

MEDIA RELEASE

Pavilion of Singapore at the 60th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia

SEEING FOREST

Robert Zhao Renhui in collaboration with curator Haeju Kim
Organised by Singapore Art Museum
Commissioned by National Arts Council, Singapore



Singapore Pavilion artist Robert Zhao Renhui and curator Haeju Kim with *Trash Stratum* (2024).
Courtesy of Robert Zhao Renhui.

Venice, 17 April 2024 – As visitors enter **Seeing Forest**, they step into a mysterious, forested zone that exists both in the imagination and in Singapore. In this in-between space called the secondary forest — a threshold between old-growth or primary forest and developed areas, between urban and wild, invention and reality — artist **Robert Zhao Renhui** invites us to consider a complex web of human and non-human co-existence.

Seeing Forest encourages visitors to explore the ways in which urban design can shape the natural world, and vice versa, resulting in a new ecosystem of migrant species that echoes the histories, trajectories and makeup of a city's human population. A selection of compelling scenes compiled from hundreds of hours of film and close to a decade of Zhao's research of

secondary forests culminate in three key works: a two-channel video installation; a sculptural video installation; and a photographic work.



Installation view of *Buffy* (2024) and *The Owl, The Travellers and The Cement Drain* (2024).
Courtesy of Robert Zhao Renhui.

Two-channel video installation *The Owl, The Travellers and The Cement Drain* (2024) is the central work of the exhibition. The filmic essay reveals a series of hypnotic scenes from the forest — its trees and animals, migrant workers’ abandoned tents, migratory birds from a concrete drain — complemented by an unstable, fluctuating narrative of two human characters as they journey through it. By eschewing familiar documentary approaches, ecologically-minded activist perspectives, and the certainties of linear narrative, Zhao aims to transpose the forest into a new register: a mutable space of possibility.

In conversation with this work is the sculptural video installation, *Trash Stratum* (2024), which comprises over ten screens showing various creatures visiting a makeshift watering hole in the form of an abandoned dustbin. The screens are arranged around a deconstructed cabinet of curiosities built from Nyatoh¹ and showcase a selection of compelling scenes compiled from hundreds of hours of film and close to a decade of research. This dismantled *wunderkammer* alludes to colonial systems of classification, destabilising control over natural history narratives in favour of more imaginative and fluid ways of drawing out relationships and networks. Within this structure, various objects from the forest can also be found, a poignant reminder of the presence of human histories, so often entangled with those of nature.

Buffy (2024) is a digital print of a bird native to Southeast Asia, the buffy fish owl. Zhao’s practice has often included photography and its indexical quality. In this work, *Buffy* has its back turned to us, an evocative reference to the Heraclitan fragment, “nature loves to hide”, perhaps suggesting that concealment and discovery are somehow connected, behaving like curious companions.

¹ *Nyatoh* is the collective trade name of several species of hardwood found in Southeast Asia rainforests.

Alongside the three key works, visitors will also encounter a digital printed map of an unnamed, imaginary forest. This work identifies the contours and features of the secondary forests that appears in other works presented in the Pavilion. The work orientates the visitor to the imaginal and natural zone, and serves as a guide to the characters and histories conjured up by Zhao's works.

Artist **Robert Zhao Renhui** said: "I have studied secondary forests for close to a decade and they yield constant discovery, surprise and meaning to me. They exist on the margins of the city, unwanted and overlooked, but they are the spaces where there is a sense of wildness, an equilibrium of forces resulting not from control but being allowed to just be. There is a rich intermingling of past and present, nature and culture, native and invasive, which makes these spaces radically hospitable and free. I hope *Seeing Forest* offers a rich and ambiguous space where an imaginary forest comes alive through hypnotising images and sounds, invoking a sense of community, wonder and mystery with the myriad beings that populate it."

The Pavilion's curator **Haeju Kim** added: "Visitors are invited to observe the lingering details, narratives, and connections that unfold and become visible within the exhibition. Much like entering a forest, entering this exhibition is a bodied and temporal experience, one that draws attention to the relationship between what is seen and experienced with one's physical self. Set against the backdrop of Singapore's secondary forests, the exhibition provides one pathway to understanding the city's history intertwined with nature. It invites us to an active listening and careful seeing of what is happening at the threshold of a rapidly developing city and the affected natural environment. In doing so, it suggests a humbling view of the world around us."

