Mark Dion is an artist, conservationist, collector, traveller, and self-styled adventurer. He is comfortable creating beautiful curiosity cabinets, retracing historic botanical expeditions in Brazil, digging for treasures on the Thames’ banks beside the Tate Gallery, or even, as he did last year, curating an ambitious exhibition based upon the Principality of Monaco’s national art and maritime collections. He has exhibited installations, drawings, and photographs at Tate Britain and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and been artist in residence at London’s Natural History Museum.

Motivating this rather enviable list of activities is Dion’s desire to unearth where our current big ideas about history, science, and the natural world have come from. It’s an overwhelmingly huge task, yet he summarises it in deceptively simple terms. “I am looking back and trying to understand how we got to this point, how we got to our understanding of what counts for nature in our society.”

As part of this lifelong project, Dion spent two and a half years exploring three centuries of art, craft and maritime objects on the invitation of museum directors Marie-Claude Beaud and Robert Calcagno. The resulting major exhibition, Oceanomania: Souvenirs of Mysterious Seas – from the Expedition to the Aquarium, was held jointly in April, 2011 at the Oceanographic Museum and the New National Museum at Villa Paloma, Monaco, and included 18 of the artist’s own works. The show and its stunning, accompanying publication (Mack Books, 2011) each evoke a deep sense of wonder towards the sea, while honest appraisals of the damage we have caused are uncomfortably close at hand. “Some of the contemporary artists have a conservation sensibility – Alexis Rockman, James Prosek, Ashley Bickerton; theirs is an overtly critical, pro-Ocean approach... But also, I wanted to treat everything equally, whether it was a vernacular object or a painting. For example, the shell art, which is very amateurish, was treated with the same degree of seriousness as the Monet.”

A childhood on the coast drew Dion to the ocean, equally as an ecological concern and artistic muse. “I’m from New Bedford, Massachusetts, which is a city on the sea. It’s an industrial sea port, renowned for being the place that Herman Melville sailed out of, and where he starts his book Moby Dick. I’ve been deeply intrigued by the ocean from a very young age; I was a scuba diver at 12 years old. I spent summers on the coast, so I was always a very passionate
Dion’s career-long engagement with photography provides one way to navigate Oceanomania’s multiple displays. For the show, he selected grainy, romantic pictures of swashbuckling 19th century explorer and artist Ernst Haeckel surrounded by his spoils, giant starfish, crabs, and coral; contemporary photography by Xaviera Simmons depicts rickety boats crammed with people, helplessly tiny against the ocean’s vast, blue backdrop. The exhibition also features Surrealist photographer Man Ray’s Marie-Laure de Noailles costumée, 1928, a black and white image of Viscountess Noailles preening in a layered, fish skin gown at a sea-bed themed ball. Dion explains: “In the Surrealist tradition, people were very drawn to the uncanniness of the sea; it feels so otherworldly. The strangeness of the sea, the strange nature of organisms, was inspiring to artists like Man Ray.”

Perhaps not surprising given Dion’s boyhood Jacques Cousteau Society membership, the celebrated French deep-sea diver, filmmaker, author, photographer, scientist, and co-inventor of the aqua-lung is another touchstone for Oceanomania, and for the artist’s work in general. Dion often casts himself in multiple roles in his installations, performances, and photography. For his art-imitating-science piece in 1992, called The Department of Marine Animal Identification of the City of New York (Chinatown Division), he turned American Fine Arts Co., New York, into an office for identifying, cataloguing, and preserving weird and wonderful creatures purchased at local markets. His intention, in part, was ecological, questioning why a collection of dead animals “indicates his distaste for bloodsports. Yet, in owning such a collection, he is clearly fascinated by the ways in which hunters bridge the gap between civilized culture and beautiful, unruly nature.”

Dion not only collects photographs and poses for self-portraits, but also since the late 1980s has spent time behind the camera to compile one of his largest bodies of work. Entitled WHITE OUT, and published in the book Polar Bear: Ursus Maritimus (2004), his collection poses for self-portraits, but also since the late 1980s has spent time behind the camera to compile one of his largest bodies of work. Entitled WHITE OUT, and published in the book Polar Bear: Ursus Maritimus (2004), his collection
studied the Komodo dragon, the world’s largest lizard, and the delicate ecosystem of its rugged island home. The experience was restorative. “Like all people who are invested in these [ecological] ideas, we’re going to go through melancholy as the thing we care about the most is disappearing. It’s easy to be engaged with these issues and to reach a state of exhaustion. So, one of the things you have to continually do is to recharge your batteries and refuel your passion through an encounter with wild places, otherwise you get so exhausted you just want to stop thinking about them.”

Through his interwoven creative and charitable work, the artist aims to “foster a culture of nature” in urban Western society. “What I mean by a ‘culture of nature’ is there are models for our relationship to the natural world that don’t have to be based on degradation, exploitation and destruction. There are possibilities for a more positive, balanced interaction with the natural world.” He believes people in every profession and walk of life – whether “chef... poet... nurse... construction worker” – have a part to play in re-imagining the ways we coexist with other living creatures, and is refreshingly humble regarding his own contribution. “Artists are part of the puzzle, but I don’t think they can do it alone; it can be done by a large number of people working in their fields, and mine happens to be art making.”

Having just returned from a journey to Colombia, South America, Dion expresses the urgency of his artistic mission, and its play upon his conscience. “These trips are about seeing the last of these places before they disappear. It’s about reaffirming a connection that will refuel the will to fight for them.”

Becky Hunter is an art critic for Art Papers and Sculpture. She blogs on art at www.beckyhunter.co.uk.
Mark Dion (born August 28, 1961) is an American conceptual artist, best known for his use of scientific presentations in his installations. Dion earned a BFA in 1986 from the Hartford Art School at the University of Hartford, Connecticut, and was also awarded an honorary doctorate in 2003. Contemporary Cabinets of Curiosity: Artist Mark Dion. Universal Collection: A Mark Dion Project. Mark Dion: Krypto-Zoologist. Transcription.