

# JOURNAL OF FLORIDA STUDIES

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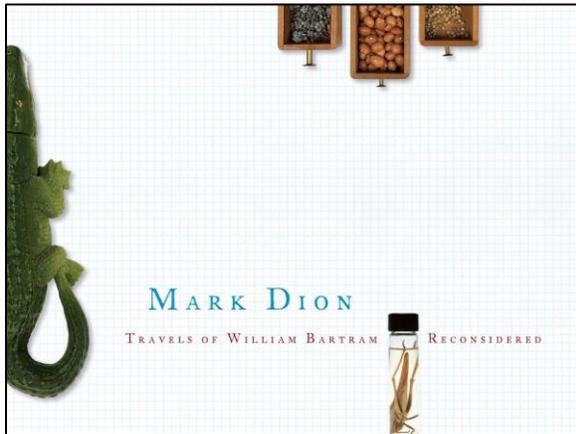
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## **Book Review**

Mark Dion, Julie Courtney, Joel T. Fry, and Gregory Volk. *Mark Dion: Travels of William Bartram Reconsidered*.

Philadelphia: John Bartram Association, 2010.

Karen Bearor, *Florida State University*



Contemporary artist and sculptor Mark Dion is fascinated by cabinets of curiosities, the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century descendants of the Renaissance room-sized *Wunderkammern*. In cabinets of curiosities, organic and non-organic treasures

were tucked away in drawers or arranged on shelves. Less subject to display than to storage and categorization, the collected specimens yielded no easy visual relationships one to another but challenged the viewer to contemplate, to make more empirical or associative connections.

This challenge to the viewer underscores all of Dion's art. Yet it becomes particularly apparent in *Travels of William Bartram—Reconsidered*, the exhibition held from June 20 to December 6, 2008, at Bartram's Garden in Philadelphia, for which this lavishly-illustrated book is a record. Not a catalogue, this volume provides a biography of an exhibition, if you will—its incubation, development, and legacy. Nevertheless, these aspects are not linked in a continuous narrative, but in separate short essays and other texts interspersed among a variety of

photographs, maps, and other images. Indeed, where the book draws its unique strength is in its own relationship to a cabinet of curiosities. Each turn of a page is like opening a drawer with unanticipated contents, asking readers to make their own discoveries, their own connections of one idea or object to another.

Dion is attracted to the work by William Bartram, whom he has called the first true American travel writer. An eighteenth-century naturalist, the son of a pioneer in this field in the British colonies, Bartram was also an artist and adventurer who spent much time in northern Florida. What would he find were he to have made his famous 1773-1777 journeys in 2008, Dion mused? To find out, the artist decided to retrace the naturalist's journeys through southeastern America, as documented in his famous *Travels* (1791). Thus began this unusual artistic collaboration across more than two centuries, Dion's results literally sharing space with Bartram's—in Bartram's own home in Philadelphia and in this book.

Readers know they are in for an unusual experience when they find, in place of an introduction, reproductions of letters of introduction for Dion in the manner of such letters used in Bartram's Philadelphia. These letters were written by independent curator Julie Courtney, the guest curator for Dion's exhibition; current and past executives of Philadelphia's John Bartram Association; the mayor of Charleston, SC, where Dion officially began his journey; New York art critic and curator Gregory Volk; and Joel T. Fry, curator at Bartram's Garden and a Bartram scholar. The final letter, hand-written on yellow paper, is by Lord Breaulove Swells Whimsy, Enthusiast and Gentleman Amateur, the pseudonym, until he retired the name and persona in February 2015, of illustrator, designer, and writer Victor Allen Crawford. Each of these letters was read at Dion's public send-off on November 15, 2007, by Whimsy, described in the book as a local dandy and carnivorous-plant expert.

