

## MEDIA RELEASE

**Singapore Art Museum presents the homecoming of *Seeing Forest*  
following its successful debut at the  
60th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia**

***Seeing Forest***

Robert Zhao Renhui in collaboration with curator Haeju Kim  
Organised by Singapore Art Museum  
Commissioned by the National Arts Council, Singapore



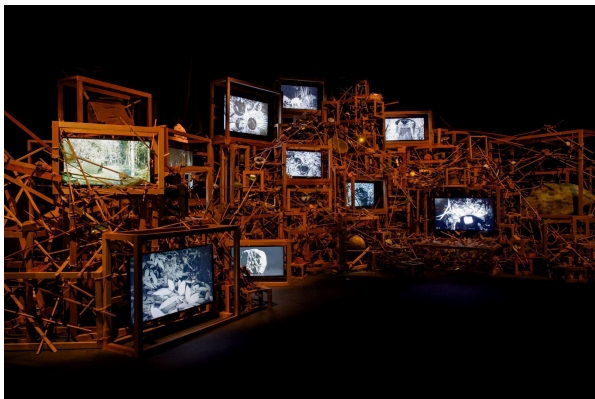
Installation view of *Trash Stratum* (2024), *Buffy* (2024), and *The Owl, The Travellers and The Cement Drain* (2024).  
Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.

**Singapore, 9 January 2025** – Following its successful run at the 60th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia (Biennale Arte 2024), the Singapore Pavilion, ***Seeing Forest***, by artist **Robert Zhao Renhui** will return to Singapore. The exhibition will be presented at Singapore Art Museum (SAM) at Tanjong Pagar Distripark as part of Singapore Art Week (SAW), and will run from 15 January to 18 May 2025.

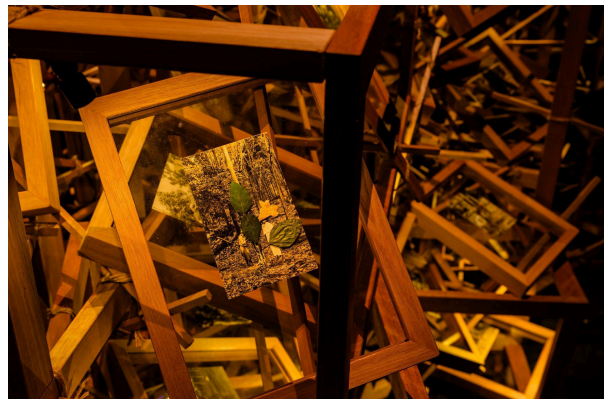
Organised by SAM and commissioned by the National Arts Council, Singapore (NAC), the Singapore Pavilion at Biennale Arte 2024 was officially opened in Venice by Mr Edwin Tong, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth on 17 April 2024. *Seeing Forest* was well received in Venice, having welcomed over 320,000 visitors from across the globe by the end of its run on 24 November 2024. This also marked Singapore's 11<sup>th</sup> participation in the prestigious Biennale Arte, which spotlights global artists that stand at the forefront of contemporary art research.

*Seeing Forest* invites audiences in Singapore to discover a largely unknown and unexplored side of the city's urban landscape. The works feature footage captured from the artist's extensive exploration of secondary forests in Bukit Panjang and Gillman Barracks, revealing a rich ecology not often seen, from sambar deer—once thought to be extinct in Singapore—grazing at the boundary of the forest in the West of Singapore, to migratory Japanese sparrowhawks pausing for a drink at a concrete drain in Gillman Forest. The return show will feature the full assemblage of videos and sculptural installations presented in Venice, with one of the key works, *Trash Stratum*, nearly tripling in scale for the Singapore edition.

Using sounds, sights, and stories that convey the richness and multiplicity of secondary forests, the return show addresses Singapore audiences more intimately, inviting them to revel in how these undomesticated and free forests have found ways to thrive around them in their home country despite rapid urban development. *Seeing Forest* nudges audiences to discover these multifaceted spaces brimming with the wonder of life, and to reflect on our relationship with our natural environment — a question that is especially pertinent today.

