



**Mark Dion: South Florida Wildlife Rescue Unit**  
by René Morales, Assistant Curator, Miami Art Museum

Western cultures have generally assumed a clear distinction between the human realm and the “wilderness” – those boundless, pristine spaces that have yet to be conquered and tamed by human hands. Precisely because it was considered separate from humanity, virgin nature became tasked with two important, contradictory functions: to serve as a limitlessly exploitable fountain of wealth and resources (“as a machine that would never break<sup>21</sup>); and to provide an antidote to the social ills of urban life and industrialization. Amid the reality of countless habitats tainted, stripped, and overrun, however, we must, today, finally acknowledge that nature does not exist on these terms. Certainly there remain pockets of the world where no trail has ever been cleared, no tree cut down; but given the cumulative effects of recent human activity on the planet – from the buildup of greenhouse gases that trap radiation within the atmosphere, altering weather patterns, to the relentlessness with which ecosystems have been destroyed and thrown out of balance – it has become increasingly difficult to claim that there exists a place on earth beyond the reach of human influence.

If there is a single thread that runs through most of Mark Dion’s complex and voluminous work, it is that what we call “nature” is, in fact, composed of two separate entities: There is, on one hand, that immense totality of living things (humans included) together with the physical environment in which they each struggle for survival; and there is, on the other hand, a purely conceptual wilderness, one that exists solely in the human imagination. Ever mutating and old as humanity itself, this “second nature” consists not of earth, sky, and water, but of ideologies and systems of knowledge, of cultural myths and attitudes. It is simultaneously constructed and perceived through scientific, literary, and artistic representations – from natural history displays to the heroic tradition of American landscape painting. Dion’s “central gesture,” writes art historian Norman Bryson, “is to foreground not nature, but the interface between nature and the history of the disciplines and discourses that take nature as their object of knowledge.”<sup>22</sup> Because this interface is mediated by and imbedded within the flow of human ideas, it is, and inevitably always will be, hopelessly anthropocentric. Only when this bias is fully acknowledged, Dion’s work suggests, can we begin to understand our relationship with the natural world that surrounds and courses through us.

Dion has gone to great lengths to demonstrate this point. In seminal works like *On Tropical Nature* (1991) and *A Meter of Jungle* (1992), he assumed the mythic guise of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century pioneer naturalist, undertaking journeys deep into the tropical rainforests of Venezuela,

Brazil, and other countries, for weeks at a time and sometimes in isolation. But unlike the explorers who preceded him into these and other jungles, Dion’s primary objective was neither scientific nor utopian – his goal was neither to solve nature’s riddles (he identifies as an artist, after all, not a scientist), nor to commune spiritually with sublime landscapes. Rather, it was to re-perform some of human history’s most notable and telling incursions into the wilderness – but, pointedly, in the current context of ecological crisis. In this way he could serve, in his words, “as a magnet for critical questioning,” and in so doing act out the disjuncture between nature and the desires and obsessions that we have so destructively projected onto it.

In a new project originated for the Miami Art Museum, Dion focuses on the Everglades – that vast stretch of territory that ran, in its original state, from Lake Okeechobee and the Kissimmee waterways near Orlando to the coral reefs off the Upper Florida Keys. The installation consists of three parts, corresponding roughly to three major phases in Everglades history: the period of exploration and conquest (late 1700s – mid 1800s); the age of scientific discoveries and technological advancements, which for the first time afforded the possibility of populating the area and draining it for agricultural purposes (mid-1800s – early 20<sup>th</sup> century); and the present era, in which the Everglades has become synonymous with ecological devastation and the urgent, paradoxical challenge of artificially restoring the natural landscapes that we have misused. Throughout the broad historical arc that the installation encompasses, perceptions of the Everglades have oscillated between romantic reverence and utter disdain, between fervent calls to subdue and transform “the swamp” to impassioned pleas for conservation and restoration.

