



MARK DION Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK

'I want to frustrate the viewer,' Mark Dion remarks at the opening of his exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery. He's referring to *Tate Thames Dig* (1999) and the seemingly irrelevant taxonomies that this installation creates out of worthless junk combed off the banks of the eponymous river by a team of volunteers. Rubbish, in this case, isn't simply a material to be transformed into art, but a medium to be shown on its own merit. Dion digs, washes, classifies and presents the meticulously organized refuse in a sumptuous, carved wooden cabinet inspired by early British Museum display cases. Gathering every object found over the course of a week, the work has become a monument to material culture of the past few centuries. It questions the nature and the hierarchy of our knowledge systems while subtly caricaturing the fetishism of museum collecting: what gets saved and what gets thrown into the rubbish bin of (art) history?

Frustrating as it might be, the exhibition fails to disappoint. Spread across the gallery's two floors are around 20 works created over the past two decades, which keep an inquisitive mind constantly engaged. 'I do not want the visitors to rush through, as if it was an Ikea shop,' Dion says. The art of slowing down is prompted in multiple and multisensory ways: as we peek inside a wooden lodge, *Hunting Blind (The Glutton)* (2008), where cured meat hangs from the ceiling and a table is set for a feast; when we examine the mind-boggling detail of the *Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy* (2005), a fictional recreation of the Surrealists' Parisian office of 1924; by a sumptuous library that Dion has arranged on the top floor.

The centrepiece of the ground floor is *The Library for the Birds of London* (2018),

a walk-in aviary populated by Australian zebra finches who, examining their curious visitors, jump from branch to branch on an apple tree, rest on *Introducing Marxism* (2004) and various other books representing the multitude of disciplines that define humankind's fragmentary approach to knowledge. It seems as if the entire world could be sliced down and placed onto neat shelves in a library: here biology, there mathematics, over there philosophy. The finches chirp ever-gleefully, displaying little interest in either science or the humanities, quantum physics or curative medicine but, rather, in the regular seed supplied by staff. Visitors are told to enter and exit the cage with extreme caution, so that none of Dion's bird friends escape the installation into the wilds of the gallery.

The wilderness is no safe place, as four wooden, life-size hunting standards displayed in the same room remind us. The works focus on the history and culture of hunting: that peculiar human activity combining a profound sense of respect and admiration towards non-human species on the one hand and the brutality of killing for the sake of enjoyment on the other. Dion makes no quick judgments in his portrayal but, rather, questions the practice and the associated political and ecological entanglements. Once known as 'the sport of kings', the hobby is itself moving fast towards extinction, the intimate and 'cultured' tradition of hunting replaced by slaughter on an industrial scale.

Dion has little optimism when it comes to the future, which is perhaps why he directs his gaze almost exclusively towards the past. From renaissance *studioli* to 16th- and 17th-century *wunderkammern* and Victorian museums, his fictional world offers a full immersion in the history of science, collecting and museum displays of the past five centuries. A place from which we emerge with habitual taxonomies and hierarchies ever so slightly recalibrated.

Aliya Say