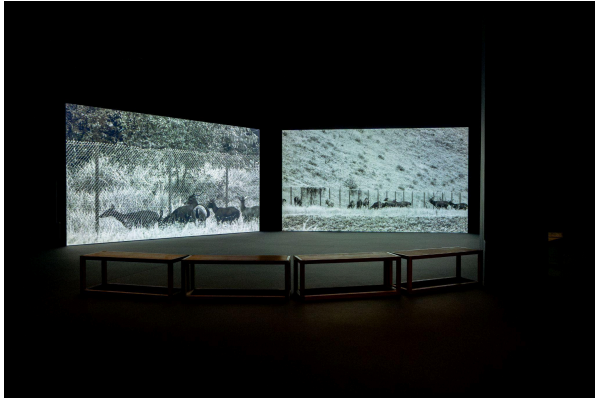


Installation view of *Trash Stratum* (2024). Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.



Detail view of *Trash Stratum* (2024). Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.

Three key works anchor the multi-dimensional environment of *Seeing Forest*. When visitors enter the gallery, they encounter the sculptural video installation *Trash Stratum* (2024), which has been scaled up for the Singapore presentation. Imagined as a deconstructed cabinet of curiosities comprising stacked wooden boxes, screens showcasing found footage from Zhao's research, and objects collected from the forest, the work speaks to the endless reconstitution of the forest and our entangled existence.



Installation view of *The Owl, The Travellers and The Cement Drain* (2024). Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.



Detail view of *Buffy* (2024). Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.

The two-channel video installation *The Owl, The Travellers and The Cement Drain* (2024) grounds the presentation with its uncanny juxtaposition of forest scenes meticulously compiled from years of patient observation, and an inexplicable narrative of two human characters journeying across the forest. Through this, the artist reveals the interdependence between humans and nature, and its far-reaching impact on the forest. At SAM, *Buffy* (2024) the fish owl still has its back turned to visitors, alluding to nature's inherent tendency to conceal its truths. With no windows in the gallery to look out of, visitors must wonder where the contemplative fish owl is casting its gaze.



Installation view of *A Guide to a Secondary Forest of Singapore* (2024). Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.

As with the Venice exhibition, *A Guide to a Secondary Forest of Singapore* (2024) will be presented alongside the three key works, offering an overview of Zhao's explorations and a guide to the characters and their stories that dwell within *Seeing Forest*. The works collectively encourage visitors to consider the complex and deeply connected inter-relationship between humans and the natural world.

While Singapore's secondary forests have been at the heart of Zhao's practice for nearly a decade, they remain liminal spaces that go unnoticed by most. *Seeing Forest* raises awareness of secondary forests as a universally-relatable phenomenon to those living in any urban environment.

Eugene Tan, Chief Executive Officer and Director of SAM said: "As one of the foremost multidisciplinary artists in our contemporary art scene today, Robert Zhao sparks important conversations on the natural world through his projects rooted in both scientific inquiry and the fantastical. It has always been SAM's mission to support Singapore artists and connect their art practice to audiences, and it has brought us immense joy to play a part in this significant milestone of Zhao's artistic journey. We look forward to bringing his Singapore Pavilion presentation to audiences here, and seeing how *Seeing Forest* will transform SAM's space as Tanjong Pagar Distripark comes to life for SAW 2025. Through Zhao's stories of the secondary forest, we invite everyone to reimagine these transitional spaces and discover how Singapore's urban history is interconnected with our natural environment in unexpected ways."

Low Eng Teong, Chief Executive Officer of NAC, Singapore, said: "Over the years, we have supported many Singapore artists to showcase their art at major overseas platforms along with their international counterparts. We are proud that visitors worldwide could explore Singapore's complex and ever-changing urban landscape through *Seeing Forest* at the Venice Biennale. Opening in conjunction with SAW, we are delighted to welcome the exhibition back to our shores as we celebrate the vibrant community that fuels our visual arts scene. The homecoming of *Seeing Forest* is a testament to the success and potential of our artistic talents and Singapore's growth as an arts hub in Southeast Asia."

