

Boston, Massachusetts

# Mark Dion: Misadventures of a 21st-Century Naturalist

by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy Institute of Contemporary Art

After a visit to the remarkable *Mark Dion: Misadventures of a 21st-Century Naturalist*, on view at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Boston through December 31, 2017, I have been forced to reexamine my love for natural history dioramas. I have had to do the same regarding my largely unquestioned acceptance of other conventional methods of collecting, interpreting, and displaying objects that purport to represent the natural world. Dion's assemblages and installations have even inspired me to think in new ways about collecting in general, i.e., what we, as a society and as individuals, decide to save and study and what we devalue and discard. I had previously seen the conceptual artist's works singly in museums—his work is in collections here and in Europe—and found the impact to be significant, but the force of this mid-career retrospective is seismic.

"What I do for my projects is buy stuff," Dion, who was born in 1961, once told an interviewer. "Some artists paint, some pull prints, some sculpt, but I shop." This is an impish understatement. While it's obvious to anyone looking at his works that he shops flea markets, antiques stores, and secondhand book dealers for his raw materials, what he has done with what he buys is genius. Nor is shopping all he does. He dredges bodies of water and collects the refuse he finds. He digs in abandoned lots, recovering such things as corroded machinery, pottery shards, and old apothecary bottles, along with more contemporary castoffs, such as wayward golf balls and construction site debris. He also undertakes what he calls "museum interventions." These are projects in which, with a team, he rummages in the storerooms of institutional collections and makes art out of what he finds forgotten there.

What's the point of it? Dion's main focus is the natural world, and he has a very well-developed sense of its fragility. This is coupled with an awareness of the hubris of the human species. He wants us to consider the consequences of having placed ourselves at the center of the universe. He also wants us to think deeply about what traditionally has been deemed and treated by museums of all kinds as sacred and worthy of study and what has not.

ICA curator Ruth Erickson, organizer of the show, points out that much of Dion's recent work "dwells on the loss of wondrous things." Arctic sea ice, for starters. But Dion doesn't preach; he doesn't even offer narratives, only visual statements. *Landfill*, for example, is his comment on the kind of dioramas that used to mesmerize me as a kid. In one merciless example—a 21st-century diorama—he exposes what has happened to the pristine landscapes that those old-time dioramas portray. And so, instead of a doe and her fawns or a black bear and her cubs with squirrels in the underbrush, we are faced with seagulls, mice, rats, and a coyote caught unawares in the act of scavenging garbage. I peered through the glass to see what they were picking at amid the bulging black plastic bags, layers of magazines and newspapers, and an overturned oil drum labeled "Racing Fuels." I spied cat and dog food cans, bird food bags, egg cartons, milk cartons, and all kinds of other stuff that we all, at some point, have tossed in the trash. What's the cliché? Gone but not forgotten? Unfortunately, this stuff is forgotten but not gone.

The background sky of *Landfill* has been painted in classic diorama style. It's always a beautiful day in this neighborhood. The lighting is always ethereal. The only problem is that, in the distance, instead of a mountain or some other pastoral sight, we see an ominous industrial city skyline. But the real kicker is that the diorama, made in 1999-2000 and lent to the show by the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, is housed within a standard plywood shipping container on casters. In containers similar to it so much of *Landfill*'s detritus was transported to us in the first place.

As Dion has said, "Never has there been a global culture which has made so much and cared so little for it."

Dion's cabinets of curiosities are among his most celebrated pieces, and there are several in the show, including *New Bedford Cabinet*, a 2001 work now in the ICA's collection. Same as the others, this one tweaks



*Cabinet of Marine Debris*, 2014, painted wood and metal cabinet and found objects, 113" x 84" x 32". For this piece Dion gathered objects, most of them made of plastic, including flip-flops, during an expedition with scientists to Alaska. Collection of Martin Z. Margulies, Miami. Courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York City. © Mark Dion.

Dion's main focus is the natural world, coupled with an awareness of the hubris of the human species.



