

TRANSSEXUAL TIME VOL. 2:



FRACTURING

Text Shia Conlon

Bild Madsen Minax

There's something to be said for seeing yourself in the world. Even if visibility in the queer community can be weaponized against us, representation can often be future-altering. I felt a future forming when I found the work of **Madsen Minax**. Often as trans people when we encounter attempts made to represent us in art, our struggles are frequently at the forefront. Watching Madsen's works I noticed that his art avoided this trap while still remaining inherently trans. The line of thinking within it felt like a home. As a trans person, I'm often occupied by my body and gender. But even if I often think about others' gaze on me, there are many other ways trans people live and think and see.

This way of making becomes even more apparent when Madsen brings the camera into his blood family's life in his new documentary *North by Current*. On the surface of this film, time appears to be linear: we move through his childhood and three consecutive years of his adulthood, following the loss of his infant niece Kalla. Through this river of time, you might also sense a swimmer working hard to wade against it. Other swimmers might recognize this effort. I

watched *North by Current* four times in one week, and when I wasn't watching it I was thinking about it.

Time is a relentless character in this film. It furies on, as Madsen leaves and returns to his rural hometown. While he's gone, things move: bodies grow and then age, tension builds, then dissipates. A steady stream of change. As a human it can be hard to wrap your head around how when you leave, although you might be wanted, you are not needed. For queer and trans people there are extra layers of grief to this realization. As people who live outside of normative trajectories of life, it can be a struggle to fit inside our families' lives. When we return we might have to change our forms or language to get by. When I'm with my blood family, my mouth changes; it speeds up as my dialect returns, but it also loses words, pretends to forget. Sometimes I fracture into another self.

Fracturing comes up again and again in *North by Current*. In one scene we see a clip of Madsen's sister, Jesse, and her husband. A child speaks over the image, saying: "We're taught that fracturing is unbecoming, that a picture of wholeness is far more satisfying, stronger". If we are conditioned

to think like this, then how do we find our way to transness? To be trans is to break. All the things you thought you knew, you turn upside down; you go through and out the other side; usually without any guidebook to show you the way. The dilemma is that, to some people, this breaking is seen as something one should go about repairing, if they believe it can be repaired at all. Why else do our families sometimes need to grieve our becomings, if they don't think of them with a sense of loss? After a particularly painful scene with his parents where they equate his transitioning with a death, Madsen explains that it wouldn't hurt him so much if he didn't work so hard to be alive. I felt that statement in my body, and I'm sure many trans people can relate. The efforts we take to assemble ourselves after our revelations are often invisible to those who don't know what to look for.



This is why it feels so triumphant to find artworks that hold space for the understanding that to break is also to fully understand wholeness. Through our act of disassembling we end up somewhere, usually through many variations of violence, holding the



many pieces of selves that got us here. These pieces are our fragile code. Code we might be able to transmit to others. It's rare to find code that speaks to you, which is why *North by Current* felt like a dream when I found it. Here was a trans story that included the pains and struggles of being transsexual, but without making them the entire focus. Here was all the luxury normally afforded only to cis people's narratives, but for a trans man.

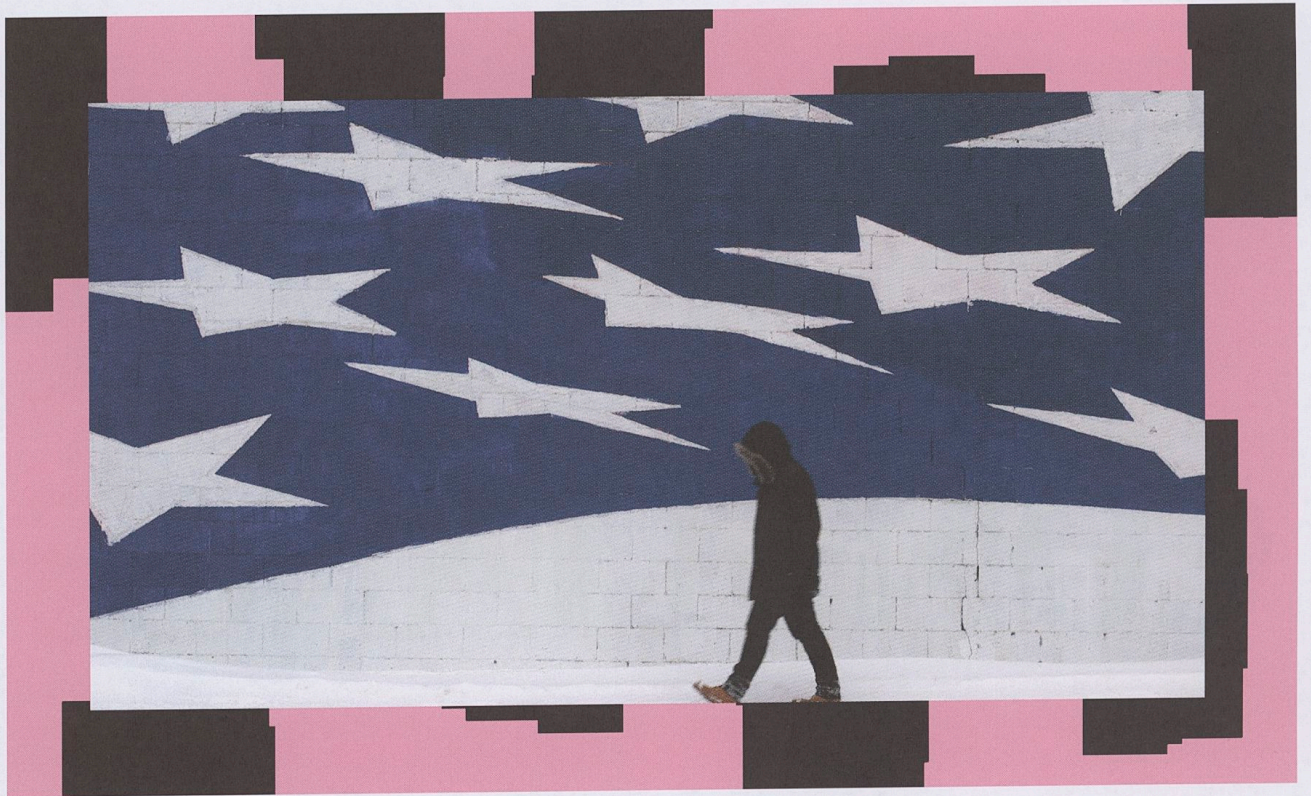
Watching Madsen's questioning of time and loss was very physical for me. I could feel the exertion in the excavation. How he confronted not only the words weaponized against him by his family, but also his own role in his sister's pain and grief. There is a real representation here of how it feels to love someone who has caused you harm, of the way you can forgive them whilst also knowing that the harm will never feel 'right', but merely that time will continue, and you will persist with the tireless work of each trying to understand the other. In a video call with Madsen he tells me that making *North by Current* "[t]

