There are Many Different Stories, but Somehow, Nobody Talks about it. A conversation with Jaanus Samma

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Jaanus Samma. Photo: Diana Pfammatter

Jaanus Samma has been interviewed by *Echo Gone Wrong* several times before, and each conversation brings new revelations about his work, which trawls through the body of normative history to excavate what has long been unseen, unnoticed and silenced. This time, fresh from completing his DAAD artist residency in Berlin, he had new experiences to share.

We met in Tallinn after several confused encounters with directions in the city centre, eventually finding each other in front of the historic Viru Hotel, beside a busy street. From there, on a winter afternoon, we randomly chose a restaurant on our walk towards Vabaduse väljak, although we were not really going anywhere in particular; we both knew we would eventually sit down for this conversation.

Samma is one of Estonia's most acclaimed visual artists, both internationally and locally, whose work explores queer desire and identity, national motifs, and the politics of representation through folk culture. His works recontextualise historical materials and vernacular forms to question how heteronormative sexuality and power have shaped narratives of sexual identity, narratives that pushed queer people to the margins and forced them into hidden sexual lives in Soviet-era Estonia. Sometimes he builds queer utopias, as in his installation *Riga Postcards*. He weaves visuals through textiles, wool, photography, installation, video and sculpture.

Jaanus Samma, Swimming Pool, Digital chromogenic print, cardboard, beads 2005. Photo: Ly Lestberg

Shameema Binte Rahman: *You've just returned to Estonia from the DAAD artist residency in Berlin. How was it? If you could share your experiences with us a bit …*

Jaanus Samma: Berlin is a city where for the last five years I've done exhibitions, participated in group shows, and things like that. So it was a very good continuation. I already had professional and other friends there, so it didn't start from zero, and yes, it was very productive. I really like Berlin. I think one of the reasons is, they understand Eastern Europe, or let's say, East Europe. While living here in Estonia, I don't think of myself as living in Eastern Europe, you know. But when you have an encounter with some countries more in the West, then you see how you are often exoticised. I didn't experience that in Berlin, because they have their own experience with the Berlin Wall and all that, so I felt it was kind of my scene as well. And I also understand them because of the German influence in Estonia from the 13th century. So culturally there wasn't any conflict, it was very comfortable in that way. I just continued my artistic life, doing exhibitions and developing different projects. Many of my projects run parallel, working on different things at the same time.

Shameema Binte Rahman: *It sounds like James Joyce's character Stephen Dedalus. He appears in both Ulysses and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man as the same character across different novels. Could you tell me a bit more about what projects you're working on now?*

Jaanus Samma: One project looks at historical queer ancestors. I'm preparing an exhibition for the Temnikova Gallery in May about Eric Stenbock, a late 19th-century British-Baltic-German nobleman who inherited property in Estonia and spent about two years at Kolga Manor. He was extraordinarily extravagant. His influence was so strong that there are still folk songs and tales we can trace back to him. He was a writer, active in Oscar Wilde's circle in London, and died very young, around 35. He probably had relationships with men, and his short stories explore alternative family patterns.

Another project I am working on is about Estonian national iconography, the myths and narratives Estonia often uses, like the Vikings or *Kalevipoeg* (the Estonian national epic). It is a continuation of an exhibition at the EKKM (Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia) in 2023 called 'Iron Man'. In that show I tried to connect several male protagonists who have each contributed to Estonia's national pride, both in a mythological and a political sense.

Shameema Binte Rahman: *Why do you take characters from history?*

Jaanus Samma: I'm always interested in history, and I also collect things: photos, objects, art. History inspires and fascinates me. I think I have a perspective that is maybe a little bit different, and I have something to say about it. For example, ethnographic material like folk costumes have usually been studied in a very boring and conservative way, and I think the material is so rich, and I want to contribute to this discussion by offering different interpretations. When working with historical topics, I'm always interested in the future and the moment we're living in now: how history influences us, and why we are the way we are. It's all rooted in the past.

Shameema Binte Rahman: *You've been working on the Estonian art scene for about two decades. Art enthusiasts often refer to your works in discussions about the construction of gay identity and eroticism. What first sparked in your mind when you began creating this path that few others dared to follow? How did it all begin?*

Jaanus Samma: If I think of my artistic career, it definitely started intuitively. When I did my bachelor studies at the EKA (Estonian Academy of Arts) I studied printmaking, but my final BA work wasn't prints. It was photos of swimming pools covered with embroidery, things like that. I didn't really know how to verbalise what I was doing. I couldn't explain why I was interested in the things I was interested in. I had nice professors, but not artistically that inspiring. So I was a bit lost, looking for something, but I didn't know exactly what. So I just worked on things that I liked. I had the courage to trust myself. Later, of course, I learned how to explain things, how to verbalise and conceptualise. I didn't have those tools at the beginning. And now when you make something, you're already thinking, how does it fit into my practice, my pattern? You become too aware of things. I think this intuition, this kind of naivety, is something I sometimes miss. Being a little bit naive is also a very beautiful thing. So I would say it started from there, from trusting that intuition. My first solo show was in 2005, and since then I've thought of myself mostly as an artist.