Readers realize at this point that Dion has a sense of humor, extending to the inclusion of his hand-written script

for his own presentation at the send-off. (We are told elsewhere in the book that Dion neither types nor uses a computer—and that his fiancée and collaborator, Dana Sherwood, who would become his wife during the project, took care of documentation.) The book's tone is set by this script, addressed to his fellow Pennsylvanians and to those "who have merely come to gawk." Dion situates himself within American literary and artistic traditions alike by linking his project to the written accounts of Lewis and Clark, Jack Kerouac, and Hunter S. Thompson; the visions of painters Frederick Church and Albert Bierstadt and photographers Danny Lyon, Ansel Adams, and Walker Evans; and the road movies of Bob Hope and Bing Crosby, *Easy Rider*, *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*, as well as films by Gus van Sant (although unspecified, he likely refers to *Gerry* from 2002). But, he notes, Americans remain at a loss as to how to represent the transformative experience of travel through the material form of expression, sculpture. Thus, in "shadowing" Bartram's travels, with whom he "shares the artist's vision," he hoped to find this transformative experience

by "braving the wilds of North Florida and west to the Mississippi River, and other areas unknown to myself" and selecting, collecting, preserving, and artfully arranging the numerous natural objects and artifacts of material culture he encounters on the journey. For the visual pleasure and intellectual edification of the people of Philadelphia, he would also report, as he put it, on the curious ways, bizarre rituals and marvelous material culture of the humanity he would encounter.

Dion's script is followed by Courtney's essay on the genesis of the project, where we learn that the artist's travels were divided into two parts—the first lasting until January 2008, and the second beginning at some point in the spring, when he took up a residency at the Atlantic Center for the Arts in New Smyrna Beach, Florida. This lasted, as we discover in a subsequent excerpt from his journal, until May 4, 2008, when he and Dana boarded an Amtrak train and were "homeward bound," to prepare for the exhibition opening. (Curiously, photographs in a separate part of the book are identified as being from a trip to Disney World on May 8, 2008.)

With Courtney's essay, the layout design carried throughout for all the essays is established. For each page, there is a vertical column on the outer edge that contains unrelated photographs, excerpts from Dion's journal in no particular chronology, details of maps, thumbnail details of Bartram's drawings, and the like. The pages allotted to each essay also contain centralized images—again, unrelated to the essay's content—nestled between the two columns of text.

Courtney's essay is followed by Fry's. He provides a history of John Bartram's botanic garden, his correspondence with Carl Linnaeus in Sweden in codifying his specimens, the homestead, and the three generations of the family who maintained the property and the international business of selling seeds and plants. Following this is a chronology of William Bartram's travels, itself followed by a portfolio of his watercolor and ink drawings of native flora and fauna, as well as a map of the Great Alachua-Savana, now part of the Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park. Following examples of Dion's journal excerpts,

his account of getting lost paddling the Bartram Canoe Triangle in Alabama, and pages of photographs, readers find Gregory Volk's five-part contribution on the exhibition itself, each part dedicated to one of the cabinets. First is the obligatory cabinet of alligator-themed souvenirs, then Dion's cabinet of pressed plants and bottles of water samples. This "cabinet" in the text is interrupted by a two-page spread devoted to Linnaeus. The third cabinet is one devoted to "hate." It contains boxes of virulently racist objects mailed back to Bartram's Garden, sealed and stamped in red with "do not open" and "hate archive," and thus taken out of public circulation. Dion's cabinet of curiosities contains everything one might imagine in our throw-away culture—metal and plastic bottle caps, thimbles, fishing lures, keys, Disney figurines, buttons, shards of broken crockery—as well as jars and vials placed on top of the cabinet and filled with preserved plants, insects, pods, an eel, and a snake. There is, finally, a cabinet of postcards, with Dion's hand-painted cards illustrating the birds, butterflies, leaves, shells, and so forth, which the artist dated and

sent to individuals involved with the project at Bartram's Garden. Throughout the book are images of things that Dion collected for the exhibition, as well as pages of photographs of drawers of the cabinets and their treasures. Some of these images would have appeared on the website that was mounted for the duration of exhibition, so anybody might follow Dion's journey and discover with him both the richness of Florida's natural habitat and the myriad homeless human-made items, discarded yet perhaps outlasting the lives of their former owners. This delightful book both excites the eyes and causes us to ponder all that surrounds us, how we think about our lives, and the complicated connections between nature and our perceptions of nature as inflected by our material culture.

At the end of Volk's section on Dion's fourth cabinet, the cabinet of curiosities, appears a quotation from Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The Poet," written between 1841 and 1843. This quotation beautifully sums up Dion's goal for the reader: "Thought makes everything fit for use. The vocabulary

of an omniscient man would embrace words and images excluded from polite conversation. What would be base, or even obscene, to the obscene, becomes illustrious, spoken in a new connexion of thought."