The project’s most prominent component is the mobile laboratory of the “South Florida Wildlife Rescue Unit,” an imaginary agency comprised of individuals who rush into natural settings to rescue endangered plants and animals from developers’ bulldozers, and who attempt to manage the serious epidemic of human-introduced invasive plants, which have decimated the region’s native species. The vehicle is loaded with specimens and outfitted with various paraphernalia, from scientific instruments to the kind of gear one would want to have on hand while trekking through Florida’s difficult terrain. Laid out in self-apparent order like a natural history display, the array works as a practical how-to guide for those who may be inspired to carry out the team’s activities for themselves.

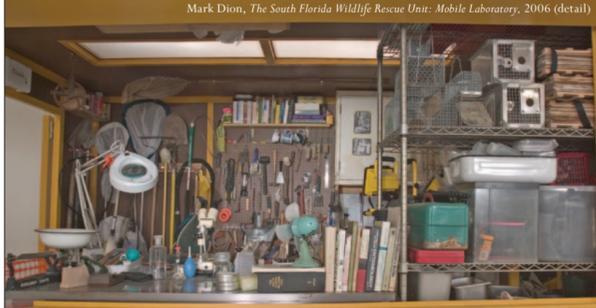
Together with its conspicuously authentic-looking insignia, the Rescue Unit’s uniforms (displayed on mannequins) create an aura of governmental authority. Against the backdrop of a restoration effort that for years has been hobbled by bureaucratic impasses, this confabulation of fiction and officialdom bears a thinly veiled, ironic



Mark Dion, *The South Florida Wildlife Rescue Unit: Mobile Laboratory*, 2006



Mark Dion, *The South Florida Wildlife Rescue Unit: The Uniforms*, 2006



Mark Dion, *The South Florida Wildlife Rescue Unit: Mobile Laboratory*, 2006 (detail)

reference to the long-held dream of decisive action by policymakers, and, more generally, to the great extent to which the fate of the ecosystem has become dependant on political machinations. With a measure of icy humor, Dion thus embodies the frustration that many environmentalists have expressed upon being forced to settle for political compromises in the face of irreversible environmental damage.

This subtext is particularly pointed with regard to the Everglades, which, perhaps more than any other major natural habitat in the U.S., owes its hope for survival to the efforts of private citizens. The great figure in this respect is Marjory Stoneman Douglas (1890-1998), who, in the process of defending her beloved “river of grass,” focused on community-based forms of activism, while stressing goals that would be realistically achievable within the context of a baroque political process.<sup>3</sup> Stoneman’s example in turn played a key role in the development of modern environmentalist strategies, helping to advance the movement beyond some of the self-defeating positions it had held under earlier incarnations (outward scorn toward government; passive or unpracticable biophilic sentimentality; an unwillingness to acknowledge human economic and subsistence needs; and so on).<sup>4</sup> More than a recipe for direct action, Dion’s Rescue Unit is a reflection on the intersection between “the system” and the vital, grassroots passions that have emerged as nature’s secret weapon against despoilment.

Accompanying the Rescue Unit is a series of digital reproductions of vintage photographs taken by John Kunkel Small (1869-1938), a curator of the New York Botanical Garden who identified numerous plant species in the Everglades and who authored a scathing book entitled *From Eden to Sahara: Florida’s Tragedy* (1929). Spanning from 1915 to 1927, the pictures depict individuals transporting bulk shipments of orchids, bromeliads, and cacti out of the swamp by car, wagon, and boat – historical antecedents, perhaps, to the Rescue Unit’s fantastical mobile laboratory. Dion’s image selections present a sad irony: Throughout the time that Small was collecting samples for preservation in botanical conservatories, the future of the Everglades’ famed biodiversity was facing a serious challenge from different sorts of gatherers – poachers and plant sellers. In response to the flourishing of loosely regulated markets for rare plants, pelts, and bird feathers, the number of individuals ransacking the Everglades for booty had exploded around the turn of the century. Small’s photographs depict both naturalists and plant hunters engaging in the same activity, though with diametrically opposed motivations.

