



Taryn Simon at her 2016 exhibition *A Soldier is Taught to Bayonet the Enemy and not Some Undefined Abstraction*, in Dresden, Germany

FACT, FICTION & FALLACY

ART

Research plays a part in many artists' practices, but when it takes centre stage as part of the final output, does it – and can it – hold the same legitimacy as in other fact-based realms? What role can art play in telling us about the world around us? **BY CHRISTINA KO**

Our world spins on accepted truths: that the earth is round, one plus one equals two, and if you drink too much coffee, you're going to be up all night. But then there are things we sometimes believe — once considered absolute authorities, bodies such as governments, news media and education providers — that are now almost accepted as unreliable or biased, just as unverified Whatsapp messages, social media posts, word-of-mouth and whatever tops a Google search can become gospel as quickly as a bushfire claims a forest.

Given that the way we consume information has changed so drastically, is it possible that art, too, has a role to play in

telling us facts about the world?

Certainly, much of what we see in the art world today is there to make us think, a certifiable change from the days that art existed mainly to look pretty. And given these paradigm shifts, coupled with the fact that many artists execute substantial research in executing their practices, what role can art — a medium once considered the realm of dreamers and creatives — play in shaping our understanding of truth?

American artist Taryn Simon has made research a focal point of her practice, not only executing painstaking fact-finding missions in preparing her work, but also incorporating her results as part of the final work. In one of her most famed series, *Paperwork and the Will of Capital*, Simon

took documented images of international political meetings and signings, choosing to focus on the floral centrepieces that acted, as she says, as “silent witnesses” to moments of historical importance.

After having a botanist identify each component, Simon recreated the arrangements, deemed “impossible bouquets” in the age before globalisation as the species were derived from different seasons and climates. She photographed each of them before juxtaposing the images with descriptions of each political accord, highlighting, among other aspects, the manner in which power is crafted and arranged. Durable pressed versions of the flowers were also presented in a sculptural context, which, poignantly, outlived the mutable ramifications of some of the contracts.

While Simon is a dedicated researcher, her authority is created in the visual presentation of her work, and in the juxtaposition of facts both botanical and political, serving a purpose that is less about information dissemination and more about drawing attention to the system of power creation — and it works, speaking to how readily we buy into narratives on the basis of nothing more than appearance. That her work shows in spaces such as Gagosian galleries and international museums seem

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to tell us she is trustworthy.

Simon doesn't squander that trust; she uses it to make statements about her subject matter.

In contrast, Singaporean artist Robert Zhao Renhui might create equal credibility for his work through its presentation, going so far as to showcase his “findings” via an organisation he named the Institute of Critical Zoologists, though in actuality, his facts are often intertwined with fiction.

Zhao's interest is in documenting nature, and stems from the absolute manner in which science claims to organise the natural world. He often seeks to apply its methodologies, if with a non-scientific goal at hand. His multi-disciplinary approach manifests as books, photography, installations and more — his latest work being a tome that imagines the life of Singapore's last cow.

If we were to distil what Zhao's practice achieves, it would seem to disseminate the message: You can't trust anyone or anything, because even hard facts can be reordered to form biased narratives.

“The fiction I produce is a combination of the facts that I collect from my research, although... the final composition is fictional. A combination of many facts may not

necessarily be the truth, it can be just a form of reality,” he says.

He cites nature documentaries as a prime example: “Nature documentaries are highly edited products and experiences. Very few people can experience nature as the documentaries show them to be, [and] engaging with nature through documentaries might not be the best way to understand nature at all. Many scenes of documentaries purporting to be following single animals are made of many animals projected as single characters. I think we should be aware of the structures in place for a lot of narratives, even when it is science.”

Bleak though this realisation may be, it makes sense, particularly if you extend this way of thinking to humankind and generalisations or prejudices made about humans along social classes such as race, gender and sexuality. “More and more I feel that I am reorganising the research in a way that science would not normally do,” Zhao explains.

While the typical scientist is looking to draw conclusions to organise the world in some manner, Zhao considers that unnecessary to his practice, for one, but also in life, with broader implications that art can be just as legitimate a tool for

ANTHOLOGY

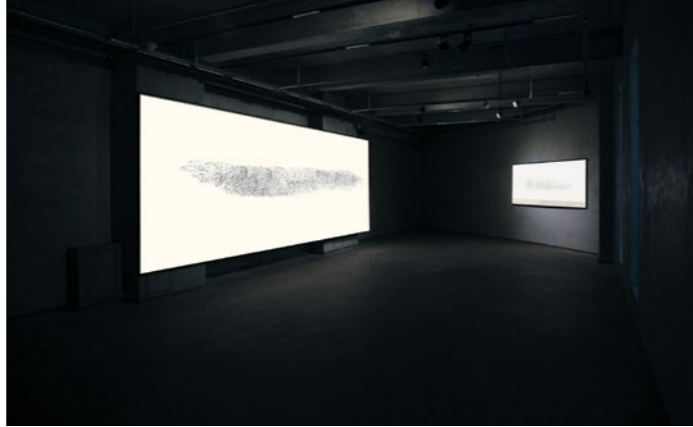


(from top) Robert Zhao Renhui; From 2015–2016, he undertook a research residency on Christmas Island. He documented the extinctions and conservation efforts on the island in his book *Christmas Island, Naturally* — a collection of 120 images, including the one below



ART

“In my process to understand these spaces and its inhabitants, I might use science. But I will try to keep in mind to break every available rule that science has in place” — Robert Zhao



(from top) Zhao's solo exhibition *The Lines We Draw* at ShanghArt Singapore explored migration and extinction in the natural world; A goshawk and his prey on Christmas Island as photographed by Zhao

understanding nature as science. Scientists might study a dozen-strong group of Javan Mynas in a forest to extrapolate verdicts on the whole population, whereas Zhao might study the population diversity of one patch of land over a year or analyse the growth pattern of one specific tree over a specific period — for no reason whatsoever.

