

SeptFest 2015: Robert Zhao takes on The Substation's famous banyan tree

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Exhibition kicks off the 25th anniversary edition of the arts centre's annual festival

SINGAPORE — Last year, when artist Robert Zhao Renhui was invited to hold a solo show for The Substation's annual festival this year, he had no idea what he wanted to do.

So he went camping for inspiration.

The result is the ongoing exhibition *The Tree That Fell*, the first show under SeptFest 2015, which is also the arts centre's 25th anniversary edition. It comprises remnants of the famous Malayan banyan tree behind the former Substation Garden, which is now Timbre.

Zhao had spent a few nights under the trees behind The Substation. And in a Buddha-under-the-tree moment of enlightenment, if you will, he decided to take on the trees after eventually finding out that these were scheduled to be cleared away in August 2014 for the ongoing construction by the Singapore Management University.

Around 15 to 20 trees were felled, ranging from banyan to tembusu to rain tree varieties. But the iconic banyan tree that encroached on the art space's walls was spared after a campaign to relocate it.

Zhao was one of a handful of artists, including Lucy Davis and film-maker Tan Pin Pin, who documented the process. But he took it a step further, collecting some of the pieces of wood, not

only from the transplanted banyan, but also from the other trees that didn't make it, too. Storing them at a tent at The Substation, he later discovered these were infested by wood-eating powderpost beetles, which were leaving a powder-like residue.

"I found the powder material very interesting," he said. "And I learnt it takes a few years for the beetles to reduce (wood) to powder."

The tension between this slow natural process and the swift destruction of flora by man lies at the crux of *The Tree That Fell* (the title of which coincidentally links with the title of his first show as a solo artist, *If a tree falls in the forest*, which was also held at The Substation in 2009.)

At the centre of the gallery space are two vitrines that form a dialogue with each other.

How To Make A Tree Disappear As Intended I features a straight 3.91m root from The Substation banyan tree. It's peppered with holes and inhabited by the beetles, and nature will be taking its course throughout the show.

Meanwhile, *How To Make A Tree Disappear As Intended II* forms the counterpoint: A huge mound comprising 150kg worth of sawdust, it was the result of Zhao painstakingly sanding down the pieces of wood he had collected. Using sandpaper (and later, a sanding machine), he had reduced his pile of wood into powder, mimicking the beetles' efforts on a larger scale – but by unnatural means.

Two other pieces round up the show: A lightbox photograph of what remains of the transplanted banyan tree, which is currently in a holding pen. The work had been a part of another recent exhibition he took part in called *Singapore, Very Old Tree*.

There's also *A Guide To Tree Planting*, comprising pages of a book that highlighted the process of transplanting a tree in one day. As in some of Zhao's deadpan works, he appropriated a similarly titled book published in the 1980s by the Parks And Recreation Department, the predecessor National Parks Board. Tweaking the text, he used his documentation photos of The Substation banyan tree's transplanting process and presents these in reverse – showing the workers planting the tree instead of removing it.

The act of transplanting trees, including for purposes of saving these, evokes different emotions in people, Zhao said. "A lot of people get emotional about it, a lot of people were happy (with the transplanting of Substation's iconic tree)."

At the same time, Zhao also wonders to what extent does the act actually serve a purpose, particularly for a tree species as naturally wild-growing like the banyan. He pointed out that that for many transplanted banyan trees, growth is controlled by putting cement all around it.

Citing the present state of The Substation banyan tree, a sorry-looking version of its original that's stuck in tree limbo, he pointed out how its original grandeur is lost. The act of transplanting "becomes a gesture that says we love nature but it's also somewhat very pathetic," Zhao said. "Transplanting a banyan tree sounds absurd."

But it's not as if the presence of the famous tree is completely gone at The Substation. Zhao pointed out how remnants of its roots still stubbornly cling to the walls of Timbre.

Just like how the arts centre has now been around for 25 years, it would seem you can't really keep a good tree down. MAYO MARTIN

The Tree That Fell runs until Sept 27 at The Substation Gallery. For more info on SeptFest2015, visit <http://www.substation.org/septfest/>