

An Artist's Work Finds a Lasting Home

A new permanent exhibition in a house in Pittsburgh displays the creativity and artistry of Mark Dion.

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The artist Mark Dion displays a wall of jars — representative of a collecting obsession, wonder and the power of stuff — in the attic of a house that serves as a permanent installation of his creations.

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Reporting from Pittsburgh

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This article is part of the [Fine Arts & Exhibits](#) special section on the art world stretching boundaries with new artists, new audiences and new technology.

The artist Mark Dion stood in the hallway of a three-story house in Troy Hill in Pittsburgh recently, ruminating on what was about to become a unique home for his wildly unusual array of creations.

From 1956 through 2018, the modest house in a working-class neighborhood belonged to the Christopher family. But after the matriarch, Margaret Christopher, died in 2017, it was offered by her two sons to Evan Mirapaul, a philanthropic art collector and local resident.

Over the past two years, the house was gutted, rebuilt and meticulously transformed into a permanent installation to showcase Dion's work, which opens to the public on Saturday.

It combines the Massachusetts native's fascination with obsessive collecting, ordering and the preservation of things, with questions over how natural history is understood in the Western world.

[Mrs. Christopher's House](#) is the fourth art house in the Troy Hill Art Houses series, a project led by Mirapaul, 65, whose inspiration, he said, came from a trip he took in 2007 when he visited repurposed homes on the island of Naoshima in Japan.

Dion, 63, is no stranger to fleeting art exhibitions. Over the past 30 years he has produced a glow-in-the-dark pack-rat skeleton sculpture for the La Brea Tar Pits & Museum in Los Angeles; bears in caves in the remote Norwegian mountainside; and an enormous fish fountain in the coastal town of Stavoren, the Netherlands.

There were group shows, at Documenta in Kassel and the Sculpture Projects in Münster, both in Germany; and solo ones at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston and the Whitechapel Gallery in London. But none "have created a permanent, immersive experience," he said.

Until now. "I do projects where I knock myself out for years, and it only exists in an exhibition for months," he said, explaining that many of his works were discarded when an exhibit ended or were placed in storage. "Nothing in this house is temporary. The idea of having something that can be a permanent reference point is exciting."

Dion is an unassuming man with salt-and-pepper hair who favors black-framed glasses. Dressed during a recent interview in a sky-blue button-down shirt, khakis and sneakers, he seemed to blend into the furniture, almost as if he was part of the house he created.



Dion's permanent installation is in a house tucked into a residential neighborhood in Pittsburgh. It is one of four Troy Hill Art Houses founded and owned by Evan Mirapaul.



Dion transformed one room into a living room on Christmas Eve circa 1961.

As a nod to his past work, everything here purposely refers to something Dion has created before, giving the house a “retrospective feel, so that each room is a predecessor to the next,” he said.

The experience begins on the first floor in the living room, which has been transformed into Christmas Eve circa 1961. A huge plate of glass separates the onlooker from the room, which meticulously depicts a blue-collar, upwardly mobile family while exploring the idea of the American dream.

Dion amassed thousands of objects to tell his artistic story, and that of the people who lived here. Vintage liquor bottles were tracked down. Handmade felt socks created in the '50s and '60s, which hang from the repurposed fireplace, took hours of detective work to find. Same for the “picture of the Kennedys, and a white Jesus purposely placed so you can only see his reflection in the mirror,” Dion added.

A skeletal, silver Christmas tree, surrounded by presents underneath, resides in one corner. Beautiful handmade wallpaper exuding a blue hue covers the walls; the doors and frames, piped in dark wood, match the furniture.

On the second floor, an enormous sleeping bear in a brick dungeon — reminiscent of a bear Dion exhibited at the Storm King Art Center in New York's Hudson Valley in 2019 — commandeers the location once occupied by a remodeled 1970s bathroom.

The next room is a Lower East Side gallery in the 1990s, complete with a concrete floor, cheap lighting, a situation desk and 28 images of polar bears, which Dion photographed in various museums.