To commemorate the return of *Seeing Forest* to Singapore, visitors can look forward to the launch of *Seeing Forest Volume 2*, an accompanying art book conceptualised as an extension of the exhibition, which will be available from February 2025. In addition, an artist talk, featuring Zhao alongside Singapore Pavilion curator Haeju Kim, will be held on 18 January 2025, where the artistic team will share insights into the exhibition's development along with perspectives on secondary forests from conservator Yong Ding Li.

Visitors can also take part in other programmes happening at SAM during SAW 2025, including a live performance on 17 January 2025 by Park Minhee, a collaborator featured on Zhao's *The Owl, The Travellers and The Cement Drain*, who will create a subtle layer of sound that permeates the gallery, complementing the soundscape of the work. *Sonic Sessions* will also return, featuring a performance by HAEPAARY, an electronic duo consisting of Park Minhee and Choi Hyewon.

Beyond SAW, SAM will be hosting a dynamic range of programmes throughout the exhibition, such as a series of expert talks and sharing sessions by the teams working on the project, guided exhibition tours (several of which include Singapore Sign Language interpretation), hands-on workshops offering fresh insights and interactive ways to explore *Seeing Forest*. For additional details on the public programmes, please refer to **Annex C**.

*Seeing Forest* runs from 15 January to 18 May 2025 at SAM at Tanjong Pagar Distripark. Admission is free for all visitors during SAW from 17 to 26 January 2025. General Admission (free for Singaporeans and PRs) applies for the rest of the exhibition period. More information is available on SAM's website: [bit.ly/SAM-SeeingForest](https://bit.ly/SAM-SeeingForest). Media assets can be accessed via [bit.ly/SeeingForestReturnShow2025](https://bit.ly/SeeingForestReturnShow2025).

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- [Annex B: About the Artworks](#)
- [Annex C: Complementary Programmes](#)

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Organiser: Singapore Art Museum (SAM)  
Commissioner: National Arts Council, Singapore (NAC)  
Supported by: Ministry of Culture, Community & Youth (MCCY)  
Key Supporter: CHARLES & KEITH Group Foundation

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**About 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](http://www.singaporeartmuseum.sg).

### **About the National Arts Council, Singapore**

The National Arts Council (NAC) is a statutory board under the Ministry of Culture, Community, and Youth that champions the arts in Singapore. The Council promotes artistic excellence by providing diverse opportunities for artists and arts organisations while expanding access for audiences to appreciate the impact of the arts in enriching lives. By working closely with the arts community and partners, the Council seeks to build a connected society, creative economy and distinctive city through the arts. For more information, visit [www.nac.gov.sg](http://www.nac.gov.sg).

## Annex A: Exhibition Overview

### *Seeing Forest*

**15 January to 18 May 2025**

**Level 3, Gallery 3, Singapore Art Museum, 39 Tanjong Pagar Distripark**

*Seeing Forest* is a project that was conceived by Robert Zhao Renhui for the Singapore Pavilion at the 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia in 2024.

Observation of the ultimately unknowable in the natural world is a hallmark of Zhao's artistic practice, and his varied projects highlight the complex interactions between nature and human life. For almost a decade, he has been documenting various secondary forests in Singapore—forested areas that have grown over land previously deforested by human development—capturing phenomena rarely, if ever, seen before.

Secondary forests are the threshold between undisturbed primary forests and developed urban areas, and are often home to plant and animal species that have been introduced to Singapore since the 19th century. They also offer insight into the intricate web of coexistence between humans and nonhumans. Zhao's accumulated observations of these areas are condensed into thought-provoking images and installations, revealing the layered timelines and stories within.

*Seeing Forest* is about the reciprocal gaze: how we see nature and how nature sees us. It invites us to explore the complexities of Singapore's evolving landscape, showing how urban planning has shaped the natural world, and how nature, in turn, responds to it. Amidst the city's concrete structures are vibrant ecosystems thriving beyond human control and regulation, nurturing life that resists categorisation or domination. The exhibition offers a glimpse into these deep, untamed rhythms of forest time, marching on in spaces often overlooked in the rush of city life.

