

CCA DERRY~ LONDONDERRY

CCA Round Table podcast #4 – listen on CCA's [YouTube channel](#) or our [Spotify page](#)

Priya Mistry (**PM**) in conversation with
fellow artists Nithya Nagarajan (**NN**) and Hetain Patel (**HP**),
mediated by CCA Director Catherine Hemelryk (**CH**)

0:00

CH: Welcome to the next in our series of Round Table podcasts from the Centre for Contemporary Art Derry~Londonderry. I'm Catherine Hemelryk, CCA's Director, and I'm delighted to be introducing Priya Mistry, Nithya Nagarajan and Hetain Patel. Priya Mistry is based in the Midlands of England and is a multidisciplinary artist, socially engaged practitioner and creative producer covering dance, performance, visual and live art. Priya explores possibilities of choreographies between bodies, objects and space. She frequently partners with institutions to disrupt the status quo. Priya's practice adds discourse to the topics of mental health, neurodiversity, feminist politics, identity, sex and queerness, and climate. They deconstruct language, exploring sensory non-word based vocabularies, exploring possibilities and choreographies between bodies and objects as sculptural propositions, as static and moving arrangements. In 2020, Priya attempted to get to Australia by boat and sea – no flights – for a research residency with Critical Path, just as the pandemic erupted. Priya is an associate artist DAO (Disability Arts Online); In Good Company consortium, Derby Theatre; Quarter Master for the Artistic Mutiny; artist member of Chisenhale Dance Space; Eastside Projects; and Onyx Collective. You can see Priya in Emily Speed's *Flatland* exhibition and film work at Tate Liverpool until June 2022. She's working on a new moving image commission with Unlimited for Release next year, too. Nithya Nagarajan joins us from Australia, and is an artist and curator. Her practice adopts movement as a system of inquiry into the sacred, essential and the decolonial. She describes her performance work as affecting sensory perceptions of witness through collaborative process of meaning making, underpinned by a strong feminist sensibility. Nithya often invites non-artists as co-performers in participatory projects, such as her dance project *Sacred Grooves for Secular Spaces*. As well as interactive projects for children and young people, Nithya's curatorial practice finds her collaborating with artist-activists from the sub-continent to present body based interventions in a range of contexts. She holds an award winning PhD in performance studies, and has had writing appear in publications Peril magazine, Liminal magazine and ArtsHub. She is currently working on a chapter for Routledge Reader, and a one woman semi-autobiographical dance theatre work on the coming of age in a culture of abuse. Hetain Patel is based in London, and is a visual artist and performance maker, frequently working with artists' family and non-professionals, as well as across disciplines and across languages – culturally and artistically. Hetain's practice has led him to doing Bruce Lee impersonations on stage in the Royal Opera House, undertaking commissions for Tate Modern, making a working class transformer robot out of an old Ford Fiesta (with his dad, he points out) and designed part of a mini golf course for the Venice Biennale. Hetain describes himself as being interested in connecting marginalised identities with the mainstream in an effort to destabilise notions of authenticity, and promote personal freedom. With an autobiographical starting point, he uses humour and the languages of popular culture to highlight familiarity within the exotic, recognition within the unknown.

Sometimes this involves exploring fantasy through a DIY domestic lens, whilst other works emulate the high production values of Hollywood. Hetain is a New Wave Associate at Sadler's Wells, London; a patron of QUAD, Derby; and also Film London's Jarman Award. He sits on the artists' council for AM. He is the winner of the Film London Jarman Award (2019), Kino Der Kunst Festival's Best International Film (2020), and you can currently see his work in the British Art Show now touring throughout 2022. Now, we're here because of you – Priya. Priya, I first met you back in the Midlands in England, where I'm originally from, and where I was working at the time, when you were performing part of Lucy Suggate's *Swarm Sculptures*, and I knew that I'd keep an eye on your practice and hoped to work with you in the future. And this podcast came about following your residency with us here at CCA earlier this year, and when we talked about doing this Round Table and potential guests, you wonderfully wanted to invite Hetain and Nithya. I'd love to chat briefly about what it was about their practices that drew you to inviting them.

4:48

PM: Yeah, I feel like I should say hello properly to Nithya and Hetain – it's great to see you. Not that it's any less nice to see you Hetain but it's gorgeous to see you, Nithya. I really miss you – I just needed to say that. I think also that Nithya had left a deeply felt impression on my heart and my person during my visit to Australia and beyond, and the whole time I was there. And I deeply miss you, so it's really great to have you in this space, and we had many incredible dialogues – just chats – we just spoke, and in speaking we understood that there was – I don't have words for this, but this kind of rubbing my hands together or fingers together on each hand. It's about some kind of substance – I don't know, some sort of connection. I'm sure Nithya will find better words for this to describe it. It's like a really heartfelt connection, and my invitation to the both of you is from this position of lots of things, like obviously we all think about some form of identity and decolonialisation in our work. We're working in different parts of the world and that speaks very much to the histories of colonisation – those that are not taught and promoted, and how our identities sit – whether we're in the UK or Australia, or somewhere else, and what that shift is – what that does, what happens for us. I know that we all have that sort of element of international crossover and that we all – Nithya, I know you studied in the UK, so we have the UK connection, and a kind of heritage connection in India, but Nithya I think you were born there. With Hetain, what I found interesting is that we both studied in the Midlands and came up through the Midlands scene, so we have a lot of people, places, practices and times in common. It would be very for us, I think, to be friends but we've not actually been in the same space very much. Just in this observation from a distance – Hetain's over there, I'm over here – and I think there's been these things going on in our practices that we've never been in dialogue with. In the last year and a half – so during the pandemic – then the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, there have been many dialogues that I've been invited into and I'm often finding myself as that 'token Brown' or 'Brown type' on a panel, and often talking to a room of white folk basically, and I really wanted not to do that. Also, while I was in Australia, Nithya had started this thing called Homework Club – isn't it?

8:08

NN: It's just Homework.

8:10

PM: Yeah, and it involved artists who are based in that region and time zone in Austral-Asia or Asia-Austral – it was the first time that I'd been in a room with practitioners who also have contemporary resonance who are all Brown – yeah, just that I've never been more seen in a room, and there were two other Priyas in the room. I think one of the other

Priyas said 'I've never been more seen' and I was like yeah, totally. So I guess this invitation is this want to connect and this enjoyment of Hetain's practice from a distance, and the humour in your work as well, because it's just something that I really enjoy. We're both cross-discipline by I think perhaps we approach that in different ways. And it's just an excuse to be in the room with Nithya and hear the brilliant things she has to say also. I'll stop there and pop back into the room and let someone else go.

