

Shen Xin

in conversation

with Sorchá Carey

Sorchá Carey (Director of Collective): Your exhibition for Collective, *Highland Embassy*, brings together three works which all have stories at their heart. Can you tell us about how you use storytelling and often non-human characters to explore larger themes of migration, place, and belonging?

Shen Xin: For me, storytelling is a way to invite the practice of awareness. These works make space for awareness in different ways. The stories in each work share similarities in their intention and belief in interbeingness, a Buddhist concept of dependent origination where everything (including humans, animals, plants, and emotions) exists and depends upon its relation to everything else. Through the storytelling and viewing process, these relationships – or patterns – can offer clues to what our emotions, mind, and actions have generated.

These patterns sometimes carry a past that is in need of understanding. For example, a plant currently categorised as invasive for its negative impact on local habitats, was also once brought to this country from a faraway place as an ornamental object of study and interest, albeit during a different time and particular context.

In some other cases, these patterns are connected to nurturing, compassion, and finding a path to create spaces beyond the confinement of being understood as patterns. Instead, the

stories become embodied tales of states of potential. Stories about a plant, a fungus, or wild horses are inherently connected to projections of elsewhere, by recognising the luminosity that works through the materials of moving image making, and the light that seeps into how we relate to the world.

Storytelling is a practice that does not tend to be triggered by hopes and fears, but rather as a process of coming towards or seeking truth. In some ways, we can understand the patterns of relations as the stories actively eroding in our understanding reaching a sense of release, a softening, leading to the sense of being in space – be it the filmic space or the spaces between our senses and thoughts, that offers the chance to explore.

SC: Landscape has a powerful presence in your artwork – can you tell us more about how you explore the landscape as a filmmaker and storyteller?

SX: One of the things that draws me to make moving images of land is the potential to manifest an active absence.

In the making of *Solar Wheels*, I invited children, teachers, film crew, and other community members from Xeni Gwet'in to work with me to film the landscape. The images in the film are generated through the imagined movements of wild horses eating, galloping, napping – without

the horses ever being present. In their absence, the camera holder is invited to visualise – through their own relationship with wild horses – what the horses might be doing, and to move the camera as if they are in front of you.

In *bearing fruit of fondness*, I chose to film my everyday environment and experiences. However, when I picked up the camera to film, the sameness and the familiar become absent, and the everyday takes its own path and is captured in a unique way. In this way, the images in the film are co-created with the elements through the process of filming and making.

The Child of the Mountain is a story, located in myth and the magical realm – where reality and logic are absent and not required to make sense. So, then the absence activated in land is sort of like a dance, a series of movements expressing the dependent nature of all things.

SC: *Solar Wheels* is beautifully shot on super 8 film in the Traditional T̓silhqot̓in (Chilcotin) territory in British Columbia, Canada. How did this come to be filmed in the First State, and how does it relate to the Uyghur story of the Wooden Horse, which is narrated in the film?

SX: “Can a story be an embassy, and we, the beings and the land, its witness?” This is one of the questions that prompted a series of conversations with the Xeni Gwe’tin government, which led to an invitation to unfold the Uyghur story of the Wooden Horse as moving images on the T̓silhqot̓in land. The embassy as an idea is not limited to nation states, but rooted in the acceptance of knowledge built on relationships with exchange, trust, and mutual respect. The dimensions of relational knowledge are vast.

In researching *Solar Wheels*, I was exploring the impact of the Xeni Gwet’in government’s land policies on wild horses, as well as wild horse repatriation policies in and near the Uyghur region. I was also struck by how solar energy has been activated in these two separate places between 2019 and 2024.

“The story of the Wooden Horse in a very simplistic way can be understood as a cautionary tale of new technology, but it’s also a lot more expansive than that.”

The story of the Wooden Horse, in a very simplistic way, can be understood as a cautionary tale of new technology, but it’s also a lot more expansive than that. To accentuate that vastness, of technology being a kind of governance, and the technology of solar energy, the tale of the Wooden Horse in the film is told through the eyes of the witnesses too, both as a story and as images and sounds. In that sense, regional variations of the Wooden Horse story are also present, activated by the layered absences in the film. Together they explore the migration that has happened through the consciousness of invented and inherited technologies.

Historically the creation of borders by nation-states has been the source of suffering. The reification of borders treat the socially constructed lines on a map as if they are real, permanent, and natural. However, we can choose to root our knowingness through stories and language instead. And by bearing witness to this, we can offer the possibility to protect and

strengthen these communities. This feels like a very important practice when the courses of actions are limited to being silenced or being placed in danger in relation to nation states. I think there's a place for sacredness in what one chooses to believe in, and that sacredness has the strength to undermine, or abandon, the limitations of our separate conditioning.

