

DAVID  
KORDANSKY  
GALLERY

David Altmejd  
*The Enlightenment  
of the Witch*  
May 15 – July 2, 2021

David Kordansky Gallery is pleased to present The Enlightenment of the Witch, its first exhibition of new sculptures by David Altmejd. Conceived as a series of four discrete rooms in which an open-ended journey takes shape through a series of inter-related figures, the show features Altmejd's uncanny ability to transform human forms into teeming universes of material invention, as well as his propensity for employing physical things to question mysteries of consciousness and other facets of the immaterial world. The Enlightenment of the Witch is on view May 15 through July 2, 2021.

David Altmejd's explorations of the outer and inner spaces of the human body and mind constitute a key contribution to the sculptural discourse of the last twenty-five years. His ever-expanding array of materials is as varied as the installation-based contexts he has imagined for his work. Also in constant flux are the artist's ideas about the construction of both the physical world and the human psyche.

Intimately attuned to the inner realm, the ten sculptures in The Enlightenment of the Witch find Altmejd at his most mythic and introspective. The works are installed in four rooms, which allows them to be experienced as a sequence of propositions about the evolution of consciousness: each head has been built up and broken apart to reveal, in physical terms, varying degrees of self-awareness. But the sequence is also a fairytale-like reflection on the many shapes that the journey from life to death can take in the human imagination, with "life" and "death" understood to pertain not only to the body, but to the personality, spiritual makeup, and total worldview.

This sense of progression can be most readily traced in the gradual disintegration of the body that appears from one work to the next. Beginning with a relatively intact bust of a man who holds his face in his hands, and ending with a full-figure representation of the titular witch as she gives birth and comes apart physically, psychologically, and spiritually, Altmejd animates The Enlightenment of the Witch with depictions of biological and elemental processes alike. The sculptures are defined by their details as well as their overall forms:

each is a synthesis of a multitude of compositional moves and improvisations, with every one of their elements the result of meticulous attention. Many of the highly lifelike eyes that populate his characters' faces are the result of Altmejd's handiwork, as well as the surreal clay distortions, mineral-encrusted cavities, and painterly notations that denote the presence of a faintly intelligible symbolic code.

For Altmejd, however, this virtuosic approach is more than a driver of visual elaboration. It is the result of complete submission to the whims of the objects as they emerge from the formless state in which they began their lives. Accordingly, it is also an acknowledgement that objects, along with ideas and images, have spirits of their own that communicate with their makers and observers. Altmejd increasingly allows these spirits to dictate the terms by which the sculptures are made; in this equation, the artist himself is merely a conduit through which other forces operate, assert their identities, and assume physical form. The enlightenment of the witch in question, then, can be described as a psycho-spiritual reckoning that encompasses the other figures in the show, each of which is the manifestation of a stage in her self-realization. Among them, however, are several heads largely defined by the pervasive presence of crystal; installed alternately on the floor, a pedestal, and the wall, these seem to indicate the simultaneous presence of a less earthly—and perhaps more masculine—realm of the spirit.

That an artwork (or literary text or musical composition) comes about through the possession of its maker by “demonic” forces is an idea as old as art. What Altmejd brings to light is even more radical, however. The exhibition is full of fairy tale archetypes, with hybridized beings sharing attributes with trolls, unicorns, and fairies, in addition to witches; though all of the sculptures are recognizably human in some ways, in many others, they are not, and taken together, they amount to a laboratory for expressing how humans are often—if not always—possessed by non-human spirits, dreams, or, in the case of more rigidly scientific notions, natural instincts.

The challenge Altmejd sets out in The Enlightenment of the Witch is to make figurative sculptures about—and possessed by—energetic principles that transcend figuration. Put another way, he summons all of his technical and aesthetic knowledge to make works that address the primal states of unknowing which lie at the root of human experience. And yet the exhibition also makes plain his intense, even erotic connection to the tangible stuff that surrounds us. Indeed, as viewers make their way from room to room and sculpture to sculpture, they are presented with an increasing diversity of materials, and an enriched sense of what happens when consciousness collides with the body and spirit engages matter—or vice versa.

David Altmejd (b. 1974, Montreal) has been the subject of solo exhibitions at David Kordansky Gallery (2021); Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels (2016); Kunsthal KAdE, Amersfoort, Netherlands (2016); Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark (2015, traveled to Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec); Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (2014, traveled to Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal and Mudam Luxembourg – Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean), among other institutions. In 2007, Altmejd represented Canada at the 52nd Venice Biennale, Italy. Recent group exhibitions include In the Spotlight of the Night Life in the Gloom, Marta Herford Museum, Herford, Germany (2019); Zombies: Pay Attention!, Aspen Art Museum, Colorado (2018); ANIMA MUNDI, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, the Netherlands (2018); Voyage d'hiver, Château de Versailles, France (2017). His work is in the permanent collections of museums such as the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Guggenheim Museum, New York; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; and Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris. Altmejd lives and works in Los Angeles.

**David Altmejd**  
**The Enlightenment of the Witch**  
**May 15 – July 2, 2021**



**David Altmejd**  
*Matter*, 2021  
expandable foam, epoxy clay, resin,  
wood, acrylic paint, and steel  
29 1/2 x 10 1/8 x 12 1/2 inches  
(74.9 x 25.7 x 31.8 cm)  
(Inv# DAL 21.006)



**David Altmejd**  
*Ghost Realization*, 2021  
expandable foam, epoxy clay, epoxy  
gel, resin, wood, steel, acrylic paint,  
and quartz  
30 x 23 1/2 x 23 1/2 inches  
(76.2 x 59.7 x 59.7 cm)  
(Inv# DAL 21.003)



**David Altmejd**  
*C.C. (Emerging)*, 2021  
expandable foam, epoxy clay, acrylic  
paint, glitter, and quartz  
7 x 8 1/4 x 9 3/4 inches  
(17.8 x 21 x 24.8 cm)  
(Inv# DAL 21.008)



**David Altmejd**  
*C.C. (Standing)*, 2021  
expandable foam, epoxy clay, quartz,  
resin, acrylic paint, glitter, wood, and  
steel  
23 3/4 x 8 1/2 x 8 1/2 inches  
(60.3 x 21.6 x 21.6 cm)  
(Inv# DAL 21.009)



**David Altmejd**

*Splitting Smurf*, 2021

expandable foam, epoxy clay, epoxy gel, resin, wood, steel, acrylic paint, quartz, glass rhinestones, and pencil  
27 3/4 x 23 1/2 x 24 inches  
(70.5 x 59.7 x 61 cm)  
(Inv# DAL 21.005)



**David Altmejd**

*The Troll*, 2021

expandable foam, epoxy clay, epoxy gel, resin, wood, steel, hair, acrylic paint, quartz, glass eyes, pencil, Plexiglas, thread, metal wire, glass rhinestones, and glitter  
35 x 30 3/4 x 28 1/4 inches  
(88.9 x 78.1 x 71.8 cm)  
(Inv# DAL 21.004)



**David Altmejd**

*Smoking with Oneself*, 2021

expandable foam, epoxy clay, epoxy gel, resin, wood, steel, hair, acrylic paint, quartz, mechanical pencil, pencil, Plexiglas, paper, thread, metal wire, and glass rhinestones  
36 x 23 1/2 x 25 1/4 inches  
(91.4 x 59.7 x 64.1 cm)  
(Inv# DAL 21.002)



**David Altmejd**

*The Unicorn*, 2021

expandable foam, epoxy clay, epoxy gel, resin, wood, steel, hair, acrylic paint, quartz, glass eyes, pencil, Plexiglas, thread, metal wire, and glass rhinestones  
55 x 26 x 24 inches  
(139.7 x 66 x 61 cm)  
(Inv# DAL 21.001)



**David Altmejd**

*C.C. (Rising)*, 2021

expandable foam, epoxy clay, acrylic paint, glitter, quartz, and wood  
12 x 8 1/2 x 7 1/2 inches  
(30.5 x 21.6 x 19.1 cm)  
(Inv# DAL 21.007)



**David Altmejd**

*The Enlightenment of the Witch*, 2021  
expandable foam, epoxy clay, epoxy gel, resin, wood, steel, acrylic paint, quartz, glass eyes, glass rhinestones, glitter, hair, wire, thread, pencil, marker, plastic, screws, and Plexiglas  
56 x 45 x 30 inches  
(142.2 x 114.3 x 76.2 cm)  
(Inv# DAL 21.010)

**DAVID ALTMEJD**

born 1974, Montréal, Canada  
lives and works in Los Angeles, CA

EDUCATION

2001 MFA, Columbia University, New York, NY  
1998 BFA, Université du Québec à Montréal, Québec, Canada

SELECTED SOLO / TWO PERSON EXHIBITIONS

(\*indicates a publication)

- 2021 *The Enlightenment of the Witch*, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
- 2020 *Rabbits*, Xavier Hufkens, Brussels, Belgium
- 2019 *The Vibrating Man*, White Cube, Central, Hong Kong
- 2018 *Magic Loop*, Modern Art, London, England
- 2017 *David Altmejd: The Vessel*, Glenbow, Calgary, Canada
- 2016 *The Flux and the Puddle*, MNBAQ, Québec, Canada  
*L'air*, Xavier Hufkens, Brussels, Belgium  
*Géants*, Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels, Belgium  
*Self-Fiction*, David Altmejd and Friedrich Kunath, Kunsthal KAdE, Amersfoort, The Netherlands
- 2015 *The Flux and the Puddle*, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark  
*Faces*, Modern Art, London, England  
*\*Flux*, Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal, Montréal, Québec, Canada  
Galerie René Blouin, Montréal, Québec, Canada
- 2014 *\*Flux*, Mudam Luxembourg, Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean,

# DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

- Luxembourg, Luxembourg  
*Juices*, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, NY
- 2013     \**David Altmejd*, Xavier Hufkens, Brussels, Belgium
- 2012     *David Altmejd: The Orbit*, MOCA Cleveland, Cleveland, OH  
*David Altmejd*, Modern Art, London, England
- 2011     \*Brant Foundation Art Study Center, Greenwich, CT  
*Conté crépusculaire (Twilight Tale) with composer-performer Pierre Lapointe*, Galerie de l'UQAM, Montréal, Québec, Canada  
Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, NY
- 2010     *Le guide*, Xavier Hufkens, Brussels, Belgium  
*Colossi*, Vanhaerents Art Collection, Brussels, Belgium
- 2009     *Les Abattoirs*, curated by Pascal Pique, Toulouse, France  
*Le Magasin – Centre National d'Art Contemporain de Grenoble*,  
Grenoble, France
- 2008     *David Altmejd*, Modern Art, London, England  
*Doctor Atomic*, Gallery Met at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York,  
NY  
Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, NY
- 2007     \**David Altmejd, Stages*, curated by Silvia Sauquet, Fundació La Caixa,  
Barcelona, Spain  
\**David Altmejd, Métamorphose/Metamorphosis*, curated by Louise Déry,  
Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens, Oakville, Ontario, Canada,  
travelled to Galerie de l'UQAM, Montréal, Québec, Canada; Illingworth  
Kerr Gallery, Alberta College of Art & Design, Calgary, Alberta, Canada  
\*52<sup>nd</sup> Venice Biennale, *The Index*, commissioned by Louise Déry,  
Canadian Pavilion, Venice, Italy
- 2006     *David Altmejd*, Modern Art, London, England
- 2005     *The Builders*, Xavier Hufkens, Brussels, Belgium
- 2004     Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, NY
- 2003     *David Altmejd: Sculpture*, Galerie Optica, Montréal, Québec, Canada

# DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

- Sarah Altmejd*, Centre des arts actuels Skol, Montréal, Québec, Canada
- 2002 *Clear Structures for a New Generation*, Ten in One Gallery, New York, NY
- 1999 *\*Modèles d'esprit et jardins intérieurs*, Galerie B-312, Montréal, Québec, Canada
- 1998 *Jennifer*, Galerie Clark, Montréal, Québec, Canada  
*Table no.2*, Centre des arts actuels Skol, Montréal, Québec, Canada

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

(\*indicates a publication)

- 2019 *In the Spotlight of the Night Life in the Gloom*, Marta Herford Museum, Herford, Germany  
*ARTZUID*, Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
*Dog Days*, CLEARING, New York, NY  
*Psychedelic Healing Center*, Essex Flower, New York, NY  
*People*, Deitch Projects, Los Angeles, CA  
*They Who Walk Behind the Rows*, False Flag, Long Island City, NY
- 2018 *Zombies: Pay Attention!*, Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, CO  
*Absence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder*, Leroy Neiman Gallery, New York, NY  
*Beside Myself*, JTT Gallery, New York, NY  
*DISTORTIONS*, Nathalie Karg Gallery, New York, NY  
*ANIMA MUNDI*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
- 2017 *Private Choices*, Centrale for Contemporary Art, Brussels, Belgium  
*Voyage d'Hiver*, Château de Versailles, Versailles, France  
*Magritte, Broodthaers & l'art contemporain*, Musée Magritte, Brussels, Belgium  
*Miroir Miroir*, MUDAC, Lausanne, Switzerland  
*Dream Machines*, James Cohan Gallery, New York, NY  
*Second Nature*, curated by Janet Fong, K11 Art Foundation, Brooklyn, NY  
*NGV Triennial*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia
- 2016 *Shroom Show*, helper, Brooklyn, NY

# DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

- In Search of The Present*, EMMA, Espoo, Finland  
*From Here to Eternity*, La Maison Particulière, Brussels, Belgium  
*Theories of Modern Art*, Modern Art, London, England  
*Everybody is Crazy, But Me*, Maison Particulière, Brussels, Belgium  
*Human Figure*, Charles Riva Project, Brussels, Belgium  
*Solid Liquids – Internationale Tendenzen der Skulptur in der Gegenwartskunst*, Kunsthalle Münster, Münster, Germany  
*A Material Legacy: The Nancy A. Nasher and David J. Haemisegger Collection of Contemporary Art*, Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina
- 2015     *2050. A Brief History of The Future*, The Royal Museums of Fine Art of Belgium, Brussels, Belgium  
*Possible Collection*, Honolulu, Zürich, Switzerland  
*The Art of Our Time*, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA  
*Rock Hound Swap Meet*, organized by Randy Wray, Junior Projects, New York, NY  
*Rêve Caverne*, Château-Musée, Tournon-sur-Rhône, France
- 2014     *The Grace of a Gesture: Fifty Years of Gifts*, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, Montréal, Canada  
*Love Story – Anne & Wolfgang Titze Collection*, Belvedere Museum, Vienna, Austria  
*Hybrids*, curated by Tatyana Franck, Galerie Sophie Scheidecker, Paris, France  
*Man in the Mirror*, The Walter Vanhaerents Art Collection, Brussels, Belgium  
*Lone Tree*, Marlborough Chelsea, London, England  
*Homecoming*, Galerie Division, Montréal, Québec, Canada  
*Elevated: Contemporary Art in the AGO Tower*, The Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada  
*\*Astralis*, Espace Cultural Louis Vuitton, Paris, France  
*Misled by Nature*, Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto, Canada  
*States of mind*, La Maison Particulière, Brussels, Belgium  
*David Altmejd, Roni Horn, Didier Vermeiren, Danh Vo*, Xavier Hufkens, Brussels, Belgium  
*The Body Metonymic*, Oakland University Gallery, Rochester, Minnesota
- 2013     *Chambres à Part VIII: Voir est un fable*, Laurence Dreyfus Art

# DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

Consulting, Paris, France  
*Science of Dreams*, The Arsenal Montréal, Montréal, Canada  
*À mes amies les licornes*, curated by Cynthia Girard, Parisian Laundry,  
Montréal, Canada  
*Theatrical Gestures*, Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, Herzliya,  
Israel  
*\*My Little Paradise*, Middelheimmuseum, Antwerp, Belgium  
*Jew York*, Zach Feuer Gallery & Untitled Gallery, New York

- 2012 *La Belle et la Bête*, L'Institut Culturel Bernard Magrez, Bordeaux, France  
*\*Builders: Canadian Biennial 2012*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa,  
Ontario, Canada  
*Inside Out and from the Ground UP*, MOCA Cleveland, Cleveland, OH  
*Misled by Nature: Contemporary Art and the Baroque*, organized by the  
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario and the Art Gallery of  
Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, travelled to Museum of Canadian  
Contemporary Art, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, and the Winnipeg Art  
Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada  
*\*Hybrides et Chimères: la conquête d'un rêve éveillé*, Musée Goya de  
Castres, Tarn, France  
*Pothole*, Salon 94, New York, NY  
*ZOO*, curated by Marie Fraser, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal,  
Montréal, Canada  
*Figures from the New World*, curated by Agnieszka Tarasiuk and Fabio  
Cavalluci, Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw,  
Poland  
*Fairy Tales, Monsters and the Genetic Imagination*, curated by Mark  
Scala, Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville, Tennessee, travelled to  
Winnipeg Art Gallery, Manitoba, Canada, and the Glenbow Museum,  
Calgary, Alberta, Canada
- 2011 *Barroco Nova, Site 3: The Fold and Possible Worlds*, London Museum,  
London, Ontario, Canada  
*HabitéR/Collection Frac Midi-Pyrénées*, Les Abattoirs, Toulouse, France  
*Night Scented Stock*, curated by Todd Levin, Marianne Boesky Gallery,  
New York, NY  
*\*The Shape of Things to Come: New Sculpture*, Saatchi Gallery,  
Chelsea, London, England  
*Mystère, Mystères*, Flaran Abbey, Gers, France  
*Mondes inventés – Mondes habités*, curated by Marie-Noëlle Farcy and  
Clément Minighetti, MUDAM, Luxembourg, Luxembourg

# DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

*The House Without the Door*, David Zwirner, New York, NY  
*Everything You Can Imagine is Real...*, Xavier Hufkens, Brussels,  
Belgium  
*Der Traum vom Fliegen*, curated by Britta Heinrich, Haus der Kulturen  
der Welt, Berlin, Germany

- 2010 *Surrealist Conspiracy*, curated by Michael Rooks, High Museum of Art,  
Wieland Pavilion Skyway Galleries, Atlanta, GA  
*\*It Is What It Is. Recent Acquisitions of New Canadian Art*, National  
Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada  
*Ten Year Permanent Collection*, Les Abattoirs, Toulouse, France  
*\*Skin Fruit: Selections from the Dakis Joannou Collection*, curated by  
Jeff Koons, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, NY  
*\*Contemplating the Void: Interventions in the Guggenheim Museum  
Rotunda*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY  
*\*The Visceral Body*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, BC, Canada  
*Alpha Omega: Works from Dakis Joannou Collection*, DESTE  
Foundation for Contemporary Art, Athens, Greece
- 2009 *Everyday Above Ground is a Good One: Reflections of the Underworld*,  
Reg Vardy Gallery, Sunderland, England  
*Collection: MOCA's First 30 Years*, The Museum of Contemporary Art,  
Los Angeles, CA  
*Performance/Art*, Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX  
*Between Spaces*, curated by Tim Goossens and Kate McNamara, P.S. 1  
Contemporary Art Center, New York, NY  
*Sobey Art Award 2009*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario,  
Canada  
*Saint-Nazaire Biennale*, curated by Adam Budak and Laurence Gateau,  
Nantes, France  
*Dream Time*, Caves, Contemporary Art and Transhistory, curated by  
Pascal Pique, Mas d'Azil Prehistoric Cave, Toulouse, France  
*Emporte-moi/Sweep Me Off My Feet*, curated by Nathalie de Blois and  
Frank Lamy, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Québec,  
Canada, travelled to Musée d'art contemporain du Val-de-Marne, France
- 2008 *Without Walls*, Museum 52, New York, NY  
Art Gallery of Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
*Freeway Balconies*, curated by Collier Schorr, Deutsche Guggenheim,  
Berlin, Germany  
*\*Lustwarande 08-Wanderland*, Fundament Foundation, Tilburg, The

# DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

Netherlands

*\*Légende*, Château et Fabriques Domaine Départemental de Chamarande, France

*\*Québec Triennial*, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, Montréal, Québec, Canada

*Installations: Selections from the Guggenheim Collections*, Guggenheim Bilbao, Bilbao, Spain

*Second Thoughts*, Hessel Museum of Art & CCS Galleries, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY

- 2007 *\*The New Authentics: Artists of the Post-Jewish Generation*, curated by Staci Boris, Spertus Museum, Chicago, IL, travelled to The Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University, Waltham, MA  
*Star Power: Museum as Body Electric*, curated by Cydney Payton, Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver, CO  
*\*Six Feet Under: Autopsy of Our Relation to the Dead*, Kunstmuseum Bern, Bern, Switzerland, travelled to travelled to The Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University, Waltham, MA  
*David Altmejd, Renate Anger, and Eric Cameron*, curated by Micah Lexier, Birch Libralato, Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
*\*Fractured Figure: Works from the Dakis Joannou Collection*, Dakis Joannou Collection, Athens, Greece  
*To Build a Fire*, curated by Yuri Masnjy, Rivington Arms, New York, NY  
*Disorder in the House*, Walter Vanhaerents Art Collection, Brussels, Belgium  
*Effigies*, Modern Art, London, England
- 2006 *\*Six Under Feet Under: Autopsy of Our Relation to the Dead*, Kunstmuseum Bern, Bern Switzerland, travelled to Stiftung Deutsches Hygiene Museum, Dresden, Germany  
*\*The Eight Square*, Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany  
*\*The Guggenheim Collection*, Kunsthalle Bonn, Bonn, Germany  
*The Dining Room Show*, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, NY  
*A Brighter Day*, James Cohan Gallery, New York, NY
- 2005 *\*L'echo des limbes*, curated by Nathalie de Blois, Galerie Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Montréal, Québec, Canada  
*\*Blake & Sons. Alternative Lifestyles and Mysticism in Contemporary Art*, curated by René Zechlin, Lewis Glucksman Gallery, University College, Cork, Ireland  
*\*The Zine UnBound: Kults, Werewolves and Sarcastic Hippies*, Yerba

# DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

- Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA  
*The, The*, Modern Art, London, England  
*\*Ideal Worlds. New Romanticism in Contemporary Art*, curated by Max Hollein and Martina Weinhart, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Frankfurt, Germany  
*David Altmejd, Mathew Cerletty, Kirsten Everberg, Alisa Margolis and Sophie Van Hellerman*, Galerie Ghislaine Hussenot, Paris, France
- 2004 *Noctambule*, organized by D'Amelio Terras, Fondation Dosne-Bibliothèque Thiers, Paris, France  
*\*Whitney Biennial 2004*, curated by Chrissies Iles, Shamin M. Momim and Debra Singer, Whitney Museum of Art, New York, NY  
*\*Scream: 10 Artists X 10 Writers X 10 Scary Movies*, curated by Fernanda Arruda and Michael Clifton, Anton Kern Gallery, New York, NY
- 2003 *Material Eyes*, LFL Gallery, New York, NY  
*Licht*, organized Optica, Art Forum Berlin, Berlin, Germany and Montréal, Québec, Canada  
*\*8th Istanbul Biennial*, curated by Dan Cameron, Istanbul, Turkey  
*Détournements*, Maison de la Culture Côte-des-Neiges, Montréal, Québec, Canada  
*Corporate Profits vs. Labor Costs*, curated by John Connelly, D'Amelio Terras Gallery, New York, NY  
*Now Playing: Daniel Reich Gallery*, John Connelly Presents, K48, D'Amelio Terras Gallery, New York, NY  
*Life/Like*, Apartment 5BE Gallery, New York, NY
- 2002 *Demonclownmonkey*, curated by Matthew Ritchie, Artists Space, New York, NY  
*Lucky Draw*, Sculpture Center, Deitch Projects, New York, NY
- 2001 *Interval: New Art for New Space*, Sculpture Center, New York, NY  
*How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Recession*, Ten in One Gallery, New York, NY  
*\*Pointe de chute*, curated by Louise Déry, Galerie de l'UQAM, Montréal, Québec, Canada, travelled to Centre d'art Contemporain, Brussels, Belgium
- 1998 *\*Stimuli*, curated Nicolas Baier and Emmanuel Galland, Maison de la Culture Frontenac, Montréal, Québec, Canada  
*Artifice 98*, Saidye Bronfman Art Center, Montréal, Québec, Canada

# DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

*Les Bricolos*, Galerie Clark, Montréal, Québec, Canada

## SELECTED PROJECTS

(\*indicates a publication)

2009 Daniel Hesidence (ROSE LAUGHTER Winter Holiday), Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, NY

## AWARDS

(\*indicates a publication)

2015 Ordre des arts et des lettres du Québec Award  
2009 \**Sobey Art Award*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

(\*indicates a non-periodical book, catalog, or other publication)

2020 "The shows must go on – what not to miss during Frieze week this year," Apollo-Magazine.com, October 8, 2020  
Wullschläger, Jackie, "Frieze Sculpture Park opens its doors to nature," FT.com, October 7, 2020  
Rea, Naomi, "See the Playful Sculptures on View at Frieze London's Sculpture Park, From an Enormous Braid to an Art Star's Sandwich," Artnet.com, October 5, 2020  
Rea, Naomi, "See the Playful Sculptures on View at Frieze London's Sculpture Park, From an Enormous Braid to an Art Star's Sandwich," News.artnet.com, October 5, 2020  
"15 Things to do This Weekend in London: 9-11 October 2020," TheResident.co.uk, October 5, 2020  
Freeman, Nate, "Studio Visit: Artist David Altmejd on Cleaning His Studio for a Fresh Start and the Powerful Spiritual Teachings of Eckhart Tolle," Artnet.com, September 25, 2020  
Mantai, Joshen, "David Altmejd | New Online Exhibition with David Kordansky," Flaunt.com, August 24, 2020  
Solomon, Tessa and Claire Selvin, "ARTnews in Brief: David Kordansky Now Reps David Altmejd—and More from August 21, 2020," ARTnews.com, August 21, 2020  
Hernando, Silvia, "Contemporary art rubs the crystal ball," El País,

# DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

- February 28, 2020  
"David Altmejd represented by David Kordansky Gallery," *artdaily.com*,  
January 15, 2021
- 2019 Estiler, Keith, "The Best Booths to See at Frieze New York 2019,"  
*Hypebeast*, May 2, 2019  
Marchese, Kieron, "David Altmejd's 'The Vibrating Man' Exhibition  
Conjures Up a Post-Apocalyptic Fantasy," *Designboom.com*, March 30,  
2019  
Zara, Janelle, "Three to See in Hong Kong: Louise Bourgeois, Julio Le  
Parc, and David Altmejd," *ARTnews*, March 29, 2019  
Donoghue, Katy, "David Altmejd's New Bust Embraces the Real and  
Absurd," *Whitewalls*, March 28, 2019  
Arulrajah, Kevin, "David Altmejd Launches 'The Vibrating Man'  
Exhibition," *Hypebeast*, March 27, 2019  
Moldan, Tessa, "Art Basel in Hong Kong: Exhibitions to See," *Ocula  
Magazine*, March 23, 2019
- 2018 Selvin, Claire, "White Cube Now Represents David Altmejd," *ARTnews*,  
November 30, 2018  
Collings, Matthew, "David Altmejd – Magic Loop review: Weird and  
wonderful show merges magic with science," *Evening Standard*, January  
17, 2018
- 2016 Simmons, William J., "David Altmejd," *CRUSH fanzine*, Issue 11 Men at  
Work, November 2016, pp. 53-60  
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artnet

## Studio Visit: Artist David Altmejd on Cleaning His Studio for a Fresh Start and the Powerful Spiritual Teachings of Eckhart Tolle

The artist tells us about how he stays sane during long stretches in the studio.