### **About the Artist**

Robert Zhao Renhui (b. 1983, Singapore) is an interdisciplinary artist who explores the complex and commingled relationships between nature and culture. Working across 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 has 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 Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay. He has also been featured in the 14th Gwangju Biennale (2023), 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).

In 2010, Zhao received the prestigious National Arts Council Young Artist Award, Singapore's highest award for young arts practitioners aged 35 and below. He was also a finalist for the Hugo Boss Asia Art Award in 2017.

## About Secondary Forests in Singapore

Secondary forest is defined by the National Parks Board as:

'Secondary' forest refers to the forest that has grown up *de novo*, following the 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)<sup>1</sup>

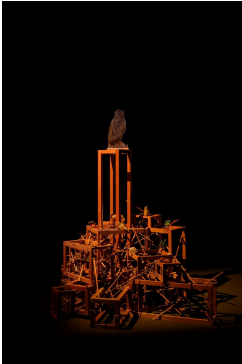
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<sup>1</sup>National Parks Board. (2014, October 15). *Terrestrial - Our Ecosystems - Biodiversity - National Parks Board (NParks)*. <https://www.nparks.gov.sg/biodiversity/our-ecosystems/terrestrial>



## Annex B: About the Artworks

Artwork	Description
 <p>Installation view of <i>The Owl, The Travellers and The Cement Drain</i> (2024). Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.</p>	<p><b><i>The Owl, The Travellers and The Cement Drain</i></b> <b>2024</b></p> <p><b>Video, two channels, 16:9 aspect ratio, colour and sound (nine channels), 46 min</b></p> <p><b>Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART Gallery</b></p> <p>This video brings together footage of secondary forests in Singapore that has been collected over almost a decade. This includes moments captured during the artist's visits to the forest, from his apartment on the 26th floor using a zoom lens, as well as motion-capture and thermal cameras he had installed in the forest.</p> <p>This secondary forest is a place where natural and man-made elements interact, introduced and native species coexist, and past and present intertwine. Abandoned tents languish under the trees. Animals and migratory birds rest on a trash bin and a broken concrete drain. Remnants of military facilities from the British colonial era and the Japanese occupation, as well as items left behind by migrant workers, are scattered and buried in the forest. Layered onto this landscape is the unfathomable narrative of two travellers passing through the forest, who speak of things seen in the forest and the things the forest sees.</p> <p>The two screens of the artwork are also deliberately juxtaposed to highlight the contrast and interaction between the natural world and events caused by human intervention. Through this, the artist prompts us to reimagine these forests—which are continually shaped and erased by urban expansion—as a mutable space of possibility where the boundaries between human and nonhuman, and native and foreign are dismantled.</p>
	<p><b><i>Trash Stratum</i></b> <b>2024</b></p> <p><b>Video, broken glass bottles, archival photographs and ceramic shards</b></p> <p><b>Video: 15 channels, 16:9 aspect ratio, colour and sound (four channels), 46 min</b></p> <p><b>Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART Gallery</b></p>

<p>Installation view of <i>Trash Stratum</i> (2024). Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.</p>	<p>The central structure of the exhibition is a crumbling cabinet made of stacked wooden boxes. It harkens back to cabinets of curiosities, while also challenging the colonial approaches to collection and categorisation associated with it. Within this structure, 15 screens display various creatures visiting a watering hole created by a dustbin left behind by a migrant worker who resided in the forest. Also featured are close-up photographs of objects from the forest that the artist had collected.</p> <p>These images are interspersed with various archival photographs and objects taken from the forest. Collected during the artist's research, these objects were either found at the bottom of a river after the rain or discovered entangled within the exposed roots of trees that had fallen after strong winds. They are a testament to how the forest preserves human history while continuing to grow alongside it.</p> <p>Together, the footage and objects speak to transformations over time within a place and the endless reconstitution of the forest. By destabilising colonial narratives of control over nature, <i>Trash Stratum</i> imagines more fluid relationships between the human and the nonhuman, reminding us of our entangled existences.</p>
 <p>Installation view of <i>Buffy</i> (2024). Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.</p>	<p><b><i>Buffy</i></b> <b>2024</b> <b>Wood, acrylic, broken glass bottles and ceramic shards</b> <b>Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART Gallery</b></p> <p>The Buffy Fish Owl is a bird native to Southeast Asia. Known to inhabit well-wooded parks and nature reserves, this owl was observed drinking water from a cracked cement drain in Gillman Barracks. The image of the bird, with its back turned to us, evokes the enigmatic aphorism by Greek philosopher Heraclitus: "Nature loves to hide." The artwork references how nature has an inherent tendency to conceal its truths, alluding to the idea that the true essence of things is not easily grasped or understood.</p>



Installation view of *A Guide to a Secondary Forest of Singapore* (2024). Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.

