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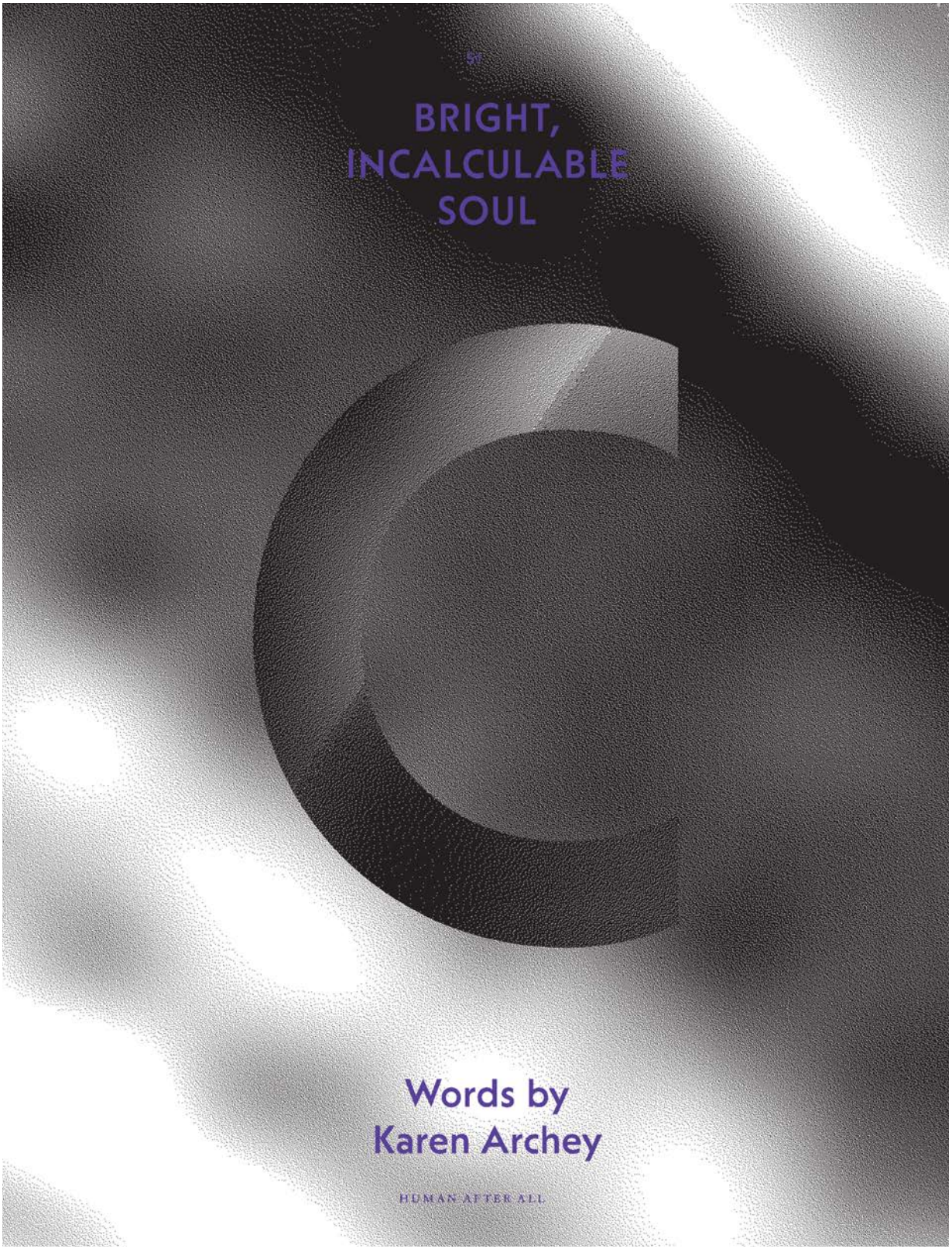

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In a world defined by a collective alienation from our own bodies, David Altmejd wants to make objects that “come alive”—revealing the corpus as a contradiction, ruined yet teeming with life.

Untitled, 2011

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The Pit, detail, 2011

A handsome man in his mid-thirties sits on a bench in an upscale, warehouse-like setting, taking his own photo, MySpace-style, in a mirror riddled with holes. He gingerly tugs his white t-shirt up to his neck to reveal a nipple and a chest cascading into abs. A massive fissure shot through the mirror obscures his jock, replacing the view of any unmentionables with what appears to be half a cantaloupe on a coffee maker. If ever there was a perfect amalgamation of an art-world studio portrait and a Grindr profile pic, this is it. And such an image is the genius of David Altmejd's Instagram account. "I like holes," the artist once said in an interview with Linda Yablonsky. "I like orifices. They're what lets in light and air."