Nate Freeman | September 25, 2020



David Altmejd. Photo courtesy David Kordansky Gallery.

Many artists kept busy during quarantine, but it seems like the Los Angeles-based sculptor David Altmejd was especially tied up.

Holed up in his studio in L.A., Altmejd put the finishing touches on works for a show at his Brussels gallery, Xavier Hufkens, that opened earlier this month. And in August, word got out that he was joining the roster at powerhouse Los Angeles outfit David Kordansky Gallery, which promptly gave him an online show dedicated to a single new work. Altmejd's first show in the physical gallery space is slated for May 2021.

In the days before the show in Brussels opened, Altmejd emailed us some thoughts about how he stays sane during long stretches in the studio, and what he would put on his moodboard if he had one.

### **What are the most indispensable items in your studio and why?**

Quartz, [an] open mind, pencil/paper, space to cry.

### **What is the studio task on your agenda tomorrow that you are most looking forward to?**

I just finished a piece, so cleaning up and emptying the space for fresh new start.

### **What kind of atmosphere do you prefer when you work? Do you listen to music or podcasts, or do you prefer silence? Why?**

I listen to Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now* audiobook on repeat. It's my bible. It's not so much about the content, but the fact that it opens up a space in consciousness, outside of time, and so most of what happens in the studio comes from this space (or non-space) rather than from me.

Freeman, Nate, "Studio Visit: Artist David Altmejd on Cleaning His Studio for a Fresh Start and the Powerful Spiritual Teachings of Eckhart Tolle," *Artnet.com*, September 25, 2020



David Altmejd, *Joy*. Photo courtesy Xavier Hufkens.



David Altmejd, *Codebreaker* (2020). Photo courtesy White Cube.

When I work late at night, I try to open up a scary zone, an ominous space, where spirits awake and where intensity grows exponentially. It feels like something so immense is about to happen, like the end of the world, death, or a complete transformation of consciousness. At that moment, I stop working because I'm too scared. This unreachable sweet spot is God.

**What trait do you most admire in a work of art? What trait do you most despise?**

When I'm mesmerized and I don't know why. It means that there's something in the work that comes from beyond the mind. Or rather, when a work of art is not made up completely of mind-stuff, so it leaves openings and the other side, which can not be described, and can be felt.

And I don't despise anything in art.

**What snack food could your studio not function without?**

I take care of a little vegetable garden just outside my studio, so anything ripe is a perfect snack. Recently it's been raw okra and tomatoes.

**Who are your favorite artists, curators, or other thinkers to follow on social media?**

Mu Pan (@mupan1911), Sgàire Teàrlag Wood (@sgairewood), Alina Perez (@alina.perez).

**When you feel stuck in the studio, what do you do to get un-stuck?**

Nothing.

**If you had to put together a mood board, what would be on it right now?**

World in flames, beautiful jack rabbit, marijuana, woman giving birth.

Solomon, Tessa and Claire Selvin, “ARTnews in Brief: David Kordansky Now Reps David Altmejd—and More from August 21, 2020,” *ARTnews.com*, August 21, 2020

## ARTnews

# ARTnews in Brief: David Kordansky Now Reps David Altmejd—and More from August 21, 2020

By Claire Selvin & Tessa Solomon | August 21, 2020



David Altmejd, PHOTO: LEE THOMPSON/COURTESY DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES

### *David Kordansky Gallery Now Represents David Altmejd*

David Altmejd has joined David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, which will present an online exhibition devoted to a new sculpture by the artist from August 26 to September 16. Altmejd’s sculptures combine figurative and abstract elements, and he explores various opposing concepts, such as that of inside versus outside, through the use of multifarious materials. The artist’s pieces can be found in the collections of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the Whitney Museum in New York, the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, and other major institutions.

# EL PAÍS

## Contemporary art rubs the crystal ball

The exhibition 'Still human' delves into visions of the near future, marked by ideas such as artificial intelligence and transhumanism

By: Silvia Hernando | February 28, 2020

The unknown, that which we intuit is yet to come but do not know exactly when or how, has been an inexhaustible source of fascination for the human imagination. Also, of course, of fears and anxieties about the prejudices that are being formed before what we agree to call the new comes ashore in the present. With the aim of exploring these visions of the near future through the latest art, the Solo Space in Madrid has mounted the Still human exhibition (open until July), a selection of seven dozen pieces by 40 international authors –some guests and others part of the permanent collection that Ana Gervás and David Cantolla have formed, exhibiting in a building renovated by Juan Herreros– that move between technology and the humanities to launch ideas about the life of tomorrow.

All these questions have been addressed by philosophy and religion since time immemorial. Perhaps that is why the tour starts with a kneeler, placed not next to a confessional but in front of a poster like those old ones that were used in airports, where the lapels turn to write different messages. As a divine revelation, when the viewer kneels down, the 125 letters distributed in four lines stop moving randomly to capture a coherent and always different phrase in English (more or less). For example? "When you are happy you always want the best you can when you are not." The work of the German Mario Klingemann, it is one of the several proposals in the exhibition that use artificial intelligence as a creative tool.



David Altmejd's work 'Spirit' (2019). Photography: Victor Sainz

"The learning base is an open source neural network that has learned from Wikipedia to produce texts," the artist explained about his creation, adding that one of the different layers of interpretation of the piece is defined by reflection on the notion of meaning. "We humans look for it everywhere," said the German, a collateral victim of the coronavirus, since he could not receive in time for the inauguration several replacements of letters that did not work, since the Chinese city where they were produced was in quarantine. Also by Klingemann, the screening *Memories of Passerby*, made up of two adjacent screens, creates portraits in real time from a database fed by the artist. Produced in a series of three, this was the second AI-created work in history to be sold at auction at Sotheby's, where it fetched \$ 51,000 last year.

The technology and its applications mark one of the main concerns of the creators represented in the exhibition, where proposals by rapidly modern artists are conjugated with other established ones such as Nam June Paik. Yang Yongliang uses computer programs to draw what looks, at a distance, like a traditional Chinese landscape but, up close, reveals itself as a pile of modern architectures, with buildings, cranes, and power lines laid out in the shape of mountains. In a small room halfway through the tour, Lars Dietrich and Koka Nikoladze play with sound art through self-made instruments that improvise melodies in real time while posing a reflection on the transformation of the consumption and production of music.

Transhumanism, the fusion between robots and humans that, supposedly, will elevate our race to a higher state of evolution, marks another of the open debates in the exhibition. There are also representations of hybrids between animals and people, such as Neo Rauch's dog-man, or sculptures with multiple points of view, such as the postmodern and, in a way cubist, figure of David Altmejd, a bust of a sliced man to create multiple perspectives. There are also video games, 3D projections and works, such as those by Nina Saunders, that fuse people with objects of daily life, such as a chair. "I usually create things that use everyday life to take it out of context and surprise," explained the artist, who participated in the presentation of the sample.

# whitewall

## David Altmejd's New Busts Embrace the Real and Absurd

By: Katy Donoghue | March 28, 2019

On March 26, David Altmejd's solo show at White Cube opened in Hong Kong. It is the New York-based artist's first in Asia and also marks his official representation by the gallery. On view is a new series of "head" and "bust" sculptures.

Inspired by magic, spirituality, and psychedelia, Altmejd is known for juxtaposing the real with the absurd. Faces are carved out and filled with crystals or cantaloupe. Whitewall checked in with the artist about the new body of work on view through May 18, 2019.

**WHITEWALLER:** Included in the show at White Cube in Hong Kong are new "head" and "bust" sculptures. What's usually the starting point for you for this series?

**DAVID ALTMEJD:** The starting point is usually a remnant of the last body of work I did. It can either be a specific idea that I didn't get a chance to explore, or an individual piece that was left astray in the studio. For the White Cube show, it's one individual "bust" sculpture that was the starting point for this new series. I identified two specific characteristics of that bust and let them become two thematic branches.

**WW:** The busts juxtapose hyper realism with the absurd—a face filled with a cantaloupe or a cavern of crystals. What kind of feeling are you hoping to evoke in the viewer by this?

**DA:** Some attraction, some repulsion, but mostly a feeling of wonder, of being mesmerized by something weird.

**WW:** What attracts you to recurring materials we see in your work like fur, crystals, and fruit?

**DA:** The unexpected use of certain materials makes the process more exciting. Having the feeling that some materials or references are awkward can be a good thing. But it's mostly the contrast between materials that I find interesting. Fake vs. real, organic vs. mineral, seductive vs. repulsive. These contrasts produce tensions, and the tensions produce energy. When energy flows through a sculpture, it becomes alive, independent, and ready to be shown.



David Altmejd, *Crystal System* (2019) Courtesy of White Cube



Courtesy of the artist and White Cube

**WW:** Science, science fiction, and magic are named as references in your practice. Are there specific inspirations you could share for this new body of work?

**DA:** Magic, spirituality, psychedelia.

**WW:** This is your first solo show in Asia. Of what significance is that for you?

**DA:** Different contexts always bring out different aspects of the work. For example, in America, my work is very much about its energy and how it exists physically. In France, the same work will bring all its symbolism to the surface and connect with history. I'm not sure what the Asian context will wake up in my work but I'm really excited to figure it out. I have a feeling that there is a deeper spiritual aspect in my work that is about to awaken. Maybe this will be the moment.

**WW:** What are you looking forward to seeing and doing in Hong Kong this week?

**DA:** Enjoying getting lost.



David Altmejd, *Bad News* (2019) Courtesy of White Cube

Collings, Matthew, "David Altmejd - Magic Loop review: Weird and wonderful show merges magic with science," *Standard.co.uk*, January 17, 2018

## EveningStandard.

# David Altmejd - Magic Loop review: Weird and wonderful show merges magic with science

By Matthew Collings | January 17, 2018



Out on a limb: *Magic Loop*, 2017, the centrepiece of the exhibition

Here's a show that will blow your mind, make you laugh and slightly disgust you. These are subjective responses so I can't guarantee them but I'm sure they're all in there. David Altmejd — a Canadian sculptor, still only in his early forties, who lives and works in New York — seems to be interested in aesthetic feeling. Is it like natural growth, natural transformation or is it more like wizards and werewolves? Is it the soul in turmoil, like pain but not painful? Is it the body's knowledge?

He conjures up wild and weird ideas. He has been well known in the art world since the early 2000s, a star of the Venice Biennale (he represented Canada in 2007) and other illustrious art hotspots.

To the ordinary public in the UK he's still a relative novelty. His work in this show is deliberately reduced in spectacular effects. It's a testament to his genuine ultimate seriousness that he can still be marvellously playful with limited means.

His installations are often enormous and feature every type of surface, from realistic simulated human skin to complex crystals. They explore a range of imagery emphasising transformation: everything's in flux, spells merge with science.

A vast show at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris in 2015 was full of towering semi-human men that turned out to be, indeed, werewolves but not as they're usually imagined. Flesh-coloured and hairy lifelike limbs turned into crusty abstract paintings here and there, or sprouted bunches of coconuts — or revolting clusters of perfectly formed human hands.

In that same Paris show, streamlined geometric glass sculptures — each the size of a room — contained nests of faux ants and bees and floating male heads with realistic eyes, exaggerated beards and eyebrows, and nasty, dream-like gaping holes. There were also arrangements of arms and hands cast in a hard creamy white material, the effect something like 3D paintings. It is this look that the new exhibition at the Modern Art gallery near Old Street emphasises.

He plays everything down and it still works. Every object was made in the past year. The sole repeated format is monochrome — a raised relief of many different types of shapes within an overall rectangular frame, the colour like white clay. And the imagery is confined mostly to eggs and human limbs.

Maybe they're more drawings than paintings — line plays a major role. It might be executed with a pencil or in-cised with a carving tool, or implied by an arrangement of objects and shapes. It can be a big fat looping mark like an aerial view of a racing car track or an explosive scribble. Sometimes there are little written notes and dashed-off rectangles. On the surface of a streamlined chiselled eye shape in I T Guy, another eye is rapidly dashed off in pencil. Seemingly an afterthought, it also functions visually as I T Guy's compelling focus. This double quality alerts the viewer to the way that Altmejd eventually contains and controls every thing that ever happens in a making process that can be as much unconscious as conscious, making it all count.

A theme of metamorphosis is consistent throughout — something symbolic and intense is going on, the human soul is altering, and it's happening not just poetically, in the mind, but also right there physically in front of you, in grungy real materials.

That's what all the werewolves have been about for Altmejd over the years, they are vehicles for exploring soul-ful energy. All the silliness and corniness one might expect from such a concept is still cheerfully present but it is mucked about with, so daftness becomes not profundity exactly but unexpectedly ambitious — certainly visually impactful.

Surfaces are smooth and creamy and then suddenly churned. There are looping gouge marks clearly made by the artist's hand clawing the material in its molten state — claylike matter, sometimes bulky sometimes flowing. (It is in fact a mixture of resins and varnishes with elements of foam and steel.)

If this sounds abstract you're also seeing three-dimensional lifelike shoulders and arms, and multiple hands that might have erupted through holes or gradually grown on a surface like fungus — or a culture in a giant scientist's petri dish.

The illusion quickly takes hold that it was these writhing arm and hand fragments that created these artworks: created themselves. And the whole show is a monster joke about autogenesis, art going against God, creating life, life coming out of life — artificial life.

If Altmejd is corny about fertility — proposing art as an equivalent to Frankenstein's science, that it can beat natural growth, that his artworks are in fact super-nature — he's also witty. In *Le Saut*, vaguely organic things grow out of scooped-out egg shaped holes. In another work, perfectly cast 3D eggs stand up like soldiers in individual wonky rectangular openings arranged in rows. They stop and start for no reason — did a soldier egg do its fertilising duty and disappear?

