

Mark Dion, *The Life of a Dead Tree*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Toronto

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Mark Dion

← *The Life of a Dead Tree*, installation view, MOCA, Toronto, 2019.
Photo: Tom Arban Photography Inc., courtesy of the artist & Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles

↑ *Emerald Ash Borer*, 2019, illustration by Matthew Wells.
Photo: Tom Arban Photography Inc., courtesy of the artist & Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles

Mark Dion

The Life of a Dead Tree

The idea of museum as morgue isn't new. Interventions by scholars, Indigenous Peoples, and artists critique the museum for sequestering stolen cultural objects and displaying them as artefacts. Natural history museums extract organisms from complex ecosystems and present them as specimens within Enlightenment-inspired classification systems. But when Mark Dion engages those same processes—as when he recently arranged for a diseased and deceased tree to be dragged from its forest resting place and laid out in MOCA—he creates hybrid spaces that conflate museum, laboratory, classroom, and institutional critique.

Dion's site-specific commission, *The Life of a Dead Tree*, follows terrain previously tread in earlier installations. For *The Library for the Birds of London* (2018), a giant birdcage-like structure was furnished with ornithological books and artefacts, along with live birds that defecated upon them. More closely linked to the MOCA project is *Neukom Vivarium* (Seattle, 2006), for which Dion installed a giant old-growth tree inside a specially designed life-support greenhouse to educate visitors about the abundant life that ancestral trees birth long after their death. The western hemlock in *Neukom Vivarium* died of natural causes, but the white ash interred at MOCA passed prematurely, incapacitated by the emerald ash borer, one of the invasive insects currently laying waste to North American forests. If Dion's hemlock project was designed to alert audiences to the verdant wealth of natural ecosystems and inspire their protection, the MOCA installation intones a more sombre message—the earth's fragile ecosystems are veering toward collapse, and humans and their invasive cargo are the cause.

Harvested from a nearby forest, the massive ash tree's dissected sections are reconstituted to replicate its original form. Performing as “in-museum scientist,” Alexandra Ntoukas, wearing a lab coat, explains her forensic analysis

to visitors. Chipping away at the bark, she captures insects as they gradually emerge from their host and puts them in specimen bottles. There is pretense here but also a measure of authentic science: the specimens and data collected are being shared with the Royal Ontario Museum and the University of Toronto's Faculty of Forestry. The installation also includes photographs and diagrams that provide information about the different invasive insects. A diorama-like laboratory at one end of the gallery mirrors the contemporary divide between scientific research and the public that supports it: visitors can only see the researcher's mysterious environment—a dense collection of equipment, books, charts and specimens—by peering through glass walls. Yet, undercutting this division, greater engagement is possible: during a botanical drawing workshop I attended, Ntoukas excitedly showed us the first of the adult ash borers to develop from larvae and emerge from the tree.

Such educational moments distracted momentarily from the installation's fundamentally melancholic affect. The dead tree is a totem for the looming environmental catastrophe and for what Dion has called “the most pernicious and poisonous” of Western culture's ideas. Through an ideological lineage stemming from Aristotle's *Scala Naturae* and Christianized as the Great Chain of Being—the conceit that humans are separate from and superior to all other earthly creatures—this enduring conceit has made us the most invasive of species.

Jill Glessing

Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Toronto
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