

Robert Zhao Renhui

Watching a Tree Disappear

February 29 - April 30, 2024

Opening Reception February 29 2024, 7-9pm

Press Release

Queensway Television, a video-centred project space by D. D. D. D., is pleased to present our first programme with Singaporean artist Robert Zhao Renhui.

The inaugural exhibition presents two works made 10 years apart—*A Guide to Tree Planting* (2014) and *This Tree We Must Save, and Other Stories* (2024)—both surrounding trees as their core subject. Trees have been an integral part of Zhao's conceptual practice, beginning with his first solo exhibition titled *If a tree falls in the forest* (2009), which paradoxically did not feature any works with trees. The motif of trees, however, persists throughout his practice, as his fascination with the subject can be found in many later works, often in conjunction with an element of time.

The current exhibition's title, *Watching a Tree Disappear*, implies the passing of time, and of change; these qualities reflexively present themselves within and between the two works. When viewed together, they invoke reflection upon our personal experiences and relationships with nature and time.

Both works share the same source material—The Substation Banyan tree that was cut down and transplanted away in 2014. Famed for its presence in the history of The Substation, a storied art institution in Singapore, the tree embodied the memories of the artistic community held in its court and witnessed the development of the then-nascent scene. The tree's fast-growing nature resulted in roots growing into surrounding walls—symbolically and physically ingraining itself into The Substation. Yet, this caused significant damage to the structure of the building, and the ongoing construction projects in the area eventually led to its inevitable removal. This event provoked a range of emotions and reactions at the time.

Invited to do an exhibition celebrating The Substation's 25th anniversary in 2015, Robert Zhao created a series of works inspired by the Banyan tree. *A Guide to Tree Planting* was among the works he made at that time. Zhao was intrigued by the phenomenon of trees suddenly disappearing and reappearing elsewhere, representing an efficiency of the city-state that intrigues him. Imagining a situation where trees are built through magic, Zhao reverses the footage of the tree being cut down to create the illusion of it being built. Only presented as a series of photographs at the time, this is the first time the video work will be shown in

Singapore. Deemed incomplete by the artist, as he wished to shoot the video differently, Zhao decided then to complete the work with another suitable tree.

A decade later, Zhao revisits the same footage to create the new video work, *This Tree We Must Save, and Other Stories*. Ten years after the tree was transplanted, the artist presents a conflicted account of the episode as he juxtaposes recordings of the tree being cut with the timelapse of a growing secondary forest. Words are weaved into the video as Zhao contemplates the binary perspective of humanity's actions and their consequences towards nature, seeking to consider alternative ways of thinking about our relationship with nature.

Through multiple ways of seeing, Robert Zhao prompts us to examine the different rates and methods in which trees appear and disappear in Singapore, a self-pronounced "Garden City." Humanity, nature, and time share an inseparable and intricate relationship. Through Zhao's use of trees, he presents them as more than just a representation of nature; he imagines them as a reflection of humanity and time.

Artist Biography

Singaporean visual artist Robert Zhao Renhui (b. 1983) works chiefly with photography but often adopts a multi-disciplinary approach. 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 have been exhibited globally, having held solo exhibitions in Singapore, China, Japan, Australia, and Italy and participating in various biennales and photo festivals.

He will be representing Singapore in their national pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale in 2024, and his recent exhibitions include 14th Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju Biennale Exhibition Hall, Gwangju, South Korea (2023); Monuments in the Forest, ShanghART, Shanghai, China (2023); Living Pictures: Photography in Southeast Asia, National Gallery Singapore, Singapore (2022); Words at an Exhibition, Museum of Contemporary Art Busan, Busan, South Korea (2020); Singapore Biennale 2019, Singapore (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, Australia (2018); JIWA: Jakarta Biennale 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia (2017); 7th Moscow Biennale, Moscow, Russia (2017); 20th Biennale of Sydney, Sydney, Australia (2016).

A Young Artist Award winner in 2010 awarded 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.

For more information please DM us on Instagram @queenswaytelevision, or e-mail dd@dddd.pictures

More notes on the exhibition title

The exhibition is titled after a work originally planned to be shown. The initially selected work consists of live recordings of a giant fallen Albizia tree, as Zhao strives to document the decay of the tree in its entirety until it fully reintegrates into its environment. The camera that Zhao installed to monitor the fallen tree only triggers upon detection of movements, resulting in long periods of blank screens, eventually leading to the idea's abandonment.

When reconsidering the works to present, we decided to retain the title as the inherent notion of watching a tree disappear remains. At the same time, the subject of the works in its place parallels the decision to reject the original work - an unwillingness to allow nature to be and the desire to exert control. In a way, the tree has indeed disappeared.

Queensway Television started with a simple idea to provide a space for video art. Presenting two video works made a decade apart by Robert Zhao, who has gone from a young artist to becoming the Singapore Pavilion representative at the Venice Biennale this year, we hope to kickstart the space with a reminder to stay true to ourselves while hoping to emulate the perseverance and consistency in Zhao's practice.