A corner of one of these wall-slab semi-paintings or outsize drawings peels back like the corner of a sheet on a bed, revealing an underlying bed of eggs. Along the bottom edge of *Fan of Soul* two mighty egg shapes protrude, irregular and lumpy, crudely moulded, with a suggestion of nipples, merging an egg concept with a breasts concept.

His works bear repeating looking. An immediate sensual blast — so many contrasting shapes, and plays of smooth versus lumpy, the highly realistic and versus the impulsively gestural and crude — belies a more slow-burning visual content, as what seemed like mere terrain turns out to be signs or even cartoons.

In *Magic Loop*, the show's centrepiece not only for its large scale (eight feet wide, its relief elements at points six inches deep) but also its dense concentration of imagery, a set of curvy rectangles at the top can be seen after a while to be cubistic views of either a bowler hat or a Stetson.

They were abstract sharp thin lines, rushing curves and a grainy crust like the surface of porridge, at first, but now they're a meaningful symbol. So much sculptural activity making a meal out of a hat: beneath its crevasses and hills a male head eventually comes together with an egg in its cheek (birthing irony?) and a stream of multiple cut-off realistic hands heading towards its open mouth.

What are they doing? They appear to be popping eggs into the mouth. Are they the hands of the Creator, the Great Altmejd? Creation symbols going on and on, telling us about art and life? In any case, they pop out of his ear and start round on the loop again.

Everett-Green, Robert, "The many dimensions of David Altmejd's surreal, violent work," *TheGlobeAndMail.com*, July 1, 2015

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

# The many dimensions of David Altmejd's surreal, violent work

By Robert Everett-Green | July 1, 2015



*The Flux and the Puddle* by David Altmejd is a gigantic block of lucite boxes in which numerous figures are encased.

"I like the idea that the hand has a mind," David Altmejd told me, as we walked through the new exhibition of his sculptures at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal. That's a very resonant comment when you see the recent work of this acclaimed Montreal artist, who now lives in New York. His pieces are full of hands cast from life, mostly disembodied, emerging in crablike procession from a figure's hollowed chest, or clawing their way through flesh or the surface of a wall. They're like verbs scuttling through his art, always making things or tearing them apart.

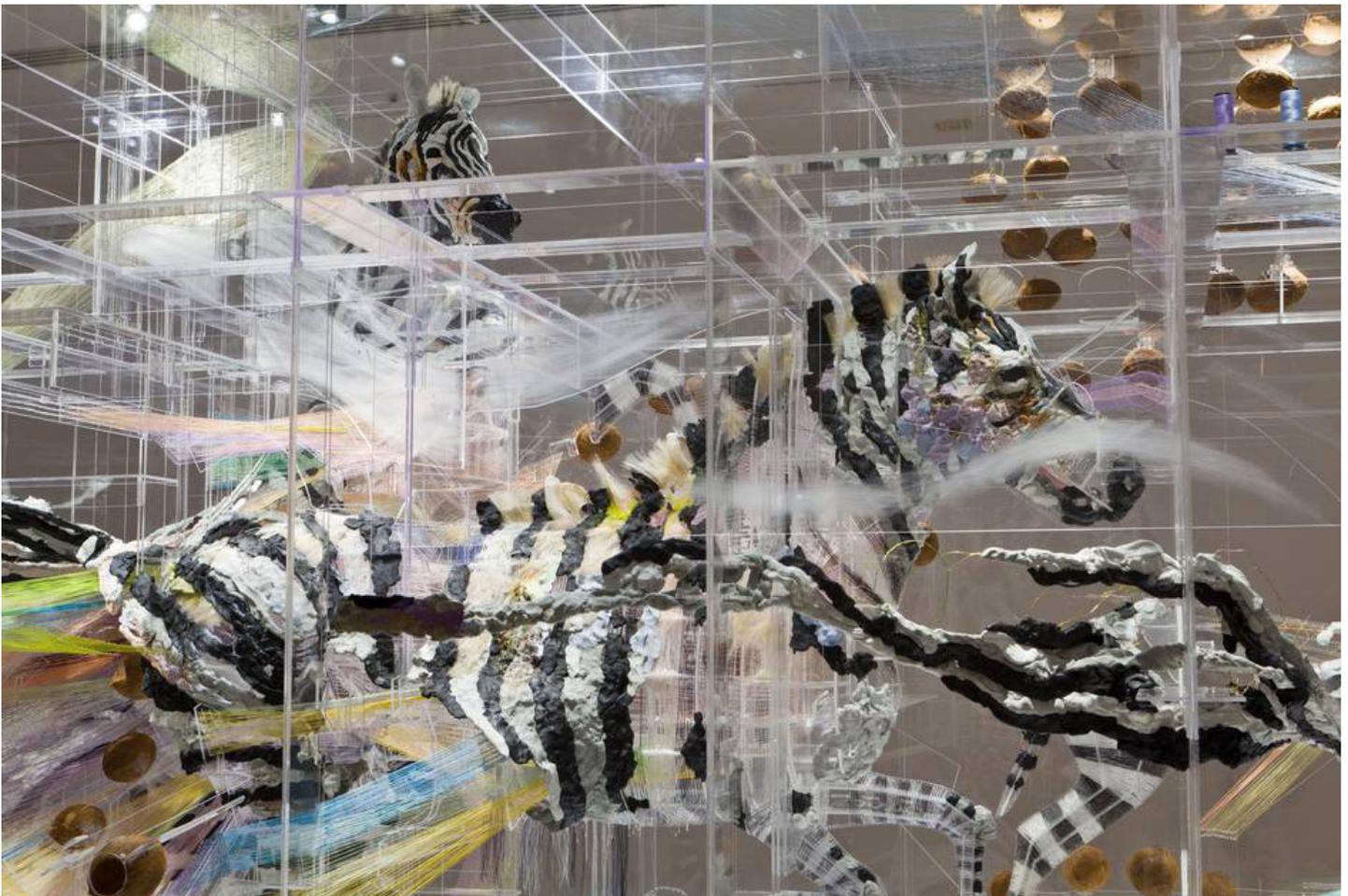
Some people, like me, may see these hands as visualizations of impersonal forces that we experience only as effects. We see a leaf wither, but not what drives that transformation. The work done by Altmejd's sculptural hands, however, is often more surreal and macabre. In *Le désert et la semence*, a piece he completed three days before the show opened on June 20, two hands form a ball from sand and glue, which moves through a spiral of transformations from ball to coconut to skull to a man's head, and from there to the head of a wolf, suspended high above the first stage of the process. A stream of sperm-like glue drips from the animal's jaws to where the hands first gathered up the sand. It's a complete cycle with no real beginning or end.

A nightmare, you might say, though Altmejd said he takes no direction from dreams, and is interested in surrealism and science fiction or fantasy only in that "they do offer a freedom to build and combine things." More surprisingly, perhaps, he said that he sees the hands that gouge the surfaces of his angelic *The Watchers* and *Bodybuilder* statues as forces of self-transformation – the mind of the individual working on the self, not some outside power relentlessly tearing at the body.

The really striking thing about talking with Altmejd is how often he uses the language of freedom and transcendence to describe works whose material content can look fairly hellish. *The Flux and the Puddle* is a gigantic block of lucite boxes in which numerous figures are encased, throwing their transforming heads into space or standing with their guts or faces blown open and studded with mineral crystals. A pair of blackened humanoid figures slump over a table, mucking around with some dark, gooey substance that could become one of them. Mirrors inside and outside the block multiply its surfaces and magnify its contents, as teeth emerge from within pineapples, and streams of grapes and coconuts fly through the transparent structure like wind-borne projectiles.

You could look at *The Flux and the Puddle* for a long time and still feel like you hadn't seen the whole piece, which is part of the point. "I like the idea of an object that contains more volume than appears from its outside, an object that contains infinity," says Altmejd. He's also really into the illusion of weightlessness, as a way of liberating his material from its debt to gravity. In *Le spectre et la main*, another of his large lucite structures, a dense streaming network of coloured threads support two fragmentary zebras that float in space, their solid black and white stripes flowing away like weightless clay.

Everett-Green, Robert, "The many dimensions of David Altmejd's surreal, violent work," *TheGlobeAndMail.com*, July 1, 2015



*Le spectre et la main* by David Altmejd. (Guy L'Heureux)

Altmejd studied biology before becoming an artist, and the relationship of his boxes with the vitrines of a natural-history museum seems obvious. But he's not keen on that association, perhaps because his vitrines are really structural systems that are integral to the work, not just containers for things. Their many interior facets and the theatrical way in which they are lit, with spotlights from above, make them glow like large crystals that emit their own light.

All of these pieces are about drawing or painting in space with objects and coloured threads, and their feeling of movement and energy is impressive. You almost expect there to be a switch somewhere that might pitch the whole frozen process into action. But Altmejd's streams of coconuts and grapes are also analytic representations of imaginary movements, akin to Eadweard Muybridge's photographic studies. In that sense, Altmejd is both a stop-motion sculptor, and an animator who has no use for a camera.

Portraiture is a big element in this show, which includes a room full of heads, some of them with two sets of inverted features, others with crystals growing from holes and lesions – perfect structures growing from decaying ones. At the entrance to the exhibition stands a bust of the artist's sister Sarah, the glinting face of which is hollowed out and blackened. These objects imply a drastic violence that in other parts of the exhibition shows up as holes smashed into mirrored surfaces, and – depending on how you look at them – those hands, ripping at flesh.

There's also a gay erotic theme floating through Altmejd's work, via the not-so-subtle coconuts, grapes, bananas and puddles of glue that persistently allude to male genitalia and semen. A full-sized sculpture of a bird-headed man in a suit includes a scrotum under the chin, apparently cast from life. The painstaking use of thread, however, which in the lucite pieces is strung through innumerable drilled holes, associates his art with the traditionally female world of needlecraft, and all the patient effort that implies.

Altmejd said that *The Flux and the Puddle*, which he completed in 2014, is the summation of a long period of work. "I wanted to include in it everything I had ever done as a sculptor," he said. The next phase, he said, is represented by the single blackened figure that hangs upside down at the end of the exhibition's last room. That's another kind of space to explore, he said, and another kind of weightlessness. Whatever Altmejd finds there, it's sure to be worth visiting with him.



# BORDERCROSSINGS

**HARMONY KORINE**  
**DAVID ALTMEJD**

GEOFFREY JAMES  
SOPHIE JODOIN  
GUY MADDIN  
LEE HENDERSON  
JIM HOLYOAK

**we are  
monsters**

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# Seductive Repulsions

## An interview with David Altmejd

by Robert Enright  
Introduction by Meeka Walsh

It begins with *Sarah Altmejd*, 2003, and the artist's intention, having just completed his graduate studies, to make an object of power and not to begin with a modest goal, but instead to direct his attention in earnest to making a work that would have significance for him. The seeds or small crystal elements in so much of his subsequent work can be located in this early, essential piece. What motivation could be more romantic and guileless than to make a piece whose subject is the person the artist loves most in the world?

The work is a sculpture, to be seen in the round and therefore would have no necessary front or back. Images of it are presented in the very fine book, *David Altmejd* (Damiani, 2014), as a sequence of three views, one on each of three pages. It begins with a head seen from the back and mounted for display on an iron rod. Lovely, rich and glossy, red-brown hair drawn into a ponytail with a blue elastic band, one earring visible—a hoop and dangling in the centre is a Star of David set with small sparkling stones—diamonds perhaps. A portion of the neck or bust, as would traditionally be the case in a portrait, is just visible. The second image is almost full face but the face is a black void surrounded by a lacy, jewelled encrustation of crystals in a mix of turquoise, silver and coral, from pale to an almost vivid, exposed-flesh tone. It is startling but not horrific; instead, almost tranquil in its calm self-possession. In the third image the full profile shows the concavity or absence of the face—surrounded by the carefully constructed frame and tracery of crystals.

For David Altmejd the void is a safe and infinite place, an entry or portal of limitless possibilities and an auspicious beginning. As a central motif the void appears often. It is a cut-out on the floor or ground in extended sculptural works like *The Old Sculptor*, 2003, or a recessed opening, "below stage" in *Delicate Men in Positions of Power*, 2003, or *The Student*, 2004, or the gaping jaw in *Untitled (Brown)*, 2003, resting on a mirrored plinth, some of which surfaces were shattered by what appears to have been a large-bore bullet, and revealing empty space beyond. Or the series "Rabbit Holes," heads severed from perhaps a human body, perhaps some other being but with features largely effaced—that is, mouths agape, or spaces highlighted in a Rabelaisian manner but not rude so much as pronounced and outlined to draw attention. Altmejd intends that these pieces be displayed on the ground and, Alice-style, these rabbit holes are meant as apertures into the earth and would go on, go down without end. Like subterranean caves, crystal stalagmites and stalactites protrude from the floor and ceiling of these compelling maws. As with *Sarah Altmejd*, where he addresses his interest in the infinitude of the body and the lack of distinction between the human inside and outside, so the "Rabbit Holes" are connections between the outside and the inside of the earth.

David Altmejd, *Untitled 7 (Bodybuilders)*, 2013, plaster, wood, burlap, polystyrene, expandable foam, latex paint, 86.5 x 36 x 48 inches. © David Altmejd. Photograph: Kurt Deruyter. Courtesy Xavier Hufkens, Brussels and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

The head detached from the body isn't seen as an anatomical fragment, although the artist argues that the severing, rather than being violent, is a generator of terrific energy. Instead, the head is beautifully and richly representative of this connection between inside and outside and as a form, is quite complete. Altmejd says, "I like to think that the universe was exactly the same size as a head just before the Big Bang."

