



Singapore Tree

Singapore 1925–2025

Photos by Robert Zhao Renhui



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Do you remember what Singapore looked like in the past? Can you imagine what the Republic will be like in the future? Given the rapid pace of change, can you tell memories and manufactured visions apart?

Through a series of composite photographs, artist Robert Zhao Renhui explores the blurring line between the real and the imagined in a fictional Singapore between 1925 and 2025.

His thought-provoking work ventures well beyond the familiar depiction of Singapore in traditional news photography, and explores talking point issues—ranging from the impact of land reclamation to concerns about ecological changes and wildlife in Singapore—in new ways.

About this series: Singapore's photography scene is growing rapidly, with an increasing number of local photographers publishing their own books, holding exhibitions and making a name for themselves overseas. This new monthly series highlights the diverse range of work these Singapore photographers have produced in recent years.

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About Robert Zhao Renhui: Robert, 34, is an award-winning artist whose works have been exhibited at home and abroad. He works mainly with photography but often adopts a multi-disciplinary approach by presenting images together with documents and objects. His work includes textual and media analysis, video and performance.

The awards he has won include the United Overseas Bank Painting of the Year Award (Singapore, 2009), and the Young Artist Award by the National Arts Council (2010).

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Tell us about yourself.

I am Robert Zhao Renhui, and I was born in Singapore. I cannot remember much of my childhood because there weren't a lot of photographs taken. My dad had two Yashica cameras, which came in handy when I was in Primary 5. I started taking photographs in the classroom, and I added 'spirits' to the images by using a felt tip marker to draw random small shapes on the film. I brought the photographs to school and the reactions from my classmates had a profound effect on me. This is one version of the story.

Do you think most Singaporeans can tell that these are composite photographs? Does it matter?

Yes I am sure it's very obvious the photographs are composite. We are all very used to how Singapore looks like and feels like. The optics are more or less familiar. It does not matter if one can read the image for its reality or for its narrative. The image should bring about different readings for people, beyond just the aesthetics.



Gali Batu, overlooking Bukit Panjang

In this “post-truth” world, how do you think your photographs would be interpreted by Singaporeans?

There are many ways to read my photographs, one good way is to be slow. Really slow. Consider the moon and the stars for that photograph.

Photographs have always been truthful and untruthful at the same time. Photographs have always been contextual and they should be. We are a little naive when we look at photographs. Have a look at the photographs used in advertisements, that’s not even “post-truth”, they are straight out lies with hardly any sincerity.



View of Singapore Island

How can we tell when you are showing us an actual scene and when you are showing us an imaginary one?

In real life, I'm not good at telling lies, my friends know immediately when I am lying. I usually dramatise the truth, which is much easier. In the same way, my work usually starts with facts and my direct observations. Along the way it gets twisted and distorted into something else. For example, "View of Marina Bay Sands", the print that we are offering for my book, is a scene that will never happen. Some people can't tell and have asked me how I shot the photograph. I don't blame them—Singapore changes very fast, so our memory of its landscape is often vague. The picture is a composite of two cities from Japan and the United Kingdom, two countries which have shaped how our island looks today.



Bukit Timah; sand from Ulu Tiram

Are you afraid that in time to come, you may not be able to tell the difference between truth and lies?

I tend to think everything is a lie, ha! Anyway, I believe that my Singapore landscape work will feel different over time. It will take on a different life, like all photographs, which get harder to read with time. Especially in Singapore, where the landscape changes so rapidly and it's hard to remember what really happened to some places. Anyway, a photograph is always lying in some way and we must be careful not to look for an absolute truth in such a precarious object.



Singapore wild dogs

Do you think your works are political in any ways?

I always think there are enough overtly political works around and I am not the best person to contribute—it's not my natural inclination, so why force the issue? What I'm obsessed with is humankind's interaction with nature. When I look at landscapes, I am looking at the impact we make on nature and the narratives we create when we have the ability to create artificial waterfalls, sand dunes, air-conditioned parks, zoos and natural history museums.

But these stories that we spin aren't divorced from politics. (Obviously it's hard to find anything that is untouched by political forces.) So if politics come into my work, it's by sneaking in through the back door. In Singapore, for example, we are very green and pruned. This is a political decision. This is a way to show that we are in control, that even nature can be controlled. So when anything grows too wild in our Garden City, I tend to visit these spaces.



Singapore wild animal

Where do you find your inspirations and ideas?

I use Google Alerts for subjects that I am interested in to see how these subjects come up in news items and academic discussions. I put alerts on things such as “wildlife conservation”, “extinction” and “animal traps”. I am also on a constant look-out for images on the Internet and in flea markets. At the moment I am collecting images from all the natural beach sand dunes in the world to try to construct an alternate history of Singapore’s own sand dunes.

What would Robert Zhao be like in 2025?

Hopefully he’s creating better photographs than he is now



View of Marina Bay Sands

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These photographs and the accompanying interview first appeared in the book Singapore 1925–2025 published in March 2014 by Platform. A local photography collective, Platform has published 22 books since June 2013 to help mark Singapore’s Golden Jubilee.

For more of Robert’s work, go to his website at: www.criticalzoologists.org.

Photography

Art



55 claps



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