

Persistent forces of alienation, acculturation, and racism left their imprint not only on our daily well-being but also on the methods and contents of our artwork. And while assimilation was neither viable nor desirable, subtle tendrils of adaptation and transformation began to take root in our bodies and practices. We were compelled to confront the intractable entanglements between art, identity, and the socio-political dynamics of place.

In this conversation, I invite Noah and Xingpei to reflect on how the three years spent in Estonia have informed, inspired and unsettled their artistic trajectories.

D: What work were you making when you got to Estonia?

X: Before we moved to Estonia, I had just started working on an animated film called *Wishing Fountain*. It grew out of my thesis work at the Rhode Island School of Design in 2017.² Both films attempt to locate queerable attachment in the collective memory of the Chinese diaspora.

Wishing Fountain draws from an archive of queer avant-garde cinema, Greek mythology, Chinese iconography, and canonical art history to trace a genealogy of Chinese queerness that doesn't ascribe to the Western, neoliberal narrative of normalization. It's set in a highly decorative interior. The story unfolds with an erotic ritual involving a snake and a papaya. The main character conjures a fountain, summoning a monkey spirit who puts on this explosive, kaleidoscopic musical. I'm interested in queer interiority (as exemplified by James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* or Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*), and how it connects to the orientalist perception of China as the interior (as exemplified by "Behind the Iron Curtain" or "The Forbidden City"). There's a double interiority that envelops Chinese queerness. Queerness is left out of dominant Chinese history, while Euro-American canons of queer discourse exclude Chinese thoughts. *Wishing Fountain* is my way of thinking through that tension.

² Lotus Lantern (2017), directed by Xingpei Shen is an experimental animation that pays tribute to Zhou Xuan, a 1930s Shanghainese Lounge diva, whose songs were excavated by the Chinese queer diaspora as sites of joy and queer lineage. <https://vimeo.com/242858238>



Still from *Wishing Fountain* (forthcoming), Xingpei Shen.



Still from *Lotus Lantern* (2017), Xingpei Shen.

D: What about you, Noah?

N: I was making very family and spirit-oriented photographic work. I was thinking about the connections between my Black American family's history and the particulars of intergenerational trauma, erasure of these kinds of narratives from popular discourses, contemporary political trends, and histories of photography. I was also thinking a lot about performance as an avenue to elaborate on more formal photographic works, like books. I was into artists like Adrian Piper⁴ and Ulysses Jenkins⁵ who used video in really sharp ways to share information that was locked into Black bodily being. I was inspired by Jenkins' early work from the 80's like *Inconsequential Doggeral*, where he would chop up TV broadcasts and combine them with solo performance excerpts and personal footage he'd shot. Piper's later work, *Adrian Moves to Berlin*, was also always on my mind for its portrayal of her joyous and irreverent encounter with a new home in Berlin. When I arrived in Estonia, I immediately experienced culture shock and realised that distance made it difficult for me to complete this work as desired.

D: Could you talk more about that distance?

N: Well, I was working with this image of my great-great-grandmother, Mama Lular, who appeared to me in a photo I took at my family reunion in 2019. For that work, I had been continuously reinterpreting her image in different material contexts and seeing how it travelled—letting it breathe. I first put it into a book that I made for my mom, my grandmother, and myself. Then I tried to incorporate it more into my studio practice as a part of an altar, which turned into a body of work called *The Promise of Growth* (2022).

I presented the work in 2022 in my first public exhibition at ULM in Tallinn with what I thought was great care, but the whole process of exhibiting it made me think about my position in Estonia more than the work itself. I had put effort into translating a text about my relationship to my family and the social context around the work, enlisting my friend Mirjam Maekalle and others to work on language for texts I distributed. At the same time, I was more and more conscious of being perceived

⁴ Adrian Piper (b. 1948) is an American conceptual artist and philosopher based in Berlin.

⁵ Ulysses Jenkins (b. 1946) is an American video and performance artist based in Los Angeles.

in the Estonian social context by and large as an inconvenience, if not worse. In conversations, there were very limited attempts to connect with the work at the level of family, spirituality, or cultural history. In public, I was often physically accosted. I wondered what the point of my putting this very Black, queer, and spiritual work out there was. It seemed like there was no social context in Estonia in which the work could function as intended.