The generative decay that is transformative works to mute and confuse the line between exterior and interior. *Untitled (Brown)*, for example, is a woolly-haired beast identifiable as a head through what remains of its mass, its still shiny, partial black snout and open jaws in which a few teeth remain. Entwined in its hair or fur are pearls, crystals, delicate silver chains and wires strung with a few beads. But its condition is such that what is interior or exterior is unclear. Its status has been turned inside out and outside in to entirely blur distinctions, and this borderless state will transmogrify endlessly into an ellipsis—that is, into pure potential. Into a state of immanence, the endless possible, which I think is the artist's desired mode. It's here that he draws a parallel between the void in the face of his beloved Sarah Altmejd and Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*. The *Rückenfigur*, alone and gazing endlessly over the vast and misty landscape would, if Altmejd could have him turn and face us, show the same limitless void, a reflection, Altmejd says, of the infinite inside him.

Altmejd's delicate touch is evident in the carefully balanced tone he maintains between the grotesque and the beautiful, between seduction and repulsion. *The Lovers*, 2004, is one example. Flesh and fur and skeletal bones conjoin. With infinite care thin gold chains link the finger bones to crystals and flesh. Only the British writer John Berger can make life after death so desirable. In *And our faces, my heart, brief as photos* (Pantheon Books, 1984), he writes, "What reconciles me to my own death more than anything else is the image of a place: a place where your bones and mine are buried, thrown, uncovered together....A metacarpal of my left hand lies inside your pelvis. (Against my broken ribs your breast like a flower). The hundred bones of our feet are scattered like gravel." The piece goes on, a paean to eternity, to infinity. Altmejd's pursuit as well.

In a sincere giving over of authorship, Altmejd sees himself as the works' collaborator. He may begin with a drawing, as a way of getting it out of his head, but as the sculpture progresses he says it makes its own choices. If he were to adhere closely to an original drawing he points out that what he would have would be "merely an illustration of an idea rather than something alive in itself and able to generate its own meaning." This notional or ideational displacement is also manifest materially. The plasterwork "Bodybuilders" appear to construct themselves out of their own being. Hands drag their self-same material from the legs up to become the torsos and heads constructed of hands. The process parallels a Gothic



1. & 2. *Sarah* Altmejd, 2003, plaster, acrylic paint, polystyrene, synthetic hair, metal wire, chain, jewellery, glitter, 16 x 7 x 7 inches. © David Altmejd. Photograph: Lance Brewer. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

3. *The Egg*, 2008, wood, plaster, acrylic paint, latex paint, polystyrene, expandable foam, burlap, overall dimensions 53.75 x 96.25 x 60.25 inches. © David Altmejd. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

cathedral, an ascension which builds upward toward the light. The material assembled near the bodies' shoulders is transformed into wing-like extensions, conjuring images of angels and then, as part of the classical history of sculpture, become Altmejd's own winged work, his reading of the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*, in a series called "the Watchers."

His assertion that the pieces make themselves is what interests him. Surprise, transformation, serendipity and chance are his collaborators. "I'm not really using sculpture as a way of illustrating meaning that already exists," he says. "I'm constantly looking for a loss of control when I make something."

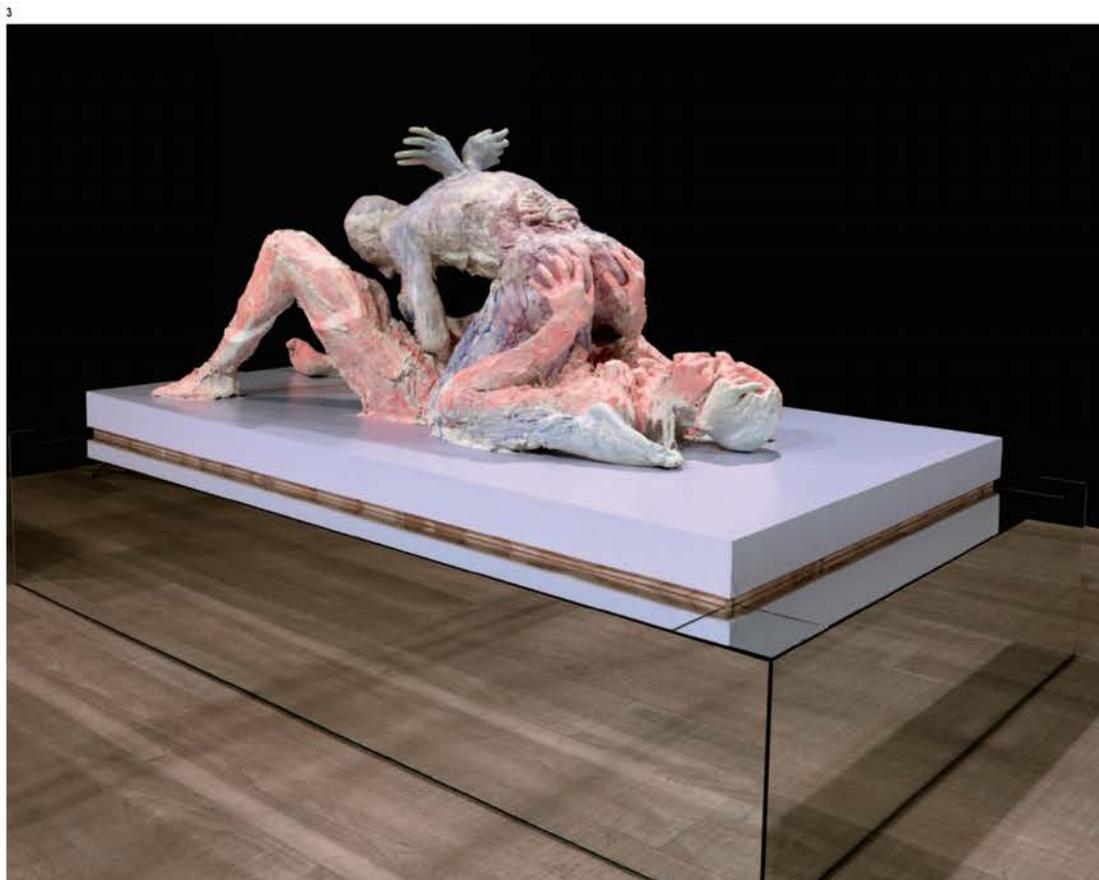
Altmejd's phrase for the state he pursues is the "fetishization of potential." It's something more lyrical as well. The artist in a constant state of becoming—a wonderful anticipatory state of immanence and innocence.

**BORDER CROSSINGS:** Last year in a lecture you gave at OCAD (Ontario College of Art and Design) you began by showing a picture of your sister, Sarah, a beautiful woman, and then you showed the sculpture you did of her in 2003, which is also beautiful, but in a very different way. Why did you decide to make the portrait?

DAVID ALTMEJD: I was trying to find a way of making the most powerful object I could make. I had just graduated and I found myself in this small apartment with no money; I didn't have a studio or any resources. All I had was my bedroom floor and a handful of materials but I didn't want to feel like a victim of circumstance. I wanted to prove to myself that I could make something extremely powerful with these limited resources. I thought that making a portrait of my sister with an infinite hole, instead of her face, would work. The result ended up being really interesting but the process of making that object and digging that hole was also weirdly interesting.

**You're right about the black hole, but there is also a delicacy evident in the filigreed, jewel-like halo around the voided face. Your sister is someone you love, so I assume you intended the piece to be tributary?**

Yes. My sister is the person I love more than anyone in the world. The idea was not to make a one-liner about destroying that person. The object had to be more complex than that; it had to contain a tension. I wanted to make some sort of infinite hole and I wanted to get lost inside it. That's why I spent time working on crystalizing details at the edge of the hole. I ended up spending a lot of time





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right in front of that black hole and forgot about the fact that it was my sister. Being safe in that void for a while was really powerful. I'd work on those little crystal formations at the edge of the hole for a couple of hours and then realize that I was only two inches away from this endless hole, which happened to be my sister. I learned a lot making that piece.

**You're a young artist living at home, with no materials and no money and you decide you want to make the most powerful object in the world. Where did that sense of ambition come from?**

I don't have the pretension to say that I made the most powerful object in the world, but at that moment it was the most powerful thing I could do. It was about wanting to prove to myself that I existed.

**A couple of other contrasting things stand out about the sculpture: the richness of the hair and the bright simplicity of the turquoise elastic that holds her ponytail in place.**

The jewellery she is wearing is like that elastic. I bought it on Broadway and 30th Street in New York, in the kind of store where you get huge bags of jewellery for ten dollars. I wanted the object to be the result of the way I make sculptures, which is a process where I'm not always making super heavy gestures. I'm also making light gestures and those are very important for the piece. So, on an object which is very intense and grave looking, the presence of a cheap elastic band becomes a precious thing. It sparkles the way a real diamond would sparkle.

**Your background is a rich one. On your mother's side you're Catholic and on your father's side, Jewish. You and your sister have classic Old Testament names. You've also talked about the energy contained in the symmetrical architecture of Catholic churches. Was that influential? I don't mean in a religious way but in a structural and architectural way.**

Absolutely. I regard the whole system of visual symbols in the Catholic Church, not just the symmetrical architecture of the church, as beautiful and it touches me much more than anything else. I am really into the visual dimensions of the church being based on the shape of a cross. From above, the architecture of the cathedral is a cross and that shape is defined by the shape of the body. So when you enter the church, you are entering the body and I imagine the heart is at the centre of the building where all the lines meet. The architecture of the synagogue is completely different. When I was a kid I used to go to a temple but it was divided—the men were on the left and the women were on the right, and the ceiling was low. It ended up feeling much more like a brain divided into right and left halves. The fact that the ceiling was low made me think about the top and the inside of the head. If you think about it, the Kabbalah is much more geometric—there are ideas and numbers and codes. So in my mind it corresponds much more to the brain, whereas everything that is Catholic is much more about the body and that touches me greatly.

**Catholicism is a religion of retrieval in that its central tenet claims that out of death comes renewed life. It is certainly possible to read your work through that framework.**

That is totally plausible.

**The writing on *Clear Structures for a New Generation* that you did in 2002 is bracketed by Stars of David and says, "DISSENT QUEER BUILD CLEAR." Who is that instruction for and who was issuing the message? Were they instructions you were giving yourself?**

At the time I was interested in the aesthetics of activism and protest and all the energies that came with that. I was trying to make up sentences that were



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1. *Untitled*, 2011, epoxy clay, plaster, glass eyes, synthetic hair, acrylic paint, assorted minerals including quartz, 13 x 8 x 13.5 inches. © David Altmejd. Photograph: Jessica Eckert. Courtesy: Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

2. *Untitled*, 2011, epoxy clay, resin, chicken wire, 12 x 7 x 11 inches. © David Altmejd. Photograph: Jessica Eckert. Courtesy: Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

3. & 4. *Untitled 1 (The Watchers)*, 2009, plaster, wood, polystyrene, expandable foam, burlap, metal wire, acrylic paint, latex paint, overall dimensions 92 x 32 x 32 inches. © David Altmejd. Photograph: Jeremy Lawson.

connected to me and that came with some sort of power. It was a way of using words that could have been coming from me and presenting them in ways that could transport energy and be more dynamic.

#### What made you make *Anne Frank 2* in 1999?

In a certain way, it functions like *Sarah Altmejd*. Anne Frank came with a very dramatic idea of life and death, so I wrote Anne Frank on a large board and then created glass-beaded structures that seemed to be growing along with the name. I was taking Anne Frank, a name loaded with grave connotations, and pushing it in this optimistic direction. It was as if the energy contained in her name was making the glass structures grow. It's a little bit like my work functions.

Energy has always been and remains the key to your work. You constantly refer to the energy that



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comes not only out of making, but also out of the materials themselves. It is a mantra for you. When I talk about my work it is the word I use most often. It's the way I think about making things.

In one way, you're still attempting to create that most powerful object you referred to earlier. You say you can't compete with a woman giving birth but I sense something incredibly complicated in what you're doing. It's as if you're giving birth to a world. Your work has become so ambitious that it is a whole cosmology.

But that's not what I'm focused on. I am not interested in groups of things or cosmologies or ensembles. I'm just focused on objects. It is true that when I look back I can see I've done a bunch of objects and together they create a cosmology but that is not something I think about. For me, it is one object, one universe.

So you move from detail to detail. I think you said at one point that you work microscopically, like an ant.

That's my way of making things. Much of my work ends up being enormous, and people think that is an important and defining characteristic. But in my mind it's not. I don't even see it as large because it is just an accumulation of details. If I accumulate a lot of details, then it ends up being large.

If you work detail to detail, does that alleviate the complexity of what you're doing? Is the larger idea of composition not something with which you have to contend?

I would say that my work is more about details and less about the bigger picture. But since I've had the help of assistants, not for every project but certainly for the larger ones, I have had the freedom and enough time that I can afford to step back a little bit. When I was making my work by myself I was glued to the piece one hundred percent of the time and I didn't have the opportunity to look at what I was doing from a distance. Now I can and the whole composition has become quite important. One of the most important things about these Plexiglas boxes that I've been making is this idea of creating some sort of movement through the composition. To do that I need to be able to step back from the piece.

**Was it a practical thing to have studio assistants? For a while you were resolute about wanting to do it all yourself.**

I think it was practical. The projects were too ambitious and in order to finish them, I had to ask for help.

**Do you still do a preparatory drawing before making a piece?**

I do draw and make sketches but only as a way of getting out of my head. At the beginning my ideas are abstract inside my head and making a drawing is the first step into reality. It's a way of making the idea a bit more concrete. When I see it existing outside of my head I get really excited and start working with materials in the studio. Then I totally forget about the drawing. As I make the sculpture, it makes its own choices; it takes directions I didn't expect; I make mistakes that are good and that open new spaces I hadn't explored. So at the end the sculpture is always completely different from the first sketch that I made.