The images are most powerful when considered in full light of the monumental changes that humans were exacting upon the Everglades at the time.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, Florida’s population was growing exponentially, and new communities encroached upon ever larger portions of the region. The Army Corps of Engineers’ drainage/flood control projects and the construction of Tamiami Trail were underway, choking off the crucial southward flow of freshwater from Lake Okeechobee. As the ecosystem struggled to adapt to prolonged, unnatural droughts, the declining water table fueled fires that raged across the river of grass, ravaging wildlife. By the next the

decade, a handful of large agribusiness firms (mainly sugar interests) had consolidated monopolies over tens of thousands of acres of Everglades land, establishing a powerful, permanent grip on the state’s environmental management policies. Small’s determination to document the Everglades and collect endangered plants at this precise moment was thus underscored by realistic fears that the wetlands might soon collapse entirely. Today, it is difficult to overstate the importance of Small’s efforts; the specimens he preserved and especially the many photographs he took of the dramatic changes that occurred before and after what he described as the “fast and furious destruction” of the Everglades will serve as critical resources as we struggle to make decisions about what, exactly, the region should look like after restoration.

The third part of Dion’s project consists of a seaweed herbarium – an album of pressed algae specimens – purportedly gathered and compiled by the botanist and early Florida settler Dr. Henry Perrine (1797-1840). Like many of Dion’s previous subjects, including Alfred Russell Wallace and Baron Georges Cuvier, Perrine formed part of a legion of pseudo-amateur explorers who throughout the century of Darwin ventured into remote regions, often risking life and limb. As Dion has suggested in several works, the traditional figure of the early naturalist is both heroic and problematic. In the process of forging new paths through the wilderness and extricating specimens for study and eventual display, these adventurers fueled popular desire for the conquest and commodification of nature, even as they sounded loud calls for environmental protection.<sup>6</sup> Herbaria embody as well as any other kind of object the efforts of these individuals to develop and standardize methods for the classification and representation of nature. They also perfectly encapsulate hubristic, 19<sup>th</sup>-century attempts to subsume the infinite complexity of nature within parameters narrow enough to be fathomed by human reason: Here the book, a primary symbol of human culture and knowledge, is used literally to contain physical examples of the living world and display them according to a system of rational organization.

In 1838, after years of service as U.S. consul to Mexico, Perrine was awarded a land grant encompassing the southern tip of Florida, and moved with his family to Indian Key, off the coast of Cape Sable. In Mexico, Perrine had studied the characteristics of agave, pepper, cactus, mango, coffee, and other plant species, which he believed could be introduced to the southern U.S. and farmed on a large scale, eventually transforming the country into a competitive force in the global agricultural market. He anticipated that South Florida – with its alternating dry and humid seasons – would serve as the perfect setting to cultivate these breeds. The region may, in fact, have proven to be too well-suited. Whether or not they were introduced by Perrine himself, foreign plants such as these have competed aggressively against Florida’s native species, and today they present the second gravest threat to the original ecosystem, after direct habitat loss. Just two years into his adventure, after ignoring numerous warnings of warring Seminoles, Perrine was killed in a raid at his home, and his work destroyed in a



John Kunkel Small (1869–1938), *The “Weed Wagon” with a Load of Orchids, Ferns and Bromeliads (Ross Hammock, Florida)*, 1915  
Image Courtesy of State Archives of Florida

fire. Yellowed and charred, the pages of Dion’s false artifact symbolize the reckless, obsessive drive with which many early naturalists plunged into the wild in order to unlock the mysteries of nature; the object also stands for the unintended damage associated with their legacies.

What emerges from Dion’s project as a whole is a parable of the various mentalities and motivations, both positive and negative, which have conditioned the history of our engagement with the Florida wilderness. While the juxtapositions created by the installation’s three parts reflect our evolving attitudes, they also afford a sense of how this history is contradictory and riddled with cyclical recurrences. It is here that Dion’s fundamental point is imbedded. If human treatments of nature are inherently tied to our culturally determined preconceptions, then the only way to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past perpetually is to proceed with full awareness of the limitations of our knowledge. We must recognize the deeply ingrained cultural tropes that we have used to rationalize the domination and destruction of the living world. By the same token, we must learn to harness, to truly positive ends, the veneration of nature that is just as firmly imbedded in our history and cultural traditions.

