

the Artling

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best artists and designers.

Zen Teh, "Calls for a New Natural Order" at 2902 Gallery

Zen Teh is a young artist born and working in Singapore. Interested in man's relationship with the natural world, she travels the globe to learn about environmental issues and photograph the impact of urban development upon the environment.

Bringing together two distinct series of work, one rooted within the landscape traditions of literati painting and the other on symbolism, Calls for a New Natural Order presents an artistic practice invested in a posthumanist relationship between Man and nature, in which Man is not the defining partner. Teh's photographic images, sans human life, are redolent of primordial landscapes. However, being based on photographs of city natural reserves or forests being side-lined for development, her images are firmly rooted in the anthropocene (our current geological age in which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment).

Each photograph is a visual feast that provides moments of escape into seemingly natural environments. In turn, Teh's work exposes the duplicity of our desire for a natural sublime, a pristine environment in an increasingly resource strapped world, where the natural or primary forest can only be experienced as a myth or historical artefact. In reflecting the harsh realities of our desire, each work calls for a new orientation to nature, another pace to life and another gauge for progress - important calls in the age of the climate crisis.



Singapore Landscape Painting- Zen Teh

Here in tiny, land-scarce Singapore, it comes as no surprise that nature's often had to take a backseat to the demands of progress and development. Even as campaigns to save the Green Corridor and Bukit Brown make it plain that not everybody's on board with the idea of replacing natural areas with highways and shopping malls, there's precious little left of nature on the island. What does remain often ends up aggressively manicured, presenting not so much nature as some carefully orchestrated interpretation of nature, filtered through very human expectations and perspectives. Zen Teh's first solo exhibition in Singapore, 'Calls for a New Natural Order,' examines, among other things, this curiously dysfunctional relationship with nature. It's a relationship that could be compared, if we're being uncharitable, to anime-obsessed shut-ins who become bizarrely attached to purely fictional characters.

Which is not to say that Teh's photography can be boiled down to some nostalgic pursuit of images of an authentic, unspoiled nature – of lushly rugged landscapes to be contemplated at our leisure in a comfortably air-conditioned gallery. Hers is a rather more critical eye, questioning our relationship with nature and the landscape in three very distinct bodies of work from the past four years.

The series 'The Imperative Landscape,' for instance, is built on dense, large-scale images of Chiang Rai forests, discarding the usual landscape format for less conventional shapes – a circle with a hole in the middle, a notched triangle, and what might well be a reference to the yoni symbol. Rendered in a subdued monochrome with a glossy diasec finish, these dramatic forms suggest both a confrontational graphic sensibility and a concern with sacred geometry – nature not as some passive ground to be built over, but an active, primal force, one which provides the foundations of our myths and symbols.





Unknowing (triptych)- Zen Teh

Though the show is largely one of photographs, there are influences beyond that of photography itself – most notably, painting, and particularly that of traditional Chinese painting. Teh's 'Unknowing' series and 'Singapore Landscape Painting' are both printed on scrolls of hand-made paper, horizontally and vertically respectively. It's a gesture that verges on affectation, particularly in the case of 'Singapore Landscape Painting,' which requires you to carefully – almost tediously – manhandle the scroll to take in the whole image. The physical investment involved in viewing lushly verdant scenes of sameness seems to function as commentary in itself, on our endless vistas of cookie cutter flats and malls.

Composed as they are of photo-composites of various natural scenes in Singapore – ranging from familiar parks and reserves to other, less identifiable fragments of landscape – the two series suggest a relationship with nature founded, on some level, on some sense of limitless editability. An approach to the natural world that has something in common with Spotify's systems of musical recommendation, or the filter bubbles quietly imposed on us by Google's monitoring of our internet search habits.

At the same time, the compositing of these photographs to suggest landscapes wholly strange to our own experiences of Singapore suggests a touch of deception or concealment through collation, lending a touch of disquiet and unease to these otherwise lushly beautiful images. Far from simply indulging our taste for contemplating nature from afar, the show hints at some sort of complicity and instability, disrupting our settled gaze.