9:11

CH: Perhaps we can pick up on the point of talking cross-discipline; something that threads very much through your practices is working across disciplines – not just using any medium, but fully engaging with different canons and discourse structures, different disciplines. Hetain, perhaps starting with you, what attracts you to working in this way? And maybe an impossible question, but did you have a first passion?

9:35

HP: Yeah, I mean, just to kickoff, just to sort of pick up a bit on what Priya was saying there actually, you know, I echo a lot of that in terms of sentiment and feelings. I know exactly what you mean in terms of, you know, coming up in the Midlands and doing our own thing, crossing over and bumping into each other occasionally. I find the same in London when I've been to London, there's slots of artists that I follow and admire but don't necessarily get to hang out with and and part of me wonders whether it was a bit like we're sort of aware that each other are doing the work. You sort of hold your pulse and do the work and you're sort of grateful that there's some other people who're also doing the work and sometimes it's a bit of a luxury to be able to talk together about it, connect about it. And probably in a similar vein of what Priya said, since Black Lives Matter happened – since then, for all of us in different ways things have just exploded and there's a sort of retraumatising effect and that definitely had me hankering to connect more with other artists, artists of colour. And so I've slowly been doing that, you know, it's hard to do, isn't it? Lockdowns and we're all busy doing stuff and whatever, but I've definitely been nourished doing this – and in a typical fashion, you sort of go wow, I haven't done this before. It feels so good. And with this added thing of, since Black Lives Matter has happened, in the sort of semi-clumsy way that different art worlds sort of go 'yeah, let's give commissions to Brown people' and as much as part of you goes 'okay, we'll see what happens next year' when it's going to be cool to be green or something. But at the same time, it's also been a joy of seeing your practice and other people's practices out there doing things and again, finding that nourishing so I was really grateful when you connected to do this chat, and hopefully we can kind of connect more. So getting back to your question, Catherine, in terms of the multidisciplinary thing, I think probably at the beginning – the reason that I will move from medium to medium – it took a long time for me to realise that I like to work in different media or that I didn't see myself as an artist working with a single medium. Like when I was at uni, the things that I graduated with, which was photography, and kind of self-portraiture, but still photographs all the time. And then the first time the local paper or something probably mentioned me as a photographer, and I was like, 'why are they calling me a photographer? I'm not a photographer' and you know, a mate of mine was like, 'well you've only ever shown photographs', and I was like, 'oh, right' – that sort of made me want to just do some video, or do performance even though I'd never done performance. I hated the idea of being called a photographer or filmmaker or performance artist or whatever, and so initially it was kind of in opposition to being called something I guess, but now I feel like it's – I feel like you know, as artists and having art practice, you're supposed to – it doesn't really amount to a lot – but you're supposed to have freedom. You're supposed to feel free. It's you know, this kind of journey towards being free and and sometimes I find myself in it

and a bunch of times I find myself not in it. And the thing about that is I find for me personally, if I find myself restricting myself to a single way of engaging or researching or communicating I don't know why I'm restricting myself. I feel like when we live in the world, we receive things and engage with things in all different ways – through physical touch, through movement, through visuals, through audio, through the screen – so why wouldn't I communicate that way as well? You know, and receive it this way that feels natural or instinctive to communicate in different ways, if you like, and then secondly, I feel like it also allows me to be able to indulge in different media. Often something comes from a singular idea, not necessarily sure if it's meant to be sculpture or performance or film, and so I start trying all of these things, and sometimes very quickly some don't work and I'll stay stuck with one thing. Sometimes they all work and I do them all, but they all end up doing really different things because there's things that that medium can do that others cannot or they work in different contexts. And that gives me the freedom to indulge in that. So, if I'm working in sculpture for an idea, after the idea's developed, I give myself permission to really indulge in the materiality of it and not think about the other stuff just because I can, that I wouldn't do in another medium, perhaps. I just feel like there's different ways to say something. I always think about working cross-disciplinary as having grown up bilingual, and even though it was the bane of my life at times—it's one of the things that gets you bullied, and you know anything Indian—that now I feel really grateful for it. I consider it a superpower; it feels like without realising it at the time, it feels like it ingrained me with this idea that there isn't just one way to say something or one way to understand something, or one way to create something.

14:30

HP: I feel like that is kind of part of the source-bed of my practice in terms of how that manifests in different media. I'm babbling here, but just to answer the question, if I was to kind of—I don't know if I've got a preferred medium, I think it's probably the body. But I don't know if that's answering the medium because I film a lot and do performance a lot, but the things that connects all of them is the body, and that's still how I research most things – not even necessarily consciously – but I'm aware this is where it's coming from. I guess the journey of trying to have more access to my body. I saw this new film recently from artist Florence Peake, she's an incredible performer and I just came away thinking that she just has incredible access to her own body, and I feel like my practice is a bit like that and I'm on a journey to do that. Alright, I'm going to shut up.

15:24

PM: I was just gonna say, I resonate with quite a lot of things there. One thing I wanted to say is that sometimes I feel as though they are—'they' are like spreading out the Brown people, like we can't have them both at the same time. And I feel like a deep desire for there to be more voices and more speakers, and of different generations and ages so that we can we can do this as well. And I imagine that if we did this on a panel ,but there would also be people in the room not knowing what to do, but having an insight into actually what it's like for us to even be in the room in the first place. So yeah, I just kind of wanted to say that, and then also on the bilingual front – and what you were saying about the body being the main medium – actually that's really beautiful. don't have a main medium but I think the body is certainly how I access things. I love Florence's practice as well – I've worked with her and I keep going back to that relationship of working with Florence, and when you invite her into a space she just comes in the from the body and moves through through the body. Everything is through the body. Everything is spoken through the body. But yeah, on the cross discipline front, I think I've resisted from the get go. Like being one thing, I just felt like nobody understood that. So to some people I'm like, a choreographer, and to some people I'm a body based visual artist, something like that.