***A Guide to a Secondary Forest of Singapore*  
2024**

**Archival pigment print on paper, 150 × 108 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART Gallery**

This imaginary forest map presents an overview of the artist's extensive explorations and research in Singapore's secondary forests—forests that have sprung up after the destruction of primary vegetation. Such forests are often inhabited by both native and foreign species that interact to create new ecosystems. Reflecting the rich ecology of the secondary forests, especially those near his home in Bukit Panjang and the forgotten Queen's Own Hill area (today Gillman Barracks), the map incorporates symbolic stations and features that Zhao encountered on his frequent walks and captured with motion sensor cameras over an extended period.

Notable natural and man-made elements depicted include Albizia trees—an introduced species initially planted due to its rapid growth—that quickly naturalised in Singapore's secondary forests, and a shattered concrete drain from the British colonial period, which concealed a river that is vital to the forest ecosystem.

## Annex C: Complementary Programmes

Programme Details	Description
<p><b>[Performance] <i>Ghost of Time</i> Opening Performance by Park Minhee</b> 17 January 2025, Friday 8pm Gallery 3, Level 3, SAM at Tanjong Pagar Distripark Free</p>	<p>This solo performance by Park Minhee was specially conceived for the exhibition <i>Seeing Forest</i>. It responds to the multi-channel soundscape created by musician and composer Jang Yonggyu for Robert Zhao Renhui's two-channel video work <i>The Owl, The Travellers, and The Cement Drain</i> (2024). Drawing from the repertoire of <i>gagok</i>, a traditional Korean vocal music genre rooted in poetry, Minhee creates a subtle layer of sound that permeates the exhibition gallery. As she moves through the space, her vocal movements—drifting like ghosts between the scenes, artworks and audience—transport visitors from a room to share music (<i>pungryubang</i>) to the forests of Singapore. Spanning both physical and mental spaces, the performance evokes reflections on Asia's diverse landscapes.</p> <p><b><u>Performer Bio (Park Minhee)</u></b> Park Minhee sings the Korean traditional vocal genres of <i>gagok</i>, <i>gasa</i> and <i>shijo</i>. Interrogating the meaning and methodology of doing traditional music, as well as its disciplinary practice, is both the starting point and purpose of her work. Moving beyond staged performances, she utilises substantial and aesthetic issues—ranging from the musical structure of traditional music to its format of presentation and social significance—as constituent conditions for her work, thereby rearranging the dispositive context of the act of singing and that of listening. For Park, <i>gagok</i> is not merely auditory signals for auditory appreciation, but also activates inward observation and focus. For both the singer and listener, song is the vibrant sensation passing through the body: feeling the song entering internally, feeling the sound as “object,” and waking up the senses in a new way.</p>
<p><b>[Talk] Artist Talk for <i>Seeing Forest</i></b> 18 January 2025, Saturday</p>	<p>Join us for a special conversation featuring Robert Zhao (Artist), Haeju Kim (Curator), and Yong Ding Li (Conservation Biologist).</p>

