



Art Radar

Contemporary art trends and news from Asia and beyond

Singapore's Robert Zhao Renhui and the Institute of Critical Zoologists – interview

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Art Radar uncovers hidden truths behind Robert Zhao Renhui's photographic work in an exclusive interview.

Singaporean artist Robert Zhao Renhui was shortlisted for the Prudential Eye Art Awards 2016 and was among the finalists in the photography category. Art Radar spoke to the artist about his work and the fictitious Institute of Critical Zoologists.



Robert Zhao Renhui, 'Singapore, tolerating the tropics', from the series "Singapore 1925-2025", 2014, archival Piezographic print in frame, 121 x 84 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

Singaporean visual artist Robert Zhao Renhui is well known for his works that pair fiction and fact together in a provocative manner, which often leave the viewer unable to decipher where one ends and the other begins. His multi-disciplinary approach is centred on his observations of the natural world, but instead of documenting it, he constructs layered narratives provoking doubt in viewers as to the status of the works as documentary or fiction.

Zhao presents his art investigations through the Institute of Critical Zoologists, an online organisation that he set up in 2008 with the stated aim of advancing unconventional, even radical, means of understanding human and animal relations.

With real animal traps, invented insect species, a guidebook on the flora and fauna of the world, fallen trees, Zhao's works runs a wide spectrum. What is consistent though is his yen for urging the viewer to look at things beyond what they seem to be. Zhao's work has been exhibited extensively in museums, biennales and festivals, and most recently he was shortlisted for Best Emerging Artist Using Photography for the Prudential Eye Awards 2016.

Art Radar spoke to Zhao about his practice, his interest in nature and what he is working on next.

Congratulations on being shortlisted for the Prudential Eye Awards 2016! In Singapore there isn't much of an opportunity to be involved with nature and animals outside the planned zones of parks, zoo, bird park, etc. So how did you get interested in animals and nature?

My experience with nature is rather unique because I grew up in Singapore. Singapore is a city in a garden. It is not difficult to start to think about nature in Singapore, it is everywhere around us. Maybe it has become so obvious that nature is almost invisible to us. You know the fumigation that happens in the landscape to rid ourselves of pests in a single sweep? That is a very conflicted and dramatic scene of Singapore's dealings with nature. It is dreamy, surreal and suffocating.

The image in the Prudential Eye Awards talks about our need to tolerate and manage these tropical insects. We probably have the highest number of trees per capita in the world. Beneath this net of evergreen trees and plants in Singapore, there is a huge effort involved to maintain this illusion. We are a country that grows trees based on the way we can maintain them. Nature is treated on a very utilitarian level. I believe this is true for most cities.

In San Francisco, I just saw a row of 18 trees that were replaced because it was costing the estate too much to 'maintain' the trees. They were to be replaced with a more economical type of tree. Most of the time, when we talk about landscapes and animals we are really talking about human concerns and human perspectives. Our interaction with nature shapes the way we approach these subjects.



Robert Zhao Renhui. Image courtesy the artist.



Robert Zhao Renhui, 'How To Make A Tree Disappear As Nature Intended II' (detail), 2015, vitrine, 150kg of sawdust from The Substation Malayan Banyan tree, 2 x 2 x 1.55 m. Image courtesy the artist.

Tell us about ICZ (Institute of Critical Zoologists). How did you come up with the idea to set up an institute?

The ICZ is a long term project. It is also my artist persona. The website looks like a real scientific website and it is also my artist website. I started the ICZ because I think we give a lot of trust and belief in science. I borrow the language and look of science into art to see if people will give art the same amount of trust and belief. For all my projects I try to pretend I am an objective scientist. The ICZ still carries on through my projects and exhibitions.

Who else works at ICZ?

I am afraid it is just me.



Robert Zhao Renhui, 'Singapore Wild Dogs', from the series "Singapore 1925-2025", 2014, archival Piezographic print in frame, 121x 84 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

On the ICZ website you state that your mission is to develop a critical approach to the zoological gaze. Do you think it is possible to do so in highly urbanised societies like Singapore? How successful has the Institute been in doing so?

It is like calling the police a 'good police'. When you say that a scientist is critical, suddenly you begin to think that maybe there are some scientists that are not critical. By calling my project the institute of critical zoologists, I am trying to call into question whether zoologists are critical or are we critical of zoologists? I think more and more we have learnt that nature can survive in an urban setting as well, especially in Singapore. I am afraid I am not sure how successful the Institute is in developing the approach.

Your work often involves mixing of fact and fiction. In many ways this can also be read as a device for deception or subversion. What is your intention in doing so? Do you want the viewer to question that what is often presented as fact?