To some people I'm a dancer, and then like one day I'm in the play studio and another I'm working as a dancer for somebody else on the film project or you know, whatever it is, but all of those choices are not just random or to do specific sets of interests as well. I think what I tend to find other than this entrance from the point of the body is I have an idea or have ideas or ideas on processes that come about and instead of—I'm not like an end product person. I'm very much about process. And it took me a while to be able to assert that actually, because people are so product orientated and I think that's such a huge—like for me, the value is in the process and in the process you can be exploring everything so for me is the processes. Nithya, I don't know if you find this with socially engaged practice – for me socially engaged practice is entirely about process of being and being together and how that works and what you do and how you connect, and it's far less about 'have we made a thing that looks like something?' and I've made a version of it – I'd never do that in my socially engaged practice. I never present a thing and say 'we're gonna make this' it's never what happens. I wanted to tell that to each of you. Nithya?

18:30

NN: Yeah, I first of all want to raise my arms out and give you a big hug. It has been so long since I last saw you when we were in a wine bar in my 5k radius, so that is wild to be speaking you on the other side of the world, and it's really interesting to hear you both speak across so many points of resonances, but also radically different contexts coming from where I'm located and I think I will start there; that I am on Cadigal lands, and these are lands that some of you might know as Sydney, but I would like to pay my respects to elder's past and present and give my gratitude to live work, play and rest in the protection of the airways and waterways that surround me and the custodians of a country who have practised 65,000 unbroken years of storytelling. So, that is the context in which I am located, and sovereignty was never ceded.

19:33

NN: So the dialogue of being a Brown person in Australia in my positionality is also a complicated one, because in the positionality of Australia, I am a settler-coloniser. I'm complicit in that process. But then as a minoritised body I am also a product of colonisation. So that relationship is really complicated and when you both are specifically speaking to the Black Lives Matter movement, and kind of regenerating an interest in the structural issues and racism in institutional spaces, and that being shifted to a kind of racial capitalism. That conversation is also very different in the context of where I'm dialling in from where there is a difference between 'BLAK' Black, and the 'BLACK' Black and all those positionalities these are hyper invisible and marginalised in the artistic landscape. Here, the arts landscape in Australia still has only 8% cultural diversity and the metropolitan cities identify as being one of the most multicultural places in the world. So it's a very complicated system to be contending with, and then a complex positionality to occupy within that system as well. So I'm really interested in speaking more and unpacking that, and then with a question on process – I love what you were saying Hetai, about bilingual and the resistance to the pigeonholing. And Priya, you're talking to that from being a young person and always resisting that is so interesting to me because my training initially is in the dance form of Bharatanatyam, which is a neo-classical dance tradition, and I had a one track mind for a lot of my life about becoming a Bharatanatyam performer and I was born not in India, Priya—but then I moved to India as a teenager and trained and performed and did that whole circuit and at some point, the code-switching between the spaces—within the studio space and in real life just didn't fit anymore. And I started to really contend with caste politics of the form, the appropriation, the kind of disservice the form has to its complicated history that tethers to diaspora and its capitalist circulation globally, and that still makes for a love/hate relationship because

I also don't want to deny my body the joy of performance, knowing it intimately in form, but that did come that fissure point from form which is what opened me up really to broader disciplines, and I think today I'm much more interested in a line of inquiry and form is something that comes much later. And form is something that actually serves the question that I'm primarily interested in or the argument that I'm making, and one that I hope to also come to with empathy and invite people into a collaborative process of unpacking that with me. So you're totally right on the socially engaged process and living in a kind of slow and long and process conscious space that is about the moment and there's such an intimacy to it that doesn't always translate or doesn't need to translate to a product. Yeah, so I feel like that is kind of how I come to now navigate multiple spaces and then multiple forms within my own making practices and I'm also interested in South Asian dramaturgical principles, so less about specific form, but about the dramaturgical principles that organically talk about an intrinsic ferocity of disciplines and on learning from First Nations peoples here; there are many First Nations languages that do not even have the word 'artist'. The word 'artist' does not exist in language because it is such a way of being it is considered part of a way of being, which I think is something we can all learn from.

23:36

PM: Yeah, I was thinking this also when Hetain was talking about how some things just don't translate. Like it's not possible. It's not only that there's not an equivalent expression, it's that it's a state of being or it's a cultural context, like it takes account of so many of the things that without having lived experience understood or being enveloped by those things in your life. Yeah, it's non translatable. It's only something that comes with experience, and some of that is also to do with lineage, and it's not even your experience directly lived. It may be that of your parents or your family or other people, but I think I just wanted to speak to this thing of Blackness, and having been in Australia and trying to—I think we had quite a few dialogues about what does it mean to be a Brown person in Australia because it was hard for me to travel anywhere due to the pandemic and I also had a real query about being some sort of voyeur on to Indigenous peoples. And I just didn't—I basically am coming here from there and I know nothing. And I need to learn what this means to actually be this body in this space in this time. And I think there is also just to flip that, you know, to relocate or locate blackness or different types of blackness in different places – that's also without wanting to state a kind of hierarchy historically, perhaps one could say there is a kind of hierarchy and privilege and on the flip side, in the ways in which people have been colonised and suppressed across time, and to what degree and in what ways. So often, I am sort of observing, but that I can't speak of Black experience just as much as I can't speak of Hetain's experience, but also I definitely can't speak of Black experience, and where where is my position relative to that? Something that I haven't totally explored, but it's on my mind, and it's seeping in, which is about anti-Blackness in Brown and Asian societies, so yeah, there's that here in Britain. There is also that in Australia, just in terms of the lands that we're occupying at the moment and there's many more variations on that and I'm curious about that. I don't have any answers, but it's a thing that's on my mind. I do know that—I think, in growing up that the sense of otherness was always very clear, and was very well stated. That to my parents, I was forthrightly told you 'you are Indian first and foremost', which is really problematic for me because what that actually meant is it came with being expected to live a life like this and conform to these things, and being of the first wave of generations that born here, you have to negotiate your identity here as being British and then being Brown, but actually being Asian and I do speak about 'coconutism' and various other fruits in my work as well. Yeah, and I think I've embraced the coconut because at some point, my parents said to me, 'you're more white than you are Brown', which is like a real insult at

