

Taxonomy for the Goldish Queen: An Interview with the Institute of Critical Zoologists

by Caroline Picard | Aug 12, 2016 | Blog

This interview was originally published on Bad at Sports on Dec 27, 2013.



"Blind Long-tailed Owl," Desert Variant of Little Owl from the series, *As Walked on Water*, Institute of Critical Zoologists, 2011. Installation of vinyl print, 280cm x 194 cm (Exhibition view)

Singapore based artist Robert Zhao Renhui is the Institute of Critical Zoologists, an organization that—for any Doctor Who fans out there—would be the environmental analogue to the Torchwood Institute. The fictional Torchwood was founded to protect the Earth from supernatural and extraterrestrial threats; with that mandate in hand its employees must remain open and unperturbed by a myriad of strange and uncanny possibilities within the universe. Shrouded in secrecy, however, it attempts to perpetuate the myth of everyday banality, to keep their fellow human citizens free from fear. Although similarly invested in strange zoological proclivities of our non-human fellows, the ICZ is not a secret society. It delves into the multifarious world around us to expose the strange assumptions humanity takes for granted about its surrounding landscape. Working primarily as a photographer, Renhui blends fact and fiction to emphasize the idiosyncratic relations between animals, their habitats, and the humans that categorize them. While the result is ecologically minded, the dominant effect is uncanny. The ICZ effectively unearths little understood behavioral habits of animals and re-presents them within gallery settings as representational photography, encyclopedic texts, and multimedia installations. Currently ICZ currently has an exhibit, *The Last Thing You See*, up at 2902 Gallery in Singapore until January 5th that examines the act of sight. By demonstrating the shift in perception that would result from a sensitivity to ultraviolet light, ICZ reveals a world familiar to insects while being totally divorced from human experience. ICZ is going to appear in *Ghost Nature*, a series of shows that I'm curating at Gallery 400 (Chicago, US) and La Box (Bourges, FR).

Caroline Picard: *How did the Institute of Critical Zoologists (ICZ) come about and what does "animal spectatorship" mean?*

Robert Zhao Renhui: The ICZ came about mainly because of my interest with photography and animals. A long time ago, I was involved with animal rights activism. At that point of time, I was curious with how photography was used in animal activism. I contributed a lot of photographs to talk about the plight of animals living in captivity in Asia. I got too emotional and personally involved at one point. On the other hand, I was also using photographs to create my own fictional narratives about humans and animals. In college, my tutor asked me to look at my photographic narratives with my concerns of animals rights together, instead of two separate projects. Slowly, the ICZ took shape. Animal spectatorship, in my work, is very much about the conditions of looking and understanding animals.



"A spider web which is a flower," Institute of Critical Zoologists, 2013, 150cm x 100cm, Diasec
From the series, How to eat bees? Under ultraviolet light, certain parts of a spider web glow, forming a pattern that looks like a flower—this is visible to bees, which attracts them.

CP: *I feel like you're interested in the way things are visible and invisible for instance how a human can all but disappear in a suit of leaves, or what a spider's web looks like in ultraviolet light, can you talk more about how this series of works came together.*

RZR: My interests are very much shaped by my medium, photography. Photography has always been about a way of seeing. In this exhibition, I was interested in how not seeing is as important as seeing. For the longest time, nobody knew why certain spiders weave distinctive markings on their webs. It isn't logical for spiders to make these markings because then they render an otherwise hard-to-see web visible. Scientists came up with a theory that the markings are made to warn larger animals to not walk into the spider web and destroy it. In other words, the insect trap had a defense mechanism. It was not only recently that we realised that most insects see in the UV spectrum, a visual spectrum invisible to humans. Under UV light, the web mimics the shape of a flower. These markings are also visible on flowers in UV light. A spider web that wants to be a flower. I like that idea. A mimic and an invisible trap. Like a photograph.



Institute of Critical Zoologists, "Eskimo wolf trap often quoted in sermons," 2013, Dimensions variable, Installation of diasec, eskimo knife, polyurethane, 200 kg of sodium bicarbonate. Eventually, a wolf will approach the knife and begin to cautiously sniff and lick the frozen blood. After believing it is safe, the wolf will lick more aggressively. Soon, the blade of the knife becomes exposed and it begins to nick the wolf's tongue. Because its tongue has been numbed by the cold of the frozen blood, the wolf is unaware that he is being cut, and the blood it now tastes is its own. Excited at the prospect of fresh, warm blood, the wolf will hungrily lick the blade all the more. In a short time, the wolf will grow dizzy and disoriented. In a matter of hours, it will die from blood loss, literally drinking itself to death. As horrible as this picture is, it illustrates an important truth.

CP: *Traps come up in several of your works—I'm thinking of your bee trap for instance, or the wolf trap—in both instances I feel like you're somehow able to tap into an animal semiotics, almost, using the bee's attraction to blue to bring them into the gallery, or using the wolf's appetite for blood to disguise its sense of pain. What draws you to traps?*

RZR: Michel Foucault said that visibility is a trap. He meant it in the case of the Panopticon, a prison where all the inmates were visible to one another, hence creating a system of totalitarian, mutual surveillance. I've been thinking a lot about this statement, but with the trap not relating to the observed, but the observer. Visibility is a trap because we imagine we know a lot through empirical evidence. But what is beyond the visible? Even my interest with animal traps is linked to my interest with photography. A photograph can trap us rather than liberate us. Seeing can be dangerous and misleading because we always have an eye out for the truth. It narrows our vision and the price to pay is not really knowing the bigger picture. That's how animals get trapped—they fail to see beyond what is already presented to them.

CP: *You have a book that just came out! How long did it take for you to make it? What does it contain?*

RZR: *A Guide to the Flora and Fauna of the World* is an encyclopedia of man-made nature. It started with the goldfish. Why doesn't the goldfish have a scientific name? Why is it not included in any natural history encyclopedia? Today, the goldfish is a very common fish and in China, they recently held a competition for the World Goldfish Queen. I wanted to find out if there was a book that



Institute of Critical Zoologists, "World Goldfish Queen," 2013, from the series, *A Guide to the Flora and Fauna of the World*.

the goldfish can exist in other than a decorative aquarium trade fish. I started looking at other aquarium fishes that were artificial and slowly branched out into other animals and plants affected by aesthetic modification, ecological conservation, pollution, evolution and genetic-modification. It took me about a year to create the volume. Included in the book are my past projects like *Acusis* and *A heartwarming feeling*. So you can say the book has almost 3 years of my research. At the end of the book (there are about three books in this book, all housed in a box) there is a book that talks about Tropical Bonsai, specifically the Banana Bonsai Plant. My father keeps a dwarfed banana bonsai plant of 6 years at 15 cm tall. Bonsai is the art of miniaturising trees. It is man controlling nature in a very obvious and aesthetic way. There are rules to create bonsai and there are also rules to view bonsai. There are front views, side views and back views. This is a very important part of the book. It offers a way to think about the way we have controlled nature. As a species, we have always defined and controlled the way nature existed with us and this is nothing new. Broccoli and Cauliflower are not natural although we have become so familiar with them. Man has always determined what nature should look and feel like. The way we think and look at Bonsai may offer us a way to contemplate our complicated existence with nature.



Caroline Picard

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