**You have said you're not in competition with your material but you're there to help those materials find their own character. I gather that the making of work for you is quite literally a process in which you discover what the thing being made wants to be?**

Absolutely. If I was trying to recreate a sketch in three dimensions and was attempting to make a sculpture that corresponded to the drawing, then it would only be about translation and nothing new would happen in the process. I would end up with a sculpture that was merely an illustration of an idea rather than something alive in itself and able to generate its own meaning. I have to let mistakes happen, to find ways of making mistakes become positive, and let the material make choices.

**Do the materials have their own logic?**

Of course. For example, with the glass mirrors. Once an object is covered in a mirror, there is no way of transforming it unless I smash the mirror. When I build a wood structure and cover every facet with mirror, I end up with something that in a physical way is completely closed off. If I want to build an extension, the only way I can do it is to violently smash the glass so I can access the wood underneath. Then I can attach this new extension and I end up with an object covered with broken glass. I then have to find a way of making that interesting. So I learn to appreciate the effect, and I would even say the symbolic potential, of an object that is covered in broken mirrors. I often refer to symbolic potential because I'm more comfortable talking about potential

than about specifics. Symbol is something that I understand intuitively.

**The video of you in Paris taking a hammer to your own pieces is startling. The opening of that surface is a violent act.**

It's aggressive but it is completely satisfying for me because mirrors don't have a visual identity, they don't exist visually. When you look at a mirror you're looking at what it reflects. It's not a surface; it's invisible, there's nothing there. But the second you smash it, it becomes a visual object that exists super-intensely in the world.

**You think of yourself as a process artist but how do you know when something is done? Is it done when you stop working on it?**

I don't like using the word "done." There is something sad about the idea of something being done. It would be sad if you said that about someone. I like the idea that things always have the potential of transforming and growing and opening themselves up. So a piece is done when it's not in my studio anymore, when I'm showing it to the world. As an artist I believe that in a certain way every state of the object I'm working on is perfect. So every morning when I arrive in the studio, wherever the sculpture is at is perfect because it is a result of its own making. Of course, I understand that it has to be presentable if I want to put it out in the world. I couldn't say I'm going to take five pieces in the studio that are being made today and install them in a gallery for people to see. I may consider them perfect but they also have to be presentable. It's like any person: you wake up in the morning and you're yourself, the result of your own history; you might have a cold but it doesn't make you any less perfect. You're complete, total, you're infinite, but if you want to go into the world you need to shower and put on some clothes. The last thing I do when I work on a sculpture is to make sure that it is presentable. Before that, the whole process of making the sculpture is not aiming at a specific goal; it is just making the thing grow and transform as it wants.

**You have a lovely sense of the transformative. You used to talk about your werewolf heads as batteries. Now other containers hold energy. I'm thinking of the *Rabbit Holes*. They're perplexing. If I were to taste them, would I be a vegetarian or a cannibal?**

They're just holes, so there is nothing to taste. The *Rabbit Holes* are heads that are meant to be displayed on the ground or the grass, and instead of a face there is a hole that goes deep into the ground. When you're on top of the head and you look inside the hole, it keeps on going and going and going until you don't see anything. That's why they're called Rabbit Holes. These works are about the connection between the outside and the inside of earth. I just thought that the head is an interesting symbol for that connection. That's what a head is anyway. It's the border between what is inside and what is outside.

**What is it about the infinity of the inside body that you find so compelling?**



I think one of the things that defines the body and that defines people is that they are infinite. People are more amazing than any art. Why is the most powerful experience you will ever have seeing someone in a room for the first time and completely falling in love with them? I understand when people say they've had an experience in front of a work of art that changed their life, but I don't think it is as strong as what happens with a person. Why is a person standing in front of you so powerful? Why is that presence so strong? I think it's because they contain infinity. When I make a sculpture I think of the body as a model, and I would love my sculptures to have that power but I know they will never have it.

Is the inside also a reflection of what is outside, so that your sculptures are a membrane that negotiates those two spaces?

Yes. I really like this relationship between the inside and the outside and the recognition that the infinity inside is the same as the infinity outside. It's interesting because that was the relationship I was thinking about when I made *Sarah Altmejd*. When it was in front of me I started to think of the Caspar David Friedrich painting that makes it on to the cover of every book about Romanticism.

*Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, where the man stands looking out into the abyss of Nature?

Exactly. And what is he doing? I thought it would be amazing if you turned him around and saw that his face was actually an infinite black hole. In my mind what he is looking at is the infinity of the landscape and that is a symbol for the infinity inside of him. The infinitely large is the same as the infinitely small; the inside is the same as the outside. The inside may be less accessible structurally but it is the same. I think the head is the perfect object. I like to think that the universe was exactly the same size as a head just before the Big Bang.

In 1947 Antonin Artaud said the human face "hasn't yet found its true countenance," and he went on to say, "the face of man has suffered and grieved for thousands of years and it is still a field of ruins." He's accepting the romantic idea of the ruin but you have a different attitude about the human face. You see it as a space of regeneration and not a field of ruins.

A field of ruins? No, I see it as a portal, a sort of opening. I see eyes as being doorways. I know it is cheesy but that is the way I see it symbolically. My *Rabbit Holes* function like that, and so does *Sarah Altmejd*.

The upside-down heads from 2012 on, the ones that use glass eyes, seem to be different. I read them as more frightening.

You might be right. When I make these reversible heads, I work more or less realistically, making sure that I define a strong identity. Then I turn the head upside down and use the eyes as a reference point to build a new face. As I make a new face, I make a new identity and I forget about the old identity. But while the object may have a new identity, it hasn't lost the old one. It is still there; it is just upside-down and hidden. So you end up with an object that has a double identity; one more direct and one that is more hidden. And anything that has a hidden identity is both really powerful and, in a way, creepy.

Preceding page:

1. & 2. *The Swarm* (detail), 2011, Plexiglas, chain, metal wire, thread, acrylic paint, epoxy gel, epoxy clay, acrylic gel, granular medium, synthetic hair, plaster, polystyrene, expandable foam, sand, assorted minerals including quartz, amethyst, pyrite, glue, pins, needles, overall dimensions 102.5 x 244 x 84.5 inches. © David Altmejd. Photograph: Farzad Dwrang, Courtesy The Brant Foundation Art Study Center, Greenwich, CT and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

3. *The Swarm*, 2011, Plexiglas, chain, metal wire, thread, acrylic paint, epoxy gel, epoxy clay, acrylic gel, granular medium, synthetic hair, plaster, polystyrene, expandable foam, sand, assorted minerals including quartz, amethyst, pyrite, glue, pins, needles, overall dimensions 102.5 x 244 x 84.5 inches. © David Altmejd. Photograph: Jessica Eckert



Maybe it's that creepiness I'm responding to. You have to look twice. You're seeing two things but they have an intriguing level of integration. Some kind of transition occurs. Do you have to work hard to orchestrate that sliding connection?

I work until I get it. What I said before about every stage being perfect doesn't work with this series. I need to achieve something, and the piece is done once that happens. It contradicts what I told you before about my process but I've never been embarrassed about contradicting myself.

Recently you have been able to achieve a kind of grandeur. I'm thinking of the piece that looks like your version of the *Victory of Samothrace* in the Louvre. You seem to be going after a sublime combination of awe and fear. Is that a conscious invocation?

Yes, it's conscious.

The other thing that has emerged in the last few years is a lightness, a kind of airy lift. *The Swarm*, 2011, comes to mind. That work seems to be less about presentation than about atmosphere and mood. Is that because you are using different materials or is that something you're intending? What do you mean, it is less about presentation?

Well, a lot of your pieces played into display culture and architecture. That is still evident but now there is something that seems more about the quality of atmosphere than the object itself.

In these pieces, like *The Swans* for example, the architectural structure is transparent. Maybe that's why you read it as more atmospheric. You don't really pay attention to the structure because it is invisible, so everything looks immaterial, as if everything was disintegrated and floating. But it's not. The physical reality of the object is such that every little thread in the piece that looks like it's floating is held by a lot of structure, a lot of Plexiglas. There's a preoccupation with big engineering.

In the linear pieces, you have the chains acting like lines. They seem to be like three-dimensional drawings, or some version of a drawing in space. That is how I thought about them since the beginning. I started this series of Plexiglas boxes with gold chain, I would only use gold chain and I saw the pieces as geometric drawings in space. Then when I started using different materials I added colours, threads and bits of plaster, and the whole thing became more like a painting in space.

In fact, an untitled piece from 2009 has a linear sense that makes me think of a Julie Mehretu painting. It's like an exploding or radiating cosmology of lines.

That is actually the first one that I made with more things than gold chain.

Is that simply a natural evolution, that it would get more complex?

Yes, and if it takes a new step it also justifies the existence of how it was before. The fact that I was able to enter the new territory of these multimedia pieces in Plexiglas justified or proved to me why it was so important to make those gold chain pieces. And the gold chain pieces offered me a doorway into a new space inside of which I could have an infinite number of new possibilities. I think that is what drives me. When I work on something I have to have the feeling that it is also a doorway to a new space, that it has this potential of bringing me somewhere else.

Installation view, "David Altmejd," May 3–June 14, 2008, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. © David Altmejd. Photograph: Tom Powell Imaging, Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.



But at the same time you are doing these reduced and minimal chicken wire pieces. They get away with as little as they possibly can.

After making a lot of complex, heavily layered pieces with gold chain and detailed coloured thread, a very simple, modest and light gesture can be extremely precious. It has its place in the world. Making a piece that is essentially a little ball of chicken wire is a deep gesture.

I want to talk about some bodies of work—and bodies seems to be the right word. Where did the "Watchers" and the "Bodybuilders" come from?

I don't know where the *Bodybuilders* came from. Mostly what you see if you look at the history of sculpture is standing figures, and so I felt it was worth exploring because it was already present in my work. I decided to make plaster figures, using a very fundamental material that is part of art history and then I decided to use the figure's hands as a way of displacing material on the body itself. So the figure ends up looking like it's using its own hands to take plaster from its calf or its leg and dragging it up to its shoulders to make its shoulders bigger. It ends up having the power to transform its own shape, its own body.

So the "Bodybuilders" are in the process of reconfiguring themselves, of pulling themselves into being?

I like the idea that the work itself possesses the power to transform itself. If you look at the Plexiglas box from 2009 that you mentioned with some floating figures, that Julie Mehretu thing, there is a lot of thread inside. If you follow the thread you realize it is coming from spools that are in the piece itself. So the piece contains the material that it uses to shape itself. The piece is self-generating. It's more alive. The *Bodybuilders* function like that. They use their own hands and then I added casts of my hands, so the body is covered with hands that are reshaping it. I call them *Bodybuilders* because that is what they literally are. But then something happened. I began thinking that the figure is taking material from the lower parts of its body and dragging it upward using a fundamental sculptural gesture. It brings material upward as a way of trying to transcend material and make the object look lighter. It ends up detaching itself from the floor. In the process, the *Bodybuilders* had accumulated a lot of material behind their shoulders to the point that this mass of material behind the object looked like wings. The *Bodybuilders* had transformed themselves into winged angel figures. I liked that and I ended up with a series that I decided to call *Watchers*. In my mind, that is another word for angel.

But you also connect it to sensuality. In *Untitled 1 (Bodybuilders)*, 2010, the figure auto-eroticizes himself in pinching his right nipple. You set up a very complex read in that piece because he has a pleasing pink and white palette but his legs have these gaping Francis Bacon-like mouths. And the hand on top of his head holds a body part that looks like a prop from a horror movie. How are we to read those competing messages in that piece?

I don't know that they are competing.

Let's try another piece. The *Figure with Black Arms and Strawberry*, 2013, grabs his own ass in an action of self-making, as if he were putty in his own hands. There are compelling gestures in these works. Their making themselves becomes an act of sensuality, too.

The piece that preceded the *Bodybuilders* is called *The Egg*, 2008, and it shows a couple made of plaster engaging in sexual activity. There are a lot of hands with which they are touching themselves in a sexual way but at the same time they are transforming themselves. So the hand that is represented as some sort of sexual tool is also the hand of the sculptor who is making the object. I like that ambiguity.

In *The Egg* the lavender-coloured man who is blowing his partner has hands on his back that become small wings. It's as if the piece is saying sex becomes holy.

I'm not disagreeing with that idea, I just wasn't thinking about it in connection with this sculpture. But for me sex is definitely interesting to think about in a biological way because it is an essential part of the cycle. Also, when I am grabbing matter and shaping a body as a sculptor, there is something sexual because I am actually touching every part.

In *Architect 1*, 2011, you get a richly ambiguous read, because the angelic figure could be from Rilke's "First Duino Elegy," which says every angel is terrifying because it serenely disdains to annihilate us. The hands in that figure look like they're about to pry open the chest cavity of the figure on the wall.

Absolutely. I went from the *Bodybuilders* and dragging material upwards to create wings so they could become *Watchers*, and decided to use the same logic directly on the wall. I dragged material from the wall to a point where it would accumulate and shape a body. It looks like a body is shaping itself on the wall using material that comes from the wall itself. That's why they're called *Architects*. But in that case they also ended up looking like angels, which is a result of the process. I love that because it produced a figure that is deep in human culture. The winged figure has been represented since Mesopotamia and the invention of language. It has always been there. I thought it was fantastic that as a sculptor the result of grabbing and displacing material would be to realize something as fundamental as the winged figure of an angel.

*Untitled 4* is figurative from one angle and when you move around it, the read becomes architectural. Your work has often played inside the terrain of architecture. Forms can turn into architecture; so can bodies themselves. That interests me a great deal because if the body becomes an architecture, if the body starts having holes and staircases, then it enables you to imagine existing inside of it. It draws attention to the inside space and transforms it into a container, something that you could imagine inhabiting.