the same time, because actually, I think I'm one of the more informed people of my generation about what it actually means to come from those cultural presidencies, and the religious factors, and trying deeply to understand from a really young age, the difference between religion and culture, and just what humans want – what humans want other humans to do for themselves. Just to come back for a moment to this, there's quite a lot of things there. To this otherness is that there was always like 'them' and 'us', that being the white people, and then us being the Indian people, which did not include people of Black origin, that people of Black origin were perhaps almost perceived as an even greater threat in certain circles. And this is what I haven't totally understood the whole span of, because there is this deep thing about fitting in and different degrees of fitting in, and that you're allowed to fit in up to a certain extent but not beyond that. And sometimes that means 'us' could be in alignment—for example, I'm not saying this is absolutely correct—could be an alignment of Brown people and white people and then the 'other' is the Black. You're almost aligned, but now there is potential for the alignment of Brown peoples next to so called black peoples but then there is also this pull of people saying, well, no, because our experience and our lineage, the history and everything that we've come from, is very different as well. So I guess, I'm just actually throwing quite a few thoughts in the pot that are not fully formulated, but are kind of on my mind. Yeah, it feels like this might be a space where I can where I can put that in and it can be investigated. And I'm not saying that my expression of these points is right. I feel quite uncomfortable about how I've expressed a few things, but it's more from the point of inquiry. And I'm just wondering if you guys have anything to say on these things as well.

29:13

HP: Yeah, I can definitely relate to all that, in terms of how I grew up and this idea of 'them' and 'us' and 'them' being any non-Indian actually, not just related to white people and Black people but also Pakistani people or Muslim people, or anyone outside of the specificity of what's going on in your home life. It's a really interesting, problematic thing, and one of the things I've observed in my own family in a way, is the only thing that's changed some of that—not all of it—has been certain people who've taken part or married people who aren't Indian; in my family, the first person to do that was my sister, who married an English guy. That was initially a really turbulent and difficult few years, but when that started to change – and it did change – I think what happened was it started to open up to people from my family to other kinds of otherness, which I didn't really expect, in a way I thought it might be like they decide, okay, it's alright if you're friends with white people, we've got one in the family now, I thought it might be more like that. But actually, there's something that kind of opened up beyond that, and not with everyone don't get me wrong. Yeah, I found that unexpected, I guess. I don't know what that says, but I think part of it was also growing up, it was a bit like movement was really insular. The only people you'd see is people in our family, you know, at weekends you're forced to do family visits. And it's only us as the British-born generation who go to school and mix with the white kids sort of thing, and that insularism is one of the things that really keeps you in this mode of 'them' and 'us' and the otherness. And there's something about—for all of the horrors of modern digital life now, I think that's been some—it's got its big problems, don't get me wrong, but some movement in my family that's kind of opened things up, you know, taking the edge away from some of what you grew up in and internalised – I think that's the thing that was difficult and was part of my journey, my practice and my life had to be a sort of an ongoing undoing. An undoing of internalising that stuff that comes from that generation of anyone outside of what you're supposedly told you are we is bad or indifferent or whatever, and I consider that a practice somehow. So it's really interesting to hear you both talk about process, actually, in terms of your works and I kind of feel like even though I do create a lot of products in working with my family, I think a lot of it is

really connected to the process of those works, and in in those processes, for me at least it feels like I can't do it in my day-to-day life as much, but through my work somehow I feel like some of my political agendas in my work can happen a bit more through engaging my family through my practice, because it creates this space where more things are allowable, and not just for me as a practitioner, but also my family members. You know, if it's in a conversation over a cup of tea, the usual restrictions are there. But if we're playing with this project we can have a bit of fun with it or whatever, it feels like things become a bit more allowable, and not just in a practical way, but emotionally, maybe politically, maybe and I wonder whether that's also something about you both being so engaged in practice? I mean, do you find that that sort of process allows an opening in a way that not working towards a product does? That might be a weird way to say it.

33:06

NN: Yeah, for sure. I think also in a beginner's mind there's possibilities, whereas I think when you're in a form that closes down the boundaries of what remains possible—Priya, I'm really interested in your questions, because I feel often like it's not my space to speak in these conversations, but since you were so vulnerable, I feel compelled to share that I moved here as an adult. So I moved here with a relative self-actualisation that had already taken place. And so I don't feel like I grew up in a relationality to whiteness that has the 'them' and 'us' because I didn't grow up in a country that was predominantly white. So, my sense of self has always been relational to Brownness and growing up in India, and so I think that makes a really big difference in even the spaces that you believe you can take up, and I see it a lot in being able to take up space. But having said that, I think the question you ask with South Asian communities and anti-Blackness, and that is a huge issue, in most parts of the world really, whether that is the subcontinent or overseas and it's impossible to have that conversation without thinking of the history and implications of caste. And I think that's a really hard conversation to have in the diaspora, because so much of the diaspora, certainly in many parts of the world, certainly in Australia are caste-forward. So it becomes a really difficult conversation to have around colourism or anti-Blackness in a caste-forward environment, and when I moved here, I really thought it was a diaspora politic and I could not get myself to engage for a long time because it didn't come from an alliance building or solidarity building perspective. But in the same vein, now having been here and you were talking about Homework having connected to diaspora artists, and having been here for nearly a decade, I also see what the process of uprooting your life and moving does in tightening your grip around that insularity that you were talking about Hetain, what it does to tighten your grip around notions of tradition, or culture. So that tension feels very alive in those spaces. Then in terms of like, not diversity or inclusion, but actually equitable practices. Certainly, in the context of Australia, I see it as First Nations first really, and then going backward from that. So rather than alliance building by the indicators of funding, which put you in 'culturally or linguistically diverse' in Australia, which is just one huge bracket of everybody that does not identify as white. It's really looking at action through the spaces of First Nations people, then people who were displaced or came here on refugee status, then migration of people who came here by choice migration, who are generationally further ahead, like children of migrants being second, third generation and then people who came in on a class migration – I think that gives a framework for building more equitable practices that aren't dictated by the mandates of funding bodies, or how we're asked to classify or speak of our practices. I don't know if that feels like a—they are also just open-ended thoughts. I don't know how that resonates for you, Hetain.

36:54

HP: It's really interesting, this idea of talking about it in terms of equitable practice and the ordering that you just described, and in some ways adds a little bit of clarity to the kind of mess in my head or being overwhelmed of thinking about similar–

37:13

NN: Otherwise, it's racial capitalism really, and then we become coopted by the institution continuously, and we're implicated in different ways. It just shifts that on its head.