Shameema Binte Rahman: In your 'Sweaters' project, you used imagery of penises and words like 'Kaspar on Homo', 'Fags', etc. Sweaters are outerwear. Wearing such sweaters is like a visual performance. When I looked at the images, Judith Butler came to mind: gender as something we perform rather than are.

Jaanus Samma: I definitely agree with Judith Butler, but that wasn't the starting point for me. Often those messages like 'Casper is Gay' are meant as insults. I was thinking of inverting it so that someone would be proud to wear it. I did the exhibition about the sweaters as a store, like a shop, because I was interested in people actually wearing the sweaters, and creating this connection between personal space and public space. That raised a whole new set of questions. Are the sweaters in the exhibition a craft, a design or a fashion? It becomes especially confusing when you present it as a shop, because art exhibitions aren't usually shops with price tags. And there are hierarchies in those categories, right? We tend to look at crafts as something lower. I was interested in blurring those categories.

Jaanus Samma, Sweaters, 2014. Photo: Anu Vahtra

Shameema Binte Rahman: I remember seeing one of your installations at the VI Artishok Biennale in 2018: a toilet structure with jockstraps hanging inside. And your exhibition 'Outhouse by the Church' (also 2018, in Rome) grew directly out of the research on toilets.

Jaanus Samma: The 'Outhouse by the Church' project involved a public toilet in Kodavere, a small village by Lake Peipsi. The toilet stood inside the churchyard. There were architectural studies from the 1950s and 1980s with detailed photos, but the images were cropped exactly where the toilet would have appeared. Built in 1916, the toilet had walls covered with poems,

graffiti, and inscriptions from the 1910s to the 1940s. For me, that made it a heritage object, not because it was beautiful in any classic sense, but because it held stories, memories, and social history.

When I spent two weeks in Kodavere interviewing local residents, some of whom were over ninety, many of them had a story about that toilet. So the project became a way of thinking about beauty and ugliness, and how we tend to value certain things as heritage, while ignoring others that are just as meaningful.

Since the toilet was close to collapsing, I decided to save it. I contacted Hilkka Hiiop, now rector of the Estonian Academy of Arts, and she came with her students to help restore it. After that, it couldn't go back to the original site, so I began exhibiting it as an installation. When I showed it in Rome in 2018, a city overflowing with Classical remains, I wanted to make the point that value doesn't come only from beauty or age. This toilet was only a hundred years old, but it had a century's worth of human traces. That was the core idea.

Jaanus Samma, NSFW. A Chairmans Tale. Estonian Pavilion at the 56th, Venice Bienniale Exhibition view, 2015.
Photo: Reimo Võsa-Tangsoo

Shameema Binte Rahman: *Your famous work* NSFW: A Chairman's Tale *was exhibited at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015. You've discussed this project in many interviews for its uniqueness. How did you discover the chairman from the Soviet era?*

Jaanus Samma: Chairman was a kind of legend in Tartu, people knew him. He was famous, at least in gay circles. I worked on this for several years, constantly finding more material. He was prosecuted for having homosexual relationships, which was illegal in the Soviet Union. When I started, I had no idea I would find the court files: three or four hundred pages. But once I found them, they became the main source for the project. I also did interviews with his friends.

It's a sad, personal story in a regime where the state makes it its business to know your private life and draws the limits of what is allowed. Through him you can talk about all those different aspects of gay life in Soviet Estonia. With him as an example, you can talk about marriage as something socially expected for career reasons, violence against queer people, court cases, jail, blackmailing, all these elements are there.

The question for me wasn't if I should do it, but how. It was so rich you could write a novel or an opera. That's why the exhibition was so complex. We had videos, found objects, room installations, an archive, etc.

Shameema Binte Rahman: *Did the exhibition attract any negative responses?*

Jaanus Samma: At the Venice Biennale the media were supportive, everyone was supportive. The only backlash came when we brought the exhibition to Estonia in 2016, to the Occupation Museum, now Vabamu. Conservatives were very angry and called for a boycott. One private radio station, Nõmme Radio, even urged people to 'do something' about it. Because the opening speech was by the head of the parliament, we had about eight or ten security guards there; it felt like a performance itself. Nothing happened, though.