Your work is self-generated. In doing one kind of work recognitions come that suggest other directions in which to move. But when I look at those open mouths I think of Francis Bacon and



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**Tony Oursler.** How do you want the mouths to be read in a piece like *Untitled 1*, (*The Watchers*) from 2009?

I was at a point where I wanted to make something visually very powerful. It was about creating an object that would have a strong effect. I had the need to make something that was going to exist intensely in the world, a little bit like fire. I was thinking of fire a lot. The specific decision to use open mouths was really a way to help me make an object that would have that sort of power.

When I look at a piece like *Son 1* (*Relatives*), 2013, I see echoes of Rodin's *Walking Man*, 1877, except your figure is upside down and his feet are on the ceiling. Then in *Figure with Cantaloupe Shoulders*, 2013, the gesture of the arm and the finger is similar to one of the figures from *The Burghers of Calais*. Were you consciously invoking Rodin?

Probably. I never reference something consciously but I've been visiting museums since I was a kid, so it's really ingrained and has helped shape my vocabulary. But I rarely make specific references to art history, except for the piece you mentioned that looked like *The Victory of Samothrace*. That was a deliberate echo because I had made it specifically for my retrospective in Paris. It was the introduction to the Paris show and I had the staircase as a place where I could place it. So I did want to make references to *The Winged Victory*, which is one of the most elegant objects I have ever seen.

Rodin raises a question about the function of the fragment in art. In the 1995 Venice Biennale, René Clair curated an exhibition on the body and art. He included two sets of vitrines: in one were cast body parts by Thomas Eakins, and in the other were many plaster hands and appendages by Rodin. It made me realize that the parts were sufficient to stand in for the whole body. How do you view the idea of the fragment in your work? Certain fragments can be whole and others not. It depends on the fragment. It reminds me of the way we were talking about the



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head; the head contains everything in my mind, so it is whole. It is the whole universe. One head contains infinity. I think that the hand, too, is complex and has enough potential. If you think of the hand of the creator, it becomes symbolic of every thing we can create. Certain fragments have that potential. For me the hand is symbolic of building infinity. I wouldn't see that in a foot or an ear.

**When you made *le spectre et la main*, 2012, that piece with zebras in front, were you thinking about Damien Hirst?**

Oh no. That piece is in the same line as *The Swarm*. It is made of thread and a few other materials. So those zebras look like they're disintegrating, or you don't know if they are disintegrating, or reshaping themselves, or crystalizing. I wasn't thinking of Hirst because when he places an animal he cuts it up. I feel like the zebras in my piece are actually born from the insides; they have been crystalizing. They started with nothing and they have been growing. It is the opposite way from Hirst's process of fragmenting things. My piece is shaping itself.

**Where did the idea for the fruit cornucopias come from?**

I felt at one point that my work needed a new energy. I felt exactly like you might feel when you are sick, or hung-over. It might sound really silly but the work needed vitamins in the same way that a body feeling under the weather does. So I decided to integrate fruits inside the work as a way of injecting a new energy, a new colour, some humour and a new texture. It ended up working the way I wanted.

**Now the human and fruit and vegetables are hybridizing in the same way that humans and animals have done, and humans and minerals. Your Nature is constantly finding things in common, and generating transformative moments when one thing begins to show how it is connected to another thing.**

Right. When I integrate I must have the intuitive feeling that it is going to open a new space. So if I integrate fruit inside the work I have to have a feeling that in the next piece these fruits are going to create something new. I also realized that the fruit can act as seeds—that's what they are—and things can grow from that. They can also produce juice. I have the chance to let them drip and accumulate new material, make it travel in troughs through the piece. I can play with that and make the juice become something else. So the fruit has opened doors. I integrated them for a very simple reason but then it has become something else.

**Is *Untitled 7 (Bodybuilders)* your *Nude Descending a Staircase*?**

I say I never reference art history. But I did realize that a body descending a staircase has such a specific position and weight. It's different from a figure walking down the street. When a body descends a staircase it has a very specific elegance that you can't find anywhere else. I thought it could be a motif in art history. The position of that body should have existed since the Greeks, but it doesn't. I can only think of three pieces by Muybridge, Duchamp and Richter. So I was conscious of that when I made my piece.

**Does humour play into the work? I always think that Arcimboldo is very funny and there are occasions when your work moves in his direction.**

I think humour is fundamental. When I started making work I was really looking up to Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelley and Cindy Sherman. What I liked was their ability to create situations that were extremely dramatic and extremely humorous at the same time. So the viewer would be uncomfortable because they didn't know how to react. Should they laugh or not laugh? I loved that confusion. I see that in David Lynch as well. A lot of my work in art school came out of that attitude and the energy it produced. Is it funny or is it grave? Today the work has evolved on its own and sometimes I forget about the humorous aspect of it, and other times I don't. I remember that is one of the things that excite me, so I reintegrate it into the work like I did with the fruits.

**In 2004 critics talked about your work delivering "the repressed underside of our imagination with a certain sense of cheap glamour." The glamour is still in your work but I wonder if it is less cheap than it was before? Is this high-tone glamour?**

I know what they meant by cheap glamour. I think the work is evolving a little bit like a Bonsai. Instead of it being a spontaneous, energetic combination of materials, it's a little bit more layered and more elegant. I don't know that I would use the words glamour or cheap anymore.

**It is interesting that while your werewolves may not have been drinking piña coladas, their hair was perfect. Beauty has always played into your work and I don't think you have ever lost that.** It is important to me that they have the power of seduction. A perfect object for me is an object that is extremely seductive and extremely repulsive at the same time.

**You have also said that all of your works are an oddity. Do you still feel that?**

I'm not interested in making things that I can understand, or that I can control intellectually. The objects I make are able to exist in the world in an odd way. They are not easily graspable. They're even conceptually weird. I like the idea of not being able to position them. I like to think that you can't classify people the same way because every one is different. Everyone is weird and has their own secrets and I like to think of objects that way.

**You named your exhibition in 2002 "Clear Structures for a New Generation." You're a dozen years from that naming, and I wonder what has become clear for you and your generation? Is your Bonsai focus a kind of clarity that is generational, or is that your particular journey?**

I would say that clarity is something is actually felt through the work while at peace. I'm satisfied if I'm able to work and be at peace. I'm not interested in understanding clarity in a political or intellectual way. It is something that has to be understood through work and intuition. I mean, it seems contradictory; it should be something that you can describe with language but I like the idea that it is not.

**Did the Paris exhibition represent a new level of achievement for you?**

The most amazing thing was to see that things I did many years ago were able to live and have meaning. They held up okay and when they were placed next to more recent works, a new electricity happened. Meaning was generated. Because of the specific architecture of the museum, I had to display the work in a linear way. Rather than three huge rooms, it's long hallways one after the other. So I had to think of installing the show as if I were writing a story. I ended up trying to define a creation myth of the work itself. What was interesting was the story I ended up inventing was not chronological.

**Your upside-down figure is not a riff on Baselitz but is the figure of the artist?**

That's pretty complicated. In the show in Paris the first part is almost exclusively normal standing figures, right side up. The second part of the show is those huge Plexiglas boxes with little universes floating inside. When you walk through the first part it becomes clear you are sharing the same space as the sculptures.



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Preceding page:

1. & 2. *The Architect 1*, 2011, plaster, wood, polystyrene, expandable foam, burlap, latex paint, 96 x 39 x 18.625 inches. © David Altmejd. Photograph: Jessica Eckert, Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

1. *Untitled 6 (Rabbit Roles)*, 2013, resin, polystyrene, expandable foam, epoxy clay, epoxy gel, plastic beads, quartz, synthetic hair, acrylic paint, overall dimensions 4.75 x 13 x 7.5 inches. © David Altmejd. Photograph: Lance Brewer. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

2. & 3. Installation view, "My Little Paradise," May 26–September 15, 2013, Middelheim Museum, Antwerp. © David Altmejd. Photograph: Joris Cassaer. Courtesy Xavier Hulckens, Brussels and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

You and the sculptures exist in the same space, which is real space. When you enter the second part of the show, full of Plexiglas boxes that contain universes, it's as if that real space has been confined inside those boxes. Now that reality is in the box, what is the space around the box? It's a new space. What was especially exciting to me as a sculptor was the idea that a new space creates the opportunity to think of a new logic and new rules. I thought, what could happen in this new space that is outside of real space? Then I thought, well, everything is going to be upside down. All the figures that are presented next to the Plexiglas boxes will be upside down because they are not in reality; they're in this new space. That was exciting to me. I don't know if that is clear but everything I just said is how I work.

The last time we talked in depth about your work was 10 years ago. You said then that you wanted your work to say things that you'd never said. I wonder how you have constantly come up with the not-yet-articulated, because I think your work is still finding things that haven't been said. How have you been able to sustain that quest over the decade?

Maybe it is too simple but I embrace intuition and I let it work. I'm not really using sculpture as a way of illustrating meaning that already exists. I'm constantly looking for a loss of control when I make something.

**And you constantly find meaning in that process?** As I told you earlier, I use intuition to feel like the work can open itself to meaning. It's not something I can control. I have to feel that what I do has symbolic potential, or if there is narrative, it has to feel like it has a narrative potential. In a certain way, you can say that I fetishize potential. Maybe the most defining thing in my work is that it represents the fetishization of potential. ■

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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."

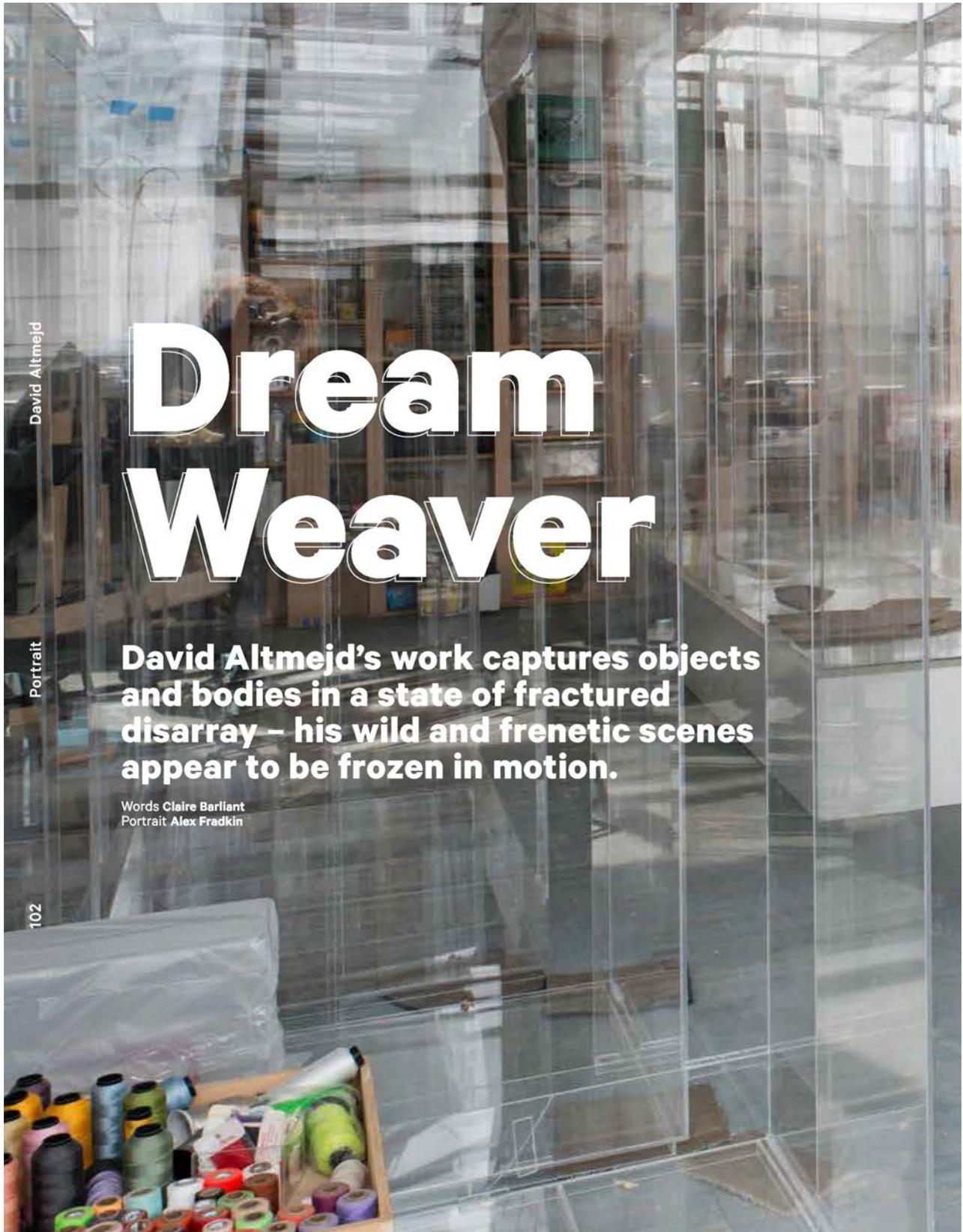
Paris's Museum of Modern Art is housed in the eastern wing of the Palais de Tokyo compound. For his show there, Altmejd will utilize the museum's stately U-shaped architecture to create a linear progression of his work. Formally, it will suggest the measured visual tempo of a Roman sculpture hall, offering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



David Altmejd

Portrait

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# Dream Weaver

**David Altmejd's work captures objects and bodies in a state of fractured disarray – his wild and frenetic scenes appear to be frozen in motion.**