“I am interested in the ‘look’ of these experiments rather than the final results. I am not interested in generating facts or further understanding the phenomenon that attracts me. Sometimes with nature, the simple act of looking is enough for me. In fact, I feel that with too much knowledge, science often strips away a layer of awe and mysteriousness that nature has. In my work, I try to bring that back.

“More and more, I feel that subjectivity is needed for us to connect with nature. In my process to understand these spaces and its inhabitants, I might use science. But I will try to keep in mind to break every available rule that science has in place. So whether or not the facts that come from my research is credible is less important to me than its ability to offer a new way to think about nature. The limits with a traditional way of exploring and cataloguing nature is that nature becomes a subject to be studied and ultimately to be controlled. As an artist, I try to see if art can offer another way to experience and understand nature. Different scientists have different ways in which they look at a space, and each space may mean very different things to different scientists from different disciplines. I like this way of seeing a landscape.”

Like Zhao, Hong Kong-based Lee Kai Chung is an artist who is interested in the systems behind the documentation of facts, although his pursuit leans more towards historical records. And if you think scientists have an agenda, consider the

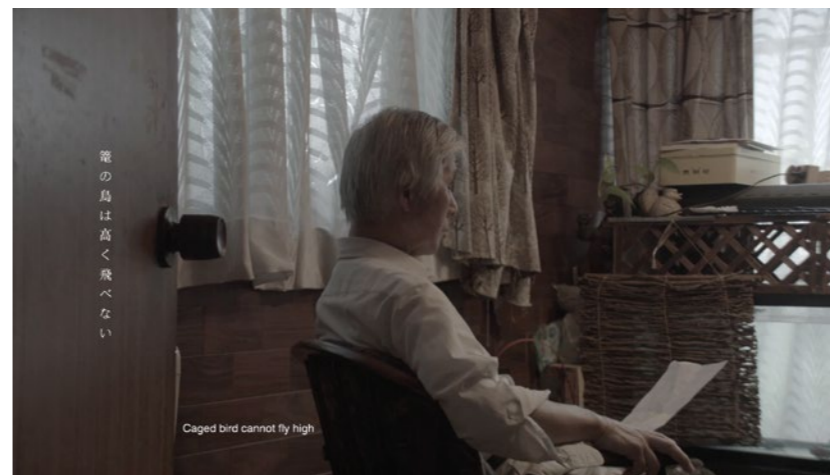
PHOTOS: ROBERT ZHAO, LEE KAI CHUNG

adage “history is written by winners”. It is a common reminder that things learned in the classroom — which shape our youth’s understanding of the world — aren’t immune to bias.

But Lee doesn’t seek to undermine the role of an institutional archive. “My main job is to extract or select a different aspect of history... and add a different layer to a narrative,” he says. His most recent exhibition, *The Narrow Road to the Deep Sea*, for example, focused on a somewhat overlooked historical event called the Nanshitou Massacre, in which bacteriological experimentation on Hong Kong citizens occurred when the city was occupied by the Japanese during World War II. The video-heavy presentation riffed on anecdotal evidence, which was interspersed with facts gleaned from research, and added an emotional aspect to the proceedings. Given the popular notion that emotion connotes bias, is there a place for it in documenting history? And yet, what is history but a timeline of feelings, whether it’s the anger that starts wars or the sorrows of a nation?

This is all part of the evolution of Lee’s practice, which was initially concerned with the logic of systems and archives, but has since grown to be more encompassing. Like Zhao, his research methodology now prizes singular experiences over generic fact, with a goal of creating a richer, more experiential documentation of the world.

“I am extending from visual and cultural studies and archival research to more anthropological research. At the end of the day, I believe history is made for humans,” he says. “It exists because people can read it, and also have the freedom to rewrite it.”



ANTHOLOGY



Lee Kai Chung’s recent exhibition *The Narrow Road to the Deep Sea* focused on the Nanshitou Massacre. Video installations included *The Smoking Lady* (above) and *The Enka Singer* (below)

So rewrite it he does, not to contradict the history books, but simply to offer a more personal alternative, though his work can be enjoyed without any accompanying statement. “For the audience to view my work, research is definitely not the prerequisite, [but] I think they can get a second layer once they get to know the background and my intention. Since 2017, whether I am being supported by an institute

or not, I will publish a small booklet, about my reflections and research findings.” Mixed in with his account of the Nanshitou Massacre is his memory of an incident that happened at school, which has but a loose thematic relevance to the episode.

Historians would argue that his additions subtract from the legitimacy of his research — but should it? And given that legitimacy can be so easily constructed, what makes it anything more than an illusion?

Regardless, Lee reminds us that what sticks in our memories, more often than fact, is feeling. “When we talk about research in art, it is necessarily compared with academic research. Both are not mutually exclusive, sometimes creative research is slightly different. It goes back to the aim of rediscovering our world. [But] visual language is important to tell information, it intrigues the audience’s interest and sometimes the visuals itself convey details that stay longer in our memory.”