

Reviews

■ Mark Dion

London Projects January 18 to March 1

Ikon Gallery Birmingham January 25 to March 29

After years spent fighting malaria and insanity in the uncharted tropics of the Malay Archipelago and the Amazon Basin, 19th-century naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace was robbed of his rightful place in science history. His far more fortunate contemporary, Charles Darwin, protected by London academia and rewarded with his very own eponymous *-ism*, reaped the lion's share of credit for the theory of natural selection. Darwin's 1859 *The Origin of Species* (full title: *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*) gives only passing acknowledgement to the contribution of his courageous colleague, who wrote of his theory of evolution to Darwin from deep in the Indonesian jungle. Wallace was driven only by his reckless curiosity and intellect, guaranteed nothing for all his suffering and effort. He persisted with renewed commitment even

Mark Dion
Scala Naturae 1994



after a disastrous shipwreck saw all his cargo – carefully selected specimens, notes and drawings – perish woe-fully at sea around 1852.

Wallace: a trooper, an Indiana Jones-like figure and loner whom Mark Dion commemorates in his installation *The Delirium of Alfred Russel Wallace, 1994* – in the guise of a taxidermied fox wearing glasses – is laid respectfully to rest in his mosquito-netted hammock, surrounded by his beloved butterfly nets, trunks and explorer gear, ranting deliriously of his unjust fate by means of a hidden electronic sound device. This theatre set-like installation is a tribute to Wallace from an artist at the close of the science age; it is a new kind of monument. Dion has been working since the late 1980s on such installations, representing the most eco-minded in a group of *contexte-kunst* artists such as Renée Green and Christian Philipp-Müller. In two complementary exhibitions forming the artist's first semi-retrospective, we discover Dion as part adventurer, part Pop artist, part activist. The works on view expose the perils and deception behind traditional science, ecological irresponsibility, Disney tyranny and the social constructs behind the museum-box; accompanied by a reading table covered in science books, they plainly announce their didactic purpose.

A surprise predecessor to Dion, another nature nerd, was John Cage, composer and mushroom expert, who claimed that music, for example, is ecology, and who admired nature as a 'together-work'. Where Cage was all invisible, rarefied poetry and silence, Dion is textural and grossly, proudly materialistic. He craves objects, collects them with the passion and appetite of his explorer heroes who'd trap anything not rooted 40 feet into the ground, shipping it all back home by the museum-load. Dion hunts and gathers anywhere: trash heaps, antique fairs, biological specimen mail-order catalogues, Woolworth's – wherever the 'bunch of stuff' method of presentation proves itself once again irresistible. In *History Trash Scan (Civiltella Ranieri)*, 1994, the artist catalogues a few centuries' worth of garbage – chipped porcelain, pigs' jaws, plastic toys – tossed onto a convenient dump just outside the walls of an ancient Italian castle. These are lovingly labelled and inventoried, an archaeology *ad infinitum* of rubbish which turns precious by virtue of the artist's attention. Time collapses and everything becomes fascinating, worth preserving, safe.

His sculpture *Scala Naturae*, 1994, is a stepped plinth, a kind of half-ziggurat pile of stuff arranged hierarchically. From the bottom still-life of clocks and books we ascend to minerals, then plants and on to primitive life forms, insects, starfish, a bird, a cat and, climbing to the sublime peak, Man *himself*, here in his stiff, White, humourless version. A smallish, solemn, Beethoven-like bust towers pathetically over his magnificent, colourful food chain below, effectively illustrating human (male) arrogance. This folly of 'natural' history is hardly natural, an embarrassing triumph. Looking closely at this 19th-century scheme, Man is not really represented at all: the top shelf is finally occupied by God, created in Man's own likeness. In such books as *The Moral Animal* (Robert Wright, 1994), evolution has been unmasked as a kind of ruthless race for genetic survival, what Andrew Ross (in 'The Future Is a Risky Business', 1996) summarised as 'an unsavoury mix that involves sexual manipulation, self-promotion, deep inequality, social climbing and moral deceit, all of it incessantly driven by our genes' determination to get themselves into the next generation'. No wonder artists, scientists and other intellectuals are now anxious to renounce humankind's top-

dog position, making room for any other species foolish enough to share the driving.

