

# SEEING FOREST

## Robert Zhao Renhui

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*Seeing Forest*

15 Jan–18 May 2025

Level 3, Gallery 3, SAM at Tanjong Pagar Distripark

*Seeing Forest* is a project that was conceived by Robert Zhao Renhui for the Singapore Pavilion at the 60<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia in 2024.

Observation of the ultimately unknowable in the natural world is a hallmark of Zhao's artistic practice, and his varied projects highlight the complex interactions between nature and human life. For almost a decade, he has been documenting various secondary forests in Singapore—forested areas that have grown over land previously deforested by human development—capturing phenomena rarely, if ever, seen before.

Secondary forests are the threshold between undisturbed primary forests and developed urban areas, and are often home to plant and animal species that have been introduced to Singapore since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They also offer insight into the intricate web of coexistence between humans and nonhumans. Zhao's accumulated observations of these areas are condensed into thought-provoking images and installations, revealing the layered timelines and stories within.

*Seeing Forest* is about the reciprocal gaze: how we see nature and how nature sees us. It invites us to explore the complexities of Singapore's evolving landscape, showing how urban planning has shaped the natural world, and how nature, in turn, responds to it. Amidst the city's concrete structures are vibrant ecosystems thriving beyond human control and regulation, nurturing life that resists categorisation or domination. The exhibition offers a glimpse into these deep, untamed rhythms of forest time, marching on in spaces often overlooked in the rush of city life.

Robert Zhao Renhui (b.1983, Singapore) is an interdisciplinary artist who explores the complex and commingled relationships between nature and culture. Working across 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 has 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 Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay. He has also been featured in the 14<sup>th</sup> Gwangju Biennale (2023), 10<sup>th</sup> Busan Biennale (2020), 6th Singapore Biennale (2019), 9<sup>th</sup> Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (2018), 11<sup>th</sup> Taipei Biennale (2018), 17<sup>th</sup> Jakarta Biennale (2017) and 20<sup>th</sup> Biennale of Sydney (2016).

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

For more information, please visit:

- [www.seeingforest.com](http://www.seeingforest.com)
- [singaporeartmuseum.sg/art-events/exhibitions/seeing-forest](http://singaporeartmuseum.sg/art-events/exhibitions/seeing-forest)

1.

*Trash Stratum*

2024

Video, broken glass bottles, archival photographs and ceramic shards  
Video: 15 channels, 16:9 aspect ratio, colour and sound (four channels), 46 min  
Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART Gallery

The central structure of the exhibition is a crumbling cabinet made of stacked wooden boxes. It harkens back to cabinets of curiosities, while also challenging the colonial approaches to collection and categorisation associated with it. Within this structure, 15 screens display various creatures visiting a watering hole created by a dustbin left behind by a migrant worker who resided in the forest. Also featured are close-up photographs of objects from the forest that the artist had collected.

These images are interspersed with various archival photographs and objects taken from the forest. Collected during the artist's research, these objects were either found at the bottom of a river after the rain or discovered entangled within the exposed roots of trees that had fallen after strong winds. They are a testament to how the forest preserves human history while continuing to grow alongside it.

Together, the footage and objects speak to transformations over time within a place and the endless reconstitution of the forest. By destabilising colonial narratives of control over nature, *Trash Stratum* imagines more fluid relationships between the human and the nonhuman, reminding us of our entangled existences.

2.

*A Guide to a Secondary Forest of Singapore*

2024

Archival pigment print on paper  
Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART Gallery

This imaginary forest map presents an overview of the artist's extensive explorations and research in Singapore's secondary forests—forests that have sprung up after the destruction of primary vegetation. Such forests are often inhabited by both native and foreign species that interact to create new ecosystems. Reflecting the rich ecology of the secondary forests, especially those near his home in Bukit Panjang and the forgotten Queen's Own Hill area (today Gillman Barracks), the map incorporates symbolic stations and features that Zhao encountered on his frequent walks and captured with motion sensor cameras over an extended period.

Notable natural and man-made elements depicted include Albizia trees—an introduced species initially planted due to its rapid growth—that quickly naturalised in Singapore's secondary forests, and a shattered concrete drain from the British colonial period, which concealed a river that is vital to the forest ecosystem.

3.