Noah Emanuel Morrison, *Mama Lular (Out the Light)*, from *The Promise of Growth*, ULM, Tallinn, Estonia, 2022.

D: Being in Estonia meant you were facing an audience that lacked a lot of the context needed for your work to be appreciated and understood. Did you also experience this decontextualisation, Xingpei?

X: When I presented my work in Estonia, people appreciated my obsessive devotion to images and the labour-intensive, slow process of hand-drawn animation. However, I sensed a hesitation or even reluctance to engage with my work conceptually, especially when it touched on Chinese history or queerness. The responses I got stopped at how beautiful the images were and how detailed the drawings

looked. This reflects a broader issue with how animation is often consumed, as entertainment, rather than as a serious, personal, and emotional experience. That's why it has felt especially meaningful when I've shown my work in spaces with more queer people and people of colour. Those are often the audiences who approach me afterwards to talk about queer joy, grief, and share their own experiences.

Even in the academy, I was rarely able to get any substantial engagement with my ideas. It was frustrating, especially given the growing obsession with Chinese aesthetics and orientalist motifs in recent Estonian animation productions.⁶ Despite this visual fascination, the animation community remains largely uninterested in the personal narratives and lived experiences of the Asian animators among them.

D: You were both facing a persistent sense of otherness during this time, whether it was in school, in public space, or in social life. How did your work contend with this objectification and general hostility towards your identities?

X: Being queer-femme and East-Asian, my identities were inevitably flattened in Estonia. In public, I was often invisible. When I was out with Noah, people would only address him when talking to both of us.

However, when we went to the club, particularly to Hall or 9/11, everything shifted. My height, slender body, and long black hair, traits that made me inconspicuous on the streets, now lured horny men on the dance floor. I wasn't trying to pass as a cis-woman, nor would I be perceived that way in

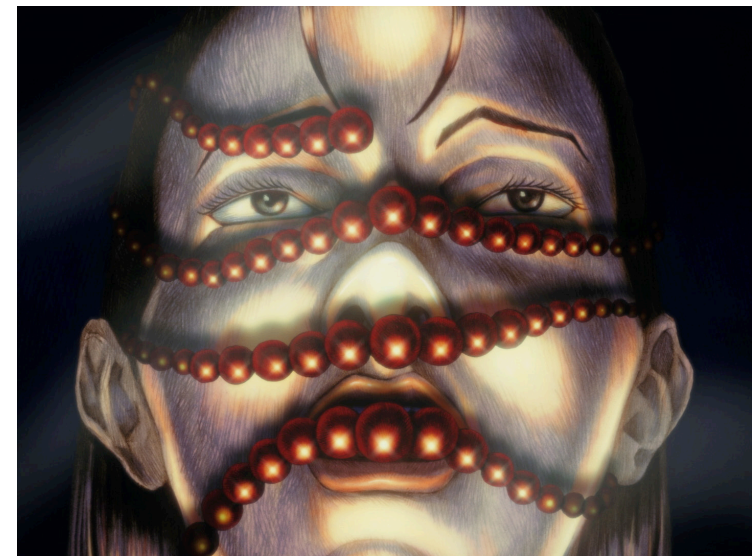
a more queer-friendly space. At first, I accepted the attention, thinking it was harmless. As soon as they realised that I wasn't what they wanted, a submissive Asian cis-woman, they got visibly upset. It was the first time I'd experienced transphobia in such a visceral way. I became acutely aware of the racialised feminisation and objectification that I was undergoing.

Despite the freaky encounters, clubbing was deeply generative. I often had my most fruitful animating sessions after going to Hall. It felt like entering a BDSM scenario and submitting to a role where I was metaphorically whipped by microaggressions, violence, and objectification. It was strange and compelling to be in that state, then go back home and work through the experience. There was a kind of power in giving up control and moulding that negativity into creative force.

⁶ A recent example is Koer (2025), directed by Kaspar Jancis, which presents an orientalist portrayal of Chinese sexuality by relying on appropriation and stereotypes.