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1 Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Alfred P. Knopf, Inc., 1995), p. 13.  
2 Norman Bryson, “Mark Dion and the Birds of Antwerp,” in *Mark Dion* (Phaidon Press Limited: London, 1997), p. 96.  
3 See Marjory Stoneman Douglas, *The Everglades: River of Grass* (New York: H. Wolff, 1947).  
4 See Jack E. Davis, “‘Conservation is Now a Dead Word’: Marjory Stoneman Douglas and the Transformation of American Environmentalism,” in *Paradise Lost? The Environmental History of Florida* (University of Florida Press: Gainesville, 2005), pp. 297-325.  
5 See Michael Grunwald, *The Swamp: The Everglades, Florida, and the Politics of Paradise* (Simon & Schuster: New York, 2006), and David McNally, *The Everglades: An Environmental History* (University of Florida: Gainesville, 1999).  
6 Miwon Kwon, “Unnatural Tendencies: Scientific Guises of Mark Dion,” in *Natural History and Other Fictions* (Ikon Gallery: Birmingham, 1997), p. 41.

Exhibition Checklist — All works by Mark Dion unless noted			
<i>Biologische Forschungsstation Alster</i> 2000 Silkscreen 41-1/4 x 29-1/2 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Mildred’s Lane Historical Society and Museum	<i>A Meter of Jungle</i> 1992 Color photograph 27-1/2 x 20-3/4 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Tanva Bonakdar Gallery, New York, NY	<i>Seattle Vivarium</i> 2000 Colored pencil on paper in 5 parts 2 parts at 12 x 15 in. 11-3/4 x 14-3/4 in. 1 part at 10 x 14-3/4 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Tanva Bonakdar Gallery, New York, NY	<i>Typical Avian Topography II</i> 1992 Silkscreen on paper 31-3/4 x 21-1/4 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Mildred’s Lane Historical Society and Museum
<i>The Bureau for the Centre for Surrealism and its Legacy</i> 2004 Collage on board 18 x 23-1/4 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Tanva Bonakdar Gallery, New York, NY	<i>The Mobile Gull Appreciation Unit</i> 2006 Colored pencil on paper 13 x 15 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Tanva Bonakdar Gallery, New York, NY	<i>The Seed Smuggler’s Luggage</i> 2008 Antique Boy Scouts of America rucksack, cotton batting, plastic containers, seeds 15 x 23 x 16 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Tanva Bonakdar Gallery, New York, NY	<i>Wood World</i> 1999 Colored pencil on paper 11-3/4 x 14-3/4 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Tanva Bonakdar Gallery, New York, NY
<i>Bureau of Remote Wildlife Surveillance</i> 1999-2007 Twenty unique color photographs 13-1/2 x 15 in. each Courtesy of the Artist and Tanva Bonakdar Gallery, New York, NY	<i>The Mobile Gull Appreciation Unit</i> 2006 Pencil and watercolor on paper 9 x 11 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Tanva Bonakdar Gallery, New York, NY	<i>The South Florida Wildlife Rescue Unit: Mobile Laboratory</i> 2006 Mixed media installation 18 ft. 11 in. x 7 ft. 7 in. x 8 ft. 11 in. Collection Miami Art Museum, gift of Lin Lougheed	<i>Dana Sherwood in collaboration with Mark Dion</i> <i>Portrait of Mark Dion After William Beebe</i> 2005 Cyanotype 20-1/4 x 16-1/2 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Mildred’s Lane Historical Society and Museum
<i>Concerning Hunting (I/V)</i> 2008 Silkscreen 16-1/2 x 20-1/2 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Mildred’s Lane Historical Society and Museum	<i>Mobile Ranger Library – Komodo National Park</i> 2005 Colored pencil on paper 12-3/4 x 14 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Tanva Bonakdar Gallery, New York, NY	<i>The South Florida Wildlife Rescue Unit: The Uniforms</i> 2006 Two mannequins, clothing, custom patches, assorted gear Dimensions variable Collection Miami Art Museum, gift of Lin Lougheed	<i>John Kunkel Small (1869–1938)</i> <i>Automobile Loaded with Plant Specimens</i> 1927 Digital print 22-1/2 x 26-1/2 in. Image Courtesy of State Archives of Florida
