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Mark Dion

The Memory Box

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OPENING : March 15, 2026, 3-7PM

« Birds are truly wonderful » Mark Dion



Memory Box, 2019 (detail)

In the tradition of bone-wishing, whichever of the two participants holds the longer section of this Y-shaped chicken bone will have their wish granted. The furcula (fork bone), also known as the wishbone, is the result of the evolutionary fusion of the two clavicles in the ribcage of species that fly or flutter. Mark Dion has a deep affinity for birds. As key indicators of biodiversity, they hold a central place in his visual repertoire as well as in his life. Whether depicted in a naturalistic, archaeological, or fantastical form, as in *Most any organism* (2025), birds are the predominant figures in the drawings presented in the exhibition. The game of the wishbone is reminiscent of centuries of beliefs in the prophetic power of wild or domestic birds and their sacrifice for divinatory purposes. The wishbone, as an object whose ritual or practice invites other realities, can also be viewed as a symbolic key to understanding Mark Dion's work. In his work, the taxonomy of objects—highlighted by their specific arrangements—acts as a mediation that opens access to invisible worlds. The relationship between objects and a force that they channel and embody, yet which transcends them and challenges our systems of knowledge, is indeed central to his work.

Cabinet of Marvels (2019) brings together wish bones in one of the open display cases, among a collection of objects related to a belief system associated with the marvelous—another term for that which defies established rational order. Such as a unicorn horn or an ostrich egg, set and illustrated by the legend or mystification that ostriches seek to escape danger by hiding their heads underground. But within this cabinet, which serves as a display case, clues emerge of the cruelty of the enterprises of extraction and reification of the living, of which these objects bear witness as so much plunder: a drop of blood that has beaded from the horn, the small skeleton covered in tar, or the striped sea bass suspended from a rope. The aim is to “reveal one world behind another,” as Jacques Rancière puts it, “[...] another order of measurement that can only be discovered through the violence of a conflict” (in *Le destin des images*, La fabrique éditions, 2003, p.67). Paradoxically, cruelty is not the exclusive domain of Western modernity's predatory system of harvesting and extracting life. It also plays a pivotal role in fairy tales but, and this is the crucial difference, within the symbolic and initiatory order of the narrative.

In *Alligator Mississippiensis* (2015), the alligator skull perched atop a mound of trinkets encased in tar rests on its shipping crate. It is rare for the tensions between the value systems to which these works may be held hostage to be laid bare—from the fundamental question of their authenticity, their rarity, their use as scientific evidence or for species preservation, to the establishment of their market value. Stuck in tar yet mobile, the works exhibit a paradoxical tendency to fluctuate between different projections and expectations, which concern their roots and origins (provenance) or their geographical circulation and movements (ownership and sharing).

The shape and symbolism of the wishbone seem to guide the visitor in the conception of the exhibition's visitor path. *Memory Box* (2019) is an installation composed of boxes of all kinds, gathered in shelves, which accentuates the effect of domestic familiarity in this colorful stacking. This vanity, covered with apparent innocence, explores the ambiguity of memory: abundant, yet doomed to disappear on the scale of a human life, it remains a living resource on the broader scale of the collective. *Memory Box* is a dynamic work that plays on the relationship between interiority and exteriority. In its diagonal section—the other possible branch of the Y-shaped exhibition path—the work *To Watch, to Cut, to Capture, to Kill, to Collect* (2019) displays objects and suggests the gestures of capture. It brings to light a violence that has long remained hidden, masked by the screen image of the butterfly hunter's dilettantism. It refers to an era when human activities, including scholarly ones, exercised a form of predation, with the colonial hat serving here as a temporal marker. The wooden beam on which the famous objects rest, moreover, bears a resemblance to a gallows.

Mark Dion's works are fables that tell of the crisis of human society in its relations with the living, a crisis of sensibility. Certain belief systems are based on the idea that science cannot embrace everything, that it is limited to an evolving state of knowledge, and that there may be an irreducible element to this totalizing system founded on the collection and organization of data. They postulate the multitude of ways of being in the world and their interdependence, but also the intertwining of different worlds or different perceptions of reality. Each person's capacity for action depends on the balance of relationships among all these entities.

Mark Dion invites us to rethink our experiences of nature. His works depict multifaceted and ambivalent realities, at the crossroads between the realms of mystery and the invisible and a material—even materialistic—world that is disappearing. While the objects he chooses have often already lived a life and sometimes seem dated—falsely so, since they are often replicas—his work is not driven by nostalgia. The objects do not serve to stabilize the world. The observation that our instruments and their capacity for objectification no longer allow us to describe or rationally organize reality according to specific historical categories expresses neither idealization nor regret for those bygone times. Mark Dion's work does not align with a temporal axis oriented toward the past; rather, it opens a breach toward the permeability of the sensible worlds.

Kathy Alliou, March 2026