

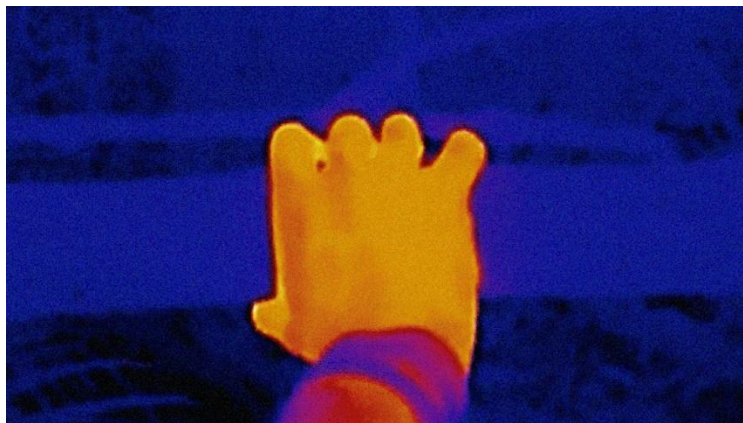
MEDIA RELEASE

SEEING FOREST

Robert Zhao Renhui in collaboration with curator
Haeju Kim for the Singapore Pavilion
at the 60th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia

A SECOND CHANCE: ROBERT ZHAO RENHUI EXPLORES THE WILD INEXHAUSTIBLE PHENOMENA OF SECONDARY FORESTS

*“Every forest is liminal, even one that grows in the centre of the city.
Disregarded and disposable in urban planning, it remains a universe unto itself.”*



Work in progress image from *Seeing Forest* (2023). Courtesy of Robert Zhao Renhui.

Singapore Art Museum (SAM) is delighted to announce the title and theme of the exhibition conceived by Robert Zhao Renhui, in collaboration with curator Haeju Kim, who will represent Singapore at the Biennale Arte 2024.

Singapore, 29 November 2023 – An unassuming patch of greenery reveals the life and stories it holds – but only with patient observation. In *Seeing Forest*, Singaporean artist Robert Zhao offers an evocative exploration of secondary forests – forests regrown from deforested land due to human intervention such as development and plantation. Often taken over by invasive plant and animal species introduced to Singapore in the 19th century, these thresholds between

primary forest and developed areas offer insights into a complex web of human and non-human co-existence.

Rooted in several years of accumulated observations from countless fieldtrips and the windows of his own apartment, Zhao's research and documentations are condensed and organised into an installation that explores the multifaceted life of Singapore's secondary forests and the manifold worlds within, encapsulating the landscape's histories of settlement, colonisation, migration and mutual co-existence amongst species. Going beyond the humdrum existence of a forest, visitors will be invited to examine the ways in which human urban design can shape the natural world, and result in a new ecosystem of migrant species that echoes the trajectories and makeup of a city's human population.

In secondary forests, we can find the traces of humanity in debris and litter, the abandoned tents of migrant workers, the ruins of *kampungs*¹ and colonial barracks, cast aside dustbins. Yet there is life, too. A canopy of fast-growing, non-native Albizia trees weaves a lacey web against the sky. Samba deer, escaped from the local zoo in the 1970s, form large roaming populations. Japanese sparrowhawks, flying in from Siberia, pause to drink from a concrete drain.

Through an assemblage of video works and sculptural installations, the exhibition created for the Singapore Pavilion explores the lesser-known stories of intersection, and moments of apparent dependence between human society and nature. The presentation reveals how these transitional spaces offer points of intersection for colonisation, migration, sustainability, and discovery, while suggesting that the edge of a city — especially one that is so carefully planned— may be the most intense frontier in existence.

Artist **Robert Zhao Renhui** says: “Secondary forests are a second chance for nature to find a way to reclaim its place after environmental and human disruptions. They provide a radically hospitable space for a variety of living subjects, where novel organisms are able to thrive despite and because of human activity – an abandoned dustbin, for example, turns into a waterhole for migrant birds. These spaces are also rich in histories and ecologies, and this interest has driven the exploration of these multilayered ecosystems in my practice over the last seven years. I hope that my presentation captures the richness and variety of the sensuous surroundings, and allows us to experience these spaces as active, animate, and open-ended.”

¹ *Kampung* or *kampong* is a Malay term for a village or a series of houses that are close to each other and form a community.

The Pavilion's curator, **Haeju Kim** explains: "Robert Zhao's 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. In the meanings generated by these observations, we are offered a rare glimpse into the true complexities and realities of the natural world around us. The exhibition will be a reminder that even in the most modernised places, humans cannot wrest initiative and tenacity from nature, and we are only part of the broader ecosystem and intricate web of the world. Through the sensorial experience that the exhibition will offer, I hope that audiences can listen attentively to what nature says to 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. As the world enters the era of the Anthropocene and humanity is forced to face the impact of climate change, *Seeing Forest* sounds a call for audiences to pay attention to the ecosystems around us, while offering a beacon of hope that communities – human and non-human, visible and hidden, natural and developed – can coexist in harmony.

Eugene Tan, Co-Chair of the Commissioning Panel and Director of SAM, comments, "SAM believes fervently in the power of art to inspire change. In Robert Zhao's *Seeing Forest*, the artist goes beyond quiet contemplation to invite audiences to pay attention to these often-unseen encounters in our environment, offering hope in the unyielding resilience of our natural world by evoking the experiences of secondary forests in Singapore. As societies around the world try to make sense of the impact of climate change, we hope that audiences will resonate with the Pavilion and be provoked into conversations on the possibilities of mutual co-existence and more connected ways of being."

Low Eng Teong, Co-Chair of the Commissioning Panel and Chief Executive of the National Arts Council, Singapore (NAC), says, "We are delighted to be able to showcase Robert Zhao's work at the Biennale Arte 2024, whose practice emphasises that even the smallest observations can move us in purposeful ways. Featuring scenes from Singapore's own secondary forests, *Seeing Forest* is an exploration of what it means for any city to embrace nature and our connections to the natural world. Through the perspective of Zhao's research, the exhibition underscores the important role of art in broadening our understanding of the world around us. We invite all to experience the work and engage in meaningful conversations with one another."

Commissioned by NAC and organised by SAM, this year marks Singapore's 11th participation at the Biennale Arte. The official opening of the Singapore Pavilion will be on Wednesday, 17 April

2024 at the Arsenale's Sale d'Armi. The exhibition will be on display on the second floor of the building from 20 April to 24 November 2024. The presentation will return to Singapore in January 2025, and will be exhibited at SAM at Tanjong Pagar Distripark for local audiences.

Organiser: Singapore Art Museum (SAM)

Commissioner: National Arts Council, Singapore (NAC)

Press preview: Wednesday, 17 April 2024

Pre-opening: 17 to 19 April 2024

Exhibition: 20 April to 24 November 2024

Venue: Pavilion of Singapore, Arsenale's Sale d'Armi, Venice

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 the 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

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 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 Mullaie (2016), ARKO Art Center (2017) and
Seoul Museum of Art (2020).