

The Origin of Invented Species

Robert Zhao Renhui

PROFILES: ARTISTS BY SYLVIA TSAI FROM MAY/JUN 2014

SINGAPORE



Portrait of Robert Zhao Renhui. Courtesy the artist.

Behind the lemon-yellow door in Singapore's Goodman Arts Centre lies an idiosyncratic collection belonging to a 31-year-old artist and self-professed natural-history lover. Whimsical memorabilia fills the laboratory-like space; life-size replicas of a rottweiler, tortoise and stork greet the visitor. Display cases and various microscopes occupy a center table, while alligator skulls rest on a shelf. An adjacent table is covered with old Singapore postcards, loose photo slides and wildlife books. Welcome to the curious world of Robert Zhao Renhui.

Primarily photographic, Zhao's practice is drawn from observations and research into the natural world. But it is not direct documentation; instead, he constructs and layers the subject with narratives, interweaving the real and the fictional, sowing a seed of doubt in viewers about the objectivity of the image before them.

From a young age, Zhao's passion for nature was nurtured by frequent visits to zoos. Zhao began photographing the animals, as they made, he says, "good dramatic subjects." He developed his documentary style during his formative years in Singapore, where his photographs focused on

animal and environmental activism. "My approach was very idealistic," Zhao says. "I wanted to save the world and stop deforestation." While at Temasek Polytechnic, Zhao's professor, Singaporean designer Terence Yeung, encouraged him to expand his conceptual scope: "He thought it was boring for my works to always come from such a strong, activist perspective. I was very young at the time and didn't understand what he was trying to say." Zhao started his bachelor's at Camberwell College of Arts, University of the Arts, London, in 2006, and the next year he won the London's Association of Photographers' student photographer of the year award for his pictures of monkeys in captivity that raised questions about our fascination with controlling nature.

Around this time, Zhao started exploring another creative strategy, using his photos as building blocks for fictional narratives. These works, part of his series "Soon Bo's Cold Room and Shelves" (2007–08), were first posted on his Facebook page, where a former lecturer from Camberwell stumbled across them and suggested that Zhao combine his fascination with animals and his narrative capabilities. This ultimately led to the formation of the Institute of Critical Zoologists (ICZ) in 2008, which has been the umbrella organization for his individual projects ever since.

As stated on its website, the aim of ICZ is "to develop a Critical Zoological Gaze" and it strives "to advance unconventional, even radical, means of understanding human and animal relations." In addition to conducting various research projects, ICZ also has a virtual museum that houses various collections, which range from specimens and archival correspondence to animal traps. In its early years, artists wrote to ICZ asking to do residencies and children sent letters wanting to know more about animals, but, as Zhao says, "these submissions are becoming less frequent because it's becoming more obvious that ICZ is an artistic project."

In the case of “The Great Pretenders” (2009), a study of Phylliidae, or leaf insects, ICZ’s authority was credulously accepted by the scientific community, justifying Zhao’s concern with how our reception of photographs can be manipulated through their presentation. With his friend and frequent collaborator, Yong Ding Li, who often poses in Zhao’s works as a Japanese scientist, the artist developed an elaborate narrative about a group of scientists from ICZ known as the Phylliidae Study Group, which was splicing insect genes with those of various plants to create new hybrid leaf insects that were undetectable when in a particular habitat. Each sample was then supposedly submitted to an annual competition to determine the best “new species.” In 2009, the fictitious prize was awarded to a researcher named Hiroshi Abe (played by Yong) for his breed, *Abe Morosus*, with a congratulatory remark from the competition’s chief judge Atsuo Asami, purportedly an esteemed entomologist in Tokyo: “[This is] yet another daring combination of *Morosus* and *Crurifolium* along with a subtle modification in its food plant with the genes of the celebicum. It contributes to a dynamic interpretation of resemblance, aesthetic sensibilities and one’s understanding of mimicry.”

Zhao shows me the image of the winning leaf insect and asks if I can spot it. I point to a slightly lighter patch. “There’s actually no insect on these plants,” he replies with a smile. “When I present this to people, they always say they can see the insect.” He explains that his main interest lies in his ability to make people believe an insect is camouflaged there. “I’m trying my best to make people aware of how they read or consume photographs, how they react to even just information. The way I have chosen to do this is through my photos but also through borrowing the language of science in the texts accompanying the work.”

This project caught the attention of the science magazine *Discover*, which in a 2011 issue focused on evolution. Without raising any questions with ICZ, *Discover* printed the “prize-winning” image of *Abe Morosus* on the inside front cover with the caption: “Leaf Insect, the slightly paler top ‘leaf’ of this cutting, took grand prize at the 2009 Phylliidae convention in Japan. Competitors breed the insects and their host plants to accentuate the resemblance between bug and leaf.” After the issue’s release, a German scientist contacted Zhao and explained how he had been studying leaf insects for the past 15 years but was unable to recognize the species. He continued by saying that after he went onto the ICZ website, he finally understood the reason for his lack of success.

When we met in January, Zhao was heading into another busy year. At the Southeast Asia platform in that month’s Art Stage Singapore, he was showing a life-size wild boar trap from “The Quieting and the Alarming” project (2013), commissioned for last year’s President’s Young Talents award. He was also participating in the Singapore Biennale at the time, exhibiting one of his latest projects, “A Guide to the Flora and Fauna of the World” (2013), as both an installation and book. Zhao uses an encyclopedic approach to document 55 species of plants and animals that have been genetically altered by humans—some common, such as goldfish and broccoli, and others invented by the artist, such as a square apple—to bring an awareness of how nature is presented. Currently, his collection of animal traps and his series “The Possibility of Knowing” (2012), created during his residency at the Earth Observatory of Singapore, are part of the group exhibition “Unearthed” at Singapore Art Museum’s 8Q space.

As we wrap up our conversation, I ask Zhao if this feeling of uncertainty is something that he is comfortable instilling in viewers. “I don’t trust anything and I’ve found it really hard to live like that, to always be suspicious,” he replies. “But it is also useful looking at things in that way. Whenever I am presented with something, I tend to ask myself, ‘Where is this image going and where is it coming from?’” He pauses mid-thought and continues, “But I don’t know if I’m trying to make everyone think like that.”



ROBERT ZHAO RENHUI, Hiroshi Abe: Winner, 2008/09 Phylliidae Convention, Tokyo, Abe Morosus (Abe, 2006), 2009, from “The Great Pretenders” series, archival pigment print, 121 × 84 cm. Courtesy the artist.