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Artful and Stunning Cabinets of Curiosities, Decoded

By MIMI VU FEB. 25, 2016



An installation view of Mark Dion's "The Library for the Birds of New York and Other Marvels" at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York. Photo: Pericles Kolias.

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This past weekend, the artist Mark Dion was standing in the midst of his apartment in Upper Manhattan, looking very relaxed after having just dispatched boxes upon boxes — which were filled with countless smaller boxes — from his living room down to Chelsea for his latest gallery showing. “When I say this room was full,” he said genially with a sweep of both arms, “I mean it was *full*. It was mayhem. But now it’s calmed down again.”

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Which was only partially true. Dion and his wife, the artist Dana Sherwood, live amongst a lovely and quirky mélange of objects — taxidermy and coral specimens and curios — not unlike the Renaissance wunderkammers that have long inspired his work. As an artist, but also an explorer, collector and environmental activist, Dion has long been fascinated with the intersection of chaos and order — specifically, our attempts to impose the latter on the former through scientific disciplines such as archaeology and taxonomy. And for much of his career, this preoccupation has found beautiful expression in his use of the cabinet — both as a piece of sculpture and as a metaphor for how people have tamed nature and arranged artifacts to make (sometimes dubious) meaning. “I’m interested in how objects in a cabinet become almost pictorial,” he says. “But at the same time, they never leave the realm of being actual objects and not merely representations.”

For his new show, which opens today at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, he continues this examination of the cabinet in its various guises, whether it’s a 17th-century *kunstkammer*, a trophy cupboard or even an aviary. “By choosing specific kinds of display cases, I’m framing things within different intellectual traditions — whether that’s the *wunderkammer*, which still has one foot in the hermetic and magic tradition, or the Enlightenment museum with its more scientific approach,” he says.

Dion is a soft-spoken and humorous polymath, whose interests sprawl in every direction. Spend an afternoon with him, and you will hear him discoursing eloquently on any subject you might bring up, from evolutionary theory to the workings of modern capitalism to the films of Peter Greenaway (whose obsession with systems of representation, be they numbers or zoology, overlaps with his own). All the while, he will constantly range around his home to retrieve numerous treasures and trinkets to animate his points.

And while he is often described as a collector of objects (“I’m definitely a lover of *things*,” he tells me, “and a true believer that things speak”), he is also a collector of ideas, mining and inspecting and artfully juxtaposing ideologies in order to draw connections between past and present. He is a genealogist of sorts, tracing the bloodlines of Western intellectual history to ask, among other things, how European colonial expansion, environmental plundering and the creation of the museum all relate to the ecological disasters we face today.

Below, he shares his thoughts behind each of the works in this new exhibition.



Mark Dion's "The Library for the Birds of New York," 2015.
Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York. Photo: Genevieve Hanson.

“The Library for the Birds of New York”

Since about 1995, I’ve done a series of works in which people enter the space of living birds. There’s a sizable cage here with zebra finches and canaries, and people can go in. At the center is a tree that has a degree of Frankenstein-ness to it, with artificially joined branches. And on this tree are lots of material objects referencing how birds intersect with human culture: implements, postcards, images of people like Poe or Flaubert. There are cages and cats and literature from “The Raven” to “To Kill a Mockingbird.” These all speak of how people have tried to make birds serviceable to some human message. The idea is based on this absurdist conceit of a library for birds. But of course, there are birds defecating on the books, and their indifference to this human knowledge is rather striking.

This piece works best when people take their time, because when you go into the cage, the birds will get as far away from you as they can. But if you slow down and stay quiet, they will adjust to you very quickly and will easily land on you. It is about measuring our distance from another animal with a very close encounter.

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Mark Dion's "An Archaeology of Disorder," 2015. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York. Photo: Genevieve Hanson.

“An Archaeology of Disorder”

I'm very interested in how a collection happens by accident in an institution. In 2013, I was artist in residence at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital. It originally took in aristocratic people with psychiatric issues, and now it's a cutting-edge facility treating everything from eating disorders to the criminally insane. To commemorate its 200-year history, I did a project called "200 Years, 200 Objects." I'm bringing a number of those objects together in this cabinet, representing things that happened in the hospital. There is a pile of puzzle pieces, because puzzle-making is one of the calming things people are encouraged to do. There's a stuffed cat, because one patient was an obsessive overeater who apparently had a cat living in his stomach that was constantly hungry. There are letters representing those that were censored because they were disturbing to the receiver. There are locks from over the 200 years. The evolution of the padlock can really be told through this space.

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Mark Dion's "Memory Box (detail)," 2015.
Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York. Photo: Genevieve Hanson.

“Memory Box”

The Memory Box is a shed with a shelf inside, and on that shelf are hundreds of boxes: cigar boxes, wooden boxes, enamel and leather boxes. In each box there is something: keys or shells or seeds, small books, trading cards, old photographs, children's toys. People are encouraged to open these and have an intimate experience exploring them. I want to provoke a childlike curiosity and the anxiety of looking through your mother and father's chest of drawers when they're not home. Really, this piece was inspired by a memory game. You see something remarkable, you put it back in the box, and you start looking in other boxes. When you try to go back and find that first thing, it can become quite challenging. I want people to find things that resonate with them.

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Mark Dion's "The Phantom Museum (Wonder Workshop)," 2015.
Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York. Photo: Genevieve Hanson.

“The Phantom Museum (Wonder Workshop)”

Imagine a nautilus in what we now call the Philippines, and this thing is collected by a Dutch sailor in the 17th century who's part of some horrific colonial endeavor. He sails back to Amsterdam, and that nautilus is sold to a curiosity dealer. It is bought by a curiosity cabinet owner who puts it into his cosmological collection. It is later drawn by an artist, turned into an engraving, bound into a book — and that's the end of that chain for 400 years. We now pick up that last link through these books, many of which are reprinted, and we find that shell and reproduce it. We are building another link on the chain, but at the same time acknowledging that this object that's part of a living culture is long gone, so all we have are these representations. We're making a museum of ghosts of things.

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Mark Dion's "Cabinet of Marine Debris," 2014.
Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York. Photo: Genevieve Hanson.

“Cabinet of Marine Debris”

This piece is the result of an expedition to the islands off the coast of Alaska. The tail end of the North Pacific Gyre crashes up against the islands, leaving vast piles of trash. It's a striking juxtaposition of wilderness and cultural detritus. In the tradition of the *kunstkammer*, you might, for example, take a beautiful shell that you find in the South China Sea, and then bind it in silver and carve into it and enhance its beauty through this interplay of the natural and the artificial. These objects are the exact opposite. They are artificial, but they have obtained a kind of beauty from the action of nature — the colors have softened, or they have barnacles on them.

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Mark Dion's "Brontosaurus," 2015.
Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York. Photo: Genevieve Hanson.

“Brontosaurus”

The pedestal is such a curious convention, like the white walls of a museum. It's not supposed to exist — we're supposed to pretend there's nothing there. And so my pedestal that elevates this brontosaurus has a secret door, and in the compartment you can see cleaning supplies — a little dustpan, a whisk broom and a mop bucket. It's always interesting how we hide labor, especially in places like museums, where nothing is more disruptive than seeing the janitor's closet. The dinosaur represents fossil fuels as well as extinction, including perhaps our own extinction.
