

Robert Zhao Renhui *The Lines We Draw*

Under the guise of The Institute of Critical Zoologists (ICZ), conceptual artist Robert Zhao Renhui works to reposition science in terms of the “contradictions, assumptions and tensions inherent in our relationship with nature.” Performative hybrids of conjecture, fact, allegory, and art, Zhao’s multimedia projects often document speculative experiments, occasionally produced in collaboration with recognized scientific researchers. The ICZ has “investigated” placing certain species endangered by habitat loss in stasis, reviving them occasionally

Zhao considered how we attribute normative qualities to animals and plants—local or alien, useful or invasive, harmless or deadly; wall captions referencing ecology texts published in the 1950s expound on these notions. Zhao offers a case study with *Spotted Tree Frogs (Polypedates megacephalus) Collected in a Single Night* (2018), a photograph depicting more than 50 diminutive frogs. Some are splayed, some rest neatly on the backs of others; all are delicate to the point of translucence. This foreign species is crowding out Taiwan’s native white-lipped frog population. In response, the Forestry Bureau instigated the “Remove Every Frog” movement to mitigate the spotted menace. Zhao joined one of these local expeditions, and recorded the evening’s pickings. Likewise, the assemblage *Disturbances* (2020) presents another ecological narrative, condensed within a compartmented wood framework. The piece is dominated by two photographic images, one of a minute, bright-eyed frog enveloped in a pale hand, the other a die-cut print of a magpie hybrid. The latter, the caption explains, is the product of interbreeding by non-native Chinese magpies introduced as pets into Taiwan and later deemed a threat to the local gene pool; attempts at culling were made by authorities. The ICZ has always been quick to seize on this sort of politically tinged, futile micromanagement of nature. As ironic commentary, Zhao includes a two-channel video of a magpie plucking spotted-frog tadpoles from a bucket.

Further into the gallery, *The Lines We Draw* (2019) comprises four large wall-mounted light boxes chronicling an annual bird migration at the Yalu River, which serves as a border between China and North Korea. Zhao frames the birds against swathes of vague

horizon and huddled spectators. His images involve varied tones of gray, black, and pearl, each bird a grainy fleck of contrast against washed-out sky; their oblique murmurings imply an intuitive, volitional pattern. Ancillary text states that, although more than 50,000 endangered godwits and great knot filled the sky the year Zhao observed their migration, the birds’ numbers have been steadily diminishing.

Ecological change was reiterated in Zhao’s desk-like installation, *A Monument to Thresholds* (2019), which features select specimens from the ICZ archives, among them illustrations of the extinct passenger pigeon; a print depicting an invasive zebra mussel (ironically, a highly efficient pollution-filter); a replica of an egg from the extinct great auk; and a book about invasive ecologies. These items appear alongside a partially obscured chart on the desk, labeled “Interacting Elements,” outlining humanity’s relationships vis-à-vis pests, plants, and animals as determined by aesthetic, agricultural, and industrial demands.

In “The Lines We Draw,” Zhao translates those vocabularies assigned to nature as a means of acquiring dominance, of negotiating issues of conservation and extinction. Specific animals may be viewed through the lens of destructive, even evil, intent, while others are granted an innate innocence or purity, as prescribed by cultural, economic, or sociopolitical conceits. In his photo *House Wood Borer* (2018), Zhao captures the smooth methodical runnels created by beetle larvae in a slat of wood. Close up, these sculptural chambers are organic, abstract, and lovely; scientifically, they are classified as material pest-damage.

MARYBETH STOCK



ROBERT ZHAO RENHUI, *The Lines We Draw II (Towards North Korea)*, 2019, UV printed lightbox, 100 × 150 × 12 cm. Courtesy the artist and ShanghArt Gallery, Shanghai / Beijing / Singapore.

to breed (*Acusis, The Ark Project*, 2003); catalogued genetically engineered, mutated and other, possibly mythic, animals (*A Guide to the Flora and Fauna of the World*, 2013/19); and examined human discrimination against specific insect populations (*Effect*, 2019–20). In postulating ethical issues arising through human mediation with the natural world, the artist graces his pseudo-documentarian works with a startling authenticity.

“The Lines We Draw,” Zhao’s latest solo exhibition at ShanghArt Gallery in Singapore, brought together three recent bodies of work, spanning photography, video, and installation. In the show’s first section, “Disturbances,”