

Artist Spotlight: Robert Zhao Renhui & His RoboRoach



Photo: Courtesy of Goodman Arts Centre



By **Pauline Mae De Leon**

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The Singaporean artist and 'critical zoologist' shares his passion for nature

In collaboration with online art gallery The Artling, our new Artist Spotlight column explores Asia's contemporary art scene and highlights the work of one up-and-coming artist each month.

Singaporean visual artist Robert Zhao Renhui has always had a passion for nature and animals. The natural environment is a constant source of inspiration for his unique, multidisciplinary artworks, which weave together photographic slides, wildlife documents and life-size animal replicas under the 'Institute of Critical Zoologists' to form complex fictional narratives questioning man's relationship with nature.

Read more: [Christo On Living In The Moment](#)

Somewhere between fact and fiction, Zhao's thought-provoking work has been showcased in a variety of biennales, festivals and museums, including the Singapore Art Museum and Shanghart. He was awarded The Young Artist Award by the Singapore National Arts Council in 2010. For our first Artist Spotlight, we spoke to Zhao about his inspirations and future projects:



Photo: Courtesy of Robert Zhao

When was the first time you held a camera?

At the young age of five, I picked up a Yashica 35mm film camera which belonged to my father. I remember bringing my camera to school and taking photographs in the classroom. My shots were all very mundane until I decided to draw some 'ghosts' onto the negatives. You do this by using a fine brush and drawing 'figures' onto the negatives and once you develop the photographs in the lab, 'ghosts' appear on the images.

Why the interest in animals and nature?

I find it extremely hard to talk to people who don't have an interest in nature. How can you not think about nature? When I wake up in the morning, it's extremely hot. I then think to myself, "Oh my, what have we done to our planet? It wasn't this warm in comparison to last June."

During my morning walks, I [usually] spot a few chickens crowing in the park. I worry that one day neighbours will complain and authorities would have to cull these rare, beautiful jungle fowls just because they're starting to get on some people's nerves. It's these little things that humans fail to pay attention to. This planet is not only our home—it's home to other species as well.

Among your works, which one is your favourite?

My favourite piece is actually the most recent one I worked on. This would be *The Bizarre Honour*, an installation I created with OH! Open House's Alan Oei earlier this year.

It is my most ambitious project yet. I think I lost two years of my life to this project, just thinking and worrying over the details. We created a house museum about anecdotes on Singapore's Natural History over the last 100 years. It was an immersive installation that utilised almost four years of my research.

What do you try to say or do with your artwork?

I really am trying to document our relationship with nature, [which] is very complex. There are

many ways to think and talk about nature. Sometimes I talk about the violent relationship we have and sometimes it's about a very long history of controlling nature.



Kings, Tottori Desert Cockroaches, 2008 (Photo: Courtesy of Robert Zhao)

What inspires the fictional narratives in your art?

My fiction really derives from facts that I read and hear [about]. I am not that imaginative and I think that if I created pure fiction from my mind, it would be terrible.

Are there white cockroaches? Yes, all cockroaches are white at some point in time, you just have to be lucky to see them when they're white. Are there robotic cockroaches? I am the proud owner of a first edition RoboRoach.

How have the themes behind your art changed as you evolved as an artist?

Recently, I've found myself looking at the more mundane and quiet parts of nature. My latest interest is trees.



30 years, from the series The Possibility of Knowing, 2013 (Photo: Courtesy of Robert Zhao)

What kind of camera gear and editing software do you use?

I only use one camera, one lens, and Photoshop. I try not to think too much about my gear—they distract and weigh you down. Cameras are really heavy.

Which artists have influenced you most?

Laslaszlo Krasznahorkai has definitely influenced me the most. What I like about Krasznahorkai's work is its intense obsession with describing a world that God has left, and, as he calls it, 'examining reality to a point of madness'. He describes a world that I feel quite close to—a world that has surely collapsed. He's probably the most important Hungarian writer today.



Expedition #10, From the series The Glacier Study Group (Photo: Courtesy of Robert Zhao)

Lastly, what are you working on right now?

I am working on trying to photograph a whole tree that has been chopped down.

Explore more of Robert Zhao's work on [The Artling](#).

See also: [China's Andy Warhol On Abstract Inspiration](#)

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ROBERT ZHAO