37:26

PM: Yeah, I think it's a conversation to keep having, but also with many other voices, but yeah, thank you for speaking to that because I felt vulnerable putting it on the table, but also, being in a sort of exclusively Brown Round Table conversation means that I can put it on the table as well, if that makes sense. And then it's important to say that if it's not spoken about it continues to sort of be invisible and not spoken about not understood. And it's also something that I'm continuously–with white folk around me–continuously doing this work, this anti-racism work, that is my work to do as well. I'm continually pointing that out, that I have to do that work too, and that I don't have all the answers. And I think that's something that's really valuable about being with both of you right now, because also there's this thing of one needing to work harder, and if you're invited in as the Brown element–

38:37

HP: Which also means the diversity expert element, right?

38:40

PM: Yeah. And also like, the least responsible for solving this problem, and for dealing with it, which is a sort of flip that has to do with that whole thing of people dealing with their white supremacy, but that there is also work here as well, absolutely fundamental work, and I think there's a few things about what Nithya was starting to speak about–I'm just wondering about one's role as an artist, and I was thinking about that the other day, because there's many things that have come into play – one, from an early stage that I didn't just want– I was really not attracted to wanting to make work about myself, about my identity, because I felt immediately pigeonholed by that, but actually, also that my first most authentic work was from the place of my own experience and to do with identity. And so it continues to reoccur as well, but there's also something about over time, understanding the importance and the power of that, but another thing that I find problematic as well, other than people noting that we need to do the work or Brown folk need to do the work is also that actually most of my work is met with by white folk, and my dream is for it to be met by Brown folk, at least from the background of my diaspora because I found that to be really problematic. Initially, I was trying to get away from a space that was full of those people because I didn't feel understood there, and then moving into spaces that were full of white people, which allowed me to be something else. So there is this thing about the potential of things, but also the potential of being something other than that which people are telling you what you are or you need to be as well. And I think maybe that also speaks to this thing of form and cross-discipline as well, and resistance towards being one form.

40:46

PM: Because I think through my life, I'm also kind of doing some sort of shape shifting internally and to do with my body and my relationship to my body, and my body's positioning in spaces in the world. I just wonder—for me, there's lots of things at play, you can't escape all the cultural information that comes in. And I think what's useful about the cultural information that's coming from my diaspora is that you're kind of doing culture all the time, and when you've come to this country, and we're surrounded by whiteness, but then you're in a city – I grew up in Leicester – which is like the mini India, one of the cities in Europe where it's so called ethnic population is the majority people, and the biggest Diwali celebrations outside of India are in this place called Leicester, and so on and so forth. And everyone comes to get their wedding stuff in Leicester if they can't do a trip to India; it's the next economically viable situation. I am talking very neurodiversally right now, in all directions – but I think, on the one hand, the very many celebrations and very many rituals are the very many punctuations in your life and in your calendar. As a person coming from my diaspora means that you are actively going and required to perform your culture, and why it feels so distinct is because you don't go and perform your culture at school, you go to a mandir or temple, and you perform your culture there, or you go to a tent that the community has acquired, or a building or the park, and you go and actively perform your culture there, and they're in your diary. I also don't know if you had this, Hetain, and I don't know how it would translate for you, Nithya. There was always a calendar at home, and there still will be—it's the Indian calendar. So you might have the dates in the UK, but actually, we have like the Indian calendar, which is relative to the moon and the cycles and what's happening. And that calendar's actually got resonance with actually with the moon and the situations partially in India, so they've got their own versions, so you're already operating like on a different type of calendar, culturally, racially, not just to do with the elements and the moon, it's not only a pagan concept if you like. You're existing on different cultural planes at the same time, and you go to different places to perform different things here. That's what you do. You're very conscious about—your outfits will change. There are people at school and people in my life who have never seen me in a sari, they just don't know what that looks like.

43:41

PM: They've never seen me in that form. So it would be a real surprise to them to see that, and other people have more of this going on nowadays, but there is a conscious performing of things and it involves song and dance and food and long periods of cooking and going to people's houses and doing certain greetings, and all of that. And so for me, it's like, well I'm always performing. I think this thing of being bilingual as well is I realise that I've grown with an incredible degree of empathy, like I'm very empathetic and very able to read others and I've become very expert in sort of mirroring others, allowing them to feel understood, allowing them to think or feel that I am one of them, which I think is a very deeply ingrained hardcore skill, not just only code-switching through language, but code switching through what you're wearing, your posture or the spaces you inhabit, what you say and what you don't say, what things you do or don't perform and how you explain your absence from something. And at the same time, trying to avoid being simply exoticised and othered when you are asked about your background. I think that is just a response to many things that you were saying, and also that I think to think I've been using in my practice, there's a way to work through lots of things. It's interesting, it's a role and from the position of that role, you can kind of do certain things that you can't just do, or I can't just do as Priya or as the daughter of (whoever) because that's how you're viewed otherwise. So yeah, from the position of an artist, it's like you can make certain enquiries, and I think actually Hetain – I remember this point really early on where my first sort of work that I would very sincerely regard as being my first proper bit of work was called *In the Same Frame*.

45:42

HP: I remember really distinctly – it's one of the searing works in my mind of your work actually. I remember when I first saw it, I tell people about it, I still tell people about it. It spoke to me really deeply and I'd just never seen anything like it. I won't try, but I'm happy to, but you were about to say about the work, weren't you? It was a photography series, right?

46:09

PM: Yeah, actually, go for it.

46:12

HP: I mean, from my memory of what I remember it was a photographic series of you and your dad, with your boyfriend at the time in the background somewhere, without your dad not only having never met him before or not even knowing about him before. I don't know if it was this way or it's how I'm remembering it – but you were outdoors in a park, you and your dad, and your boyfriend was distant in the background, and there was a series of them. And it just did loads of stuff, it was so simple, and yet so heavy and laden with tension – not dramatic tension in the kind of creating something to try to put drama or tension in a film, but a lived history in something that was very current. I think it really spoke also to this no-knowingness or trying-to-figure-outness of how to be with an older generation, in this going against reverence or trying to be respectful or not, or trying to hold on to–trying to have a relationship but wondering how, and trying something and the ongoing liveness of that, the instability of that somehow. I don't know what what year was that series, Priya?

