

(english)

Kunsthalle Lissabon

ZHENG BO:

The Soft and Weak Are Companions of Life

柔弱者生之徒

Kunsthalle Lissabon presents *The Soft and Weak Are Companions of Life* 柔弱者生之徒, the first solo show in Portugal by Hong Kong-based Zheng Bo.

Historically, in most of Western principles, values, and rights, the human species always occupies the main role. Marginalizing the natural element has led us today to have a low awareness and respect for life forms other than humans and animals. Nowadays a lot of people simply don't know which kind of plants surround their houses and characterize their cities, and most of the time, empathy with ecological issues doesn't always correspond to a real knowledge of them, creating just a fake awareness and physical distance from what really lives around us.

Zheng Bo tries to reduce this distance going beyond a simple conceptual approach to the knowledge of plants. Pushing the idea of intimacy, the artist gives us an example of a possible heightened relationship between men and vegetal world, overturning, in the meantime the anthropocentric vision we have of nature. But the ferns represent also the neglected and the queer in a standardized nature-culture, pointing, in this way, to the urgent need to expand our notions of interspecies relations, communities, and counterpublics.

A new series of drawings titled *Drawing Life* opens the show at Kunsthalle Lissabon. Zheng Bo has been walking on Lantau Island - where he lives in Hong Kong - and making a drawing of local plants every day since late spring this year. He notes the names of the plants that he could recognize, but since there are always more plants to draw and identify the text on each drawing always ends with "etc." This is the first time he exhibits a selection of these drawings.

With *Pteridophilia 1-4* (deriving from the Greek pterid- "fern" and -philia "love") Zheng Bo films young men making close contact with various kinds of ferns in a Taiwan forest. Men establish emotional and physical relationships with the plants: they lick, wrap, stroke, bite, ingest, and fuck them, showing us an infinite number of possibilities of vegetal-human intimacies.

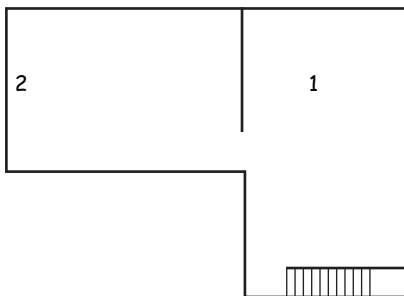
Zheng reflects on our current moral outlook questioning our ethical quandary. Where does human exploitation of plants start and where does it end? Why is it "natural" to eat plants but "unnatural" to make love to them?

The Soft and Weak Are Companions of Life 柔弱者生之徒 is a sentence from Chapter 76 of *Dao De Jing*, the Daoist text written in the 4th century BC. *Dao De Jing* is written in Classical Chinese, which

poses a number of challenges to complete comprehension. As Daoist scholar Holmes Welch observes, the written language "has no active or passive, no singular or plural, no case, no person, no tense, no mood." So, the entire text is open to a huge range of interpretations.

In this vast horizon of alternatives, Zheng Bo, with his videos, his taxonomies, and his philosophy gives us the possibility to rethink the entire human system of categorizations of knowledge about nature. Zheng Bo's invitation is to combine all the elements we have available around us, trying to find all the different combinations out of them, optimizing all the potentialities belonging to plants and humans, in order to acquire the best from each one and generate new harmonies.

Zheng Bo (Beijing, 1974) is a Hong Kong based artist. His practice has been concerned with ecology, participatory projects, marginalized communities, and gender themes in order to reflect on our cosmology. He has worked with a number of art spaces in Asia and Europe, most recently ICA at NYU Shanghai, @KCUA in Kyoto, Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong, Parco Arte Vivente in Torino, TheCube Project Space in Taipei, and Villa Vassilieff in Paris. His works have been included in the performance program of the 58th Venice Biennale, Manifesta 12, the 11th Taipei Biennial, and the 11th Shanghai Biennial.



1)
Zheng Bo. Drawing Life (2020 - ongoing).
Pencil on paper, each page 21cm x 29,7cm

2)
Zheng Bo. Pteridophilia 1-4 (2016 - ongoing)

Supported by Kyoto City University of Arts Art Gallery, the 11th Taipei Biennial, Villa Vassilieff and Pernod Ricard Fellowship, and TheCube Project Space.

Pteridophilia 1, 2016. Video (4K, color, sound), 17 min.

Six young men walk into a forest in Taiwan, making close contact with ferns. They establish emotional and physical relationships with the plants, relying on their bodies rather than words. Ferns are very common in Taiwan. They are valued by indigenous people but not by Japanese colonists or the Nationalists.

Pteridophilia 2, 2018. Video (4K, color, sound), 20 min.

A man makes love to a bird's nest fern (*Asplenium nidus*) and then starts eating it. Zheng reflects on our current moral outlook that it is "natural" to eat plants but "unnatural" to make love to them. Bird's nest fern is a popular delicacy in Taiwan.

Pteridophilia 3, 2018. Video (4K, color, sound), 15 min.

Zheng collaborates with three local BDSM practitioners who in turn collaborate with three fern species - green penny fern (*Lemmaphyllum microphyllum*), flying spider-monkey tree fern (*Cyathea spinulosa*), and elephant fern (*Angiopteris palmiformis*) - to expand BDSM practice.

Pteridophilia 4, 2019. Video (4K, color, sound), 16 min.

For centuries humans have been in love with furred fronds of young ferns. Inspired by Yaoi anime, this chapter follows a young couple in their acts of love with fiddleheads.