Dion's work is certainly about the obsessive act of collecting, whether by a naturalist or a shopaholic, but collaterally it is about the act of looking: what artists traditionally do best. In *A Meter of Jungle*, 1991, (echoed in *A Meter of Meadow*, 1995), Dion re-enacts early 20th-century naturalist William Beebe's exercise of scooping up the top layer of a single metre of Amazonian jungle and then proceeding to identify hundreds of invertebrae specimens living within it, one by one. With typical hyperbole Beebe wrote of his open-mouthed awe when he finally removed the binoculars he had worn uninterruptedly while exploring and began to see the landscape by examining the very ground beneath him. By analogy, Dion's project is not merely to look again at environmental policy and what Hegel had termed 'the production of nature', but above all, simply to *look* – and to know.

In *Ursus Maritimus*, Dion's 1992 series in which he photographed the taxidermied polar bear dioramas in natural history museums worldwide, the artist combines the biological gaze of the scientist with that of a paparazzo, snapping celebrity photos in a wax museum. Taking action shots of the stuffed bears, pitifully staged among handpainted icebergs, is cartoonish and silly, like big-game hunting in the cramped cells of a city zoo. Nevertheless, *Ursus Maritimus*, too, is an updated monument, this time to the photogenic polar bear. This series restores through photography that alleged instant of animal dignity shot dead by the diorama: one perfect, unrehearsed moment captured in the great bear's happy and natural life, from which Dion sensitively erases all trace of human violence and fraud. ■

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■ Rob Kessler

Adam Gallery London January 16 to February 2

Ornament, with its kitsch gaudiness, emblematic motifs and persistent reference to abundance beyond its confines and contexts, provides a sociocultural basis for Rob Kessler's ride on the roller-coaster of convention and language.

At its best and most eloquent, Kessler's appropriation of suburban and aristocratic associations and paraphernalia manages to combine the pleasures of linguistic disjuncture, deadpan hilarity and free association with a commentary on the telling, poignant yet often comical disparity between ornament and function, nature and nurture: like the best jokes (as opposed to one-liners), it is as much a social as well as epistemological critique.

There were three main parts to the show at Adam, the gallery's domestic environment providing an especially suitable setting for Kessler's work, as it has done on other occasions. *The Martyrdom of Ornament*, the piece which provided the title for the whole show, sought to re-enact the conflict between the proliferation and pseudo-sumptuousness of ornament and its 'real' referent. Fragrant red roses in test-tubes sprouted from a hospital examination bed re-upholstered in yellow damask, the fabric blooms facing some serious competition from the real thing. Here, ornament may be in its death throes but is saved somewhat by the hackneyed associations of its horticultural doppelgänger.



In the same room, an engraving of a 17th-century tankard adorned with leaping deer appeared pinned to the wall by a shower of arrows: a *mise-en-scène* of the thin line between illusion and reality, convention and originality and the predominance of our second-hand experience of nature, almost always once removed.

'Furniture is art's paradigm right now, compulsive as reference and model and insistent as subtext ...', wrote Peter Scheldahl. 'The theoretical point suggested by both Donald Judd and David Salle is that the chair is a royal road to the intimate nexus of nature and culture: where decorative artifice literally embraces the human body.' Furniture fills homes occupied by people. Different people go for different furniture or, more accurately, can afford certain types of furniture: for some, provenance is more important than function, and even though ornament has little role to play when it comes to utilitarianism, it features largely in provenance, even in the case of tacky reproductions ... In 'For Collectors Only', an ongoing series of graphic works, Kessler takes illustrations of period furniture from Sotheby's auction catalogues and proceeds either to comment upon the assumptions and values invested in the objects depicted or create more open-ended associations by 'defacing' the photographs with a drawing: in *Distressed*, a hole-ridden George III period golden striped sofa suddenly has a red toadstool sprouting through the centre of its rotten seat; *Odour* features a steaming cartoon of a turd on a photograph of a cast iron table supported by 'four life-sized gilt deer-hounds'; in *Audition*, three flowers take pride of place on a soft ornate settee, whereas on the sofa in *Gill*

Rob Kessler
The Martyrdom of Ornament 1996