



Inside Out in L.A. DOUG AITKEN'S *art of living*

Spring Design The refreshing restoration of a LONDON town house; one family's bold move to small-town ARKANSAS; listening to the wizard of sound; EINDHOVEN'S newest design destination; at home with Tom Delavan; The Selby goes to Brooklyn; plus CHRIS GAROFALO, IONNA VAUTRIN, Mark Dion, Oeuffice and SOPHIE ASCHAUER.

THE KNOW-IT-ALL

The artist Mark Dion's passion? Everything.
By Jim Lewis

The cover of Mark Dion's Phaidon monograph describes him as a "celebrated artist/explorer/archeologist." Not three vocations that ordinarily inhere in one man (though some improbable combination of Audubon and Indiana Jones might cover it) and not the full tally of Dion's occupations, either. To them can be added: teacher, naturalist, advocate, author, designer, collector (that is to say, hoarder), curator and probably six or seven other things I don't have room for here. Dion is one of those curious characters the world produces every so often; men and women who combine making things with intervening in the institutions that show them — in museums and schools, in cities and far-flung sites, disrupting the flow and structure of our picture of the world just enough to make us wonder why we give it that structure and flow in the first place. Dion's a collector of collections, especially the hundreds or thousands (or more — who knows how many?) hidden in forgotten buildings in small cities around the world: Cabinets of Wonder, specimen museums, obscure archives, as well as the complex and uncataloged collections of things, both manufactured and natural, one might find in, say, a patch of the rain forest or a bank of the Thames. In February, he was in New York working on "Phantoms of the Clark Expedition," an exhibition that explores, among other things, the Explorers Club — the venerable

members-only institution. The installation, which runs from May 9 to Aug. 3, is part critical, part fond, and is intended to show, through artist-made objects, what such endeavors don't reveal about themselves.

Dion is an owl-like man with an Encyclopedia Brown air about him, who lives in an apartment in Washington Heights with his wife, their dog and a kind of controlled clutter of books, knickknacks, souvenirs and the like. When I visited him there, a fishbowl on the living room table seemed to be filled with matchbooks and old receipts; a few minutes later, it stirred, alarmingly. "That's the mouse," he said casually, and then we went back to our conversation, which roamed all over



Ghost story From top: Mark Dion with objects from his show "Phantoms of the Clark Expedition"; the Trophy Room of the Explorers Club in New York, where "Phantoms" will be installed.

BOTTOM: JAEGERSLAN © STERLING AND FRANCINE CLARK ART INSTITUTE.

Uncharted territory Below: Robert Sterling Clark, (second from left) and members of his 1908-9 expedition to northern China. Bottom: Dion's papier-mâché campfire.

the world, back millennia and up to the present again. Endangered species, Renaissance customs, a periscope contraption that Freud had installed in his office in Vienna (whence Dion had just returned) so that he could spy on patients sitting in his waiting room. A very good artist can do a lot; surprisingly few of them know a lot, at least outside of their immediate concerns. Dion is one of the exceptions, perhaps because his immediate concern is ... everything.

What's more, he has an agenda,

though it's grown more subtle, more generous and less didactic over the years. "What I want," he told me, "is to remind people that human beings are part of natural history." And to remind us that natural history is made by human beings. "Anything that eats has a system of organizing the world," he pointed out. Dion demonstrates those ideas mostly by representing the pre-existing. He finds things — whether it's detritus from an urban archeology dig, trees in South Africa or objects in Ohio State University's museums and archives — and shows them, assembled in an order that half mimics and half parodies the various orders we impose on the world, be it Aquinas's Great Chain of Being, Linnaeus's classification of the natural kingdom or an Enlightenment amateur's private display of curios, along with all the attitudes they embody, from the benign (sheer curiosity and the enticements of adventure) to the malignant (West-is-best imperialism, violence and environmental depredation). He's done this sort of thing well over a hundred times and produced 15 books and a half dozen "field guides" along the way. "Examining the beast

from within the belly of the beast," was the way he described it.