How I was perceived in Estonia felt like a trap I couldn't escape. *Wishing Fountain* took on a more profound importance for me. It became a refuge and a mirror of my reality. I would lock myself in my room for days on end, animating the character trapped inside his bedroom, as a way to escape the outside hostility. Slowly, the narrative took form as a series of ever-transmuting worlds that reflected the character's internal psyche, as I contemplated my personal experiences of racism and transphobia. I was interested in non-linear storytelling, where each scene gave birth to the next, allowing utmost mental space in my creative process. At that time, I was thinking a lot about queer(able) heroes in different mythologies who are tragically trapped because of their transgression. For example, Narcissus, doomed in a self-absorbed trance for his rejection of Echo, and the Monkey King, imprisoned under Wu Zhi Mountain as punishment for his rebellion against heaven. Both myths became crucial elements of the film.

I realise now, through animation, I was reacting to the lack of visual literacy around transgressive gender expressions and racialised bodies in Estonian public spaces. The act of drawing the character over and over, embracing the transformation he goes through, was immensely therapeutic.



Xingpei Shen, Still from *Wishing Fountain* (forthcoming).



Xingpei Shen, Installation View of *Wishing Fountain*, TASE '24, Tallinn Art Hall, Tallinn, Estonia, 2024.

D: Social life, it seems, became a major site of research for your artistic practice. Did you experience something similar, Noah?

N: I made this performance called *Harm's Way* in December 2022 in reaction to the anger I felt around social life in Estonia. It was responding in part to the NGR/S/Z series of graffiti that had appeared all over the city, which I had to walk past every day.⁷ As a photographer and New Yorker, the street had always been a primary space of artistic production. In Tallinn, I would scan the walls

and sidewalks searching for anything that could help me avoid thinking about myself for more than five minutes because of strangers' stares. When I started to notice the NGR/S/Z graffiti and brought my attention to it, I became more and more upset at myself, asking myself why had I come here? Meanwhile, everyone around was asking me, "Why are

⁷ A series of graffiti that read as either NGR, NGRS, or NGRZ began to pop up with increasing frequency around Tallinn during the period from 2021–2024. As with much graffiti, the point of origin was uncertain, it was not clear who the authors were, if the originals were copied by others, or what the authors' intentions were.

you here?"—it was so silly. Nobody was aware of any of the emotions that I was repressing every day, and the fact that there was nothing that language could do to bridge the gap between my understanding and their understanding of me was even more ridiculous. I was thinking that coming to Tallinn was a mistake. I should have stayed in America and just surrendered to an MFA⁸ industrial complex that seemed to prioritize clout, money, and privilege over the development of socially and politically engaged artists.

The *Harm's Way* performance actually got to the question, "Why Estonia?" or "Why are you here?" in quite a direct way. I was trying to get to the rhetorical situation of the question. Am I here to be this object for you to throw around and use as the butt answer to your question? The contrast between me explaining the story of antiblack experiences in Estonian public spaces as I walked past the NGR series of graffiti near my house in the first part, and the babbling in the second part, where I stood in front of the graffiti and tried to 'interpret' what it meant, got to the centre of the question's problematics. It could not be answered by the person it was directed towards.

Street performance for the camera became a means for me to confront the language and spatial dynamics of the oppressor. The process of devising and scripting a performance allowed me to condense my experience into very narrow confines, which gave me more power to speak freely. I could also more clearly control my immediate audience, which was a small crew of three POC friends. In speaking directly to the camera or, later, to the graffiti, I could avoid the penetrating gaze of everyone around me.

D: There was a really interesting duality of narrating the interior through the exterior. Despite your persistent isolation, I feel that you were constantly making an effort to reach out.

N: I feel like the experiences of alienation and misrepresentation (I called it "mis-spiriting") generated a desire to relate and recoil at the same time. I often felt so off kilter that I had to react in some direct way, but at the same time, I was repressing my reactions so much that I couldn't say anything artistically. In the aftermath of *Harm's Way*, the immediacy of photography became much more comforting than it had been in the past. I carried around a little green Fujifilm point and shoot and

⁸ Masters of Fine Art.

made reaction videos of myself walking through the streets of Tallinn, thinking through the NGR graffiti as I passed it, looking at holes in the ground, being weird and faggy and strutting around. I would compile those videos and periodically look at them, and occasionally turn them into something else, like my video work *CampanX*, which centres on my narration of a dream I had where I was walking through this racial



