



Article by Roxana Florina Popa

Are we really living with the nature? An invitation to be one with the mind and eye of the conscious observer by diving into the Exhibition “The Seeds We Sow” from 4 April to 24 May 2020 at the Mizuma Gallery in Singapore.

1000 veils of illusion are falling under a plethora of finely faceted messages sprinkled with subtle intelligence and the green truth of nature. What is our relationship to nature? How close are we to nature?



Installations “As They Grow Older and Wiser” © 2016 and “Artificial Conditions” © 2019 by Ang Song Nian
Courtesy of the artist and the Mizuma Gallery

Ang Song Nian creates a “red carpet” of plant pots to reveal how people focus on the beautifying side of nature. A forest fragmented in biodegradable plant pots – patterned after the nurseries at the outskirts of Bangkok – is going to grow into the apparently abundant, thick, sky-reaching nature captured in his art work “As They Grow Older and Wiser”. Zen Teh brings in front of our eyes the portrait of a domestic nature preserved in a cabinet of curiosities, without missing a mirror for the onlooker. Robert Zhao Renhui sets up a credible online Institute of Critical Zoologists credulously sought by real scientists and followed by 12,000 followers on Instagram. Marvin Tang takes the role of the invisible photographer and discovers private gardens in the middle of state-owned forests. An expression of a human being’s desire for a plot for oneself concurring with the longing of being surrounded by nature. Is the forest our garden? Do we call our city-greenery nature? Are there mountains in Singapore? In his “Mountains Survey” art work, Marvin Tang proposes an anecdote to convey the realisation that as there are no mountains in Singapore, so do people not live in a real nature surroundings.



As "They Grow Older and Wiser" © 2016-ongoing by Ang Song Nian
Courtesy of the artist and the Mizuma Gallery

Images of trees shot at angles to convey the illusion of a natural forest. Look for signs of man's intervention: sticks to keep the plant stable, pots, ropes around branches



"Artificial Conditions" © 2019 by Ang Song Nian
Courtesy of the artist and the Mizuma Gallery

Undulated terrain by urban gardeners



Zen Teh "Reclaimed Sculpture: Domestic Landscape" © 2020
Courtesy of the artist and the Mizuma Gallery

Inkjet print on backlit film with LED light in a refurbished wooden cabinet symbolic of domestic and mind spaces within each person holding a longing to be connected to a larger environment

For good inquisitive reasons, strong documentary feature pervades the works of all exhibiting artists. "If you want to know what one fears losing, watch what they photograph", said once Merlin Mann.

The obvious of the documentary sharpens the acuity of the artists' message: "THE SEEDS WE SOW". Documentary photography becomes a tool for nature militant art.

Above all, the documentary approach reveals whether people grant the same trust to art as they do with science, explains Robert Zhao Renhui. By creating a scientific aura around the Institute of Critical Zoologists – an organisation of art investigations – he intends to show that lies lost their power to shock. Further, the postcard version of Marvin Tang’s photographs titled “The Colony” remind us that engaging with taking pictures deprives one from living in the moment and carrying the image of wonderful Natura in their soul for ever.



Colony Archive Postcard 50 by Marvin Tang © 2019-ongoing
 Courtesy of the artist and the Mizuma Gallery

How do human considerations shape the nature? Should nature survive in an urban setting?

Roxana Florina Popa: In his Tahitian Journal, Paul Gauguin writes “All the joys – animal and human – of a free life are mine. I have escaped everything that is artificial, conventional, customary. I am entering into the truth, into nature.”

He also tells of his experience of going into the forest with a young Maori to cut a piece of wood for his art works. Going into the forest required a lot of man’s strength and ability and he concludes that nature offers man everything, man only needs to know how to obtain it from nature. Have we really learnt that proximity with nature?

Robert Zhao Renhui

I once heard the a tree shelters everyone, even the person cutting the tree down.



I do not think nature has an agenda like humans. Nature just arrives, most of the time. Sometimes, it is inconvenient and sometimes, it is a nice surprise, but mostly it irritates us when nature turns up where it shouldn’t. I think that we still have some way to go in terms of **thinking about sharing our planet with non-human species.** A first step is to have the consciousness, to be aware that Nature is everywhere, not just in the parks where we want her to be.



Rainwater collected in containers. Observing how animals and plants share the same space as humans in “Monitor Swimming” and “Laughing Thrushes Scolding” by Robert Zhao Renhui © 2019

Marvin Tang: I do not think so. The description of this symbiotic relationship feels like a far cry, especially when nature needs to be functional. From botanic gardens to nature reserves, nature becomes a source of research and respite. Practical needs still stand above the need to build a relationship in nature.