ransformed [his] relationship with [his] family because it forced [him] to ask hard questions and [he doesn't] like asking hard questions..." He continued: "Having an avenue to ask these [questions] was really helpful for me. Because if I can understand this through the lens of work, we can do whatever needs to be done to make it happen".

In *North by Current* the camera becomes a way to navigate healing. Sometimes it is a barrier, such as when his sister swipes it away and says, "I haven't seen you in a long time". On other occasions, you can feel the bridge it builds: when Madsen's voice strains as he asks his mother a difficult question; or in a small moment in a tattoo parlour when his sister turns the camera on him and he smiles into the lens as she says "Gotta get the cameraman"; or in one of my favourite shots of the film, in a diner, where everyone else has become impatient for the filming process to end, and Madsen's father asks, warmly, "Did you get everything you need?" The loving potential of this type of making felt most compelling to me in these recreation scenes.

In another shot, Madsen and his sister restage a childhood memory where they try to imagine themselves as "small bodies". Her willingness to partake in this process despite its absurdity allows Madsen to see her love for him. This moment of childlike play stands out all the more amongst the turmoil this family has endured. How Madsen's transness fits into all of this is portrayed so eloquently, the edit feels expertly handled. The subtle highlighting of the nuances of how it feels to be 'other' within a cisnet family: the misgenderings, the apologies, the quiet displays of affection, the outright declarations of love, and all the trials and mundanity of loving. This sense of normalcy surrounding trans life is urgently missing in the film world.

We are so rarely given platforms to share our experiences without focusing on our 'journeys': what choices we made to get where we are, what trauma we encountered, how hard or easy it is to be trans. When movies like *North by Current* get space, that feels hopeful to me. Each time a trans person makes work in this way, it sets a precedent. It



creates possibilities and builds a more abundant world for younger trans people coming up behind them. A world where we don't have to center our transness if we don't want to, where everything we make doesn't have to revolve around our pain. Where we're afforded the luxury of responding to our world in multifaceted ways. The time for this abundance is now. As a community, we are still mourning the huge losses from decades past. We have been encountering our elders as spectres for too long. I think of when I found the diaries of **Lou Sullivan**, who worked furiously to create an understanding and more just treatment of trans men. It felt beautiful to read so many of my own thoughts reflected back to me. But I was also confronted with the painful realisation of how the very few testaments of trans masculinity I've encountered come from the voices of ghosts.



Every trans life generates something for the next one, just by existing and being here. With our own fragile code,

we do our best to honour our ghosts, but I dream of a place where we also celebrate the living. In **Posy Dixon's** *Keyboard Fantasies*, a beautiful documentary about trans singer **Beverly-Glenn Copeland**, Glenn talks about how we as humans, but also as queers, are meant to live in a multi-generational community. How learning this way is natural to us and how we are suffering because we are divided. I feel this deeply. I long for a place of abundance where many generations are in dialogue with one another, where answers to our questions are not shrouded in secrecy but live, out in the open, close by. I imagine these answers coming from the warm voice of someone who knows how you got here, without you ever having to explain.

To live as a transsexual can often feel like you are a mystery, even to yourself. I have been met with this even more so as I go through DIY hormone replacement therapy. Everything I've learned has been through a patchwork of research: a forum here, a second-hand story there, contraband knowledge. Stories of trans men are

still so rare. Someday it will be unbelievable to people that I had to smuggle hormones into a country and lie to healthcare professionals to get any semblance of fair medical treatment. But we're not there yet, and as fraught as it is, I believe we only get there through representation. That representation should be in our hands. I want to see more aging transsexuals. I want to hear them sing, I want to hear stories that don't end in death, and I want to know of all the boring, mundane things that happen alongside our grief. If our pain was the river, our shared lives are the sea. Wouldn't it be beautiful if we could trust the waters enough to lie back and let them carry us? If language is code, then maybe it can be hacked. If we speak it enough, maybe we'll live to see it. **A**