*Landfill*, 1999-2000, mixed media, 71½" x 147" x 63". Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. Photo by Pablo Mason. © Mark Dion.

the nose of traditional museum practices. On the shelves and in the drawers of what resembles a specimen cabinet are old factory belts and gears; rusty locks and keys; buoys, fishing nets, and fishing lures; toy guns, toy soldiers, a broken doll part; dented thimbles and buttons. All of it was excavated from ground where a tavern once stood in New Bedford, Massachusetts, which is Dion's birthplace; a farm dump at the edge of a cemetery in Brockton, Massachusetts; and an industrial site in Providence, Rhode Island. The objects

represent the men, women, and children who had worked in the fishing industry that once thrived in New Bedford, in the textile mills that used to line the Providence waterfront, and on our disappearing farmland—people whose lives haven't often been given the kind of treatment that museums have historically bestowed on so-called elites.

I spent a long time with one of his less labor-intensive pieces, *Men and Game*. Completed in 1998 and on loan to the show from a German museum, it consists of 161 vernacular photos showing a huge variety of hunters with guns and their quarry. Most are men, but not all. A few are children. Some are proud and smiling, triumphant; other smilers look drunk. Still others look simply self-satisfied, after having completed the difficult physical task that hunting often is. One of the most disturbing, repeated motifs is that of hunters holding up the heads of the animals they have freshly killed, as if reanimating them. And yet as a viewer of *Men and Game*, I experienced mixed emotions. The hunters of my acquaintance love nature; they certainly know more about it than I do. They respect their prey; they hunt to eat. The problematic hunters pictured here are those who seem not to be after sustenance; they're after sport. It's a game. Hence, the double meaning of Dion's title.

Dion reports that when he was a child, he had "serious learning disabilities." As a result, the early education he received was unorthodox. As he recounts, "During class, I would leave my public school peers and find my way to the school's basement for a series of exercises that felt more like game play. Luckily, I had a wonderfully warm, confidence-building tutor who also took me to plays and concerts"—and on field trips to places such as the New Bedford Whaling Museum. These outings he recalls "more acutely than any other moments in my education."

This is a man who recognizes his debt to museums, but as a cultural critic he also recognizes that museums have not always told the truth and that some of them still have not reformed their ways. "The beliefs of the past form the foundation for contemporary institutions and, more often than not, still persist in their own operation," he writes in an essay reprinted in the catalog, "Some Notes toward a Manifesto for Artists Working with or about the Living World."

The installation in the last room of the show is called *Memory Box*. This rather tame Dion piece is a life-size re-creation, complete with the fusty smell, of a wooden backyard shed covered with tarpaper and filled with boxes of all kinds. Museum-goers are encouraged to go inside and handle the boxes. There are both wooden and paper cigar boxes, candy and cookie tins, gift boxes and game boxes, including one for the game of Cootie, invented in 1949. I hadn't thought of that one in a while!

"I'm definitely a lover of *things*, and a true believer that things speak," Dion once told the *New York Times*.

Taking Dion at his word, Kathrinne Duffy, who helped curate the exhibit with Erickson and ICA staffer Jessica Hong, writes that she believes Dion wants *Memory Box* to evoke more than mere nostalgia. "By offering viewers an encounter with objects—an occasion to discover things,

hold them dear, and hear them speak — [the piece] suggests a reenchantment of the material realm and the persistent pleasures of close observation."

I have to confess, however, that even though I stepped twice inside *Memory Box*, I have been too well trained. This lifelong museum-goer is too accustomed to the old ways. Hands in my pockets, I didn't touch a thing.

For more information about the exhibition, see the ICA website ([www.icaboston.org](http://www.icaboston.org)). For more information about the artist, see his gallery's website ([www.tanyabonakdargallery.com](http://www.tanyabonakdargallery.com)).



