

Robert Zhao Renhui: Monuments in the Forest ShanghART | Press Release

Opening: 11 March 2023

Duration: 11 March - 30 April 2023 (11 am – 6pm, Mon. Closed)

Location: ShanghART Shanghai, West Bund, Bldg. 10, 2555 Longteng Avenue, Xuhui District, Shanghai, China

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SHANGHAI - More than five years since his exhibition “Christmas Island, Naturally” at our M50 space, ShanghART Shanghai is delighted to present Singaporean artist Robert Zhao Renhui’s solo exhibition “Monuments in the Forest”, opening on 11 March 2023. This exhibition brings together photography, video, and installation works created in the past few years, inviting the audience into Robert Zhao’s fascinating world as seen through his imaginative lens and investigative processes.

Known for his multidisciplinary approach that explores the intermingled relationship between humans and nature, Robert Zhao has focused on the secondary forest as a key site of exploration in recent years. Found throughout the tropics, secondary forests are regrowth forests where nature has taken over land that had once been cleared or disturbed by humans. They are often regarded as less ecologically important than primary or virgin forests, but are key sites of regeneration and regrowth. Using these forests as a jump-off point, “Monuments in the Forest” threads together several bodies of works that materialised from the artist’s observations of overlooked and disregarded places and phenomena in our environment.

The exhibition is divided into three sections. In the first section, there are images depicting wildlife co-existing with manmade structures and environments, and responding to urbanisation and climate change — demonstrating nature’s resilience and adaptability. These include images of thousands of wild storks migrating to Singapore because of droughts in Thailand (*And A Great Sign Appeared*, 2020), an owl that lives in a drain in Singapore (*Buffy Fish Owl of the Drain*, 2022) and an eagle (*An Eagle Returns, Day 322*, 2020) that gets its water source from a trash bin.

In the second section is an ambitious installation, *The Forest Institute* (2022), exploring a patch of secondary forest surrounding the Gillman Barracks precinct, which used to be a British military barracks and now an art gallery cluster. Consisting of found objects, prints, video and archival photographs, the work tells the story of a secondary forest that has regrown and flourished over disturbed land in less than three decades. Prompting an acute awareness of the interconnectedness and interdependence of the perceived ‘ecological pockets’ that we encounter within our built environments, *The Forest Institute* offers a glimpse at the beauty and mysteries that nature has to offer, while pre-empting us on what we stand to lose.

In the last section, Zhao will show an 18-metre-long lightbox installation (*Trying To Remember A Tree III*, 2017). The work is a series of 14 near life-size photographs, featuring a very old and large tree that collapsed near the artist’s home. In Singapore, trees are cut in sections to make their removal easier. The physical cuts by which the tree is sectioned echo but do not exactly correspond to how Zhao has edited and sequenced the images, suggesting that there might be different ways of “managing” nature, whether via park authorities or art.

Distilling the complexities of human-nature interactions, the artist explores the untold and unseen side of our relationship with nature through layered narratives and images filled with radical mystery.

About the artist

Singaporean visual artist Robert Zhao Renhui (b. 1983) works chiefly with photography but often adopts a multi-disciplinary approach, presenting images together with documents and objects in the form of textual and media analysis, video and photography projects. His artistic practice investigates man's relationship with nature, utilizing convincing narratives to invoke doubts in its audience towards the concept of truth and its portrayal. His works has been exhibited globally, having held solo exhibitions in Singapore, China, Japan, Australia, and Italy, as well as participating in various biennales and photo festivals.

Recent exhibitions include 14th Gwangju Biennale: Soft and Weak like Water, Gwangju Biennale Exhibition Hall, Gwangju, South Korea (2023); Living Pictures: Photography in Southeast Asia, National Gallery Singapore, Singapore (2022); From the Mundane World, He Art Museum, Foshan, China (2020); Busan Biennale: Words at an Exhibition, Museum of Contemporary Art Busan, Busan, South Korea (2020); Singapore Biennale: Every Step in the Right Direction, Singapore (2019); The Lines We Draw, Yalu River Art Museum, Dandong, China (2019); Effect, Orange County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, USA (2019); Observe, Experiment, Archive, Sunderland Museum and Winter Garden, London, U.K (2019); The 9th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Queensland Art Gallery, Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA), Australia (2018); JIWA: Jakarta Biennale 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia (2017); 7th Moscow Biennale, Moscow, Russia (2017); A Guide to the Flora and Fauna of the World, Centre of Contemporary Photography, Australia (2015).

His works have been awarded The United Overseas Bank Painting of the Year Award (Singapore) in 2009 and The Deutsche Bank Award in Photography by the University of the Arts London in 2011. In 2010, he was awarded The Young Artist Award by the Singapore National Arts Council. He was also named as a finalist for the Hugo Boss Asia Art Award 2017 as the only Southeast Asian artist, and the 12th Benesse Prize 2019 for his work in the 6th Singapore Biennale. Most recently, he was awarded the inaugural Silvana S. Foundation Commission Award in 2020 and Excellence Award in the 44th New Cosmos of Photography competition in 2021.