For those worried that this anecdote may be slightly gauche, rest assured it describes that which Altmejd continually returns to in his practice, which itself needs no introduction. This, then, is the human body, and the sense of wonder and infinity that Altmejd finds imbued in it. For in the Canadian artist's world, the corpus is a contradiction, overtaken by ruin but sprouting wings, seeping pus but hued in an elegant blush shade. In his *oeuvre*, a hole might blast through the center of an angel, for example; or a giant, frozen in time, could be found wearing jagged, rectangular, mirror-plated limbs; or a circulatory system might take the shape of a human, yet have no body to sustain. As in so many of Altmejd's works, we find the conflicted body divorced from its sentience—his figures being dumb, big and alive, seemingly despite all odds, but dead inside. It's an increasingly apt visual metaphor for the state of human consciousness in a world defined by our collective alienation from our own bodies, our proclivity to communicate through wires rather than flesh.

Although Altmejd's work synchronizes well with its zeitgeist on a societal level, the artist's approach to art-making through intuition—a word with problematic connotations of its own—feels distinctly out of vogue. I get the impression many believe Altmejd's work to be too pretty, too fantastical, too glittery. "Oh, you're writing about *David Altmejd*?" a friend and fellow critic asked when she heard I was researching the artist. In a moment of brutal honesty, she said, "It took me a while to figure out why I dislike him so much. He totally rejects the history of 1960s and '70s art." While my colleague's sentiments represent a prevalent opinion among more cerebral critics and curators, I firmly believe that working through a pre-verbal, non-theory-based *modus operandi* is not only legitimate, but potentially a step toward connecting our hermetic art world with broader publics and concerns.

Choosing to imbue one's work with allusions and allegory rather than directly reference theory or other systems of thought doesn't mean that an artist "can't talk the talk," or is ignorant of the history preceding his present. As such, Altmejd wrests visual metaphors from biology, Catholicism and architecture, as well as art history. When thinking about the artist's forebears, one cannot help but think of artists-*cum*-biologists like Ernst Haeckel and Mark Dion, as well as Kiki Smith and Joseph Cornell. Biology, like art, is another system designed to make sense of life. The concept of entropy, a scientific term popularized in the art-world lexicon by Robert Smithson, is particularly germane here, speaking as it does to the hybrid (and binary) states found in Altmejd's work: growth/decay, liquid/solid, soft/hard, grotesque/beautiful. It's only fitting that the artist studied biology for one year in university, then abandoned it to pursue art. "I think I'm satisfied by sculpture in the same way a scientist is satisfied by his studies," Altmejd remarked to me recently. "I'm interested in science, but in a creative way." Altmejd, unlike so many successful artists today, speaks with diffidence and even periodically apologizes for being "slow." Given the degree of the artist's international renown, Altmejd's modesty is unfortunately somewhat shocking, especially as compared to many art-world personalities. Altmejd's unassuming character seems to meld well with a practice that desires to "know thyself"—to venture through both the mind and the body.

The body, oversized, awkward and on the brink of collapse, took form as a giant humanoid within Altmejd's

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La Gorge #5, 2012

generally lauded Canadian Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007. Birds holding gold chains in their beaks connected disparate works throughout the angular, architecturally challenging space. The next year brought Altmejd's second solo presentation at Andrea Rosen, in New York, in which nine twelve-foot-tall colossi were hilariously described by critic Jerry Saltz as "oversized werewolves, rotting Wookiees, or sculptures of pharaohs from some sci-fi porn planet."

Although several critics had already taken note of the intuitive relationship that Altmejd bears to material discovery—the artist's constructions evidencing his proclivity to create by spontaneous design, rather than by preordained plan—the gallery contextualized his exhibition as the product of a masterminded intellectual, a description the artist would come to emphatically disavow. The eponymous show's press release states that "Altmejd melds and weaves the disparate yet connected institutional critique of Minimalism and its radical eradication of visual incident with the luscious surfaces and psychological eruptions of the work of artists associated with the Part Object, which, to quote art historian and critic Helen Molesworth, are works that seem 'skeptical of language's ability to contain our bodily experiences' and offer 'a series of imperfect vessels, cast objects filled with the matter of their own making, surfaces resistant to words.'"