Jaanus Samma, Otherness, Desire, the Vernacular. Temnikova and Kasela, Gallery Exhibition view, 2021. Photo: Roman-Sten Tõnissoo

Shameema Binte Rahman: *In your 'Pattern' project from 2021, you juxtaposed folk motifs like Baroque-style flowers on to men's jockstraps. Is that your way of challenging conventional folk culture?*

Jaanus Samma: Yes, definitely. When we talk about Estonians who used to wear those costumes, it's very heteronormative. We don't talk about queer people's experiences, like women who wear men's outfits, for example. There are many different stories, but somehow nobody talks about it. Folk costumes are so categorised: men used these garments, women used those. And it's all canonised now. Queer people didn't have the voice or the power to write themselves into history. If you had queer family members, you wouldn't talk about them. When they died, you would burn all the material because it was shameful. So my project was looking back and rediscovering, but also making up a kind of utopian history, what would have been if society had been different. But also proposing that maybe something did exist, but it was never preserved, never collected, never seen as valuable.

Shameema Binte Rahman: *Could it be said that you are one of the first to start researching the queer role in Estonian history?*

Jaanus Samma: I would never dare to say that. That's a very bold statement. There have been different artists, for example Anna-Stina Treumund, who also worked with these topics. But of course now there are more publications in Estonia exploring queer history, and more researchers and artists are working on these topics. Ten years ago, there weren't many at all. I didn't have too many artists to have conversations with, so I was quite alone on this path.

Shameema Binte Rahman: *At first glance, your works often resemble beautiful souvenirs or cosy rugs: beautifully woven, familiar, nostalgic. But on closer inspection, they reveal quiet rebellion. In* Personal Mythology *from your 'Otherness' project, you use the form of a nineteenth-century wedding tapestry, but encode queer symbols within it. What draws you to this subtle play between appearance and subversion?*

Jaanus Samma: This is what I always like to do. The aesthetic side is very important to me, and I try to balance something difficult with something nicer. That play between shock and candy.

The wedding rug fascinated me, because these were objects people believed in. They had a kind of power inside. People would wear them, use them as talismans. The National Museum in Tartu has many of these rugs, and when you read the collection records, the stories the owners told, it's fascinating how they were created and used. Very heartwarming stories. So for me it wasn't only visually attractive, but also the context and narratives that come with these objects. I wanted to make my own versions, weave my own narrative inside.

The first wedding rug I made was about me, my story, my artistic and personal life. More like a self-portrait. Later I made a wedding rug for an Estonian poet, one of our queer ancestors, a fictional wedding rug for this nineteenth-century figure.

I'm always interested in crafts. Especially when we think of Estonian history: Estonians were never in a position to write books or write history. It was always Germans, Swedes or Russians in power, and the stories we read are their perspective from the top. But crafts reveal the stories of everyday people. The patterns and messages woven in are kind of their books. So this is why I'm researching them and trying to offer different perspectives.

Jaanus Samma, Rugs. Exhibition Elisarion. Kumu Art Museum Exhibition view, 2024. Photo: Joosep Kivimäe

Shameema Binte Rahman: *This curiosity just popped into my mind: why did you choose to work specifically with rugs and wool?*

Jaanus Samma: They were very inspiring for me, and I wanted to contribute in the same manner, the same medium. After I'd done a few, I started to love it. It's something I'm working on more and more. I work with different craftspeople. Over the years, I've developed very good relationships with them. I give them the design and then we discuss how to realise it, and sometimes I will make some changes. I like to work with the same craftspeople many times, if possible, because it's a relationship. They get to know me, I get to know them.

Shameema Binte Rahman: *Have you ever encountered a craftsperson who didn't want to work on what you asked for, from a conservative perspective?*

Jaanus Samma: I was very afraid with my sweater project, because there were penises and all that. But now I would say I was the one who had stereotypes. I almost never had any problems.

Shameema Binte Rahman: *I found a quote in the introduction to one of your projects: 'Any sexual expression in a public space carries a political weight.' Can you explain a bit about the politics and publicness of sexual expression?*

Jaanus Samma: Public space is regulated by power: what is considered acceptable, what the norms are, and how people are expected to behave. We are expected to wear certain kinds of clothing and act in specific ways. Of course, some rules are necessary; without them, public space would descend into chaos. However, it is equally important to question who benefits from the rules, and whether the norms are inclusive and tolerant of people who are different, and public sexual expression makes these power imbalances visible.

Shameema Binte Rahman: Thank you for your time.

Jaanus Samma: Thank you, too.

Jaanus Samma, Vikings. Exhibnition Iron Men. EKKM, Exhibition view, 2023. Photo: Paul Kuimet

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