I think we do not question enough of anything and this is very dangerous. Have a look at any advertisement, it is a lie. Let's not try to pretend that photography is still a medium we can trust. Someone from the audience once confronted me during an artist talk and asked me who I think I was to make people question what they are seeing? I told him I think that is my job as an artist to raise questions. We have become so comfortable with lies that lies have lost their power to shock.



Robert Zhao Renhui, 'Singapore Wild Animal', from the series "Singapore 1925-2025", 2014, archival Piezographic print in frame, 121x 84 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

In an interview you said that “A photograph is always lying in some way”. Can you comment on this and how it relates to your work.

I was an animal rights activist once, but I think the work got too emotional for me and I was uncomfortable with the way photography was used (too manipulative). During this time I became interested in the 'truth' to which photography purports. Although some of my methods include falsification, I am attracted to truth and I pursue that in my work. The fiction I create comes from my observations on seldom-questioned systems of knowledge. I read somewhere that 'the honest, if they are to pursue the truth, they must be sufficiently competent at dishonesty'. In the creation of fiction, one must understand how truth is often constructed.

Your work has often been presented as a subtle commentary on the political and social environment of Singapore, but you have said that it is not in your nature to comment or criticise. How do you feel about this reading being offered to the viewer?

I think that is fine. If the work can say something more than I've intended it to be, that's great.



Robert Zhao Renhui, 'View from Ulu Tirum', from the series "Singapore 1925-2025", 2014, archival Piezographic print in frame, 121 x 84 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

Tell us about the series “Singapore 1925-2025” and your works that have been shortlisted for the Prudential Eye Award. How did you get interested in the sand dunes? How did the series evolve? And what were the challenges, if any, that you faced?

In the late 1990s, my father would take me to these reclaimed lands on the west coast of Singapore. These places were so huge that it would take 30 minutes of driving before we could see the sea. It has always been a mystery to me why such huge landscapes existed in Singapore. The city was only 224 square miles when the reclamation projects started in 1960 and by 2030 it will have grown to 317 square miles.

A casual visit to the reclaimed lands has become nearly impossible in recent years as the reclaimed land sites are now fenced up. So I now make it a point to visit coastal dunes in other countries to try to re-live the experience of walking on the sands of Singapore in my youth. There are giant dunes in the middle of several cities today, like the Dune du Pyla of Arcachon in France, the Tottori Sand Dunes in Japan, and the Dunes under Fort Funston in San Francisco. I take photographs in these foreign places and imagine that these were the kind of images I could have taken in Singapore when I was younger. Sometimes I wish I had a souvenir for the dunes of Singapore because most of us actually forget that, as Singaporeans, we are mostly walking on water or, if not, on the sand of others.



Robert Zhao Renhui, 'How To Make A Tree Disappear As Nature Intended II', 2015, vitrine, 150kg of sawdust from The Substation Malayan Banyan tree, 2 x 2 x 1.55 m. Image courtesy the artist.

How has your practice evolved over the years?

I think I am beginning to look at the less visible aspects of nature. Like dust. When I was in California doing a residency at Kadist, I started looking for all the insects that might be in my apartment. I collected 127 insects. At first I thought the little insects were just dust. The insects must have found their way into the apartment and gotten trapped. Perhaps they were attracted to the apartment lights or the food in the kitchen.

When some trees were felled to make way for a building, I tried various ways to remember the trees. I tried sanding the tree down with sandpaper for about a year. I exhibited the sawdust in a vitrine. In this form I find the tree in a more “natural” state, as dust is as natural as nature gets. If a tree falls in a forest, it returns to the forest by breaking down — I’ve sped up the process here a little. Dust, if we are to look at it at a micron level, carries material from a long time ago and from far away. Dust is human, animal and buildings. Dust is everywhere and nowhere, and in art, we could learn to stop fighting it and instead embrace it.



Robert Zhao Renhui, 'The Last Cat on Christmas Island', 2016. Image courtesy the artist.

What are you working on next?

I have been going to Christmas Island to look at the invasive problems on the island. The island was not populated by humans until 1880, so its ecological state is very pristine and unique.

There is no other place quite like Christmas Island on earth. The keystone species of the island are crabs. There are crabs everywhere. In the short 100 years that we have colonised the island, we have brought about many undesirable species of animals onto the island. These invasive species are believed to have caused the extinction of some of the animals on the island. I am looking at the impact of the invasive species and the conservationists' efforts to restore the ecological system.

It is heartening to see humans trying to fix the problems we created. The fixing here involves tons of killings: killing of undesirable animals that we have introduced. These include setting up thousands of cat baiting traps to kill feral cats. In my project, I am proposing to restore the island to a state where humans have already left the island. This would be after we have fixed the mess we created. It's a proposal and a way to think about the impact and actions we have on nature.

If you weren't an artist, you would be...?

I would start a museum of Nature.

Durriya Dohadwala