

Hugh Lane Gallery

# Mark Dion: *Our Plundered Planet*

## A Resource for Students

4 April to 1 September 2019



Above: Mark Dion, detail of *The Old Crow*, 2016



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## Welcome

This resource is intended to provide an introduction to the exhibition *Our Plundered Planet* and some of its themes. It offers information, ideas for discussion and activities for visiting teachers and students. Some of the activities or discussion questions can be used to prepare for the visit and to complement the process of viewing the exhibition itself, while others are more suited for use after the students have visited the gallery.

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## Introduction



Mark Dion was born in New Bedford, United States, in 1961. He studied at the University of Hartford, School of Art before continuing his education at the School of Visual Arts, New York. In 1984 he joined an Independent Study Programme at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. In 2003 Dion completed his Doctorate in Arts at the University of Hartford School of Art. Dion currently lives in New York but is very much an international artist.

## Areas of interest and exploration in the artist's work and exhibition

- Humanity's relationship with nature and animals.
- Investigates and questions in a playful and witty manner the natural environment/human sense of responsibility.
- *Our Plundered Planet* 1948 Henry Fairfield Osborn Jr – Conservationist and president of New York Zoological Society – book about environmental destruction by humans.
- Playful and witty questioning of science.
- Interest in fields outside of art including ecology, natural history, science, archaeology. He is interested in “artists who have expanded the definition of art and enriched it by looking outside its field”.
- Playing with the idea of what a museum is and what it functions as. An exploration of how objects are displayed and classified. How this influences ‘meaning’ and our understanding.

Mark Dion, *The Old Crow*, 2016,  
158x35x35cm (with plinth)  
©Mark Dion



### Keywords

Ephemera – things that exist or are used for a short time only

### Background

Magpies and crows are both part of the Corvid family. They are highly intelligent birds and one of the only non-mammal species to be able to recognise its own reflection in a mirror test. Here Dion's crow rests on top of a pile of debris. This is reminiscent of the myth of the magpie being attracted to shiny objects.

### Discussion and Activities

- What do you think is going on in this artwork? Describe what you see.
- Why do you think humans create myths or superstitions around certain birds, for example in the children's nursery rhyme -one magpie bring you sorrow or bad luck; that a crow or a magpie is associated with theft due to the misconception that they are drawn to sparkling objects; or that an ostrich buries its head in the sand – giving the assumption of unintelligence.
- How would you describe the character of this bird?

Mark Dion, *The Salmon of Knowledge-RETURNS*, 2015  
200x300x90cm  
©Mark Dion



Mark Dion, *The Salmon of Knowledge-RETURNS*, 2015,  
Sculpture Epoxy resin, steel, tar, wood, foam, paper, aerosol enamel, acrylic paints, adhesives, glass eyes, mixed media

### Keywords

Mythology  
Environmentalism

### Background

The salmon is swimming over debris, treasures or curiosities, which block the natural sediment where it gets its nutrients. During a residency in Limerick, the artist was inspired by the Rover Shannon and how it formerly supported a fishing industry and an abundance of wild salmon. However, insensitive human intervention and pollution has decimated stocks.

### Discussion and Activities

- The *Salmon of Knowledge Returns* 2015 hangs over a bed of rubbish and tar echoing a memorial of something magical or mythical lost / something natural lost to fish-farming and over harvesting
- Nature inside a museum rather than bringing it in
- Layers – trying to portray simultaneously history in items
- What is the significance of the jellyfish on the wallpaper and what impact does the wallpaper have on the setting?
- Is the artist aligning himself to the salmon who swims against the current?
- “when the world is in crisis what are artists doing?” discuss Dion’s comment

Mark Dion, *Sea Life*, 2011  
170x175x37  
©Mark Dion



*Sea Life*, 2011, wooden furniture, plastic objects and jars

### Keywords

Science; Display; Taxonomy - the branch of science concerned with classification, especially of organisms

Oceanic gyres- An ocean gyre is a system of circular ocean currents. Winds blow floating plastic and debris into these gyres creating large oceanic patches of rubbish.