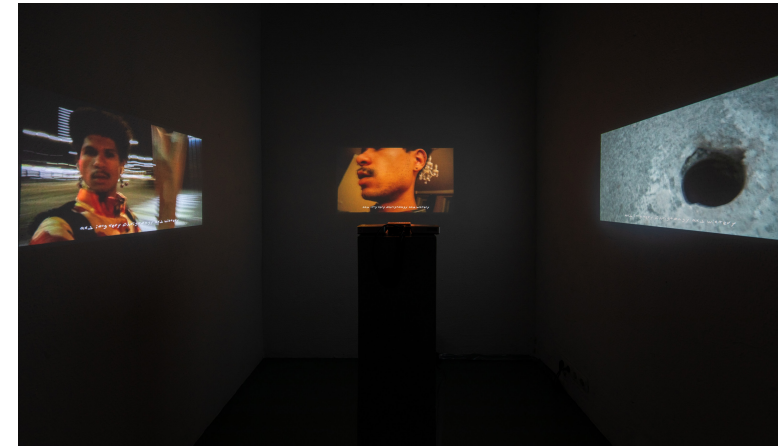
Noah Emanuel Morrison, *Harm's Way*, performance documentation, 8x10 large format film, Tallinn, Estonia, 2022.

battleground Euro-American city. It became important to me in this vortex that I didn't lose myself as an artist. Around the same time, I was also working in the Tallinn Museum of Photography's dungeon-like darkroom, playing with 5-10 images for a couple of months at a time, printing and reprinting, fussing with light and machinery until everything looked right.

As I progressed through these contradictions, I wanted to get a better answer to "Why Estonia?"—one that considered another angle of the question, the country's history and my place in it. I turned to stories,

myths, and histories of Estonian (racial) identity to think through my place and also my legacy within the place.

By then, I had become captivated with the history of graffiti in Estonia. The NGR/S/Z series of work had pushed me to think about my own place in the country, and naturally, I began to think about how the graffiti got there as well. This led me towards the legend of



Noah Emanuel Morrison, *CampanX*, installation view, NNNNNNNNNNNN, Vent Space and Tallinn Photomonth, Tallinn, Estonia, 2023.

Ülo Kiple.⁹ I rapidly became obsessed with this singular character, turning to extensive archival research, interviews with his contemporaries, and cultural historians to try to build up an image of him. For my graduate thesis work, "*a curse to keep moving, a blessing to remain*" (2024), I weaved stories from his life into my own practice, making stone sculptures of the shoes he might have worn alongside my own, taking photos at a nutria farm because of a story from his childhood, even emulating his graffiti style in the same areas he wrote. At the same time, I was documenting his remaining works and inserting myself into

⁹ Ülo Kiple was an Estonian itinerant graffiti artist and cultural legend who lived and worked mainly in Tartu from 1962-1989. The majority of his works were made during the 1980s, where he was the first to practice writing graffiti at such a wide scale in then Soviet Estonia. His writings were idiosyncratic and included messages about secrets to good health, solutions for political problems, and relationships with higher powers. Read *Haiguste Ravi, kontrollitud.* by Tõnis Palkov, Uku Sepsivart, and Andres Siplane for more information about Kiple and Estonian graffiti history.

the documentation in various ways. I wanted to fit, in my mind's eye, however he looked—through all my research on Estonian racial and graffiti history—onto my own body, so I could better relate to both my own experiences there and to those of Estonians and their experiences. I hoped that by doing that, I could collapse my own experiences of racial and social isolation into a more culturally stable form.



Noah Emanuel Morrison, Ülo 01, Performance Documentation, Tartu, Estonia, 2023.

D: Xingpei, what was your way to deal with cultural isolation? Animation is by nature a private and obsessive kind of work—did this environment encourage any tendencies in your process?

X: Over the three years I worked on *Wishing Fountain* while living in Estonia, the character became more and more like me, physically. In particular, I was unintentionally drawing his hair longer and longer (I didn't cut my hair in Estonia; it had grown down to my hips by the end). Initially, the protagonist was a mythical Narcissus-inspired recluse. He is cryptic and

wears a shoulder-length bob. The character was meant to embody something familiar across contexts, but not necessarily representative.

Once I moved back to the U.S. to continue working on the film, I came to realise that drawing my face, hair, and body onto my fictional character was me trying to take control of my representation and identity, as a queer Chinese artist living in a small, homogeneous Eastern European country.

This therapeutic practice of injecting my physical traits into my animated character and drawing them over and over has now become my core method of artistic expression. The film is continuously and slowly revealing itself as I allow myself to step in and out of its world. In a way, *Wishing Fountain* has now become an archive of my feelings in Estonia, in addition to its original intent.