47:38

PM: It was, I want to say 2002. I was still at university, and it's probably worth saying, but my boyfriend at the time was white. And in that shoot, my dad didn't know that he was he was there so he still hadn't met him. It was a series of Polaroids, so the form was quite deliberate; I must admit, in process I shot on Polaroid and on SLR at the time, but I realised the value of the Polaroids was that you had to work harder to get both people in frame at the same time without my dad knowing my boyfriend at the time was in the background. What went on is it was shot across a day – mobile phones had just become a thing, like everyone had got them when I was going to uni, so I was getting these messages from my boyfriend saying 'I think he's clocked, he's clocked us' and I was like, he has no idea. So what would happen is that my boyfriend was moving further away, and it was harder for me to get a shot where you could clearly see both of them. So I actually had to move closer to my dad, and so my dad's space in the frame was kind of like getting bigger and taking up more of the frame and my boyfriend was getting smaller. It's kind of further away. And actually he was really worried. I remember before I did it, that a friend of mine had said, 'are you sure about this? Because this could go really badly for you.' I just had to not think and do it, and the place from which that occurred was, or what ended up being a piece of work, was that I wasn't trying to make work. I was actually really angry and upset, and I'd had a conversation with my dad, and it was super coded, we didn't say anything really straight up in a way. I'd been seeing this person, I was in love with them. I didn't say any of that to my dad, but there was a sort of you know, reading of something, possibly disobedience, where my dad–my dad and I always had conversations in the car. This seems to be a continuous thing, but that's another conversation – where he was basically saying in a way 'you might be doing whatever you're doing right now, and

possibly with whoever,'—I don't know if he imagined that far—'but at the end of the day, you'll marry a nice Indian boy.' And that absolutely just—I was 21 or 22 or something, and had spent my whole life trying to sort of in a way prepare them for not expecting me to follow the expected route, and at the same time trying—it's interesting to hear you describe it, because it's also like trying to desperately hold on to not losing your parents, because that is kind of like the ultimatum that was met, certainly for a lot of our generation, that people did partner with or marry people outside of the diaspora. So I guess, all of that tension was there as well. And I remember thinking at the time, what is the point in trying to become an artist or whatever, if I can't even do what I want in life, as a person? So yeah, I was just really mad, and I didn't intend it as a work—I don't know I just kind of had to do it. But yeah, I'm very lucky in a way to have yourself having seen it at that time. Because as I said, most of my work has been met with by a white audience, and when it's met with a white audience it's very othered, it's someone else's experience. They'd be like 'woah, is your dad really strict?' but it's not the point.

51:16

HP: It's an interesting thing, that—I think, both what you just said there Priya, and talking about what you were saying earlier as well about a response to the predominant white audience to your work and your practice to you. I feel like this is something that maybe for the three of us—I don't know why but we're interested in the body also—certainly from a diasporic place. It's like you get a sense from very young that you're being judged and interacted with and whatever due to reasons that you don't realise at first. How you look how you talk, how you dress, how you smell, what you're eating, how you eat it; and then I felt like I'd grown into a realisation of 'oh, I'm not a neutral body.' It's like, okay, I'm not neutral here. And so in my practice, I feel like both the challenge or the thing that I enjoy and the thing that also feels like a burden is that before you do anything is that you have to respond to that, that you have to kind of navigate this idea of neutrality and not being neutral. And then you know, those questions that you've talked about Priya, in terms of who sees that work or who are you making it for, and what's the purpose of it? Sorry, this is probably a non-linear way of saying it just because there's a lot of things that you spoke to—were also about how it's met, but then do we then change how we make work? With the idea of communicating to a different audience, or do you go 'no, this is the work' and we try to change the audience. Like you said, is it possible to locate your work within a diasporic audience? Or is it somewhere in between? I feel like I go between—if between is the right word—but move across that sort of sphere in terms of thinking of those things, and all of it boils down, and then you sort of come with this desire to connect and to understand, what you talk about Priya, in terms of empathy, and that which comes I think, from trying to fit in and trying to figure that out, in a way that has the least trauma or has the least violent part. So trying to fit into avoid violence, trying to fit into avoid trauma, and I feel like some of that journey is where empathy comes from. You do it as a defence mechanism. Part of that becomes something else, somewhere along the way—sorry I'm going off on a real track here. There are lots of things to say, so feel free to jump in, Nithya or Priya.

53:33

PM: I'm just sucking you into my neuroses.

53:49

HP: There's just so much to talk about, and you know, it's just so complex. And again, someone was saying earlier about what happens when it's the three of us in the space, is that because you don't get put into being the one representative of a certain ethnicity or whatever. It allows you to be freer in the complexity of how we are, how we feel, how we

make, how we 'be', and that's really useful to be able to do that. It feels like something you don't get to do so much.

54:09

NN: That was so interesting to listen to you, Hetain, speak about Priya's work that happened all those years ago, and then have you both talk to the light and shade of it and –I have so many questions. I want to know how willing your collaborators are when they're your family, and how are you negotiating and renegotiating that relationship. But also, the question of audiences, when that comes into your process, is that something that you think about during your process or have started to consider more during your process? It's interesting that you say, Priya – you feel like your work is mostly consumed in white spaces, and where you should meet your audience. That question you posited, Hetain, on where you should meet your audience or where they come to you, and I will talk to that through the example of the work I'm making right now because it's not something I considered as intensely as I'm considering at this moment, because it is a semi-autobiographical one woman work of living through an abusive relationship—I should posit a trigger warning for our listeners—and it really deals with the coming of age in a culture of abuse as a teenager and going through an experience of intimate partner violence for four years. And initially, I invited other artists into the process and wanted to have the anchor of it being semi-autobiographical to loosen the process from needing to be close to the narrative alone. We were thinking of making a sonic installation in a space that really—through a register of memoir and reportage and oral sounds, walks the audience through a very affective and sensory experience. But then it really mattered to me that the people in diaspora experienced this work, because while gender violence is universal, its mechanisms of how it unfolds can be very culturally located and this was a culturally specific unpacking, and it became really important to me that it is told at a scale where the community will come to see it and really engage with it, and it really shifted the form of the work and the way the work will encounter the audience, and even the presenting partners in the community engagement piece of the work. And it's got me thinking about how much earlier I've considered it with this work than usual in my process, and I'm really interested in both your processes and where you think that relationship – particularly after two years of kind of being in isolation as well – and making, where that consideration comes into your process?

