How do you replicate the ambience of a forest? Artist Zen Teh, 32, probes this question in a new multisensory installation at Nanyang Technological University.

Visitors take off their shoes and step into a darkened exhibition space, wandering their way around 24 fabric banners. These feature night-time images of vegetation in Singapore’s parks and nature reserves where trees are penetrated by nearby urban light.

Taking a turn around the room, one encounters the sounds and scents of the forest. An immersive soundscape of nature destination is created by audio artist Brian O'Reilly and aromatic scents by scientist Ching Ladhung. A Familiar Forest, so the work’s knewen, has taken root in the university’s new rest and relaxation space Hygge, and runs until January next year.

It is one of several art exhibitions here looking at mankind’s relationship with nature – a perennial issue on the island-city state where the impending clearing of green areas such as Clementi Forest has sparked public outcry.

Teh, who was born Teh Shi Wei and added Zen to her name as a reminder “to follow a natural way of life”, is worried about deforestation. “We talk about Tenugah Forest – how much of the actual forest do we retain? When we build, are we building with respect to the natural environment, or are we clearing and then building, and planning back from trees?”

“Teh least so much of our natural forest, but still desire to see some parts of nature, we may have to turn to images, artificial sounds, and smell,” says Teh, whose exhibition runs until May 2023. A Familiar Forest show Seating States: Healing Spa:s, whose trees are penetrated by nearby urban light.

On display are antique European lithographs of Amazon and South-east Asian jungles, many of which appeared in encyclopedia stacks of National Geographic magazines, such as those by Erwin Mannasse: A Romance Of The Tropical Forest at the National Gallery Singapore.

“Colours are captured in the multisensory installation presented by the Singapore Art Museum at the National Gallery Singapore, explores what it means to listen to nature in a time of ecological crises. It features a 16-minute audio-visual presentation, based on field recordings from areas which are inhabited by urban development – Bukit Brown Cemetery, MacKerricher Reserve, the Red Corner and forests near the Mandai project, billed as an integrated wildlife and nature destination.

In the sound installation, what begins as a kind of natural soundscape grows increasingly harried, even mechanical, reflecting Tang’s concerns for the world. One of his criticisms of the Mandai project, he says, is that it aims to connect people with nature but “could only imagine doing so through the heavy-handed, large-scale intervention and disruption of existing habitats which already had an intrinsic environmental value”.

“I’d argue that rather than closing the gap between ‘us’ on one side and ‘nature’ on the other, it simply recreates it,” he adds.