D: Since returning to the US, the two of you have started a new project called the *Võõras Tõug (Foreign Breed) Archive*. This is actually the first body of work that you two are working on together. Has your time in Estonia brought your artistic practices closer together?

N: Yeah, we now share a studio,¹⁰ and of course, live together and see each other every day. But we started working together on this archive because of the necessity of dealing with our trauma from Estonia. We would frequently discuss our experiences as if they were still with us, haunting us and our ability to connect with others in the same ways as we had before.

The archive is becoming a place where I feel like I can meld some of my concerns about family and queerness with my experiences in Estonia. It feels like a safe place to explore racial and gendered trauma and queer desire together. It's definitely slow work that's coming up at the speed of our processing trauma.

Our first steps in that direction were to reinterpret the event of us having our photo taken by [Estonian artist] Liina Siib for this exhibition called *Right Body, Wrong Body*, that was in the Estonian National Museum in Tartu.¹¹

¹⁰ We have been kinship members of Aunty's House Studio in Providence, Rhode Island, USA since November 2024.

¹¹ *Every day. Somewhere. Someone* (2023), Liina Siib, Estonian National Museum, Tartu, Estonia.

We made a collage around that image. In the photo, we are carrying a hyper-realistic baby doll as well as our dog Pepper, who we brought to Estonia and who passed away a couple of years ago. We were posed in this very specific way: me next to Xingpei, standing against a brightly lit, blue background. But we altered the image. We put a sheet of mylar over it, cut it out, and just showed the baby. It's also in this grey-silver frame, and then on top of the glass is an erasure poem over this Nazi flyer that was gleefully given to us at Freedom Square in Tallinn.

We wanted to combine these pieces because they felt psychically related in the way that we were imagined as boogeymen who were poisoning the white, Estonian bloodstream while also being heralded as beacons of futurity who could produce a complicated and surprising image of gendered, racial, and trans-species reproduction.

We also want to have fun with it! Around the same time we were making *Fated Encounters*, we glammed ourselves up and made a karaoke music video to the Estonian version of Edelweiss, the first song our (really racist) Estonian language teacher made us sing. It was cathartic.

D: Your time in Estonia was so fraught with misunderstanding. What makes you want to linger in this period?

X: To me, that misunderstanding is precisely what's driving me to make identity-based work. I'm curious about how our identities are continuously produced, contained, disciplined, and reproduced through the enduring legacies of imperial, colonial, and racial violence.

I think, in both our bodies of work, we want to tell our stories truthfully, succinctly, and poetically. *Võõras Tõug* is our attempt to mark our existences within the racial history of Estonia, to render visible the intimacies that have been concealed by normative ways of seeing.



Noah Emanuel Morrison and Xingpei Shen, *Fated Encounters*—from the *Võõras Tõug* Archive, Gifted Digital Print, Nazi Flyer, Drafting Film—from *Aunty's Housewarming*, Aunty's House, Providence, Rhode Island, USA, 2025].



Noah Emanuel Morrison and Xingpei Shen, still from *Edelweiss—from the Võõras Tõug Archive*, HD Video, 2025.

REFERENCES

- Jenkins, Ulysses. *Doggerel Life: Stories of a Los Angeles Griot*. Institute of Contemporary Art – University of Pennsylvania/Hammer Museum Press, 2022.
- Koobak, Redi, and Margaret Tali. 'Rendering Race Through a Paranoid Postsocialist Lens Activist Curating and Public Engagement in the Postcolonial Debate in Eastern Europe'. *Postcolonial Publics: Art and Citizen Media in Europe*, 26 January 2023. <https://doi.org/10.30687/978-88-6969-677-0/011>.
- Palkov, Tõnis, Uku Sepisvart, and Andres Siplane. *Haiguste ravi. Kontrollitud*. Raamat tänavakunstist, 2009.
- Sliib, Liina. "Every Day. Somewhere. Someone." Liinasliib.com, August 25, 2025. <https://liinasliib.com/every-day-somewhere-someone/>.



Xingpei Shen,
Lotus Lantern



Noah Emanuel Morrison and Xingpei Shen, *Edelweiss*



Noah Emanuel Morrison, *Harm's Way*



Noah Emanuel Morrison, *CampanX*

<https://doi.org/10.37522/2cdqtr25>