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Artist David Altmejd's World of Pure Imagination

By Anne Prentnieks | October 6, 2014

CULTURAL ANATOMY | Altmejd in his Queens studio, with his poodle, Floyd, and works in progress. PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEONORA HAMILL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

NOT FAR FROM the film lots of Silvercup Studios, in NYC's Long Island City—where classics like *Do the Right Thing* and *Highlander* were produced—a more metaphoric kind of cinema unfolds in two airy industrial lofts that together serve as David Altmejd's sculpture studio. Here, Altmejd's environments and figures come to life via thousands of handmade components scattered like ingredients in a scullery: resin cherries, stained glass, broken mirrors, buckets of wig hair, plaster casts of body parts.

Altmejd's regal white poodle, Floyd, calmly rambles through the studio. "I wanted a tall, elegant, intelligent dog," he says, before repeating, "Intelligent."

In the center of the loft space, three unfinished works from Altmejd's ongoing series of gargantuan, human-like forms stand in progressive stages of sculptural development. Mid-transmutation and seemingly positioned in a stop-motion sequence, they channel Altmejd's sculptural method of demonstrating stages within a larger narrative. The three giants metamorphose, one after another, from a towering support of steel (the bones) to layers of blue foam (the muscle). The tallest of the three, at 12 feet, begins to take a smoother form, whittled into a humanoid figure. They are all part of Altmejd's visual canon, which he categorizes according to his own nomenclature, from "body builders" to "watchers" to "giants." The giants, though human-like, are something else altogether in Altmejd's mind.

"I see the giants as making reference to landscape and nature," says the boyish and energetic Altmejd, 40, who lives on Manhattan's Upper West Side with his boyfriend of four years, Jonah Disend. The sculptures tower overhead. "For me, they are too large to identify as bodies. They are abstract, and about surface, texture and materiality."

Some of the giants in Altmejd's studio are among six new pieces he is creating for an expansive survey of his career opening this month at the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris. A to-scale maquette of the museum occupies a corner of the building studio, alongside a model of the Grand Duke Jean Museum of Modern Art in Luxembourg, which will host the exhibition in March before it travels to Montreal, Altmejd's hometown, in June.

The collector Peter Brant, who in 2011 staged a solo show of Altmejd's work at his foundation in Greenwich, Connecticut, admires the forms in the giants sculptures. "They are exceptional, so imaginative," he says. "They almost look like forms from a prehistoric time, and they are very relevant."

Altmejd's lifelike, surreal works are part of a figurative revival that includes Charles Ray, Jeff Koons, Katharina Fritsch and Louise Bourgeois. Bourgeois's tactile, weight-sensitive sculptures "first made me understand how an object can relate powerfully to the world," says Altmejd. Combining his own private catalog of fables with imagery suggestive of biology and science, Altmejd's works seem to pry open the minimalist cubes of Sol LeWitt and Larry Bell and fill them with untamed nature.

In 2001, Altmejd graduated from Columbia University's M.F.A. program. Just three years later, he had his first solo show at Andrea Rosen Gallery, which continues to represent him in New York. In 2007, he was the featured artist at the Venice Biennale's Canadian Pavilion, where *The Index*, his mirrored, forest-like installation of taxidermic and reproduced animals (purchased mostly on eBay) first caught the attention of Fabrice Hergott, director at Paris's Museum of Modern Art. By the time Altmejd exhibited at the Brant Foundation, he had won Canada's prestigious Sobey Art Award, and Hergott was ready to organize a large-scale solo survey.

"You can put him along with the big names in the history of art—with Joseph Beuys, Matthew Barney, even Bruce Nauman, " says Hergott. "He follows this tradition of using space, trying new solutions, using the body, using materials. He is an extremely contemporary artist."

Altmejd, who once studied biology, considers all his pieces to be "self-evolutionary"—living entities that develop through intuitive discovery. He envisions them embodying a vitality and narrative that emerge as they commandeer their own creation, flowing from Altmejd's psyche as if from a Ouija board. "I like the idea that sculpture is able to generate heat," he says. "I'm into making objects that really exist in this world. And for that, I have to give the impression that they contain an infinite space."

Paris's Museum of Modern Art is housed in the eastern wing of the Palais de Tokyo compound. For his show there, Altmejd will utilize the museum's stately U-shaped architecture to create a linear progression of his work. Formally, it will suggest the measured visual tempo of a Roman sculpture hall, offering an arc that illustrates the process by which Altmejd's works have evolved.

Near the start of the exhibit, four giants will stand in an aisle lined with mirrors. Altmejd sees them as "the first things that existed post–Big Bang," he says. "The giants reference landscape and nature before even man came about."

The exhibit will also include his 2014 *The Flux and the Puddle*, a labyrinthine network of Plexiglas, fluorescent lights and mirrors. Within it, a dynamic theater of evolution unfolds as Altmejd's characters transform from one type of body—crude humanoid mass, person, werewolf—to the next. The work is a dizzying spectacle, playing illusions of infinity against our perceptions of space, matter and gravity.

"Fabrice told me, 'The aim is very simple: The show should be the best,' " says co-curator Robert Vifian, a chef-owner of Vietnamese restaurant Tan Dinh in Paris's 7th arrondissement and a serious art collector. "When I saw *The Flux and the Puddle*, I said that unless we could get that piece, we would not have the best show."

Altmejd's mother was raised Catholic, and his Jewish father emigrated from Poland to Canada in the late 1960s. As a child, Altmejd attended synagogue on Saturdays and Catholic Mass on Sundays. *The Flux and the Puddle*, like all of the artist's work, appears rooted in both of these traditions, balancing geometric space with biological evolution. "I think that the Jewish way of understanding architecture is more like a brain," he says, noting that Catholic imagery and its relationship to the body more viscerally compels him. "A church is in the shape of a cross, which is the shape of the body, so when you enter a church it's like you're entering a body—it's so beautiful. It feeds me."