### Background

The artist is exploring the theme of the 'Wunder Kammer' or Cabinet of Curiosities, a phenomenon that spread from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Private collectors assembled manmade and natural objects, historical texts and insects in display cases. Having these items were thought to fuel ones curiosity and inspire enlightened discussions.

### Discussion and Activities

- Context – doing the same project in different places and how context can change things- does it make a difference if this work is displayed in a museum of national history or in a contemporary art museum?
- The artist is questioning curation in a gallery versus a studio. He said that he has “never seen a painting that was better in a gallery than a studio.” He is interested in the concept of the museum turned inside out with backrooms put on exhibition.

- Did you know that the Dublin Biosphere was recognised by UNESCO in 1981 and consists of a 50 km<sup>2</sup> core zone with rare and important habitats and species of wildlife?
- *Sea Life*, 2011 installation – what may appear to be preserved organisms have been “plasticized”.
- What are these objects and why are they displayed like this?
- How and where would you display these pieces?

Mark Dion, *Rhinoceros Horn*, 2014

60Hx64Wx64Dcm

©Mark Dion



*Rhinoceros Horn*, 2014, Rhinoceros horn replica, bitumen, flea market objects

**Keywords:** Anthropocene - relating to or denoting the current geological age, viewed as the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment.

### Background

“one man’s trash is another man’s treasure”

In certain cultures the rhinoceros horn is considered a valuable object used for medicinal purposes or as a prized artistic object. Dion places the rhinoceros horn on a mound of debris, which include plastic dice, coins, scissors, padlocks, to mention a few. The work brings into question collecting, hoarding and the hierarchy of objects and their value humans have created.

### Discussion and Activities

- Anthropocene – what significant impact have humans had on the Earth's geology and ecosystems?

- Extinction Series – Black Rhino – Wildlife conservation – discuss the idea of pandering to public with “The Survival of the Cutest”
- Collecting and cruelty – Dion highlights how humans have placed themselves at the top of a hierarchy making all animals lower and therefore fair game
- The hunter vs the animal rights activist – where has Dion placed himself?
- What does hunting mean in different cultures?
- Magic and medicinal properties of the rhinoceros horn
- What is your idea of “exotic” and why do you place this meaning on it?
- Describe the range of objects you see at the base in *Rhinoceros Horn*.

Mark Dion, *An Archaeology of Lost Objects*, 2013  
 100x109x63cm  
 ©Mark Dion



Archival furniture with found objects

### Keywords

Wunderkammer, Cabinet of Curiosities

Museology- the science or profession of museum organization and management.

### Background

Interactive – under supervision visitors with their guide can open drawers/ each one organised in different ways – try to figure out the system but the system may be changing e.g. Colour; size; function...equating almost to an encyclopaedia of systems

## Discussion and Activities

- Cabinet of Curiosity – treasure troves where items are hidden not shown off.
- How do they act as symbols of taste/wealth...gather the world's best.
- 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment collections/ Wunderkammers
- Found objects, precious objects, rubbish – which are they and how important are they?
- How sort of objects do you observe in these shelves? How can they tell us about who they belonged to? About who collected them?
- How would you display these objects?
- If you were to create a museum or gallery from scratch, what would it look like?

## Bibliography:

- Mark Dion- *Our Plundered Planet* Hugh Lane Gallery, Exhibition Catalogue, 2019
- *Contemporary Cabinets of Curiosity: Artist Mark Dion*; Presented January 27, 2013 at the Nasher Sculpture Center [www.youtube.com/watch?v=FnH3UocF2Sk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FnH3UocF2Sk)
- *The Incomplete Writings of Mark Dion. Selected Interviews, Fragments, and Miscellany.* Edited by Roel Arkesteijn
- *A Field Guide to Curiosity – A Mark Dion Project.* Edited by Earle Havens & Lisa Skogh
- <http://www.dublinbaybiosphere.ie>

To find out more about the Hugh Lane Gallery's programmes for people of all ages, including our free Mark Dion Study Morning in July see [www.hughlane.ie/education](http://www.hughlane.ie/education)

The Hugh Lane Gallery is open every day except Mondays and is free.  
Find out more at [www.hughlane.ie](http://www.hughlane.ie)



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