Ang Song Nian: One important behaviour that man has learnt about nature is the speed at which nature moves at. It has its own pace, and is never rushing. Man, on the other hand, is perpetually in a rush to recreate nature, reproduce nature, control and manipulate nature to suit our selfish agendas. This confluence of different paces between Man and Nature leads us to a paradox of what has been learnt and yet to be learnt, as well as what's been learnt and what's needed to be unlearnt. I believe we have gone to the extreme where **we have started exploiting this proximity** through the ever on-going study and understanding of and with nature.

RFP: What kind of forms of human intervention into nature are you noticing in your environment and what kind of relationships do people establish with nature?

Marvin Tang

*We are trying to bring nature
back into our concrete jungle*



This relationship is still very much curated by the need for aesthetics. From the climber plants on the building walls to the *Monstera* plants in the corner of our homes, the concept of greening is also about beautifying. **Being in nature seems an exotic concept**, especially in this country where space is sparse and nature is an attraction to visit.

Artificially created gardens for the purpose of cultivating viable crops in colonial plantations by urban gardeners



Colony Archive Postcard 54 by Marvin Tang © 2019-ongoing
Courtesy of the artist and the Mizuma Gallery



Colony Archive Postcard 22 by Marvin Tang © 2019-ongoing
Courtesy of the artist and the Mizuma Gallery

Robert Zhao Renhui: If you take a close look around you when you walk, we set aside allotments for where nature should be. That is an intervention. You drive along the roads at night and countless insects will die when they fly towards your headlights.

The trees alongside our roads may serve very little purpose than just be greenery. I am not sure how we choose the trees to be planted along the road? Are trees that require the least maintenance – pruning – the best candidates for the city? Are they the best trees for other species that might be in the area?

I said this previously, we love our parks. A park provides a cinematic experience of nature from the paved road. We go to the park to enjoy nature, but at the same time we cannot stand the mosquitoes.

This, however, is also a way in which we have a direct interaction with a world that exists not too far from us. The mosquitoes are part of a system that is entangled with birds, with plants and other species. Suddenly, we enter this world and we are irritated.



Zen Teh "Reclaimed Sculpture: Domestic Landscape" © 2020
Courtesy of the artist and the Mizuma Gallery

Ang Son Nian: The country which I'm a citizen of – Singapore, has been providing us planned and designed access to “nature” for the many years of independence of the nation. **Nature has always been designed, manicured, planned into every aspect of our daily lives through urban planning, architecture, politically-related campaigns, as well as housing development plans.** The most evident form of human intervention in Singapore is the huge amounts of trees, plants and flowers that have been meticulously planned, selected and put in place at every possible motor-vehicles expressways, commercial and residential property developments, streets, housing development projects, and last but not least, parks.



As "They Grow Older and Wiser" © 2016-ongoing by Ang Song Nian
Courtesy of the artist and the Mizuma Gallery

RFP: Your “Stateland” work opened my eyes to the art’s role of investigator into nature. Could you dive in this perspective and tells us more?

Marvin Tang: I started working with photography in the hope of becoming a photojournalist. So, the approach I take in my practice is instinctively investigative and research driven.

While working on *Stateland*, I was pondering on the relationship of Singaporean’s with gardens. The term Garden is deeply rooted in the Singapore’s identity since 1970s. I was curious about how this term relates to its citizens. Research on this project brought me to various allocated gardens in various state-owned forested areas. Through interviews and field research, **I uncovered a number of these secretive gardens and the resistance they stand for.** The representations of these spaces becomes a deliberate choice; to document in the dark and to use artificial light to create a sense of ambiguity to its location and existence.

RFP: In your film on YouTube about your work “As they grow older and wiser”, you share memories of your childhood when your father took you to walks into tree nurseries and this outing did not suppose buying anything. Why are we afraid of nature and everything nature offers for free and we choose the artificial?

ANG SONG NIAN

The choice of artificial stems from arrogance and complacency.



Ang Song Nian: This choice of the artificial does not stem from fear. Instead, it comes from a perspective of arrogance and complacency. **This subconscious action of being able to exert power and choice over something that did not originally come from our hands, can be very seducing, and at times addictive.**

RFP: Which side of the aesthetics does your art engage with when exploring the relationship between humans and animals?

Robert Zhao Renhui: I approach my work in a documentary way. I try to document our relationship with Nature.

RFP: What is a botanical garden for you? What are the findings of your study on the botanical gardens established during the British Empire?

Marvin Tang: Botanical Gardens are institutions of research on Botany that reflect the advancements and agendas of a country. My research on Botanic Gardens started from an inquiry on how *Hevea Brasiliensis* (Para rubber tree), once only native to a region of Brazil, appeared in Singapore.

