



Installation view of *Story of a Forest* (2016) by **TEAMLAB** at the National Museum of Singapore's Glass Rotunda. Courtesy National Museum of Singapore.

JAN 06 2017

[JAPAN](#) [SINGAPORE](#)

ROBERT ZHAO RENHUI AND TEAMLAB: GLASS ROTUNDA AT NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SINGAPORE

BY MARYBETH STOCK

The National Museum of Singapore (NMS)—the country's oldest museum—has just reopened its Glass Rotunda to great fanfare following two years of renovations. The unveiling of the rotunda coincides with the launch of two new permanent exhibits in the museum's Singapore History Gallery: *Story of the Forest* (2016) by Japanese collective teamLab, an installation integrated into the architecture of the rotunda itself; and "Singapore, Very Old Tree" (2015), a photographic series by multidisciplinary artist Robert Zhao Renhui.

Designed as part of the neo-classical museum's modernist extension, the glass walls of the formidable rotunda encircle an inner drum-like core. From within this 16 meter-high core, visitors originally descended a spiraling ramp to the history gallery below while surrounded by a 360-degree projection of various Singapore city scenes. The trippy *Story of the Forest* experience is far more exhilarating: viewers enter the darkened upper level of the dome via a "sky bridge" suspended within a virtual galaxy of cascading flowers and light. From this spectacular prelude, a stroll down the ramp passes alongside a brilliant tropical panorama filled with life and movement.



ROBERT ZHAO RENHUI, *Han Rambutan Orchard, Upper Thomson Road*, 2015. Courtesy National Museum of Singapore.

Two years in the making, *Story of the Forest* was inspired by the museum's extensive William Farquhar Collection of Natural History Drawings. Commissioned by Farquhar, British Resident and Commandant of Melaka from 1803–18, this series of 477 watercolors was painted by predominantly unknown Chinese artists to document regional flora and fauna. TeamLab selected 69 of these illustrations and, while retaining the engaging spirit of the originals, rendered them into a digitized pastiche of animals and plants native to Singapore (sun bear, lizards, birds and butterflies, tapirs, panther, to name but a handful) who fly, creep or meander within a stylized jungle backdrop.

Story of the Forest is not an animated, looped video; it is a sensor-driven, interactive digitized platform that is continuously and newly regenerated by a computer program. Animals react, flowers blossom and trees grow in response to viewers' behavior: for example, a cluster of visitors before the sensor-screen causes animals to gather at that spot, or colossal trees to shoot upwards, while an individual may evoke budding flowers or a stealthy pangolin. No matter how many times one may visit *Story of the Forest*, their experience will be unique: specific images and movement are never replicated, and will never reoccur. Scenes transition from day to night as the visitor ambles forward, as does the landscape itself, in accordance with Singapore's dry and wet seasons. Reflecting the museum's educational objectives, an accompanying app can be downloaded so museum-goers can photograph onscreen images for detailed information. Within the rigid architectural constraints of the rotunda-core space, *Story of the Forest* requires 59 projectors and a single continuous 170-meter screen in order to produce its immersive, visually seamless experience.



ROBERT ZHAO RENHUI, *The Wedding Tree, Seletar*, 2015. Courtesy National Museum of Singapore.



Installation view of **ROBERT ZHAO RENHUI**'s "Singapore, Very Old Tree" photographic series (2015) at the National Museum of Singapore, 2016. Courtesy National Museum of Singapore.

In recent years teamLab has been embraced heartily by Singapore: their commissioned work for NMS is their second permanent exhibition here (the other is at Singapore's ArtScience Museum)—and is their sixth outside Japan. The collective of self-described "ultratechnologists" constitutes several hundred programmers, engineers and artists led by founder Toshiyuki Inoko. Inoko, trained in engineering and physics, claims to be inspired by pure concept, rather than interactions between motifs or imagery and technology. Since their founding in 2001, the lavish digital productions of teamLab have indeed grown more conceptually immersive and more intrinsically dependent upon the viewer as catalyst. The intuitive, experiential "intelligence" that impels *Story* and other teamLab installations is what Inoko has dubbed "ultrasubjective space": an individual has no "dominant perspective" over an image, but rather is invited to merge into a "comprehensive experience." For any museum, particularly one focused on social and cultural history as is NMS, teamLab's catalytic ingenuity is far more engaging, particularly for younger visitors, than typical "interactive" touch-screen exhibits.