*Buffy*

2024

Wood, acrylic, broken glass bottles and ceramic shards  
Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART Gallery

The Buffy Fish Owl is a bird native to Southeast Asia. Known to inhabit well-wooded parks and nature reserves, this owl was observed drinking water from a cracked cement drain in Gillman Barracks. The image of the bird, with its back turned to us, evokes the enigmatic aphorism by Greek philosopher Heraclitus: "Nature loves to hide." The artwork references how nature has an inherent tendency to conceal its truths, alluding to the idea that the true essence of things is not easily grasped or understood.

4.

*The Owl, The Travellers and The Cement Drain*

2024  
Video, two channels, 16:9 aspect ratio, colour and sound (nine channels), 46 min  
Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART Gallery

This video brings together footage of secondary forests in Singapore that has been collected over almost a decade. This includes moments captured during the artist's visits to the forest, from his apartment on the 26<sup>th</sup> floor using a zoom lens, as well as motion-capture and thermal cameras he had installed in the forest.

This secondary forest is a place where natural and man-made elements interact, introduced and native species coexist, and past and present intertwine. 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 the things the forest sees.

The two screens of the artwork are also deliberately juxtaposed to highlight the contrast and interaction between the natural world and events caused by human intervention. 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 nonhuman, and native and foreign are dismantled.



An introduction to a secondary forest in Singapore in ten scenes:

**1. From the window of my flat, I can see the edge of the forest.**

In Singapore, urban and natural spaces are often in close proximity, with development constantly shifting the boundaries between such spaces.

**2. Travellers**

Two travellers make their way through the forest and talk about spirits. Overhead, parrots fly about.

**3. The symbols of the divine appear in the trash stratum**

The camp of an illegal immigrant who once lived in the forest becomes a congregation point for animals. Objects in the camp, including buckets, bottles and a black trash bin become crucial to their survival.

**4. The cement drain**

A natural stream re-emerges as the concrete drain that was built over it in 1935 disintegrates.

**5. There is another world and it is in this one**

Wild boars and human cross paths at the edge of the forest. Two travellers discover an old stone slab from a former British military camp. Sambar deer observe from nearby. A selection of historical images of the secondary forest from the 1900s to 1940s is shown. A monitor lizard travels through the forest.

**6. New worlds**

The travellers observe happenings in the forest. Animals explore objects left behind by humans.

**7. Coming back as a boar**

I observe a wild boar giving birth from my window. Nearby, a forest is being cleared.

**8. A deer walks to the end of the world**

Sambar deer appear in the forest. Until recently, they were thought to be extinct in Singapore. It is not known where the current population comes from.

**9. Who knows what the parrot knows?**

At 7pm every day, parrots flock to this tree to roost. The travellers come to the end of their walk in the forest, and one of them decides to relieve himself.

**10. View from my window, 2014 and 2024.**

Malayan Water Monitor

Ornate Sunbird

Black Bittern

Collared Scops Owl

Red-billed Blue Magpie

Crab-eating Macaque

Common Treeshrew

Javan Myna

Tiger Shrike

Straw-headed Bulbul

Asian Koel

Large-tailed Nightjar

Tiger Shrike

Red-whiskered Bulbul

Buffy Fish Owl

Chestnut-winged Cuckoo

Brown-chested Jungle Flycatcher

Siberian Blue Robin

Red-legged Crake (Breeding)

Common Sun Skink

Crimson Sunbird

Banded Woodpecker

Brahminy Kite

Red Junglefowl

Orange-headed Thrush

Common Kingfisher

Painted Bronzeback

Greater Coucal

Common Flameback

Pink-necked Green Pigeon



Black-throated Laughingthrush

Asian Glossy Starling

Yellow-rumped Flycatcher

Red Junglefowl

Black-crowned Night Heron

Collared Kingfisher

Plantain Squirrel

Rufous Woodpecker

Blue-winged Pitta

Von Schrenck's Bittern

Malayan Night Heron



Oriental Whip Snake

Greater Racket-tailed Drongo

Smooth-coated Otter

White-throated Kingfisher

Asian Brown Flycatcher

Mugimaki flycatcher

White-breasted Waterhen (Breeding)

Crow-billed Drongo

Common Emerald Dove

Oriental Magpie-Robin

Malaysian Pied Fantail

List of species observed at Queen's Own Hill, a one-hectare secondary forest in Singapore, from a single random spot measuring one square metre located behind an old colonial building, recorded between 2016 and 2022.