

Life of a Naturalist

Mark Dion, *Theatre of the Natural World* (Whitechapel Gallery, 14th February – 13th May)

Shortlisted for the Burlington Contemporary Art Writing Prize, 2018

REY CONQUER

In 2011—for the second time in his career—the naturalist and presenter David Attenborough was accused of “faking” the birth of a polar bear. In the television series *Frozen Planet* it was implied through careful editing that the cubs in question had been born “in the wild”; the sequence had in fact been filmed in a German zoo. “It’s not falsehood,” Attenborough said in response, adding later, “you know, come on, we’re making movies.”

Attenborough’s is one of the most recognisable of the portraits framed and pinned to the dead apple tree at the centre of Mark Dion’s *The Library for the Birds of London* (2018). The *Library*, part of *Theatre of the Natural World* at the Whitechapel Gallery, is a circular aviary housing twenty-two zebra finches, as well as books, pictures and other objects relating to human interactions with birds and with nature more generally. At the foot of the tree is a camcorder, as well as empty shotgun cartridges, decoy ducks, drawings of birds in a wicker basket, a camping stove, a garden fork, and books, stacked and then heaped haphazardly as if in a library return box. The birds alight on Attenborough, then whirr off when a new perch becomes available, or when, for reasons of their own, they have bored of this one. They twitch like mechanisms gone awry, preening compulsively, and seem uninterested in the visitors, who enter the aviary four at a time, becoming, as they do so, part of the installation.



In the next gallery are Dion’s own polar bear fakes. As part of *The Naturalist’s Study* (2018), photographs from the series *Polar Bears (Ursus Maritimus)* (1992-2002) are mounted, with hand-written labels, on top of wallpaper featuring a pattern of extinct animals. Designed to look at first glance as if they, too, had been taken “in the wild”, they turn out to be photographs of stuffed polar bears in museums, some staged in dioramas, others posed

The Library for the Birds of London (detail) 2018

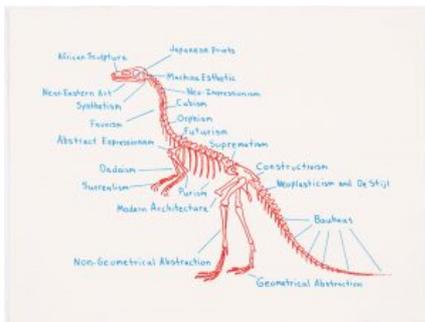
Mixed media; steel, wood, books, zebra finches, and found objects

Installation view of *Mark Dion: Theatre of the Natural World* at Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2018

Photo: Jeff Spicer/PA Wire

starkly against an incongruous background of interactive exhibits, ticket offices, fire escapes. The effort and drama and bathos of the taxidermy and of the displays, the variations in museum practice and in verisimilitude, are arresting, and a good demonstration of Dion’s central concern, namely, human constructions and reconstructions of nature, and his desire to complicate ideas of “falsehood” (the photos originally accompanied an installation of a stuffed polar bear lying in a pool of tar; the bear’s fur, the wall text revealed, made of goat hide).

“As an artist”—as opposed to the naturalist or documentarian—“I have no obligation to represent the truth or objectivity”, Dion has said in an interview with Iwona Blazwick. He is, as the exhibition title suggests, primarily interested in the artifice and theatricality of human-animal interactions. The twenty years of work surveyed here are represented at the entrance by four mannequins dressed in the outfits—or better, costumes—that Dion wore during the making of four previous installations, marking a sort of ghostly involvement and highlighting the indistinctness, in his work and self-presentation, between performance and reality. The hard hat of *Tate Thames Dig* (1999)—in which he sifted, with a group of volunteers, through the top six inches of mud on the banks of the Thames, cleaning and sorting and arranging the finds—suggests bodily risk; the khakis of *On Tropical Nature* (1991) have an air of colonial romance. The faceless figures lend a flat kind of menace to the seeming jolliness of the *Library* that they flank, but they serve also as a reminder that much of the art consists in the processes—that is, performances—that went before, of which the installations here are an at times lifeless and unchallenging record.



World in a Box (detail) 2015
Courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

An eagerness to entertain is visible throughout the exhibition, often consisting in a boyish delight in visual gags and whimsical conceits (as well as scatological humour: the chief interaction between the birds and the books, as Dion has pointed out, is via defecation). *Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy* (2005) and *The Wonder Workshop* (2015) which draw lovingly on the 17th-century Wunderkammer as well as the 19th-century natural history museum, are filled with effortfully sourced or recreated objects (some echoed in *The Naturalist’s*

Study): giant, swollen seedpods, bizarre fictitious creatures, coiled snakes made to look like ammonites, decorative bear claws, which in the first installation are crowded into an old-fashioned office, in the second displayed under UV light in a darkened room. Yet gags and grotesqueries, while providing momentary diversion, foreclose the sort of sustained attention that Dion wants to command. This is why *Tate Thames Dig*—the findings of which are displayed here in a large wooden cabinet—works so much better. Looking through the

drawers and cupboards viewers create for themselves the shifting play of taxonomies characteristic of Dion's work, and while certain juxtapositions are comical—a Tasmanian Devil figure next to a stoneware bottle of similar form—these are not played simply for laughs. The collection is now nearly twenty years old, and the finds that were then fresh—a Sunny Delight bottle, for instance—take on a sharp poignancy. Arrangements, for instance by colour or shape, allow form, function, material, history, to come in and out of focus, and human curiosity about provenance is superseded momentarily by birdlike attention to new saliences such as texture, shape, shininess.

He tells Blazwick, “things speak, and taxonomy and arrangement are the way we ventriloquise through them”; and Dion's things speak too much, do too much. The objects that litter his sets clamour for our attention, for our recognition of their wit and the cleverness of their juxtaposition, a kind of artifice too nervy and needy to invite proper contemplation. “Fiction”, his great predecessor Marcel Broodthaers once said, “enables us to grasp reality and at the same time that which is veiled by reality”, and it is towards such an idea that Dion's creations and personae have seemed to grow. But without Broodthaers's poise or conceptual dexterity, Dion's work is never quite as revealing, nor as engrossing, as it could be.