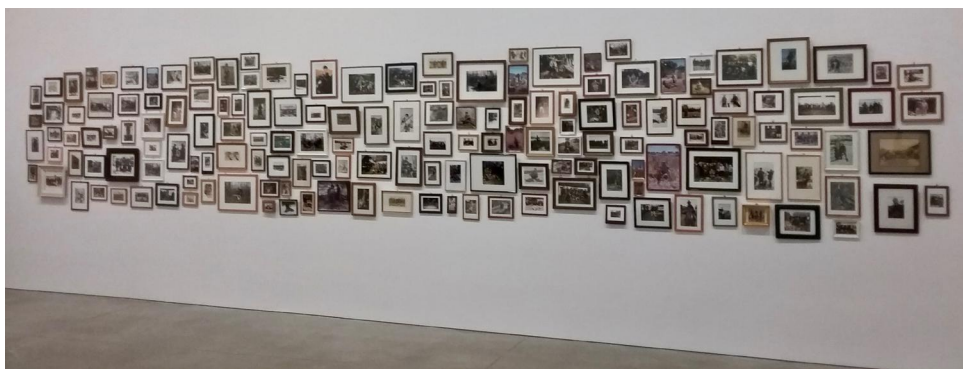




*Ursus Maritimus*, 1994, consists of 11" x 14" gelatin silver prints of polar bear taxidermy from museums in Los Angeles, Chicago, Oslo, London, Rome, and elsewhere. Schinto photo.



Detail of *Ursus Maritimus*. Schinto photo.



*Men and Game*, 1998, 120 framed vernacular photographs of various sizes. Galerie für Landschaftskunst, Hamburg, Germany. Schinto photo.



Detail of *Men and Game*. Schinto photo.



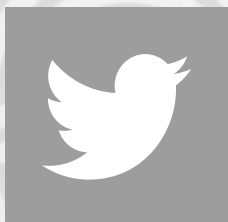
Detail of *The Ladies' Field Club of York*, 1999. Eight (one shown) sepia-toned gelatin silver prints, mounted on board and printed with text, each one 20" x 16". This clever piece features a series of photographic portraits of fictional "lady" naturalists. They were produced by the Dion & Puett Studio, i.e., Dion and another artist, J. Morgan Puett, to pay tribute to the women, often overlooked and marginalized, who were field collectors and members of naturalist societies in the 19th century. According to the catalog, *The Ladies' Field Club of York* is also a homage to women curators and art administrators of the 1990s. That's why Dion and Puett used models who hold or held positions of authority in British art world institutions, such as Phaidon Press and the Tate Gallery. Said Puett, "It's a common understanding that the art world is run by men, but when you dig around you find these dynamic women doing fantastic things." Schinto photo.



Detail of *Men and Game*. Schinto photo.

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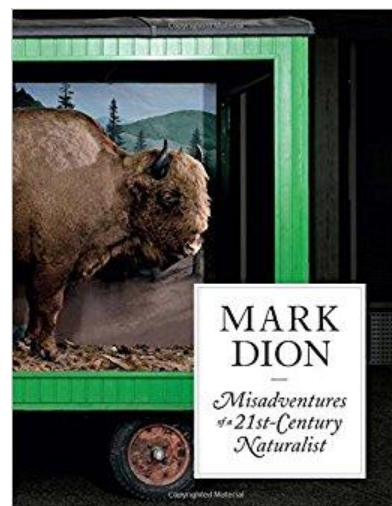
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Detail of *Memory Box*. Schinto photo.

*Sea Life*, 2013, metal book cart, books, and prints, 79" x 74½" x 37". Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections, Des Moines, Iowa. This piece is meant to evoke the picturesque street vendor stalls that display books, prints, and postcards along the Seine in Paris. The subject of the prints and books, of which there are examples in many languages, is the sea, which has special meaning for Dion, who grew up investigating the plant and animal life he found along the shoreline of working-class New Bedford and neighboring Fairhaven. He was not a privileged child; he reports that there was exactly one book in his house, *Seashores*, from the popular series "A Golden Nature Guide." That makes the sea subject even more significant and poignant. Besides being an autobiographical piece, *Sea Life* also expresses nostalgia for what we've lost as a result of the digital age, according to show curator Ruth Erickson. Photo by John Kennard. © Mark Dion.



If you can get to the show, do so; if you can't, seek out the catalog, which is copublished by the ICA and Yale University Press. To buy a copy, see the website (<https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300224078/mark-dion>).



*New Bedford Cabinet*, 2001, wooden and glass cabinet and dig finds, 104" x 74" x 19". Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston. Courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York City. © Mark Dion.



Detail of *Encrustations*. Schinto photo.



*Encrustations*, 2012, two glass and wood display cases, each 69" x 25" x 61", and found objects. Dion created this work with his wife, artist Dana Sherwood. Inside the cases are what appear to be objects that have spent considerable time underwater, but it's pure trompe l'oeil. The 14 items (including scissors, a vase, and a hatchet) are covered with artificial barnacles, coral, algae, and other sea life. Photo by John Kennard. © Mark Dion.