy you’d like to leave us with?

Lizzie Graham: Yeah, one of the first things that came to me when you invited me to speak about intimacy as family was a poem by a poet called Layli Long Soldier. And it’s about her daughter: 'In our home, in our family, we are ourselves. Real feelings be true.'

Gaylene Gould: Lizzie, thank you. And thanks to everybody who’s been part of this tender episode.

Therapists will tell us that our foundational beliefs on how we intimately connect with others are forged first in our relationships with our family. So, this is why this episode strikes deep. So much of our wiring is found entangled in these fragile, tender relationships. And the offerings today had me question my own attempts, or lack of, to shift and deepen my family relationships with the love and commitment that Hetain demonstrates. Angelo’s stirring song echoed my own loss and regret, and Lizzie’s contributions are a vital reminder that creating caring and healing families is a collective endeavour, and a good place to start is to breathe together.

I don’t know about you, but for me, a sense of guilt can often surround the family: guilt from failing to create the perfect model that advertisers trot out daily. This episode, though, cemented the truth that there is no such thing as a perfect family, even if you are lucky enough to have perfect moments. Because families are made of people, and there are no perfect people. And like people, all families evolve, families are alive and sometimes families end or break, and sometimes we must step away. What I am realising as this series unfolds and we delve deeper into intimacy is that there’s no place to hide. We have to show ourselves.
So, thank you to all those contributors who have shown themselves to us in this episode and offered their intimate perspective so generously. Until our next intimate encounter, take care of yourselves and your loved ones.

*Serpentine Podcast: Intimacies* is presented by me, Gaylene Gould. The series was produced by Katie Callin, with support from Nada Smiljanic and Anishka Sharma at Reduced Listening, and was curated by Hanna Girma and Fiona Glen. [Music fades out, rising electronic notes return] Thanks to all members of Serpentine’s Programmes, Communications and Audiences teams for their direction and contribution. Special thanks to Yesomi Umolu, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Bettina Korek.

[50:00]

The theme music for Intimacies was conceived and produced by Hinako Omori. Our thanks go to all guests, contributors and advisors.

[Music fades to silence]