

Robert ZHAO RENHUI

(born 1983 in Singapore. Lives and works in Singapore.)



***A Monument to Thresholds* (2020)**, installation: digital inkjet prints, found objects
136.5(H)*123.5*218cm; with single-channel HD video, 7:37, b/w, sound

The topics of climate change and the destruction of biodiversity are the focus of Singapore-based artist, Robert Zhao Renhui. Approaching these topics from an historical and cultural angle, Zhao is particularly

interested in what he describes as “threshold states” that he relates to the migration patterns and the extinction of different species, as both involve the crossing of boundaries or thresholds. But the critical difference between them is that migration is instinctively cyclical, while extinction is all too linear in its finality. Using aesthetic and poetic means, Zhao scrutinises this question, as well as the integrity of scientific methodology.

Zhao’s work *A Monument to Thresholds* (2020), an installation of found objects, books, prints, texts and video, balances a narrative of two past extinctions with two potentially beneficial “invasions” in a challenge to clichéd thinking about the deterioration of nature and its reversal. In this, he elaborates four different “thresholds”:

- The death in Cincinnati Zoo (on 1. September 1914), of the last known Passenger Pigeon, once one of America’s most common birds.
- The killing (on 3 July, 1844) of the last pair of Great Auks, for food or bait, by two fishermen on Eldey Island, Iceland; the activities of hunters, early museums, and private collectors had all contributed to these birds’ early decline.
- Volunteers depositing 114 tons of clams onto the mudflats at Dandong at the mouth of the Yalu River in the winter of 2017, in order to replenish their severely declining numbers: clams had traditionally fed Godwits and Great Knots on their migratory flights between Australia and Siberia.
- Lastly, the recent rapid international spread of Zebra Mussels, originally native to Russia and Ukraine, via discarded ballast-water from European cargo ships. The mussels have a bad reputation as an invasive species that crowds out native fish and damages harbour and waterway infrastructure. But, under certain circumstances, they may have a positive impact on the environment because they thrive in the most polluted waters and, by feeding there, help clean it from contaminants.

Zhao’s video *We Watch Them Disappear*, embedded within this installation, documents his own visit to the wetlands of the Yalu River in April 2019 to observe the birds’ annual gathering during what is the longest non-stop avian migration in the world. Over the past ten years their number has seriously declined, but the crowds of people who go there to observe them continues to grow, as they admire the hypnotic patterns of their murmuration at each high tide when they land there to feed.

In this work and others, Zhao elaborates the poetic paradox that extinction is one of the few ways in which the cyclical alliance between nature and time is broken, yet, once something is established as an event in the past, its fate inevitably seems to presage the future. However, turning our gaze from past extinctions to future hopes, this situation may not be as terminal as it seems: looking into the near future at a time when the technology and biology of de-extinction are already being explored, the finality of extinction itself may well soon be in question.

Zhao’s artistic vision collapses temporal boundaries between past ecosystems, present interventions, and speculative futures. He invites us to consider the theoretical afterlives of the natural world: What do we

choose to preserve, and why? What versions of the past do we project onto ecological futures? And how might we live differently by reimagining the stories we tell about the land? Through his layered, often eerie portrayals of flora and fauna, Zhao constructs a world in which nature is not only seen, but narrated, archived, and mythologized, offering a poignant meditation on what it means to inhabit a world on the brink of ecological transformation.

Courtesy ShanghART Gallery, Shanghai and Singapore

ARTIST BIO

<https://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/artists/name/robertzhaorenhui>

Singapore-based artist Robert Zhao Renhui graduated from the Camberwell College of Arts, London, UK in 2008, and received his Masters degree for the London College of Communications, London, UK in 2011. Zhao's practice unfolds at the intersection of art, science, and speculative ecology, offering a powerful and poetic lens through which to explore the landscapes of both memory and possibility. Working through photography, video, installation, and pseudo-scientific narrative forms, Zhao investigates the evolving relationship between humans and the natural world—particularly how systems of knowledge, classification, and conservation shape our understanding of nature and its future. By constructing alternate realities through fictional institutions like *The Institute of Critical Zoologists* and *The Land Archive*, he challenges the authority of scientific objectivity while drawing attention to how ecological truths are archived, erased, or imagined. His projects often take place in contested or transitional environments — secondary forests, extinction zones, or human-wildlife borders — where the line between what once was and what might be remains blurred. In doing so, Zhao renders visible the ghostly persistence of species, rituals, and habitats that linger in the ecological unconscious. Rather than adopting a purely documentary approach, Zhao deploys a careful mix of observation and invention. He constructs meticulous visual archives that feel scientific but subtly unravel upon closer inspection, exposing the fragility of the narratives we tell about nature. This gesture of blending fact and fiction does not aim to deceive but rather to provoke a critical reflection on how landscapes are mediated through language, politics, and image-making.

Robert Zhao Renhui's works have been awarded The United Overseas Bank Painting of the Year Award (Singapore) in 2009 and The Deutsche Bank Award in Photography by the University of the Arts London in 2011. In 2010, he was awarded The Young Artist Award 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.

Zhao represented Singapore in their national pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale in 2024. Selected recent biennales and solos museum exhibitions include: Singapore Art Museum, Singapore (2024); 14th Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju, South Korea (2023); The First Beijing Biennale, Beijing (2022); The Forest Institute, Singapore (2022); Busan Biennale: Words at an Exhibition, Busan, South Korea (2020); Singapore Biennale 2019, Singapore (2019); The Lines We Draw, Yalu River Art Museum, Dandong (2019); Effect, Orange County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, U.S.A. (2019); Mind Set Art Center, Taipei (2019); Observe, Experiment, Archive, Sunderland Museum and Winter Garden, London, U.K. (2019); The 9th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Australia (2018); Taipei Biennial 2018, Taipei (2018); Onassis Cultural Centre, Athens, Greece (2018); NTU Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore (2018); Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai (2017); National Museum of Singapore, Singapore (2017); JIWA: Jakarta Biennale 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia (2017); 7th Moscow Biennale, Moscow, Russia (2017); 20th Biennale of Sydney, Sydney, Australia (2016); The Substation, Singapore (2015); Centre of Contemporary Photography, Melbourne, Australia (2015); Kadist Art Foundation, San Francisco, USA (2014), amongst many others.