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Mark Dion Is the 2008 Winner of Smithsonian American Art Museum's Annual Contemporary Artist Award

The Smithsonian American Art Museum announced today that Mark Dion is the 2008 winner of the museum's Lucelia Artist Award. He was selected by an independent panel of jurors for his prolific creativity and impressively varied body of work, which includes mixed-media installations, sculptures and public projects that explore the relationship among art, science and history through pseudoscientific methods of investigation and display.

"I cannot imagine a greater, more satisfying honor than to be so favorably acknowledged by such an illustrious and sympathetic institution," said Dion. "This award confirms how seriously the Smithsonian American Art Museum regards those devoted to a rigorous interrogation of the social history of the museum, even when this does not follow along precisely academic lines. Being honored by one's respected colleagues is an event rare and delightful."

Dion is the eighth annual winner of the \$25,000 award, which is intended to encourage the artist's future development and experimentation. The Lucelia Artist Award is part of the museum's ongoing commitment to contemporary art and artists through annual exhibitions, acquisitions and public programs.

"Mark Dion's experimental approach to making art that questions public assumptions is exactly the new thinking the museum's Lucelia Artist Award is intended to encourage," said Elizabeth Broun, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. "Dion's work has an important place in the ongoing conversation about what nature and the landscape mean in America that stretches back to the Hudson River School."

The five jurors who selected the winner are Mark Bessire, director of the Bates College Museum of Art; Allan McCollum, artist and senior critic in sculpture at the Yale University School of Art; Nancy Princenthal, senior editor at Art in America magazine; John Ravenal, the Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts; and Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson, director and chief curator at the Aspen Art Museum.

“The Lucelia Artist Award acknowledges Mark Dion’s tireless imagination and ongoing achievement as an artist and educator,” the jurors wrote in their decision. “His archeological digs and museum interventions celebrate the value of exploration and learning, and invite audiences to embark on their own journey of intellectual discovery. This approach, coupled with a prodigious commitment to visual creativity, has inspired a generation of artists and established Dion as one of the most innovative contemporary artists working today.”

The jurors continued, “Dion’s interdisciplinary practice has yielded an expansive body of work that weaves together history, science and popular culture with ingenuity and wit. In taking on the various roles of naturalist, archeologist, entomologist, social historian and romantic traveler, Dion not only demonstrates a remarkable sense of curiosity, but also an abiding love for the natural and built environment. Over the last two decades, he has collaborated with cultural organizations around the world to explore how society accumulates and disseminates knowledge through the classification and display of artifacts. In so doing, Dion has moved beyond traditional modes of institutional critique, and become a passionate advocate for collections large and small.”

Dion’s work has been shown widely at museums and galleries as well as nature centers, parks and gardens in the United States, Canada and Europe. Recent major exhibitions and installations have been on view at Bartram’s Garden in Philadelphia, the Natural History Museum in London, the Miami Art Museum, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, In Situ gallery in Paris and the Tate Britain in London. In 2006, “Neukom Vivarium,” a permanent installation commissioned by the Seattle Art Museum, debuted in Seattle’s Olympic Sculpture Park. Dion is represented by Tanya Bonakdar Gallery in New York City.

Dion was born in New Bedford, Mass., in 1961. He received a bachelor’s degree in fine arts in 1986 from the Hartford Art School at the University of Hartford in Connecticut; he was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Hartford in 2003. Dion participated in the Whitney Museum of American Art’s Independent Study Program in New York City from 1984 to 1985. In 2001, he received the Larry Aldrich Foundation Award. Dion lives and works in Pennsylvania.

In addition to Dion, the 2008 nominees were Doug Aitken, Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, Slater Bradley, Matthew Buckingham, Keith Edmier, Spencer Finch, Harrell Fletcher, Mark Grotjahn, Trenton Doyle Hancock, Rachel Harrison, Zoe Leonard, Suzanne McClelland, Wangechi Mutu and Dana Schutz. Joanna Marsh, The James Dicke Curator of Contemporary Art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, coordinated the jury panel selection and the nomination and jurying process for the award.

“I am thrilled that the jury has selected such a talented and deserving artist to receive the museum’s Lucelia Artist Award and hope that it allows Mark the freedom to undertake ambitious new projects, which continue to challenge and delight,” said Marsh.

The Lucelia Artist Award, established in 2001, annually recognizes an American artist younger than 50 who has produced a significant body of work and consistently demonstrates exceptional creativity. Each year, five distinguished jurors with an extensive knowledge of contemporary art nominate artists to be considered for the award; there is no application. Previous winners were Jessica Stockholder (2007), Matthew Coolidge, director of the Center for Land Use Interpretation (2006); Andrea Zittel (2005); Kara Walker (2004); Rirkrit Tiravanija (2003); Liz Larner (2002); and Jorge Pardo (2001). The 2008 award is supported by James Dicke.

About the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Smithsonian American Art Museum celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans with approximately 41,500 artworks in all media spanning more than three centuries. Its National Historic Landmark building, a dazzling showcase for American art and portraiture, is located at Eighth and F streets N.W. in the heart of a revitalized downtown arts district. Museum hours are 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily, except Dec. 25. Admission is free. Metrorail station: Gallery Place/Chinatown (Red, Yellow and Green lines). Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 633-5285 (TTY). Museum information (recorded): (202) 633-7970. Web site: americanart.si.edu.

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