SC: The translation and editing of *Solar Wheels* feels very distinctive – the spoken Uyghur story isn't translated straight away; instead, the viewer waits for the Uyghur, Chinese, and English translation to be displayed after each chapter. Can you tell us more about arranging the subtitles like this?

SX: The editing of *Solar Wheels* separates when language is heard and when the meaning is being experienced by the viewer. And with that, it hopefully makes space for understanding sound, meaning, and writing.

“I see engaging with the mythical and relative spaces in the story as a practice similar to the movements of the shutter on a camera, allowing light, that is like the essence of our awareness, to step in.”

SC: The Cotoneaster plant plays a central part in *bearing fruit of fondness* – you even used the leaves of the plant to process the 16mm film. Why were you drawn to work with this plant?

I had been paying attention to ways of working with analogue filmmaking that use natural materials and learned of berry leaves' phenolic quality. At the same time, I was wary of the contrived tendencies of producing artwork after artwork and aspired to align living and making in a way that is freed from professionalism and market economy.

I spent a while getting to know this plant that was growing on the hill just outside of the house where we live in Skye, and I noticed how quickly it grew and took over new territories. After some research and more observation, I learned that the plant is Cotoneaster – brought to the UK in the 19th century as an ornamental plant from regions of and near my birthplace. It is an ingredient in Tibetan medicine, and it has many names in different languages that I have connections with.

Some types of Cotoneaster are considered invasive to limestone landscapes in the UK, and this was one of them. Simultaneously it was a time when I was tuning into a form of belonging that can't be harmed, as someone who chooses to live outside of my birthplace for many reasons. I thought about the different causes and conditions that are being expressed in understanding this plant and started to explore its phenolic qualities through making it into developer for analogue films, while trying to manage its unintegrated yet abundant growth.

SC: *bearing fruit of fondness* is filmed in your garden on dramatically stormy days in the Isle of Skye. The film has a very atmospheric soundtrack with the storm and your voice reading the script in one fast exhale of breath. How important is the soundtrack to the film and why did you decide to mimic the storm in your narration?

SX: Similar to the editing in *Solar Wheels*, I think about words as sounds

first. I'm interested in how words and meanings are simultaneously rhythms and feelings – when I was a teenager, I was into rap music. By mimicking the sound of the storm, it is like a non-active resistance of being with the storm through my own breaths.

SC: We're delighted to be exhibiting six new paintings which accompany the children's story *The Child of the Mountain*. What made you decide to write a story for children and how did it feel returning to oil paints?

SX: I wanted to share the idea of interconnectedness with children, and stories help raise awareness of this. I see engaging with the mythical and relative spaces in the story as a practice similar to the movements of the shutter on a camera – allowing light, like the essence of our awareness, to step in.

“The stories give forms to the birth, life, and death of the painting cycle.”

The stories give forms to the birth, life, and death of the painting cycle. And the painting process is filled with the joy and exploration of co-creating images while perceptions of forms and feelings rise and fall.

SC: The exhibition is rich in different languages and translations – Chinese, Uyghur, Tibetan, English. How important is language in your practice?

SX: I think about language as a ground of naming and labelling, and I'm interested in the inherent interdependent states of these grounds. The temperature, moisture, insectoids, plants, and seeds are all part of their relational webs, and manifest differently in each language. My relations are part of that too, and the practice involves tuning into the connectedness through sound, meaning, volition, and the spaces in between.

SC: Finally, I first encountered your work through an open call for studio visits related to *We Contain Multitudes*. What drew you to this opportunity?

SX: Over the past few years, I've started to understand the abundance of relationship building through engaging with accessibility for myself and others. At the same time, I was starting to recognise my own boundaries and limitations, which has helped me examine my expectations of productivity, professionalism, and ableism. I wanted to approach the place where I now call home through an integral self that aspires for a liberation that can be shared, hence this opportunity felt aligned with me. I'm very thankful for all that which has manifested so far.

*Shen Xin and Sorcha Carey
Edinburgh, 15 October 2025*

● This interview is part of the exhibition *Highland Embassy*, which is showing in Collective's City Dome Gallery from 3 Oct – 21 Dec 2025.

**WE CONTAIN
MULTITUDES**

phf Paul Hamlyn
Foundation

**CREATIVE
LAND**
SCOT
ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL

• EDINBURGH •
THE CITY OF EDINBURGH COUNCIL

We Contain Multitudes is in partnership with Dundee Contemporary Arts (DCA) and LUX Scotland, and is supported by Paul Hamlyn Foundation.