

**BREAKFAST AT 8**

**JUNGLE AT 9**

ERNEST GOH

Ernest Goh is a photographer and visual artist. His fascination with the natural world began at a young age, when he spent a lot of time at his grandmother's rural kampung in Singapore, wading in streams and catching spiders. His animal portraits have previously been published in *The Fish Book* (2011) and *Cocks* (2013, re-issued as *Chickens* in the US and Europe in 2015).

**In the beginning was nature, and nature inspired art: among the oldest examples of cave art in the world are 35,000-year-old paintings of animals (an anoa, a pig, and a babirusa or 'pig-deer') in Sulawesi, Indonesia. They remind us that for millennia, human beings have been scrutinising the creatures we share this Earth with, and then been moved to pluck those images from our minds and set them down as external forms, as clearly and permanently as we could, for other minds to see.**

**The question of representation in art, then, is as old as art itself. How closely can we, with our limited human senses, perceive the 'real' world, how do we reproduce that perception, and to what end? In the modern era, these questions apply to photography as well, all the more so today as ever-improving technologies promise to put more clarity, detail and computational power at the fingertips of image-makers.**

**In *Breakfast at 8 Jungle at 9*, Ernest Goh presents a three-part exhibition of his ongoing photographic studies of the natural world, which align on some of these points of inquiry. The title of the exhibition is taken from the newer of the two series on show; the exhibition also features an earlier series *The Gift Book* and a new interactive installation *Time to Wrap Up*. Together, this body of work invites the viewer to look at the rich biodiversity of Singapore and Southeast Asia in extreme close-up, through the delicate beauty of the animal, insect or reptilian form. How close can the photographer get, how much detail is it possible to obtain within the human spectrum of sight – can we see what he sees?**

There is no chance here of stumbling upon the eerily human expressions that Goh presented in his earlier works, which featured meditative orang utans, strutting chickens or soulful fish. The animals in *Breakfast at 8 Jungle at 9* are long-dead denizens of a museum archive, while *The Gift Book* focuses on live insects whose faces, such as they are, we typically regard as alien to our own. The stark clarity that Goh's animal work has become known for is still present, but now it makes the images utterly about the animal, the non-human – that which cannot be humanised by the quirk of a seeming frown or the luminosity of expressive eyes.

At the same time, the images in this exhibition are quite deliberately arrayed in a strict and seemingly un-naturalistic context. Live insects or birds don't line up in the neat grids of *The Gift Book* or the uniform circles of *Breakfast at 8 Jungle at 9*. Goh has said that the striking formality and symmetry of his compositions, heightened by the way the images in the three series repeat and mirror each other so fervently, was prompted by the way human beings try to impose a logic and structure on the natural world. Through science, as through art, we have found ways to rearrange, contain and control (or so we tell ourselves) the things of nature.

And yet nature resists. In this exhibition, nature is at once vividly present – through the rich, saturated images – and also made absent. Goh's dramaturgy foregrounds the human intervention that created these pieces. The work of the hands that made the images and arranged them are everywhere, invisibly setting down each image one by one, and then the installation *Time to Wrap Up* invites the viewer to do the same.

## THE GIFT BOOK 2014

*The Gift Book* was the first of the three works and is perhaps the most deceptively quotidian as well. Meticulously executed in the form of wrapping paper, the series consists of eight portraits of live insects, butterfly chrysalises and flowers that Goh encountered in and around his home in Singapore. The images are repeated in geometric patterns that come to resemble exuberant starbursts or intriguing, potentially infinite superstructures.

On one level, the wrapping-paper images subvert our everyday assumptions of what 'cute' or 'attractive' might be; how many modern urbanites would pause to appreciate the visage of a short-horned grasshopper or a rhinoceros beetle? Beyond the individual images, however, having them repeat as a motif on wrapping paper also suggests a way of reading the aesthetic, 'decorative' value of nature: as a gift we receive from the planet, which we often unthinkingly unwrap, use, even exploit beyond reason, and ultimately fail to treasure.

Nature is not just decorative, of course; as the artist has written, it is both the giver and the gift. Goh's decision to use wrapping paper – an everyday, mass-produced, reproducible object – as a vehicle for expression, then to collate sheets of wrapping paper into *The Gift Book* and reposition them as framed artworks in this exhibition, invests the object with new meaning. The work nudges us to reconsider our modern throwaway culture and our attitude to nature. We forget that it is wrapping paper, a pretty thing defined by its short lifespan. The wrapping paper is the exhibited object, as nature is the thing itself – something worthy of our contemplation and care.

## BREAKFAST AT 8, JUNGLE AT 9 2015

Animal images, set in geometric patterns, also appear in the new series *Breakfast at 8 Jungle at 9*, but unlike the live insects that were photographed for *The Gift Book*, here the subjects are animal specimens that have been preserved for zoological study at the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum in Singapore. As one might expect, a number of these specimens are taxidermied, pinned or immersed in jars of alcohol; others are mammal skulls, rendered clean and bare.

Shot in Goh's usual crisp, spare style, these images come across as colder, more clinical and also more haunting than those in *The Gift Book*. The specimens are laid out in a visual language that is true to the zoological archive where they repose: slender stuffed birds with handwritten identification tags; insects lined up neatly as if in invisible trays; frogs and fish artfully composed in transparent jars, the better to see their undersides. For anyone who has ever pored over drawers and shelves of such specimens in venerable museums and universities, *Breakfast at 8 Jungle at 9* immediately evokes the Linnaean compunction to put life forms in their place – only here the impulse explodes onto the canvas with colour and glee. There is discipline, there is order, but there is also unapologetic artistry.

