

Mark Dion "All Heaven in a Rage" at No Gallery, New York

23.10.2024

READING TIME 4'



“All Heaven in a Rage” is a solo exhibition by Mark Dion.

In the late fifteenth century, as Spanish colonization of the Canary Islands took bloody root, the local birds that we know today as canaries were called, by Europeans, *pájaros de azúcar*, or *sugar-birds*. Sugarcane was not native to the islands, but it was the first major cash-crop imposed there by Spaniards. With time, the idea abounded that the birds were “fond of the sugar-cane, and that [they] could eat sugar in great abundance,” unlike other birds, for whom sugar is poison. Modern experience disproves the canary’s special resilience. But this small myth helped prop up the larger one: the birds love the crop, as if it had been there all along—or as if they had needed it all along. Conquest improves, even perfects, the islands’ nature. It is not known what the native Guanche peoples called the birds.

In this exhibition, Mark Dion presents a single, stuffed canary, bottom-up in its cage. Its plumage is pure yellow, like a cartoon: a trick of selective breeding, popular with pet stores, which suppresses the bird’s melanin production. This strips blacks, browns, greens, and other nuances from its appearance, isolating its vibrant base layer: a monochrome. Dion has fixed it in place using viscous crude oil—natural asphalt—which covers the cage’s floor. He obtained the oil from the La Brea Tar Pits, Los Angeles’s famous fossil site in the tony neighborhood of Hancock Park. Where the ancient, open-air oil pit is visible to all passing cars on Wilshire Boulevard, and has since 1968 hosted a nuclear family of life-size, fiberglass mammoths: the mother is drowning in the tar, while father and baby panic on land.

Dion is wrapping up a five-year residency at La Brea, where he has worked closely with paleontologists and other scientists stationed there while also conducting archival research. Later this September, he will open the culminating exhibition of those efforts in Los Angeles, at the tar pits’ museum, as part of the Getty’s PST-Art festival. Perhaps we can think of this bird in part as carrying a song from there.

Stuck in tar too shallow to sink in, this bird has no family to bear witness—just us. In its morbid isolation, it can't help but conjure a more recent association: the iconic “canary in the coal mine,” who served as carbon monoxide detector for miners starting in 1896, and in the UK until as recently as 1986. It served its masters by passing out or dying wherever the toxin was present. Here it was the canary's sensitivity, rather than its perceived resilience, that made the once-sugarbird attendant to capitalist extraction all over again.

Extractivism is one leitmotif in Dion's practice. It is a logical outcropping of his decades-spanning investigation into the history of science, and the systems of knowledge which continuously renew the popular conviction that these disciplines unveil objective, universal truths and necessities. Capital, too, has always “followed the science,” so long as it bolstered the bottom line. Such tensions are at play in Dion's recent drawings, two of which are on view in the gallery's back room. Each subjects a schematized life form to a thicket of textual labeling: a tree in one, and a whale in the other. Taken together, the labels undermine the rationality that their form purports. They intermix resources, products, and various man-made atrocities.

The exhibition's title comes from a line in William Blake's *Auguries of Innocence*, a poem penned by the English proto-ecologist around 1803. Blake, too, was concerned with atrocities, and in *Auguries* he begins by listing man's injustices against animals, before those committed upon other humans. Throughout, Blake asserts the interconnection of all small things to all grand things: “A Dog starv'd at his Master's Gate / Predicts the ruin of the State. / A Horse misus'd upon the Road / Calls to Heaven for Human blood.” An attack against one is an attack against all.

“All Heaven in a Rage” is produced in collaboration with Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, Dion's gallery for many years.

at No Gallery, New York
until November 3, 2024