



Four Singaporean Artists That Help Us Rethink Nature



Genevieve Chua, "Full Moon and Foxes" | Courtesy of the artist.

What does nature represent in the urban landscape we inhabit? Singaporean artists provide us with strong visual metaphors to see the not-so-evident narratives behind nature.

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Nature is a recurrent subject in the work of Singaporean artists. The theme is tackled both on an individual level and collectively, as shown by recent exhibitions like “Each blade of grass each shrub each tree” at The Substation and “The Sovereign Forest” at NTU CCA.

The ubiquity of this theme is not surprising for a city-state which has rebranded itself as first “Garden City”, then “City in a Garden” since 1967. The vision of the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was to transform Singapore into a city with lush greenery and a clean environment. With its Gardens by the Bay and Botanical Gardens, Singapore has succeeded in creating a strong connection to nature, not at all at odds with its image as a futuristic metropolis.

However, from “instant trees” to waterfalls that can be switched on and off like fountains, the environment in Singapore is anything but natural. The artificiality of nature in the Lion city corresponds to the government’s push towards an accelerated modernisation and a need for control – the result is a tidy jungle.

Singaporean artists have been inspired by this interplay between the natural and the artificial and their musings on nature have been able to reveal the dynamics of society at large. Here are four artists that exemplify this:

Nature as we imagine it: Donna Ong

The work of Donna Ong looks at nature in both an aesthetic and narrative way. Nature is never presented directly, but through a poetic prism, whether conveyed through objects or illustrations within installations.

In earlier works such as “Project Eden”, for instance, the artist evoked the idea of the private garden, a staple of British culture. Back in 2007, when the artwork was conceived, the Singaporean government forbade private greenspaces in public housing. In childlike fashion, the artist used her imagination by fashioning everyday cleaning equipment into an installation which mimicked a garden.

In “Gift Series: Hortus Conclusus” (2013), the artist created elegant boxes displaying backlit illustrations of plants. She obeyed an aesthetic criterion, arranging the depictions of flora by colour rather than botanical compatibility. A figurine of a Renaissance Madonna was placed in the centre of the composition, completely incorporated in the natural environment. The feeling conveyed is one of mystery, spirituality and beauty.

More recent works like “Five Threes Make a Forest” (2016) and “The Forest Speaks Back” (2014) deal with the themes of colonialism and exoticism. Donna Ong explores the archetype of the tropical landscape from two opposite points of view: that of the locals and of the colonisers. The artist refrains from making judgments, but rather acknowledges the coexistence of two contradictory narratives of the same place.

Artist bio: Donna Ong (b.1978); MA Fine Arts, Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore; BA (Hons) Fine Art, Goldsmiths College, UK; BSc Architecture, Bartlett Centre, University College London, UK. Selected solo exhibitions include: “And We Are Those Who Dream”, Primae Noctis Gallery, Lugano, Switzerland (2013); “Dust on the Mirror”, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore (2011); “Dust on the Mirror”, Djanogly Art Gallery, Nottingham, UK (2010); and “Palace of Dreams”, The Arts House at The Old Parliament, Singapore (2004). Awards she has received include the Greater Asia: Best Emerging Artist Using Installation Award at the Prudential Eye Awards (2015) and NAC Young Artist Award Singapore (2009). She is represented by Primo Marella (Milan).

Nature is not what it seems: Robert Zhao Renhui

The work of Robert Zhao Renhui is that of a critical artist/thinker at the sway of his obsessive interest in the natural world. His work pushes viewers into questioning their most basic perceptions, beliefs and approaches to information.

The artist usually operates under cover of a fictional scientific institution called the “Institute of Critical Zoologists”. This is a nod to the fact that people are prone to have complete faith in institutions without any background checks. The description of the institute as an “interdisciplinary centre dedicated to promoting critical zoological dialogue and research” is actually a pretty accurate summary of Robert Zhao Renhui’s work, as his artistic methods can be used beyond the field of art to reconsider the methods and objectives of actual zoological investigation. Moreover, his critical gaze can be taken outside the context of the natural world and applied to all branches of human knowledge.

Due to the importance of the relationship between image and text, Robert Zhao Renhui’s work often takes the form of books. In the illustrated volume “A Guide to the Flora and Fauna of the World”, he depicts and describes a number of species: some real; some genetically modified; others completely invented.

In the installation “How to Make a Tree Disappear as Nature Intended” (2015), the artist displayed two boxes showing two different kinds of powder deriving from the same branch of a Banyan tree. One had been produced by larvae slowly eating the branch; the other had been sanded down by the artist by hand over a period of nine months. Among the different implications of the work, there is evidence of the inevitable gap between a natural and a man-made process.

