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Artforum

"Zheng Bo"

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ARTFORUM

REVIEWS NEW YORK

Zheng Bo

Kiang Malingue

By Jan Avgikos 🌱



Zheng Bo, *Le sacre du printemps* (The Rite of Spring), 2021–22, 4K video, color, sound, 16 minutes 35 seconds.

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The natural world might be the wellspring of aesthetics, the source of true beauty, the measure of all that is Real, but how to represent it and toward what end? Renaissance academicians dismissed depictions of the uninhabited landscape as meaningless without the defining presence of people. The Romantics' conception was exactly opposite: They depicted nature as a fathomless and omnipotent force unto itself. In the secular 1970s, Earthworks artists harnessed the alluring vastness of uninhabited territories and, however briefly, resurrected the idea of nature in Western art as immense and powerful. Paradoxically, the movement coincided with nascent environmentalism and the dawning realization that we were doing irreparable harm to the planet. As the climate crisis quickens, the natural world is both celebrated and mourned by scientists and artists alike in recognition of the urgent need to learn to think differently. How might our shared concerns manifest in art today?

One approach was found in Zheng Bo's modest yet expansive exhibition "Vibrancy, Vibrancy, Vibrancy." In their first solo show in New York, Zheng presented two videos and two suites of unframed drawings that derive from extended encounters (or often collaborations) with stunningly beautiful natural environments: the primeval forest of Dalarna, Sweden; the coral lagoon of New Caledonia-Kanaky; and the untouched landscape of Lantau Island, Hong Kong. (We take note of the admirably low carbon footprint when an entire show fits in a briefcase.)

A durational performance in collaboration with Dance Art Critical Ecology, *Le sacre du printemps* (The Rite of Spring), 2021–22, unfolds deep inside the Swedish forest, its floor heavily blanketed with verdant moss and its canopy thick with pine trees. Here, time moves imperceptibly slowly. Nude male dancers (their numbers vary from three to five) are cast as literal tree huggers who embrace and make love to the massive trunks. Viewed from a fixed camera position that occasionally flips upside down, the dancers are largely obscured by dense growth as they ascend or descend their arboreal hosts at a sloth-like pace or gyrate against their rugged bark. This tryst produces an imaginative trans-species experiment in primal passion: becoming tree.

In accordance with a plurality of discourses that include queer ecocriticism and ecofeminism, to "be tree" requires a relational shift: in part, to experience the forest as a living supportive community, rather than a resource to be exploited. It is to explore trees as our more-than-human companions, from whom we might learn to think differently about our relation to each other and to the Earth.

Zheng aligned with these philosophies in *The Political Life of a Coral Lagoon 1*, 2025, filmed during his diving adventures in an underwater fantasia in New Caledonia-Kanaky, the world's second-largest coral lagoon and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Viewers might well be content simply to enjoy the awesome beauty and biodiversity of fish and other creatures darting among groves of gently pulsing corals. The pristine white sand and clear water cue the release of endorphins that transport us to the brink of happiness, but Zheng breaks the reverie with the unexpected addition of graphic speech bubbles that suggest what the fish might want to convey to us humans. What makes this intervention so effective is the behavior of the fish. Rather than darting away from the camera, they regard the interloper with curiosity. This creates a pretext of plausibility, as the aquatic beings impart wisdom gained from living in harmony with other life-forms. The exhibition's title attested to the belief that consciousness exists in every living thing and is clearly apprehensible when we attune ourselves to sensibilities other than our own.

Simply grouped under sheets of glass, two ongoing series of ink-and-graphite works on paper evoked the meditative practice of drawing and, more specifically, the history of Chinese painting—a tradition that has long honored nature and its function as a conduit to understanding the universe. Simplified and abstracted, the drawings of sea and plant forms testified to a desire to linger at the site of inspiration. “In our minds there is awareness of perfection”—that’s how Agnes Martin articulated it in her 1989 essay, “Beauty Is the Mystery of Life.” Zheng’s vision fuses with contemporary environmental discourse, but his spiritual quest matches a much longer timeline of metaphysical thought in art.

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