<p>4pm – 5.30pm The Main Deck, Level 3, SAM at Tanjong Pagar Distripark Free with registration</p>	<p>This discussion will explore the inspiration behind and the creation of the exhibition <i>Seeing Forest</i>, focusing on the intersection of art and nature.</p> <p>Haeju and Robert will offer insights into their artistic process, sharing the stories behind the conception of exhibition in both Venice and Singapore. Yong Ding Li, a conservation biologist with a deep interest in the preservation of migratory species, wetlands, and tropical birds—and a long-time collaborator of Zhao—will bring a naturalist’s perspective. He will share insights into secondary forests and the diverse life they embrace, which serve as the backdrop and inspiration for the exhibition.</p> <p>Together, the panel will examine the potential of art to inspire and provoke thought, the intricate relationship between human activity and the natural world, and how we see the forest while imagining how the forest might see us.</p> <p><b><u>Speaker Bio (Yong Ding Li)</u></b></p> <p>Yong Ding Li is a conservation biologist with a keen interest in the conservation of migratory species, wetlands, and tropical birds. He works widely across the region to develop and implement projects that protect ecosystems and species, including some of the world’s most threatened wildlife, including the Spoon-billed Sandpiper. He has written extensively on biodiversity and species conservation in the Asia-Pacific, including guide books to the birds of Singapore, Malaysia, and China. He is the recipient of the Society of Conservation Biology’s Early Career Conservationist Award in 2023. He has been friends with Robert Zhao since they were sixteen, and has acted as a frequent collaborator and consultant on Zhao’s projects.</p>
<p><b>[Performance] <i>Born by Gorgeousness</i> by HAEPARY, as part of <i>Sonic Sessions</i></b></p>	<p><i>Sonic Sessions</i> returns for another exciting edition of SAW at SAM, featuring an eclectic lineup of performances by both local and international artists,</p>

<p>18 January 2025, Saturday 9.30pm The Spine (Between Blocks 37 and 39), Level 1, SAM at Tanjong Pagar Distripark Free</p>	<p>including Subsonic Eye, Bakers In Space, Pleasantry, and many more. Catch us on both weekends of SAW, 17 – 18 January and 24 – 25 January 2025, in the spine area between Blocks 37 and 39.</p> <p><b><u>Born by Gorgeousness by HAEPAAARY</u></b> HAEPAAARY is an alt-electronic duo based in Korea, consisting of Minhee and Hyewon. For Singapore Art Week, they have prepared a setlist that speaks to who they are. The first half of the concert consists of ambient tracks realised in 2024 that sing about the power of thought with music. This is followed by electronic pop music that mixes ambient and techno with <i>Jongmyo Jerye</i>, music and dance used in ancestral rites at Jongmyo, the royal shrine of the Joseon Dynasty. This traditional music is recreated with HAEPAAARY's unique worldview, who extract and reassemble the charm of <i>Jongmyo Jeryeak</i>.</p>
<p><b>[Tour] Seeing Forest: Insights from the Venice Biennale Ambassadors</b> 22 February, 29 March, 26 April 2025 3pm – 3.30pm Gallery 3, Level 3, SAM at Tanjong Pagar Distripark Free (General admission fees to exhibition apply)</p>	<p>Join the Venice Biennale Ambassadors for an exclusive 30-minute guided tour of the exhibition <i>Seeing Forest</i>. They will share first-hand insights and reflections from running the 2024 Singapore Pavilion at the world's oldest and foremost international art event in Venice.</p>
<p><b>[Tour] Seeing Forest: Curator Tour</b> 1 March 2025 2pm – 3pm Gallery 3, Level 3, SAM at Tanjong Pagar Distripark Free (General admission fees to exhibition apply)</p>	<p>Join the curator of <i>Seeing Forest</i>, Haeju Kim, for an exclusive guided tour that delves into the heart of the exhibition's vision and themes. Explore the artworks' connections to the natural world and get the latest on the artist Robert Zhao's fascinating research into secondary forests in Singapore. Within these forests that have regrown after destruction due to human intervention such as development and plantation, new ecosystems thrive, as Zhao discovers.</p>

<p><b>[Tour] <i>Seeing Forest</i>: Docent Tour with Singapore Sign Language Interpretation</b> 12 April 2025 3pm – 3.45pm Gallery 3, Level 3, SAM at Tanjong Pagar Distripark Free (General admission fees to exhibition apply)</p>	<p>Join our friendly docent on a tour of <i>Seeing Forest</i> to explore the exhibition.</p> <p>This 45-minute tour will be delivered in spoken English with Singapore Sign Language interpretation by Equal Dreams. Suitable for participants aged 6 and up.</p>
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