Following the sensory impact of *Story of the Forest*, museum visitors filter from the base of the rotunda into a more traditional gallery to view the penetrating "Singapore, Very Old Tree," by Singaporean photographer Robert Zhao Renhui. Zhao is best known for the sly pseudo-documentarian imagery that appears as "research" under the auspices of his fictive Institute of Critical Zoologists (2009–) and, more recently, through a project titled "The Land Archive" (2011–). Both the Institute and The Land Archive serve as platforms for works that arouse moral and ethical questions about how humans interpret, interact and interfere with nature.



Frangipani, early 19th century, watercolor on paper, part of the William Farquhar Collection of National History Drawings. Courtesy National Museum of Singapore.

Inspired by an eponymously titled old postcard unearthed in the national archives, the “Singapore, Very Old Tree” series (2015) was originally produced as part of a memory project for the country’s 50th anniversary in 2015, and it marks Zhao’s first foray into factual documentary. The c.1904 postcard image is a photo of a man standing beside a massive tree of a size and age now rarely seen in Singapore. Intrigued, and after delving into the country’s botanical and social histories, Zhao followed an impulse to consider the presence, and disappearance, of trees in the face of the country’s ongoing urban redevelopment. After “staking out” notable trees, Zhao then sought out locals with some personal connection or knowledge of them. The result is a quirky, fascinating archive of human-arboreal attachment that ultimately reveals less about the trees themselves, than how they are perceived.



Straw-headed Bulbul, early 19th century, watercolor on paper, part of the William Farquhar Collection of National History Drawings. Courtesy National Museum of Singapore.

There are a total of 30 digital prints in the “Old Tree” series, each portraying a specific tree, with 17 works on display at NMS at any one time. Mounted on light-boxes, the monochrome images are delicately hand-tinted to resemble faded vintage photographs. Each tree possesses a personality of sorts, elucidated through anecdotal “back stories” that accompany the image, and which read as an entertaining mix of social documentary, botanical survey and personal history, with a dollop of gossip.

“Energy” Rubber Tree, Ang Mo Kio Park is encircled by a dirt path, where people practice walking meditation and claim to absorb the energies of the tree itself; Monkey God Tree, Jurong West is a lucky “celebrity” tree believed to embody the spirit of the Taoist monkey god, while the narrative of the Durian Tree, Bukit Panjang outlines proper etiquette and methodology (helmets) for collecting the spiky fruit. Other trees are accompanied by stories that touch on their rarity, conservation or impending destruction. Without such context, Zhao explains, there is no awareness or understanding of something as prosaic as a tree. Illuminated by local lore and oral histories, Zhao casts his stately tree-forms within a pre-nostalgic framework—as icons (perhaps future postcards) of a Singapore whose urban identity is continually transfigured, never to be replicated, and never to reoccur.

To read more of ArtAsiaPacific’s articles, visit our [Digital Library](#).

Tools

| [More](#)

Related

[PROFILES](#) The Origin of Invented Species: Robert Zhao Renhui

[SINGAPORE](#) MAY 2014

[WEB REVIEW](#) MOVING LIGHT, ROVING SIGHT

[SINGAPORE](#) FEB 2015

[COUNTRIES](#) Singapore

[SINGAPORE](#) JAN 2013

© 2017 ArtAsiaPacific

[Credits](#)

[Log In](#)

ArtAsiaPacific

GPO Box 10084

Hong Kong

info@aapmag.com