Enter the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, and here the story gets complicated. In sum: the Clark is a museum and research institute near, and affiliated with, Williams College in Massachusetts. It was established in the mid-1950s to house the couple's collection, primarily of Impressionist art. Robert Sterling Clark was an heir to the Singer Sewing Company fortune; before he'd gotten into fancy things — before he'd moved to Paris and met Francine — he'd been a military man and a gentleman-explorer, an adept in the odd, turn-of-the-century, Teddy Roosevelt sense of masculinity, which gathers together a host of disparate activities (outdoorsmanship, environmentalism, hunting, scientific inquiry, colonialist warfare) under a corona of noblesse oblige and presents it as a paragon of perfect modern manhood.

In 1908 Clark mounted an expedition to Northern China, leading 40 men in an attempt to map out the terrain, measure the weather and pick up a few mineral samples and small animals along the way. In June of 1909, it ended, when one of his cartographers was murdered by bandits. Clark and his men retaliated and were promptly

“What I want is to remind people that human beings are a part of natural history.”

escorted out of the country. Still, they managed to stay long enough to gather some useful information and material, and Clark wrote a book about his journey, which came out in 1912.

Michael Conforti, the Clark's director, decided to mount an exhibition marking both the 100th anniversary of the book's publication, and the institute's recent opening of an office in New York City at the Explorers Club, a building that had, half coincidentally, once been home to Sterling Clark's estranged brother, Stephen. Lisa Corrin, a curator who had worked with Dion before, suggested the artist be brought in to add a contemporary, critical touch to a museum that is essentially fixed in time.

Not that the Explorers Club is itself entirely au courant. It's a Tudor town house on East 70th Street made of brown brick and stained glass windows, with creaking stairs, paintings of polar bears and, the day Dion and I stopped by, a malfunctioning elevator. As he showed me around, everything started to fall into place: Clark's biography; the bleary and compromised romance of adventure travel; the Clark family's internal fractures; the institute's attempt to get a foothold in New York City; and the club's own curious and slightly anachronistic presence, in the midst of an Upper East Side that's no longer quite as spotlessly elegant as it once was. And in the center of it all, Dion himself, with a space cleared in the Trophy Room on the top floor to mount a show mostly about what is not



there: the institute's own exhibit, about 150 miles north in Williamstown, Mass., and the tools and artifacts from Clark's original journey to China, most of which have been lost in the intervening years.

Dion, then, is working in a ghostly space in between institutions, between cities, centuries and theories and practices; in response he's made a spectral show, fabricating the materials that Clark would have brought with him — including a campfire, provision boxes, instruments and tools, the revolver the haplessly murdered cartographer left behind in camp and a few biological specimens (squirrel, giant moth, dead pig) — all of them (except the squirrel) made out of unpainted papier-mâché and carefully arranged on the main table of the Trophy Room, where they're overseen by a marble bust of Clark himself. They look ashen and uninflected, like so many

“

Dion is working in a ghostly space in between institutions, between cities, centuries and theories and practices.

”

survivors of Pompeii, the wraithlike leftovers of an adventure that was part science project and part amateur guerrilla war, part benign and sincere, part high-handed and clumsy.

An artist more intent on scoring points would have found Clark's expedition an easy target, and the Explorers Club, with its casual imperialism and its atmosphere of shabby gentility, interesting only as an artifact of a bygone era. But Dion had a subtler view of things; at one point he explained to me that his worldview is “generally Marxist.” At another he mentioned that his favorite book is Jules Verne's “20,000 Leagues Under the Sea.” It was the only conversation I've had that jumped from a dissection of the ills of worldwide capitalism to the phrase “So that is a whale penis, over there.” The two sensibilities are like vodka and vermouth: their individual flavors leave you unprepared for how they taste together. Head up to 70th Street for the installation, stay for the building, and for the strange nexus that, for these several months, it will house: a critical celebration, an array of curious artifacts, and a fusty and unexpected location, revived and made relevant again. ■