57:02

PM: I mean, I can speak to that a bit. So I think as I was hearing you speak, I think there's been a deep desire for that. But then I've also not felt particularly supported as an artist, to marry that desire for audience. I actually spoke very upfrontly about that—to an organisation that won't mention right now—and I was met with like, two very different responses by the two people in the organisation; one was a very listening stance and 'I'm hearing you' and the other was 'yeah, good luck with that' and I was just really appalled, that certainly in the UK, the onus seems to be on the artist to bring in a particular type of audience. So there's that factor, and there is actually a huge vulnerability especially I feel, I think somewhere in my work, I often feel like I'm actually being quite critical about the community and the culture, but what I'm really being critical of is the difficulty of that experience as well. And who or what that community is is also then changed over time; things like marriage across—between white folk and Brown folk, both having different backgrounds, is perhaps viewed differently nowadays, because we're dealing with different generations, and also in plainness; certain generations have died, and that's literally what's making the difference, because the grip of generational impact is a really long arm. So I think if I'm honest, I feel really vulnerable in that sense. But then in my creative producing practice, I think I've started to do a very different thing, and that is to

invite in other voices and artists or peoples from certain Brown backgrounds and support them to present and to try and bring in those audiences. So doing that work that nobody's doing for me, essentially. So one of the events I invited Chanda Vyas, who is the first female Hindu priest in the UK, and this was actually quite hard thing to negotiate and deal with the things she did and did not want to talk about. And she's not used to speaking in this way either. So I had to go to her house and have chai and gathiya, which for non-Indian speaking audience, is tea and Indian snacks, and it took a lot of dialogue to make her feel safe, and bring her in and ask her to be there. It was my job to do that. And also try to bring this mix of audiences into the room as well, and find the context for longer reaching arms and people who've got access to marketing folk to get other people, but also, like the actual outreach work – outreach is a long journey. That takes a lot of time.

59:50

PM: So yeah, I think I started to sort of try to form those spaces for others, and get those audiences in, and repeatedly having dialogues with organisations every time I'm working with an organisation to ask, who are you attempting to engage in the work that I'm doing? And how and when, and help them to understand that relationship, and also to say who I think the audience should be, and who I am interested in meeting with, and what I think would be interesting for the work, the work is essentially in that moment, the work is a dialogue. And because often what happens is—it certainly happened with *In the Same Frame*—and has happened with other works since then, is that the work is almost like a provocation when it's to do with identity. That's what I tend to seem to present, and then the work isn't finished once that is presented. It then begins the work of dialogue. So I've always now had to fit in time after presenting a work that is then just time for dialogue and questions, and it's not like a Q&A, it's literally a dialogue that is coming up and all the questions are coming up from the work, and conversations that people literally want to have. And because I created a provocation, they want to have it with me. So then I have to make space for that. So yeah, I think in answer to your question Nithya, it's like there's something about sort of capacity and power and expectation. And yeah, when I'm doing socially engaged work or work which is creative producing, I deeply go in there, and it's really hard to have my own practice dealing with all things I'm dealing with, and then taking it wherever I'm taking it, to then find the audience and then I guess it would be very different to be much more situated somewhere and to be building that relationship, which is another thing that I'm thinking about. So building more longer relationships with organisations and places that I work with. I don't really do touring. A few years ago, I just said I don't do touring, because it's just going in somewhere and then going back out. And I'm not interested in doing that. So yeah, I think that's perhaps me pitching in. Yeah. What are your thoughts, Hetain?

1:02:05

HP: Yeah, thanks Nithya and Priya for sharing, it's really interesting hearing you both talk and taking in your experiences, and then also naturally you find yourself locating yourself or trying to—I don't know—and I think one of the things I've found over this time is I feel like I'm at the early stages, sort of what you just spoke about there Priya, in terms of the—one of the things that's changed for me over time, and probably since Black Lives Matter happened, was a lot of my practice has been built on, or perhaps has as one of his primary modes, is a kind of humour to those sort of things that I'm dealing with. And one of the reasons is kind of what I'm like, and one of the reasons is because it's a connective tool to connect some of the stuff I'm talking about in my practice with an audience who might not be from that, and it feels like there's a way to kind of connect with people rather than allow them the possibility to put up a wall and to go 'that's something that's interesting, but it's something else that isn't to do with me' and so humour is partly to do that. And

then over this past year, I found myself—which I'm still doing in the early stages really of the last year or so—it's finding a place or a different mode in my work, that of anger. And really indulging in anger. Not quite in the kind of normal Mr. Nice Asian kind of way, but like an acceptance that that's just part of the whole wider thing. So the more recent works that I've shown that are to do with that are some paintings that I've made—I found I wasn't really able to kind of take it in and express it at the time. I guess I feel more like it as it was happening, and learning about it, of how people responded to that. In a way people have not yet quite known how to respond to it. So it's like I found people who respond to it quite clumsily. Or when I say 'people' I mean the contemporary art world, which is obviously white middle class in the UK, at least. So what I find myself doing, which I guess maybe we always do, which we shouldn't always do—it's not always our job—is to try to find the solution to that, and sort of go, how can I not make it more palatable, because I'm not going to change the work, but how can I have this occupy space? And it's still to connect, and to be accepted as part of this mix of what my practice is, and that you know, Priya spoke earlier about this idea of not thinking that as a work at first, but she was just angry, and I feel like now in my practice, I think if there's one thing that I do feel more comfortable with is just bringing anything I want into my work, you know, I'm almost considering it all work, whether we call it that or not, and just trying to be responsive to letting that in and trying not to edit it out or to censor myself. So I'm definitely in this period where some of those works that are angrier because they need to be, I'm trying to find a place for them to be shown and engaged with without a more clumsy sense of guilt. It sounds a bit abstract, so to give you an example, I've been making a series of a set of paintings, and some of them are versions of family portraits, and some of them are text works. The text works are a sort of screenplay version of a traumatic event from my family history. So when you see the exhibition, you see these family portraits of sorts, and they look very different to photographs, they're family portraits. The thing that transforms those family portraits is the paintings that have a text. So I found myself recently where there was a UK collection that bought one of the works, but they just bought the family picture. What they didn't buy is the text work that transforms what that family picture is. So at the time, I was doing lots of other projects and got caught up in the momentum of it, but what I think I'm actually going to do now is try to have a conversation with the institution about that, and to find a way for that text to stay with that work. Because it felt like the museum was acquiring it and changing it, they want to change what the works are and by whoever—who is represented with this idea of family in their works? So in a lot of these ways, it's coming from a good place, however, rethinking about it, it felt like a bit of a deletion as well – you can't have the family picture without the trauma that I've created it with. So I guess I'm learning about my making with these works in a different mode to what I'd usually make in, and trying to figure out for an audience and myself what feels like the right way that I can feel good about.