Complementing *Stranieri Ovunque — Foreigners Everywhere*, the theme for Biennale Arte 2024, Zhao's presentation offers a tribute to the undomesticated and free forests found along the margins of our urban lives. The exhibition encapsulates Singapore's histories of settlement, colonisation, migration, and mutual co-existence amongst species.

Eugene Tan, Co-Chair of the Commissioning Panel and Chief Executive Officer of Singapore Art Museum (SAM), said: "Through sustained investigation of secondary forests in Singapore, Robert Zhao Renhui reveals the complexity, conflicts and equilibriums existing in these spaces, where hierarchies of native and invasive, local and foreign, the living and the dead are collapsed. These frontier spaces help us to imagine what environments not disciplined by binary logic can look like, and at the same time, allow us to wonder at the mystery of untamed spaces. Curated by Haeju Kim, *Seeing Forest* has the propensity to provoke thought and inspire mindful change, which represents SAM's vision for the art we present. We are excited to be able to present and profile Zhao's practice at this important international platform."

Edwin Tong, Singapore's Minister for Culture, Community and Youth said: "Art, in all its forms, has always been an integral part of society, and it is no different in Singapore. Our arts sector has grown tremendously over the years, and this is Singapore's 11th participation at the prestigious Biennale Arte. MCCY is committed to showcasing our artists and our art at international platforms such as the Biennale Arte. We hope that *Seeing Forest* by Robert Zhao Renhui and curated by Haeju Kim will invite deeper reflection towards our relationship with nature and the environment, and offer hope as we look towards the future."

Low Eng Teong, Co-Chair of the Commissioning Panel and Chief Executive Officer of NAC, Singapore, added: “*Seeing Forest* opens up a portal into Singapore, for the world to glimpse the rich, unexpected biodiversity within our urban spaces. Art imitates life as we reflect on the resilience of humanity in recent years, and how the different experiences have binded humanity even closer as one. NAC has supported Robert Zhao Renhui’s practice over the years and his participation in the 60th Biennale Arte marks an important milestone in his artistic journey. As commissioners of the Singapore Pavilion, this affirms the Council’s commitment to profile Singapore’s artists on an international platform, fostering further collaborations, and conversations with the global arts community.”

Commissioned by NAC, supported by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, and organised by SAM, this year marks Singapore’s 11th participation at the Biennale Arte. The official inauguration is scheduled for Wednesday, 17 April 2024 at 12.30pm, on the second floor of the Arsenale’s Sale d’Armi building. ***Seeing Forest*** will be presented from 20 April to 24 November 2024. In January 2025, the exhibition will return to Singapore, where it will be reimagined for a second iteration at SAM at Tanjong Pagar Distripark.

For the latest information, follow updates via Facebook and Instagram (@singaporeartmuseum), or visit bit.ly/SingaporePavilion-BA2024.

Press images and media assets can be accessed [here](#).

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About Singapore’s National Collection in Venice

National Gallery Singapore’s first-time contribution to the Main Exhibition of Biennale Arte 2024

The 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia also represents the first time in Singapore’s history that National Gallery Singapore is proudly contributing artwork loans featuring artists from Southeast Asia in the *Nucleo Storico* section of the Central Pavilion. For more information, visit <https://bit.ly/NationalGallerySGVenice2024>.

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Organiser: Singapore Art Museum (SAM)
Commissioner: National Arts Council, Singapore (NAC)
Supported by: Ministry of Culture, Community & Youth (MCCY)
Key Supporter: CHARLES & KEITH Group Foundation
Press preview: Wednesday, 17 April 2024 at 12.30pm
Pre-opening: 17 to 19 April 2024
Exhibition: 20 April to 24 November 2024
Venue: Pavilion of Singapore, Arsenale’s Sale d’Armi, Venice

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About the Singapore Pavilion in Venice

The Singapore Pavilion is a 250 sqm space in a complex of buildings called the Sale d'Armi, which is centrally located and easily accessible within the Arsenale, a key site in Venice. The Sale d'Armi complex is a cluster of four 16th century barracks built with brick and stone, each with a wooden roof. It lies opposite the intersection between the long Corderie and Artiglierie buildings, where the main central square of the Arsenale is situated.

About Singapore Art Museum

Singapore Art Museum opened in 1996 as the first art museum in Singapore located in the cultural district of Singapore. Known as SAM, the museum presents contemporary art from a Southeast Asian perspective for artists, art lovers and the art curious in multiple venues across the island, including a new venue in the historic port area of Tanjong Pagar.