Artist bio: Robert Zhao Renhui (b.1983) received his BA (Photography) from Camberwell College of Arts and his MA (Photography) from the University of the Arts, London. He has had exhibitions at Singapore Art Museum; The Substation Gallery, Singapore; Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan; Institute of Contemporary Art, Singapore; Chapter Gallery, Wales; Photo- Levallois Festival, Paris; GoEun Museum of Photography, Korea; The Zabudowicz Collection, London; P.P.O.W Gallery, New York and Shanghart, Shanghai. Renhui was the recipient of the 2011 Deutsche Bank Award in Photography (London) and the United Overseas Bank Painting of the Year Award (2009). In 2010, he was awarded the Young Artist Award by the Singapore National Arts Council.

Nature as formal investigation: Genevieve Chua

Nature has been a muse throughout the career of Genevieve Chua. In her early photographic works from 2009 “Full Moon and Foxes” and “Raised as a Pack of Wolves”, the forest was seen as solace, a place where outcasts could go and thrive beyond the rules of an oppressive society.

Beginning with the series “After the Flood”, “Black Varieties” and “Nocturne”, we see the photographic nature of images melting and disintegrating into abstract forms: petals become shapes and leaves become dots. In this phase the pictures produced by the artist retain a certain sense of nostalgia, like faded memories of the past.

In 2012 Genevieve opened an interesting parenthesis with “It eludes me but”. In this installation she confronted the viewer with the actual materiality of nature, bringing ivy-covered branches to the exhibition space.

After that episode she returned to abstraction with fresh confidence, always with nature as the point of departure. Small constellations of dots have been the trademark of all her work from 2014 to 2015, along with the use of mobile surfaces. In her latest piece from 2016, she completely abandoned the narrative aspect of nature, steering instead in a purely formal direction.

Artist bio: Genevieve Chua, (b.1984) graduated in 2004 from Lasalle-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore. Selected solo exhibitions include: Rehearsals for the Wilful (Manila, 2016); Parabola (Singapore, 2014); Cicadas Cicadas (Los Angeles, 2014); Birthing Ground not a Sound (Singapore, 2012); Adinandra Belukar at the Singapore Biennale (2011); Full Moon and Foxes at the Atelier, National Museum of Singapore (2009). She was a recipient of the NAC Georgette Chen Scholarship in 2003/4 and the Young Artist Award in 2012 conferred by the National Arts Council, Singapore. Genevieve Chua is represented by Gallery EXIT (Hong Kong) and Gusford (Los Angeles).

Nature as common good: Chu Hao Pei

Chu Hao Pei is an emerging artist moved by great curiosity and a strong desire to preserve the environment and local heritage. The artist often explores current affairs issues – for example the burning of palm oil plantations – to then expand his reflections on questions of ethics and sustainability.

In “Nature Notes”, Chu Hao Pei replicates Singaporean banknotes, substituting the noble animals depicted on the genuine currency with common creatures populating Singapore today. Aside from not being considered “photogenic”, many of these are also non-native animals introduced into Singapore. This observation spurs the viewer to draw parallels between the migrant nature of Singapore’s current population and the “propaganda image” the nation-state wants to convey of itself.

A more recent example is the mixed media installation project “Developing MacRitchie”. This addresses a strongly-felt issue: the proposal by the Singapore Land Transport Authority to build a metro line across the MacRitchie Natural Reservoir. Through video monologues and an immersive environment, the artist gives voice to the pro-conservationists and formulates possible solutions to the issue.

In his latest series, the artist detaches himself from an activist prospective and starts looking at the meaning of places and memories in a wider sense. In “(Moss) Island”, a video-series which is still a work-in-progress, Chu Hao Pei looks at the eternal battle between humans and nature. The bottom line is that no matter how men try to bend nature to their needs, nature keeps on adapting and reconquering its space.

Artist bio: Chu Hao Pei (b.1990) graduated from Nanyang Technological University, School of Art, Design & Media with a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Interactive Media). Exhibitions include: “International Symposium of Electronic Arts (ISEA) Hong Kong 2016” at the School of Design, Jockey Club Innovation Tower, Hong Kong Polytechnic University; “Each blade of grass each shrub each tree”, The Substation Gallery, Singapore; “CROSSING BORDER | BORDER CROSSING – International Festival of Cross Media, Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre, Hong Kong, 2015; “New Wave Art Expo”, Venetian Macao, Macau; and “Haze Exhibition@City Square”, City Square, Singapore, 2015.