

ARTFORUM

Mark Dion

THE EXPLORERS CLUB

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In the spring of 1908, Robert Sterling Clark, heir to a vast industrial fortune, departed for northern China with a team of thirty-six men in tow. The ambitions he averred were rigorously scientific: to document, analyze, and survey the country's frontier, then uncharted by Westerners. In Mark Dion's installation *Phantoms of the Clark Expedition*, 2012, the American artist assumes the guise of both historian and ethnographer, shifting the locus of inquiry from China's flora and fauna to Clark and his men, and training a critical gaze on an expedition that coincided with the heyday of Theodore Roosevelt's "big stick" imperialism.

The Explorer's Club, housed since 1965 in the former townhouse of Clark's brother, Stephen, furnishes the site for Dion's intervention. On a long, wooden table in the club's Trophy Room, papier-mâché replicas of the expeditioners' equipment, fashioned from photographs and knowledge of what was typical for the time, are laid out like so many souvenirs. Preserved in white impasto and arrayed without hierarchy or context, these faux artifacts—a pair of binoculars, two horseshoes, a wide-brimmed hat—appear as a generic accumulation of things, the repertoire of some nondescript expedition past.

Subtle details gesture toward specificity: a blanket engraved with Clark's initials; a fictional expedition flag, rendered with felt and grommets. Others advise against conceiving each item as a strict facsimile. A wild boar, bound and hung from the rafters, cocks its head toward the viewer, opposing the room's *nature morte* (literal and figurative) with its uncanny vitality. Nearby, an oversize Chinese squirrel, enveloped in a coat of white synthetic fur, aggresses with its excess of mass and of texture. Such anomalies disrupt the realism of Dion's installation, opening fissures where the inherent violence of Clark's mission—and, by extension, that of the Western explorer—becomes manifest. Weighed against the room's original collection of decapitated predators, Dion's insertion of a readymade bust of Clark, marble and impassive, seems particularly pointed.

— Courtney Fiske



Mark Dion, *Phantoms of the Clark Expedition* (detail), 2012, mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view.

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