1:07:02

NN: I think it's great that you're actually finding a way for the text to be able to live with the companion piece with the original intention of the work remains.

1:07:16

PM: I think with clearing this sort of position of 'I'm not touring' actually comes with lots of other things, so it's interesting when you perform work, because even if I'm presenting something visual or something else, my body is normally there. I'm normally a provocation in myself as I'm presenting the provocation. I think it's interesting—no more Asian Mr. Nice Guy—I think I've never fully occupied a nice Asian space. I was listening to someone describe Josephine Baker performing her work and that performance being – 'the emancipatory potential of being problematic' – and when I heard that, I went, 'yeah

that's what I do.' Also I think in my work I present problems, not answers. I sit in discomfort and I sit in risk and I sit in vulnerability. I stand willing to change my mind, but also not have the answers. I think that's where it stops just being my job; this is where you're meeting or where an artist meets whoever is meeting with the work. This is your work, I brought the problem, I've brought the provocation and I've brought the question, now you're meeting with it, and the question is what are you going to do about it. I'm not here to give those answers. Even when I'm invited on panels and things, I'm not there to provide the answers. My position is normally of 'that's not good enough' or there's all these alternative systems, why don't you just go and engage them? Do the work, don't talk the work. Also to do with the panels, I took a position where I'd actually ask what they're doing about the issue they're discussing, and if there's no action that comes with the discussion then I'm not doing the discussion. So I'm aware of what my position is in those things, and I'll only work with organisations or spaces or people or groups that are also up for that, and are up for the learning. The learning is not just there for them, it's for me as well – I'm constantly learning. I think with a work like *Tropical Awkward Bastard* I have autobiographical material in there, but I also have alternative histories in there as well. And I use the format of cabaret because I can work with material and objects that are signifiers that hold information. I can play with that and I can play with the position of ideas like entertainment and exoticisation, but also in the form that is at its ground, cabaret is very much about political commentary in its origins. To be able to bring an audience quite lightly and playfully, not knowing why, using humour and then go heavy, and that is the journey we go on. We go heavy, we go light, we go heavy. I have to sort of release any sort of responsibility for how awkward a potential white audience or any other audience feel. You're there to sit in that – if that's not what you're sitting in then I'm not doing my job, basically. What I'm interested in is what you're going to do beyond sitting in it just over there. I'm not here to do this smoothing of the edges at the end and make everything alright, because everything is not alright. And I just – I'm also aware of time on our podcast – just to speak to this thing of other forms and other works that are also not around biography and personal experience because that's the thing – if you're making work of that ilk, there becomes this sort of demand for it, and actually I'm very careful to not only do that, because it's not my only line of interest or inquiry. But there's a heavy alignment there to do with my ethics, and people, and community, and outreach; all those really core things that are part of my practice that are about people meeting with people and me getting to meet with people. But in works where it's body-led or it's more sculptural or more materials based, there's also a potential for me and my body to meet with other materials and other situations and structures and architectures, which also, actually as a Brown person and a Brown body, people are not used to seeing that, you know? They're not used to seeing a Brown body wrapped in sheets of massive blue paper or whatever.

1:12:27

PM: When I was at the CCA in Derry, it's one of the examples of me situating my body in those places. And I'm not primarily thinking of myself in terms of my diaspora, but I'm aware that it's still there. And I do think in colours and shapes and textures, as well as in movement. So yeah, there is more to my practice and my body and ideas of movement that work across different planes. What I'm sort of wondering is what's going on, are people looking and making two different sets of readings? That's Priya in decolonisation mode other there, let's read it in that way, and then there's Priya in visual art mode. Therefore in that space there's language that only about visual art mode and sculptures and shapes and able and non-able bodies, because I also deal with those notions as well. So you know, there's a categorisation switch, and it comes back to that thing of being cross-discipline, and people seemly – certainly in the UK – needing you to be one

discipline or another to form some sort of understanding. What I find problematic about that as well is on a socially engaged level and a cultural level is that there then becomes these bodies of practice happening in the arts, and then there's public and community stuff. There's a massive dissonance between the two apparently, and I think that's created by ideas of institutions and industry, and I don't think that the art industry is particularly a working model of industry or industrialisation. Like in the dance scene, I find myself sitting in conversations in different art form scenes – sometimes I'm like 'these guys are really behind' because in that scene they had this conversation like a few years ago. And the place in which I feel like the conversations are most far ahead and nobody's caught up is in the disability sector. That's from a position of activism or disability arts, and it's also a space in which people have been making demands and continue to make demands. I think it's where I learn to also articulate this language that's about saying 'this is not enough, and I'm making a demand.' And I say that because during this pandemic I've also been in a room, and it's other practitioners like Brown diaspora who work in, let's say, a theatre context, and they're just going 'wouldn't it be nice if once a year there was a residency that was just for someone from a Brown diaspora?' and I'm like 'wtf?' like, that is beyond me. No, there should be a 90% flip of your programme – make a demand. It seems to be outrageous to you but it's not outrageous. Again, I'm speaking from many neurodiverse places, but I guess in one essence I'm saying I'm everything contained and outside and around in this body and the context of this body, but I'm also lots of other things with all sorts of potentials, and by putting my body in those situations and negotiating those architectures and materials and colours and planes, and what my body can and can't do as my body changes as I get older. There's so many different dialogues going on for me internally, and there's so many things that I present and share, so yeah there's loads going on about everything. Probably not helping to bring this conversation to a podcasty end at all.

1:16:51

CH: I think it feels really perfect to finish with a really expansive, open-ended—there's so much to pick up on, and I'm absolutely gutted that we have come to the end of our time today. I just want to thank you all so, so much for your time, for your thoughts, and your vulnerabilities, and really sharing. It's been an absolute privilege to be able to sit her and listen. I hope we can keep in touch. Thank you all. Finally, thank you again to our guests Priya Mistry, Nithya Nagarajan and Hetain Patel. You can listen to more of our Round Table podcasts by visiting ccadld.org and also subscribing to our podcast on Spotify, iTunes, and other podcast providers. This Round Table is made possible thanks to the support of Arts Council Northern Ireland, Derry City and Strabane District Council and the Art Fund. Thank you for listening.