

# Inside the Curious World of Robert Zhao Renhui



By Melissa Gail Sing  
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Does a picture say a thousand words? Probably more than meets the eye if it's Robert Zhao Renhui's work. The award-winning artist tells Melissa Gail Sing how his early exposure to nature shaped his narratives and what he hopes to achieve with his altered realities.

Many people who are surrounded by nature as children grow up advocating for animals or nature. Not Robert Zhao Renhui. He is not an animal activist. In fact, the only thing the Singaporean multidisciplinary artist has in common with an animal activist is that he is trying to find answers. The question he continuously asks through his works is, "What does 'nature' mean?" He ponders, "We all have very different experiences and answers for what is 'natural'? Is the goldfish natural? Is the zoo natural? Is the park natural?"

Combining his appreciation for natural history with his love for the camera, he moulded himself into what he calls a "critical zoologist" who addresses man's relationship with nature by presenting different human perspectives on nature, frequently highlighting how truth is constructed through a false naturalisation and manipulation of beliefs.



Curious, mischievous and confusing are just some of the words used to describe his works. Drawing upon his observations of the natural world, the artist who does primarily photography has attracted much attention for his works that are often a composite of many images, the resulting one melding the imagined with reality. It is not unusual for people viewing his work to take a closer look and go, "Is that fact or fiction?"

Through his Institute of Critical Zoologists (ICZ), a fictitious scientific research website, he pretends to be a scientist. "ICZ aims to develop a critical approach to how people view animals. I started it because I think we give a lot of trust and belief in science. I borrow the look and language of science into art, to see if people will give art the same amount of trust and belief. I'm trying to make people aware of how they read or consume photographs, how they react to even just information," says the award-winning artist who has exhibited in numerous festivals here and abroad and was a finalist in the Best Emerging Artist Using Photography category at the recent Prudential Eye Awards 2016.



We learn more about the artist's early fascination with nature, his unusual interests and current projects.

**When did you first pick up a camera?**

I used to play with my father's film camera when I was young. I'd bring it to school and take photographs in my classroom. I was also reading a book on how ghost photographs are created. By using a marker pen to draw on the negative and sending it to the printer afterwards, you could get a "ghost" photograph. I created some ghost photographs of the classroom and showed them to my classmates. They were really afraid. It was probably from there that I realised the potential of photography to tell *tatler\_tatler\_stories*.

**What's the most recent photo you took?**

It's a photograph of a mynah outside my studio. It is always there after I eat dinner and I am going out to throw the trash. Maybe one day I will feed it.



### **Why are animals a favourite subject of yours?**

Growing up, I was always watching nature, animals, plants and so on, in various ways. I watched a lot of programmes on National Geographic and Discovery Channel, which was my all my father watched. We also visited the zoo every public holiday. At our first home, my father had an artist friend paint a Chinese ink waterfall straight onto the wall. All our windows had a bonsai plant on the sill, and every room had an aquarium. Surrounded by nature, I became very fascinated with it.

### **Have you ever gotten yourself into life-threatening situations for a photo?**

I was lost in a forest for three hours once.

### **How do you know when you've got the perfect image?**

I do not think any of my images are perfect. I try to make them useful for the narrative and world I am creating for the series of work. I use a large format camera and most of the images are a composite of many images.



### **What are you busy with now?**

For the moment, I am visiting Christmas Island to observe its unique ecology. Several extinctions have taken place on the island in the past decade and one of the reasons could be cats going feral on the island. Ecologists decided that the cats had to go to protect threatened species on the island. They have been so successful that there should be no more cats on the island in the next 10 years. I've visited the island more than six times now and have amassed a huge collection of images taken on the island. Christmas Island is really a story about how humans have the ability to affect nature in a relatively short time. I plan to look into bigger narratives of humans' relationship with nature.

### **How have you evolved as a visual artist?**

My process is getting slower and more material based. I spend longer time working on a series than before. This may be due to the subjects I am looking at. Trees, for instance, take their time. I spent the last year photographing every leaf on a raintree, all 28,017 leaves.





**What are some of your lesser-known hobbies or interests?**

I like collecting animal traps. I find them very beautiful and use them a lot in my work. People think I am against the cruelty that is inflicted by these traps but I am not. The traps are violent. Nature is violent. Traps are things we create to cope and live with nature. There is something beautiful in condensing so much knowledge—the creature's habits, its biology, its weaknesses—into a single object and a single swift action.

**Who do you find most inspiring?**

The most inspiring person I ever met was Martin Hauser who changed the way I looked at the world. He is an entomologist based in California. I met him during a residency at the Kadist Art Foundation in San Francisco. He is a world authority on flies and has spent his life studying flies. He wrote to me a few years ago because he found my fictional science website via an authentic science magazine that had assumed it was real. When I met him, he showed me how the world functioned on a micro level, on the level of insects. Before I met him I felt it was impossible for me to work with flies in my work but after that first meeting, I was very obsessed with really small insects. I began to see them everywhere.

**What's your wildest dream?**

To make a good book.



Images courtesy of Robert Zhao Renhui