<i>Concrete Jungle</i> 1992 Colored pencil on paper 9-3/4 x 14-3/4 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Mildred’s Lane Historical Society and Museum	<i>Mobile Ranger Library – Komodo National Park</i> 2005 Colored pencil on paper 12-5/8 x 17-1/8 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Tanva Bonakdar Gallery, New York, NY	<i>The Terror of Transylvania</i> 1998 Silkscreen 22-3/4 x 12-1/2 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Mildred’s Lane Historical Society and Museum	<i>John Kunkel Small (1869–1938)</i> <i>Exploring Boat Belonging to Chas. Deering, Near Lower Matecumbe Key, with Load of Cacti</i> ca. 1920 Digital print 22-1/2 x 26-1/2 in. Image Courtesy Historical Museum of South Florida
<i>Dodo</i> 1995 Silkscreen 31 x 20-3/4 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Mildred’s Lane Historical Society and Museum	<i>Mobile Ranger Library – Komodo National Park</i> 2008 Mixed media 96 x 84-1/2 x 39-1/2 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Tanva Bonakdar Gallery, New York, NY	<i>The Ornithologist’s Watchtower</i> 1998 Pencil and watercolor on paper 14-3/4 x 11-3/4 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Tanva Bonakdar Gallery, New York, NY	<i>John Kunkel Small (1869–1938)</i> <i>Wagon Load of Orchids (Flamingo, Florida)</i> 1916 Digital print 22-1/2 x 26-1/2 in. Image Courtesy of State Archives of Florida
<i>Herbarium</i> 2010 7 images; Hand painted acrylic wash, spitbite aquatint, a la pousse photogravure, with hand applied letterpress labels and stamps 21 x 16 in. each Edition: 20 Published by Graphicstudio University of South Florida Collection	<i>The Ornithologist’s Watchtower</i> 1998 Pencil and watercolor on paper 14-3/4 x 11-3/4 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Tanva Bonakdar Gallery, New York, NY	<i>Travels of William Bartram Reconsidered (alligator cabinet)</i> 2008 Found alligators in various media, painted wood and glass cabinet, framed William Bartram reproduction 73 x 39-1/2 x 13 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Tanva Bonakdar Gallery, New York, NY	<i>John Kunkel Small (1869–1938)</i> <i>The “Weed Wagon” with a Load of Orchids, Ferns and Bromeliads (Ross Hammock, Florida)</i> 1915 Digital print 22-1/2 x 26-1/2 in. Image Courtesy of State Archives of Florida
<i>Herbarium Perrine (Marine Algae)</i> 2006 Two portfolios containing pressed specimens on tea-stained paper, custom vitrine, and assorted objects Herbarium (closed): 17 x 12-1/8 x 3-1/2 in.; (open) 17 x 24-5/8 x 3-1/2 in. Collection Miami Art Museum, museum purchase with funds from the MAM Collectors Council	<i>Polar Bear (Ursus Maritimus) (I)</i> 1994 10 black and white photographs and labels 17-1/2 x 21-1/2 in. each Courtesy of the Artist and Tanva Bonakdar Gallery, New York, NY	<i>Travels of William Bartram Reconsidered (postcard cupboard)</i> 2008 Thirty-six postcards, wood and glass cabinet with brass fixtures 32 x 33 x 16 in. (closed) Courtesy of the Artist and Tanva Bonakdar Gallery, New York, NY	<i>John Kunkel Small (1869–1938)</i> <i>The “Weed Wagon” with a Load of Orchids, Ferns and Bromeliads (Ross Hammock, Florida)</i> 1915 Digital print 22-1/2 x 26-1/2 in. Image Courtesy of State Archives of Florida
<i>Kurtz and Marlow</i> 2004 Wood, glass, hats, felt 37 x 22-1/2 x 18 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Tanva Bonakdar Gallery, New York, NY	<i>Scala Naturae</i> 1993 Photostat on paper 36 x 29 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Tanva Bonakdar Gallery, New York, NY	<i>Tree Scheme</i> 2009 Two-color lithograph 21 x 18 in. Edition: 60 Published by Graphicstudio University of South Florida Collection	