The museum is building one of the world's most important public collections of Southeast Asian contemporary art, with the aim of connecting the art and the artists to the public and future generations through exhibitions and programmes. SAM is working towards a humane and sustainable future by committing to responsible practices within its processes.

To find out more, visit www.singaporeartmuseum.sg

About the National Arts Council, Singapore

The National Arts Council champions the arts in Singapore and is committed to nurturing a vibrant and sustainable arts scene that enriches the lives of Singaporeans. Our distinctive arts sector fosters artistic excellence, inspires society, sparks creativity, and connects Singapore with the world. Through our collaborative efforts with individuals, private and public sectors, we aim to cultivate a creative city that inspires, while anchored on a thriving, inclusive and diverse arts scene.

For more information on the Council's mission and plans, visit www.nac.gov.sg.

Annex A: Exhibition Overview

Seeing Forest

"[Through the exhibition] My hope is to create a rich and ambiguous space where visitors can experience an imaginary forest where the barriers between human and non-human, past and future, are abandoned; where humans, animals, plants, and possibly ghosts, co-exist in various overlapping realities; where visitors will be bombarded by sounds and images that conjure up beauty and mystery and weirdness."

- Robert Zhao Renhui, Artist

The observation of the ultimately unknowable in the natural world is a hallmark of artist Robert Zhao Renhui's praxis. Since 1998, under the auspices of his own semi-fictional Institute of Critical Zoologists, Zhao's many and varied projects have served as lenses that highlight the resilience of nature and the various interactions that occur when such resilience overlaps with human life and society.

Notably, over the last seven years, he has been focusing on secondary forests in Singapore — forests regrown from deforested land due to human intervention such as development and plantation — and the new ecosystems that have developed within it. For the Singapore Pavilion, decades of Zhao's accumulated observations are condensed and organised into an intensive installation that complements the scale and condition of the Singapore Pavilion in Arsenale.

Through this exhibition, we see how the island of Singapore has evolved to arrive at the present day, revealing some of the ways in which human urban design can shape the natural world itself, resulting in an ecosystem of migrant species that echoes the trajectories and makeup of the city's human population. At the same time, *Seeing Forest* also highlights phenomena that are universally relatable to those living in any urban environment.

About Secondary Forests in Singapore



Secondary forest is defined by the National Parks Board as:

'Secondary' forest refers to forest that has grown up *de novo*, following complete removal of earlier forest. In most cases in Singapore, the interval between forest removal and regrowth are long (often, several decades), and involved intermediate stages such as cultivation of crops. Complete removal of earlier forest is detected by the lack of native climax forest trees such as dipterocarps. Secondary forest may be dominated by *Albizia falcataria*, *Acacia auriculiformis*, or *Spathodea campanulata*, and smaller trees such as *Cinnamomum iners*. In places where old rubber plantations or fruit orchards have been abandoned, a range of native species gradually accumulates over many years.

Thus, the term secondary forest refers mainly to the vegetation structure and history rather than species composition, although fast-growing pioneer species predominate and typically include a range of non-native trees. (National Parks Board, 2014)²

²National Parks Board. (2014, October 15). *Terrestrial - Our Ecosystems - Biodiversity - National Parks Board (NParks)*. <https://www.nparks.gov.sg/biodiversity/our-ecosystems/terrestrial>

Annex B: About the Artworks

Artwork	Description
 <p><i>Courtesy of Robert Zhao Renhui</i></p>	<p><i>The Owl, The Travellers and The Cement Drain</i> 2024</p> <p>Video, two channels, 16:9, colour and sound (three channel), 46 min</p> <p>This two-channel video features footage collected over a long period, including moments captured during the artist's forest visits, from his apartment on the 26th floor via zoom lens, and from motion-capturing and body temperature cameras that he installed in the forest.</p> <p>This secondary forest is a place where natural and man-made elements interact, introduced and native species coexist, and past and present intertwine.</p> <p>Abandoned tents languish under the trees. Animals and migratory birds rest on a trash bin and a broken concrete drain. Remnants of military facilities from the British colonial era and the Japanese occupation, as well as items left behind by migrant workers are scattered and buried in the forest. Layered onto this landscape is the unfathomable narrative of two travellers passing through the forest, who speak of things seen in the forest and things the forest sees.</p> <p>The juxtaposition of the two screens also showcases the contrast and interaction between the natural world and the events caused by human interventions. Through this, the artist prompts us to reimagine these forests, which are continually shaped and erased by urban expansion, as a mutable space of possibility where the boundaries between human and non-human, and native and foreign are dismantled.</p>
 <p><i>Courtesy of Robert Zhao Renhui</i></p>	<p><i>Trash Stratum</i> 2024</p> <p>Video, found objects, mixed media</p> <p>Video: 12 channels, 16:9 aspect ratio, colour and sound (stereo), 46 min</p> <p>The central structure of the installation is a crumbling cabinet made of stacked wooden boxes, which both harks back to the concept of a cabinet of curiosities and challenges the</p>

colonial approaches to collection and categorisation that are associated with it.