I don't quote this press release at length to say that the gallery misconstrued their artist's work, but to point to the fact that Altmejd's approach is highly misunderstood, and is rather brazenly, refreshingly unacademic. Indeed, there's much truth in the assertion that the artist views the ability of language to communicate our bodily experiences with utmost skepticism. Language, of course, fails to accurately portray the inner workings of our minds, bodies and lives, but so too does the staid rhetoric of institutional critique, Minimalism, post-Minimalism or "Neo-Goth," as Altmejd's work has been dubbed. It seems that he prefers to allow his art to do the talking. "I'd love to make a work of art that's as complex and layered and deep and infinite as a body is, rather than just an object that's used to communicate meaning," Altmejd tells me. "I'm not interested in the communication of meaning or making an object that communicates meaning. I'm interested in making an object that comes alive and that's complex enough to generate meaning itself."

Recent years have brought a palpable shift in the artist's work. While Altmejd's post-graduation decade saw him grow from his early display cases to installations of colossi, his concurrent 2011 exhibitions at Andrea Rosen and the Brant Foundation, in Greenwich,

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Untitled 1 (The Watchers), 2009

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Connecticut, unveiled new, immaculately composed Plexiglas structures, as well as a series of wall reliefs, entitled "The Architects" (2011). The former structures combine compositions of multicolor thread, ant-eaten plaster heads, geodes, gold chains, crystals—the works, in other words—so meticulously laid out as to be mind-bending. They begin with what Altmejd terms the "heart," a small box containing threads or another precious object, and are blindly branched out from this source like a circulatory or nervous system. However impressive, this "mind-bending" aspect may precisely be the most problematic dimension of Atlmejd's practice: these Plexiglas works highlight the favor that Altmejd shows for practices that are visually recognizable as having been invested with a high degree of labor—an artistic trope as tired as the out-of-the-tube paint squiggle. Yet, is it fair to negatively judge an artwork simply based on the fact that its production bears a high level of exactitude and labor? Can no artist make labor-imbued art in fear of being seen as reaching for a hungry market? Must we deskill in order to preserve our intellectual integrity? Such an assertion seems ridiculous, yet a clear rejoinder remains to be seen.

Meanwhile, Altmejd's newest, more radical and first non-three-dimensional effort—"The Architects"—may best be understood through the artist's little-known, nonreligious infatuation with Catholicism, specifically its visual iconography. Though it's surprising to speak of science and religion in the same breath, Altmejd's inclination for Catholicism can be seen in the same light as his interest in biology. The Catholic religion is another system—at once highly visual and deeply linked to architecture—that attempts to make sense of and establish order in our increasingly complex world. For "The Architects," it appears as if Altmejd has rabidly dug out the shape of an angel directly into the gallery wall, the artist's hand marks still visible. "This is probably the most radical move from what I've previously done, though again it maintains its interest in the body," the artist said to me. "I like the idea that the body would shape itself using material literally coming from the architecture. Every one of them is an architect."

What is it that renders Altmejd's practice distinct from his contemporary counterparts? Perhaps it's his stance on the body, the source of our aesthetic and all other experiences, which he sees as both supremely incalculable and universally relatable. It may be his renunciation of the language-laden history of 1960s and '70s Conceptualism, the lingering tendrils of which still squeeze vim out of many a young artist's practice. And upon actually parsing the work of the bevies of younger artists making work about theories such as natural selection, we find an overwhelming contradiction. The body, like life, is also seen as unknowable, ineffable and incalculable—yet it's with theory, which is bound up in the more limited tongue of verbal language, that such work is undergirded. Isn't it art that is most adept at forging together loosely bound abstractions that, with a leap of faith, produce new, keenly felt bouts of knowledge? Isn't this why we all subscribed to art in the first place?

Untitled 4 (The Watchers), Detail, 2011

There's a sense both of honesty and struggle pervading Altmejd's work that attracts me, a Helen Molesworth fan and postmodern-theory reader. The body in Altmejd's work is one we relate to privately, the experience of which resonates more deeply and profoundly than any theoretical maxims we may read. Who wants to relate to a professional body or a theoretical body, one that travels more easily through the art world? Altmejd's corpus illustrates us at our worst: the day before deadline, minutes after a professional or personal disappointment. It's ready to collapse, half-concussed, overgrown and sad, but it's what carries us through the world. Perhaps it's this built-in familiarity and tenderness that renders Altmejd so unique and relatable. He reminds us that regardless of the darkness that permeates this world, we are truly not alone.

All images courtesy of Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York