From the inquiry, I was surprised by the magnitude of plant movement that happened in the 1800s - 1900s during the British Empire and other colonisers. There were stories of "piracy" and "thief" in an attempt to smuggle and acquire botany in the name of monetising the by-products of these plants.



*Colony Archive Postcard 20 by Marvin Tang © 2019-ongoing
Courtesy of the artist and the Mizuma Gallery*



*Installation Colony Archive Postcards by Marvin Tang © 2019 ongoing
Courtesy of the artist and the Mizuma Gallery*

RFP: What is the meaning of a potted plant, a tree in the street or even more, of a “garden city” ? Some see it as an act of control over nature and some as enjoying vegetation in urban landscapes. To what extent can man recreate nature? How much nature is in a pot?

Ang Son Nian: To me, a potted plant, a tree in the street, and a “city in a garden” are all the same. The meaning of any of these depends on the perspective of which one decides to adopt while looking at them: additions to an environment – ornamental, decorative and even utilitarian. We have in many ways subjected nature to brutal, forceful and coercive ways of being controlled and to exist in the environment that we have created. **The potted plant, in its every right is entirely man-made.** The plant in a pot started off as an object of nature, but subsequently had to assume a new role in the pot. From there, **potted plants are burdened with a new and heavy responsibility** of having to be the epitome of what nature offers and how it behaves, in the company and relationship of and with Man.

RFP: I have read about your Institute of Critical Zoologists and its credulous acceptance by the scientific community. Would you like to share with us some of its stories?

Robert Zhao Renhui: I have known a few scientists who have impacted my practice in a big way. One of them is Martin Hauser, whom I met during a residency at the Kadist Art Foundation in San Francisco. He is a world authority on flies. He wrote to me a few years ago because **he found my fictional science website via an authentic science magazine that assumed I was real.** When I met him, he showed me how the world functioned at micro level, at the level of insects. Before I met him, I felt it was impossible for me to work with flies, but after the first meeting, I was very obsessed with very small insects. I begin to see them everywhere.



RFP: Where did this intention of creating doubt in the viewer spring from in your art?

Robert Zhao Renhui: Ultimately, I am attracted to truth and I pursue that in my work. My skepticism comes from my attraction to truth. The fiction I create comes from my observations on systems of knowledge that we seldom question. I read somewhere, **“the honest, if they are to pursue the truth, they must sufficiently be competent at dishonesty”.** **In the creation of fiction, one must understand how truth is often constructed.** And vice versa.

Many special thanks go to all four artists, the Mizuma Gallery and the Gallery Liaison in Singapore, Ms Cai Yun Teo

About the Artists

Ang Song Nian graduated with an MA in Photography from the London College of Communications, University of the Arts, London. Ang has been recently awarded the Grand Prize in the 41st Edition of the New Cosmos of Photography award organised by Canon Inc., Japan (2019). He has undertaken residencies at NTU Centre of Contemporary Art (2019) and Sunderland University UK (2017).

Marvin Tang graduated with a Master of Arts in Photography from the London College of Communications, University of the Arts London (2018) and BFA in Photography and Digital Imaging from Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (2015). Tang is the recipient of the LCC Photoworks Prize, UK (2018) and also the 8th France + Singapore Photographic Arts Award, Singapore (2017).

Robert Zhao Renhui with an MA in Photography from the London College of Communications, London (2010) and a BA in Photography from the Camberwell College of the Arts, University of the Arts London (2008). Zhao works are in the public collections of National Museum of Singapore, UBS Art Collection, UBS Global, Statoil Art Collection Norway, Kadist Art Foundation USA and UOB Art Collection Singapore. He has undertaken residencies at NTU Centre of Contemporary Art Singapore (2017), The Arctic Circle Residency Norway (2011), the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum Japan (2010).

Zen Teh graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts, majoring in Photography and Digital Imaging from Art, Design, Media Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (2011). Teh serves as a visual arts educator at the School of Arts (SOTA). She has also participated as an invited guest speaker at regional environmental conferences, such as ASEAN Powershift 2015 and Hanoi Innovation Week 2016 on Sustainability. Zen Teh was a finalist for the IMPART Award (2019) and has been awarded the winning title for the 7th France + Singapore Photographic Arts Award.

All four artists live and work in Singapore.

About Mizuma Gallery

Executive Director Sueo Mizuma established Mizuma Art Gallery in Tokyo in 1994. Since its opening in Gillman Barracks, Singapore in 2012, the gallery aims for the promotion of East Asian artists to the international art scene. From 2014 to 2019, the artist residency space “Rumah Kijang Mizuma” opened in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, to create a new platform for dialogue by supporting exchanges between East Asia and Southeast Asia.