Within this structure, 12 screens show various creatures visiting a watering hole in the form of an abandoned dustbin. They are interspersed with various objects from the forest that serve as reminders of human history. Collected during the artist's research or discovered as physical traces entangled with exposed roots, the footage and objects speak to transformations over time within a place, and the endless reconstitution of the forest.

Through destabilising colonial narratives of control over nature, *Trash Stratum* imagines more fluid relationships between the human and nonhuman and reminds us of our entangled existence.



Courtesy of Robert Zhao Renhui

Buffy
2024
Mixed media, dimensions variable

The Buffy fish owl is a bird native to Southeast Asia. The image of Buffy with its back turned to us is a reference to the Heraclitan fragment, “nature loves to hide,” which alludes the true essence of things is not easily grasped or understood by human beings.



Courtesy of Robert Zhao Renhui

A Guide to a Secondary Forest of Singapore
2024
Archival pigment print, 150 × 108 cm

This imaginary forest map presents an overview of the artist's extensive explorations and research in Singapore's secondary forests — the ones that have sprung up after the destruction of the primary vegetation. Reflecting the rich ecology of the secondary forests near his home and the forgotten Queen's Own Hill area — which comprises native and foreign species that interact to create new ecological situations — the map incorporates symbolic stations and

	<p>features that Zhao encountered on his frequent walks and via remote sensing cameras over an extended period. Notable natural and man-made scenes and elements depicted include a shattered concrete drain revealing a re-emerged river, which became vital to the forest's living organisms.</p>
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Annex C: About the Artistic Team

Robert Zhao Renhui, Artist



Robert Zhao Renhui (born 1983, Singapore) is an interdisciplinary artist who explores the complex and co-mingled relationships between nature and culture. Working in installation, photography, video and sculpture, Zhao is interested in the multifarious beings and objects that constitute the living world, and whose experiences and knowledge enrich our collective existence.

Zhao held solo exhibitions *The Forest Institute* (2022) at Gillman Barracks, Singapore and *Monuments in the Forest* at Shanghart Gallery (2023) in Shanghai. His latest work is a performance installation titled *Albizia* (2023), commissioned by the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay. He has also been featured in the 10th Busan Biennale (2020), 6th Singapore Biennale (2019), 9th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (2018), 11th Taipei Biennale (2018), 17th Jakarta Biennale (2017), and 20th Biennale of Sydney (2016).

He received the prestigious National Arts Council Young Artist Award (2010), Singapore's highest award for young arts practitioners aged 35 and below, He was also a finalist of the Hugo Boss Asia Art Award (2017).

Haeju Kim, Curator



Haeju Kim (born 1980, South Korea) is a Senior Curator at Singapore Art Museum (SAM), and her research focuses on contemporary art practices in Singapore, Southeast Asia and Asia. Her curatorial approach emphasises the consideration of the body, time and memory as key elements. Haeju's interest in performance and her previous collaborations with performance artists and performing arts institutions have shaped her view of exhibition curating as the creation of a shared space for bodily and temporal experiences.

Prior to joining SAM, Kim was the Artistic Director of the Busan Biennale 2022. She was also the Deputy Director at Art Sonje Center, where she oversaw the exhibitions, programmes as well as the operation of the South Korean museum. She is currently pursuing research and curatorial work that is focused on diverse topics such as migration and language, questions of coexistence, ecological perspectives, and the interplay between locality and its planetary connection, among others.

Major exhibitions curated by Kim include *We, on the Rising Wave* at the Busan Biennale 2022, and solo exhibitions by Shitamichi Motoyuki (*A ship went up that hill*, 2022) and Manon de Boer (*Down Time*, 2022) at Kunsthal Aarhus, Denmark. She also curated *Moving/Image*, a three-chapter exhibition and performance programme that was presented at Seoul Art Space Mullaee (2016), ARKO Art Center (2017) and Seoul Museum of Art (2020).