

The Korea Times

## Mark Dion critically reimagines 'specimens of Korea' in solo exhibition

Posted : 2021-09-08 16:44

Updated : 2021-09-08 16:52



An installation view of Mark Dion's solo exhibition, "The Sea Life of South Korea and Other Curious Tales," held at Barakat Contemporary in central Seoul / Courtesy of Barakat Contemporary

By Park Han-sol

For more than three decades, American artist Mark Dion has been driven by his fascination with natural history, along with its complex relationship with human civilization and destruction, prompting him to take on a wide range of roles, including: amateur ecologist, archaeologist, naturalist and avid collector.

Stating that, "Nature is the most elaborate space to produce power and ideology," Dion, at his first solo exhibition in Korea, "The Sea Life of South Korea and Other Curious Tales," at Barakat Contemporary in central Seoul, has infused the field of marine biology into his series of art installations and drawings, some of which were inspired by Korea's own coastal ecology.

In his installation work, "The Sea Life of South Korea" (2021), he has reimagined one section of the gallery as a laboratory inside a vessel used in the early 20th century to conduct research on the aquatic ecosystem.



Artist Mark Dion in a white lab coat / Courtesy of Barakat Contemporary



"Theatrum Mundi" (Cosmological Cabinet) (2018) by Mark Dion / Courtesy of Barakat Contemporary

Throughout the exhibition period, this recreated work space of an anonymous marine biologist will be filled with miniaturists, who will produce new paintings of sea creatures witnessed and collected from local markets. The completed pieces will be on display on the laboratory's cork bulletin board, while the creatures will be featured as "specimens of Korea."

Another of Dion's pieces exploring the current scene of marine ecology in Korea is the "Cabinet of Marine Debris" (2021) – a twist on the tradition of "cabinets of curiosities," in which European members of royalty and aristocrats boasted their collections of rare specimens and antiquities discovered during their travels to exotic, foreign lands.

Here, his collection consists of items that have been discarded along the southern and western coastlines of Korea, from brightly colored bottle caps and detergent containers, used facial masks, fishing nets and buoys, to old toothbrushes.

By displaying in an elaborate cabinet with glass compartments these disparate oddities that used to float aimlessly on the ocean's surface, the artist visualizes the damaging impact of human culture on the marine environment, while also imbuing worthless items with the status of objects of art, similar to that of precious gems.

Dion explained that these particular works were inspired by the idea that the presence of the ocean must have a significant impact on Korea, as a peninsula surrounded by water.



"Blood Coral" brings forth the relationship between the threatened aquatic creature and human civilization in a vibrant way. Although his coral is blood-red in color, as opposed to the bleached version, an indication of its extreme vulnerability due to environmental pollution and global warming, it sits on a transport crate marked "Fragile," as a message of warning.

On the coral's branches hang artificial items such as a perfume bottle, scissors, pearl necklaces and a magnifying glass, thereby showing how humans continue to consume natural life and endangered species into oblivion.

Mark Dion's solo exhibition, "The Sea Life of South Korea and Other Curious Tales," runs through Nov. 7 at Barakat Contemporary.