The first iteration of this series was a 12-metre long art mural, commissioned for the entrance lobby of the aforementioned museum. Goh's arrangement of specimens ignores scientific order in favour of an aesthetic one. The specimens, some of which date as far back as 1909, seem to radiate in concentric circles and march off the wall. This is no banal circle of life; the images pulse and swirl with an energy that repudiates their deadness.

The subsequent eight artworks in this series, exhibited here, repeat the circle motif. Individually each circle is tighter, less flamboyant. Arrayed together, the circles acquire a hypnotic quality and resemble symmetrical unicellular amoeba dancing in rows. The repetition of images, here and in the

art mural, at once celebrates the grand multiplicity of nature and also constrains it within a structured, man-made form, akin to the systematic construction of Western scientific knowledge. Has the human successfully tamed the natural? Perhaps on the canvas – yet blink into the white space and the circles threaten to expand ever and on, off the wall and off the frame.

The title of the series is inspired by a letter written by the British naturalist and explorer Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913). A longtime subject of fascination for Goh, Wallace spent eight years in the Malay Archipelago in the mid-19th century. During that time, he collected more than 125,000 specimens of insects, birds and mammals – including about 5,000 species new to science – and his field observations led him to independently develop a theory of evolution by natural selection.

Wallace, in other words, participated in creating the very knowledge and systems that anchor this museum collection and our modern understanding of the natural world. The title of this art series pays tribute in particular to his discipline as a field collector: 'Breakfast at 8 ...jungle at 9' is a quote from Wallace's description of his daily collecting routine in Singapore (he wrote that he began each day at 5.30 a.m. and worked until 9 p.m.).

While Wallace's account reflects the modern, industrial penchant for accurate timekeeping, in adapting his words for the artwork series, Goh has given it a jaunty nonchalance that is entirely the artist's own inflection. Similarly, his honouring of Wallace's work with these playful, spirited artworks is a way of insisting on a highly unscientific, albeit equally regimental, ordering of the animal images. Goh's kaleidoscopic compositions also challenge the otherwise macabre quality of the animal specimens. They had their lives taken away from them in the name of science, by scientists and collectors operating on the same principles as Wallace, yet perhaps through art, some other life is now made possible and restored to them.

## TIME TO WRAP UP 2015

The central element of the exhibition, the interactive installation *Time to Wrap Up*, provides an opportunity for the viewer to respond to Goh's meditations on repetition, re-ordering and the exquisite strangeness of the insect or animal form. The artist presents a hodgepodge of objects, most of them everyday items from modern life: a table and chairs, a supermarket trolley, a piano, a vehicle, models of animals, icons of East Asian culture, and other items. In a deliberate homage to Yayoi Kusama's *Obliteration Room* (2002), all the objects have been wrapped completely in white, and visitors are given sheets of stickers – bearing animal motifs from *The Gift Book* and *Breakfast at 8 Jungle at 9* – which they can stick anywhere on the white objects.

Like Kusama's work, *Time to Wrap Up* invites the visitor to create an environment that reflects the artist's vision – in Goh's case, a world that is wrapped up or covered in nature. Given the objects he has chosen for the installation, Goh is extending the assertion that nature is not merely a decorative layer, but a claim upon the landscape. We would like to believe that the things of humankind are eternal, but nature eventually overruns all man-made structures and institutions, as well as animals and plants, be it in the rapid surge of a tsunami or the infinitesimal path worn by an insect creeping up from the ground.

The act of placing stickers onto the white canvas of the objects also implicates visitors in the act of creatively ordering the natural world. What does it mean to wrap, or re-wrap, the world in nature? Perhaps it prompts a degree of care and reverence, even protectiveness – but there is also the potential for liberation, a child-like exultation and fun, until the object is finally plastered over and obscured.

Imagine hands, then, applying stickers all over this stark white terrain of lumpy, irregular objects – a gesture that says 'I was here', even as it reproduces the mark of nature upon a canvas of humanity's presence. Imagine hands, 39,000 years ago, outlined on a cave ceiling in Sulawesi by spraying red pigment around five fingers pressed against the rock; then, several thousand years later, other hands adding an outline of a babirusa to the tableau. Imagine hands, criss-crossing across millennia, moved by the same cognitive impulse to select, recreate, repeat.

Goh's artworks make no grand claims of longevity. The interactive installation will be dismantled when the show ends, and the prints and the mural will last as long as paper and digital print last in Singapore's climate. By its materiality, art is often ephemeral. The questions that drive Goh's photographic interactions with nature, however, stem from a much deeper place and an older origin. In our modern era, which some scientists are calling the Anthropocene because humankind's presence has so irrevocably altered our planet's geology and biodiversity, there is no better time to look more closely at the natural world and reconsider our relationship with it.

Text by Yu-Mei Balasingamchow

WWW.ERNESTGOH.COM

Presented by

**CPHIF**  
Centre for Photography and Filmmaking

Supported by

**NATIONAL ARTS COUNCIL**  
SINGAPORE

**a.r.t.s.fund**

LEE KONG CHIAN NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM

RAYMON'S COLLECTION

BUREAU

THE NECESSARY STAGE