

# Mark Dion

**M**ark Dion is an artist, conservationist, collector, traveller, and self-styled adventurer. He is comfortable creating beautiful curiosity cabinets, retracing historic botanical expeditions in Brazil, digging for treasures on the Thames' banks beside the Tate Gallery, or even, as he did last year, curating an ambitious exhibition based upon the Principality of Monaco's national art and maritime collections. He has exhibited installations, drawings, and photographs at Tate Britain and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and been artist in residence at London's Natural History Museum.

Motivating this rather enviable list of activities is Dion's desire to unearth where our current big ideas about history, science, and the natural world have come from. It's an overwhelmingly huge task, yet he summarises it in deceptively simple terms. "I am looking back and trying to understand how we got to this point, how we got to our understanding of what counts for nature in our society."

As part of this lifelong project, Dion spent two and a half years exploring three centuries of art, craft and maritime objects on the invitation of museum directors Marie-Claude Beaud and Robert Calcagno. The resulting major

exhibition, *Oceanomania: Souvenirs of Mysterious Seas* – from the Expedition to the Aquarium, was held jointly in April, 2011 at the Oceanographic Museum and the New National Museum at Villa Paloma, Monaco, and included 18 of the artist's own works. The show and its stunning, accompanying publication (Mack Books, 2011) each evoke a deep sense of wonder towards the sea, while honest appraisals of the damage we have caused are uncomfortably close at hand. "Some of the contemporary artists have a conservation sensibility – Alexis Rockman, James Prosek, Ashley Bickerton; theirs is an overtly critical, pro-Ocean approach... But also, I wanted to treat everything equally, whether it was a vernacular object or a painting. For example, the shell art, which is very amateurish, was treated with the same degree of seriousness as the Monet."

A childhood on the coast drew Dion to the ocean, equally as an ecological concern and artistic muse. "I'm from New Bedford, Massachusetts, which is a city on the sea. It's an industrial sea port, renowned for being the place that Herman Melville sailed out of, and where he starts his book *Moby Dick*. I've been deeply intrigued by the ocean from a very young age; I was a scuba diver at 12 years old. I spent summers on the coast, so I was always a very passionate

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Portrait of Mark Dion  
Photo: Amanda Dandeneau, 2010  
Courtesy of the artist

marine conversationist, a member of the Cousteau Society when I was in junior high school. It has always been a pretty major inspiration of mine.”

Dion’s career-long engagement with photography provides one way to navigate Oceanomania’s multiple displays. For the show, he selected grainy, romantic pictures of swashbuckling 19th century explorer and artist Ernst Haeckel surrounded by his spoils, giant starfish, crabs, and coral; contemporary photography by Xaviera Simmons depicts rickety boats crammed with people, helplessly tiny against the ocean’s vast, blue backdrop. The exhibition also features Surrealist photographer Man Ray’s Marie-Laure de Noailles costumée, 1928, a black and white image of Viscountess Noailles preening in a layered, fish skin gown at a sea-bed themed ball. Dion explains: “In the Surrealist tradition, people were very drawn to the uncanniness of the sea; it feels so otherworldly. The strangeness of the sea, the strangeness of organisms, was inspiring to artists like Man Ray.”

Perhaps not surprising given Dion’s boyhood Jacques Cousteau Society membership, the celebrated French deep-sea diver, filmmaker, author, photographer, scientist, and co-inventor of the aqua-lung is another touchstone for Oceanomania, and for the artist’s work in general. Dion often casts himself in multiple roles in his installations, performances, and photography. For his art-imitating-science piece in 1992, called The Department of Marine Animal Identification of the City of New York (Chinatown Division), he turned American Fine Arts Co., New York, into an office for identifying, cataloguing, and preserving weird and wonderful creatures purchased at local markets. His intention, in part, was ecological, questioning why we deem some animals worthier than others of scientific care and attention.

By turning the camera on himself, Dion also creates dramatic, playful, and humorous, self-portraits in which he emulates his heroes, trying on various roles, while always leaving space for

doubt. For example, he has posed on board ship in a close-fitting, red, Cousteau-style hat, gesturing theatrically to an unknown vista; in a studio shot, he proudly clasps a plaster reptile as if an archaeologist; in another photograph, Dion emerges from the Monaco sea in full scuba gear. “There is always a certain hunger for the image of the artist, and in my work I’m always conflating two similar things into the same thing. In the same way that I often fuse the studio and the laboratory, I also combine the explorer and the artist. For me, that’s an interesting strategy to tease out similarities. Taking photographs explicitly in that genre, or to make fun of that genre, or to be antagonistic to it, is something I often do. I try to play a line there.”