“The polar bear is a nod to a body of work I've been serious about and catalogs the change in our attitude from being a predatory and frightening animal, to something fragile,” Dion said. “A victim of climate change. Something that needs protection, that's sweet and cuddly.”



Dion's Extinction Club room features wallpaper peppered with an array of animals; worn leather chairs; and curiosity cabinets filled with fossils, keys and mini liquor bottles.

A darkened room, illuminated by objects painted with phosphorescent paint, leads to the Extinction Club room, featuring handmade periwinkle-colored wallpaper peppered with an array of animals (rhinoceroses, pheasants, elephants); worn leather chairs; and curiosity cabinets filled with fossils, keys and mini liquor bottles.

“Downstairs is petrified. The Extinction Club welcomes your participation. You can sit in these chairs and embrace a fictionalized conversational space,” Dion explained, pausing to adjust a bird in a brass cage. “I want to keep the viewer excited and curious, experiencing wonder at every turn.”

If the first and second floors highlight humans’ relationship to the natural world, the attic speaks to our collecting obsession, wonder and the power of stuff — Dion’s sweet spot.

More than 400 jars in a range of sizes — a microcosm from high culture to low culture, from the highly natural to highly artificial — are filled with a menagerie of items: seaweed, Monopoly hotels, chicken feet, a possum head and Paris subway cards. Most are personal: The broken eggshells, for example, are discards from his omelets.

On the opposite wall reside just as many customized cigar boxes, many of which, he said he designed and produced and for which he printed the paper that lines them.

“Visitors are encouraged to unscrew the jars and open the cigar boxes,” he said. “That’s the payoff.”

Dion spent two years locating these objects. Some were found at flea markets, church sales and antique malls; others came from internet sleuthing. Some belonged to him and are “hard to part with — a raggedy doll I found in a flea market in Brazil, a celluloid object that I got in Paris,” he said, admitting that his own home resembles this room.

“We love home because it’s a reflection on us,” he said. “This is a material catalog of my life. If you cut me open, this is what you would see.”

The tour ends with an outside experience, the Confectionary Conservatory of Wonder, a glass cage-like case filled with, at first glance, gorgeous little desserts. “As you get closer you realize they’re covered with dead insects,” Dion said of the installment he created with his wife, the artist Dana Sherwood, with whom he often collaborates from their home in Copake, N.Y.



The Confectionary Conservatory of Wonder, a cage-like structure, can be found outside the house. It is filled with colorful desserts but, Dion said, “as you get closer you realize they’re covered with dead insects.”

“Their beauty attracted the insects, ruining the desserts and killing the bugs,” he added. “We started making these pieces after we went to art fairs and we saw how people were drawn to rapid, beautiful, decorative things that weren’t very good for them.”

The desserts might not be; the house and this project, however, have been good for Dion, who said he had felt “freer working here versus working with institutions, where many constraints coming from different departments exist.”

“This is authored,” he said. “It’s an impactful, intimate, fertile and truthful space. You can keep returning to this. I want to have a serious catalog that represents my body of work. I’m not interested in an online presence because I find that incredibly ephemeral.”

If the interior is transformative, the exterior is not. All four Troy Hill Art Houses in this collection have purposely remained untouched. Rather than reflect the huge occurrence inside, they seamlessly, quietly, live among neighboring homes occupied by longtime residents.

“Some people have no idea these houses are here,” Mirapaul said, noting that all four are within 150 yards from where he lives. “There’s no real border between the thing that is contemporary art and the thing that is people living their lives.”

Over the past 11 years, other artists have left their own, specific thumbprints on these houses, including Thorsten Brinkmann, Robert Kusmirowski, Lenka Clayton and Phillip Andrew Lewis.

“It’s unusual for an artist to have the opportunity to think about an entire structure,” Mirapaul said, adding that these are not galleries or spaces to put art. “The artists I’ve invited understand it’s an opportunity to make the house the art. Their art is inextricably united with the structure of the house.”