His 2008-10 solo work Concerning Hunting travelled between premier art venues in Denmark, Italy, Germany and Austria. In the exhibition guide, Dion attributed his attraction to this controversial topic to “the sensitivity of the hunter and the profound knowledge he has of nature”. Working again with role play and carefully constructed environments, the artist produced five fully equipped hunting blinds – huts in which stalkers shelter – each themed according to eccentric personalities: the Glutton’s hideout dripping with fat sausages; the Librarian’s meticulously arranged with books and equipment. His large personal collection of images of hunters with their prey was also framed and hung as the wall installation Men and Game. That Dion refers to these pictures in our interview as “amateur photographs of men glorying over the bodies of dead animals” indicates his distaste for bloodsports. Yet, in owning such a collection, he is clearly fascinated by the ways in which hunters bridge the gap between civilised culture and beautiful, unruly nature.

Dion not only collects photographs and poses for self-portraits, but also since the late 1980s has spent time behind the camera to compile one of his largest bodies of work. Entitled WHITE OUT, and published in the book *Polar Bear: Ursus Maritimus* (2004), his collection



General view of Mark Dion’s curiosity cabinet at the Oceanographic Museum of Monaco  
Wood and steel objects cabinet incorporating objects and material from the permanent collection of the Oceanographic Institute of Monaco  
Photo Credit: NMNM Oceanographic Museum and Mauro Magliani and Barbara Piovani, 2011



Mark Dion  
Installation views from Concerning Hunting, Kunstraum Dornbirn, 2008  
Photo: Adolf Bereuter  
Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

“THERE ARE MODELS FOR OUR RELATIONSHIP TO THE NATURAL WORLD THAT DON’T HAVE TO BE BASED ON DEGRADATION, EXPLOITATION, AND DESTRUCTION”

Mark Dion  
 Polar Bears and Toucans (from Amazonas to Svalbard) 1991. Stuffed toy polar bear, Sony sport cassette player, cassette recorded in Venezuela/Amazonas territory, shipping crate, electrical cord, tar, wash tub.  
 231 x 112 x 75cm. Collection DuMont Schütte  
 Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

Mark Dion  
 Concrete Jungle, 1992  
 Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York



of black and white images of polar bears, like *Men and Game*, capture the friction between human institutions and this powerful symbol of wilderness. Dion's photographs document the display of taxidermic specimens of the great beast in natural history museums. "Polar bears are called *Ursus Maritimus*, which means marine bear. I've been photographing polar bears wherever I can find them. It's always an interesting study in our attitudes towards the species, and our attitudes towards the Arctic."

The artist's passion for conservation is not confined to gallery exhibitions. In 2005, Dion and his wife – "companion, confidant, and inspiration" Dana Sherwood – lived on a small, wooden boat alongside local park rangers in Komodo National Park, Indonesia. Participants in the Human/Nature project, a collaboration between environmental charity Rare and the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, they

studied the Komodo dragon, the world's largest lizard, and the delicate ecosystem of its rugged island home. The experience was restorative. "Like all people who are invested in these [ecological] ideas, we're going to go through melancholy as the thing we care about the most is disappearing. It's easy to be engaged with these issues and to reach a state of exhaustion. So, one of the things you have to continually do is to recharge your batteries and refuel your passion through an encounter with wild places, otherwise you get so exhausted you just want to stop thinking about them."

Through his interwoven creative and charitable work, the artist aims to "foster a culture of nature" in urban Western society. "What I mean by a 'culture of nature' is there are models for our relationship to the natural world that don't have to be based on degradation, exploitation and destruction. There are possibilities for a more positive, balanced

interaction with the natural world." He believes people in every profession and walk of life – whether "chef... poet... nurse... construction worker" – have a part to play in re-imagining the ways we coexist with other living creatures, and is refreshingly humble regarding his own contribution. "Artists are part of the puzzle, but I don't think they can do it alone; it can be done by a large number of people working in their fields, and mine happens to be art making."

Having just returned from a journey to Colombia, South America, Dion expresses the urgency of his artistic mission, and its play upon his conscience. "These trips are about seeing the last of these places before they disappear. It's about reaffirming a connection that will refuel the will to fight for them." **m**

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