Words Claire Barliant  
Portrait Alex Fradkin

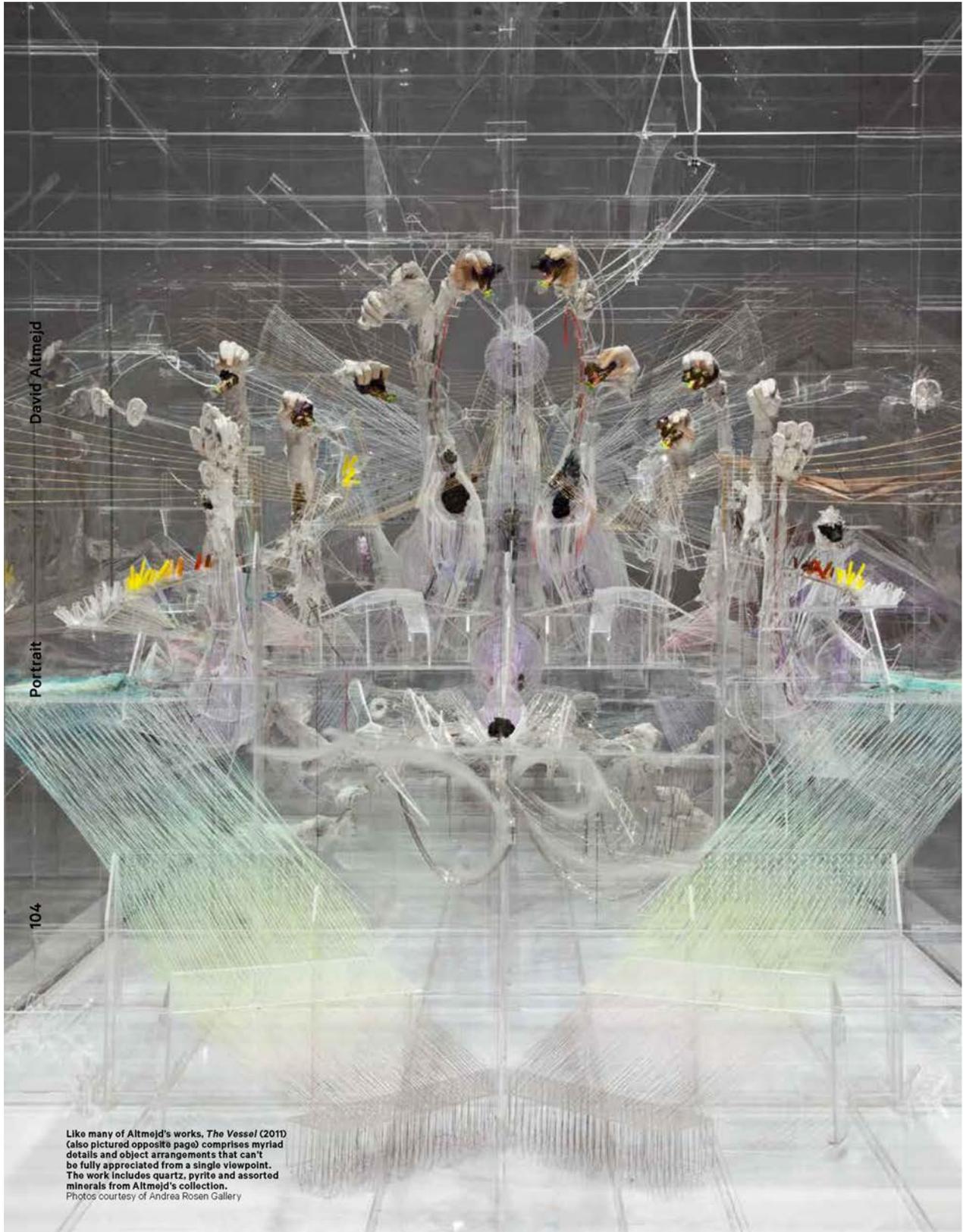


David Altmejd

Portrait

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David Altmejd and his dog at the artist's studio in Queens, New York, which he shares with a bunch of assistants who cast moulds from resin, make and fire ceramics, and work in Plexiglas and wood.



David Altmejd

Portrait

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Like many of Altmejd's works, *The Vessel* (2010) (also pictured opposite page) comprises myriad details and object arrangements that can't be fully appreciated from a single viewpoint. The work includes quartz, pyrite and assorted minerals from Altmejd's collection.  
Photos courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery



**'The first step is to get hypnotized by the plan of the space'**

David Altmejd

**O**n a rainy August morning, David Altmejd meets me in Queens for a tour of his bustling studio, which comprises two spacious rooms in a warehouse building. He is in the midst of getting ready for a solo show at Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York, opening in January, and assistants are busily assembling and painting. There are individual stations for woodworking, casting moulds from resin, making and firing ceramics, and constructing the elaborate Plexiglas structures that are his signature sculptural strategy. When I note to Altmejd that he must never have to outsource anything, he smiles. 'I hate calling people to ask them to do things. It took me years to muster the courage to order a pizza.' We sit down to discuss his sculptural practice, which he approaches with rigorous, almost scientific discipline.

**When did you start making work that intervened in the architecture of a space?** David Altmejd: For a long time it was really important for me to make things that were not connected to architecture. I was conscious of presenting my work so that it would be self-contained. It was important that the viewer could walk around it. But now I think it's interesting to make things come out of walls or hang from the ceiling. Or even go through the floor. I know exactly how that switch happened. I was really interested in the idea of an object or sculpture that had the potential to build itself, so I made a series of figures called *Bodybuilders*, made mostly of plaster. Using plaster casts of my own hands, I would make the bodybuilder appear as though it was using its own hands to drag material from one part of its body to another. For example, taking matter from its calf or its leg and dragging it upwards to sort of build itself a bigger head.

Then I started making a series in 2011 called *The Architects*. These sculptures look like they are using the material that comes from the wall to shape their own bodies. It was such a logical little move in my own practice, such a simple logical shift, that I gave myself the permission to do it, even though before then I had always been against making things that were connected to the architecture.

Since then I've been exploring every space. I made a series of heads that are lying on the ground but have holes in their face. When you look over them, the hole continues down through the floor. I call them 'rabbit holes'.

**Why were you initially resistant to using architecture?**

I went to art school in the 1990s, and I just thought using the architecture was such a cliché. I didn't want to do what my teachers had been doing. At the same time I'm just so interested in biology and the body, and I like the idea of using the body as a model. I've always been into Louise Bourgeois. She's a big influence. And through her work I discovered that sculpture could function as a body. Just the idea that the sculpture, the object, contains infinity and is able to generate energy, that it can potentially have the same presence as a body – that's what really interests me.

**A lot of your work has to do with transformation.** When I started making sculpture, I realized that what made it different from any

other genre was that it exists in real space. It doesn't exist in representations; it actually breathes the same air we breathe. It potentially has the same energy as a person. I wanted to make intensely powerful objects that were able to generate energy. So I started making severed werewolf heads with crystals growing out of them. When you place one of these objects on a table, it looks like it's generating energy – because of very different things: because of the narrative that you can imagine, the violence connected to the decapitation; because of the crystals, the seductive aspect of the crystals; and because of the contrast between seductive and grotesque.

I use a lot of strategies when I make sculptures. The suggestion of transformation is only one of these strategies, because to suggest that an object can transform makes it seem like it's alive.

**In your work it seems as if transformation goes in two directions.**

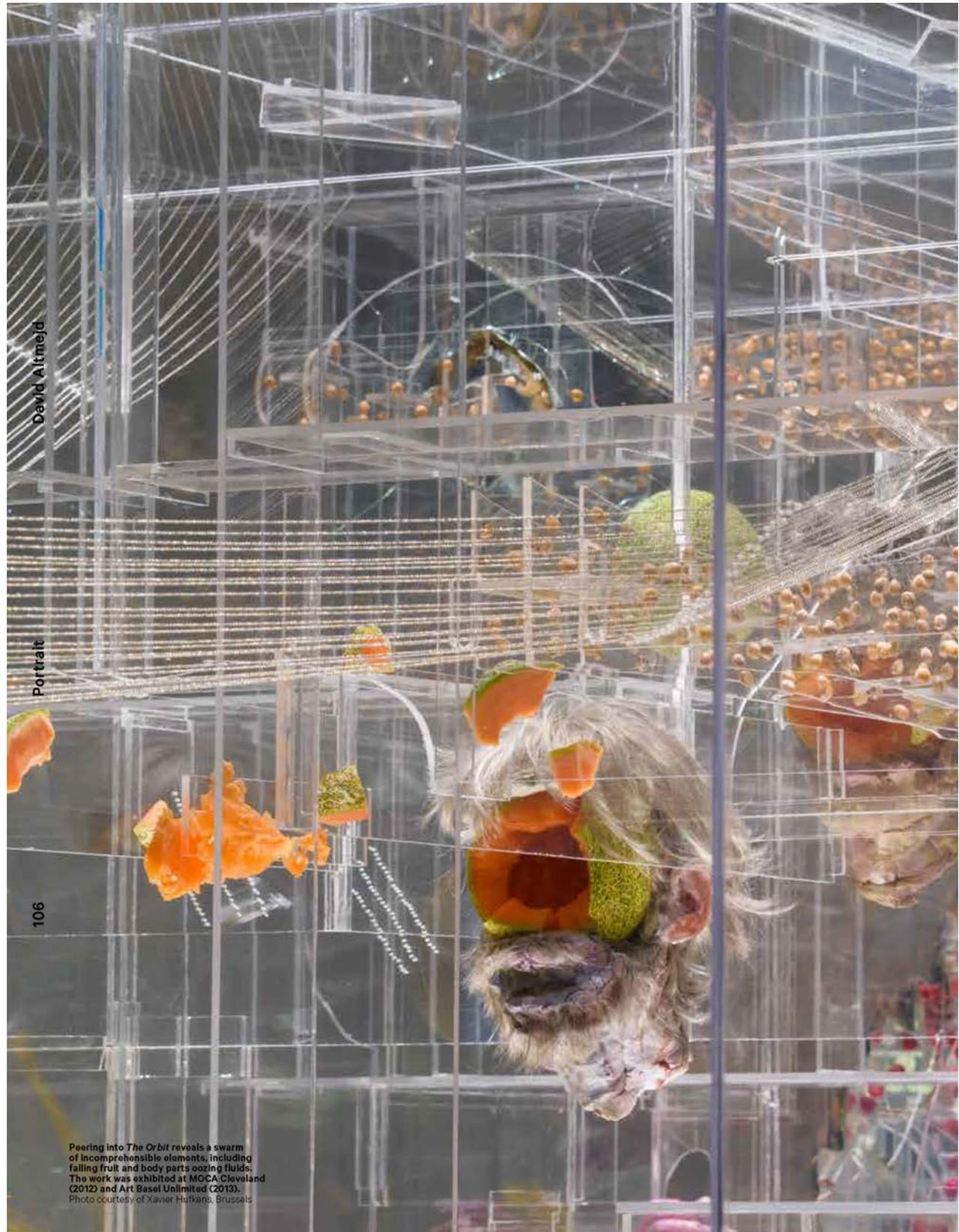
**There is decay, and there is growth.** Because I'm an artist, everything is about growth. Even the representation of decay is a positive action, because when you're in the studio you're actually building something up, making something – even if it looks like it's decaying. So I only see it as growth. ...

Portrait



For both *Bodybuilders* and *The Architects* (2011), Altmejd sculpted series of distorted figures that appear to use material from the gallery walls to build themselves.

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David Altmejd

Portrait

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Peering into *The Orbit* reveals a swarm of incomprehensible elements, including falling fruit and body parts oozing fluids. The work was exhibited at MOCA Cleveland (2012) and Art Basel Unlimited (2013). Photo courtesy of Xavier Hulken, Brussels



## 'I discovered that sculpture could function as a body'

David Altmejd

Portrait

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**... How do you start a project?** I usually start with the space. That's the first step, to get hypnotized by the plan of the space and imagine inhabiting it. Very often I see space as something I have to compete against, because a lot of spaces that I show in are overwhelming in terms of the architecture.

**For your show at the Brant Foundation in 2011, you made the interior space part of your work.** We used the works of mine that Peter Brant owns, and I also made new work. I built a room and covered a wall with mirrors. I pushed it as much as possible, the whole installation. The pedestals, everything in the installation, ended up feeling like my work, including the height of the pedestals that I made for the sculptures, their materiality and the colours I used. The fact that I covered the walls with mirrors – everything in the installation had my sensibility.

**Much of your work is about containing boxes within boxes, an infinity of cells that viewers can peer into. Can you talk a bit about display and how it relates to what you're doing? In a comparison of museum vitrines, store displays and cases for scientific specimens – which one**

**resonates more than the others for you?** None of them. I totally understand why people make that connection. But that's not where I'm starting from. For example, a Plexiglas box for me is not a space that is a container. It's an invisible structure that's going to give me the possibility of placing something inside it and of making that object look like it's floating. It's an invisible support structure.

But maybe that's not totally true. I am interested in presentation and in how one object, presented in different ways, can actually be animated in different ways. The early work that I made – really complicated architectural structures made of differently sized platforms, mirrored cubby holes and Plexiglas boxes – made it possible for me to take one object, such as a werewolf head, and try to place it within the structure in different places to see where it became animated. I would design structures that gave me a lot of different display possibilities so that I could really play around with them. **Your work is a ready-made display case. In a way it subverts the museum's curatorial installation, because it comes with its own display.** That's the way I work. I always try to subvert. I'm not comfortable with the idea that something has a clear meaning or clear status. So when I present an object on a pedestal, I like the idea of making it ambiguous – is the pedestal part of the piece or not? I also like to display that pedestal on another pedestal. Clarity is not something I aspire to. I like movement. I like when something suggests something else, or when you think you understand something, but then all of a sudden it's going in a completely different direction – I see that as good, not bad. Display is the same. It's all movement. It's alive. I'm more interested in movement and energy than I am in meaning.

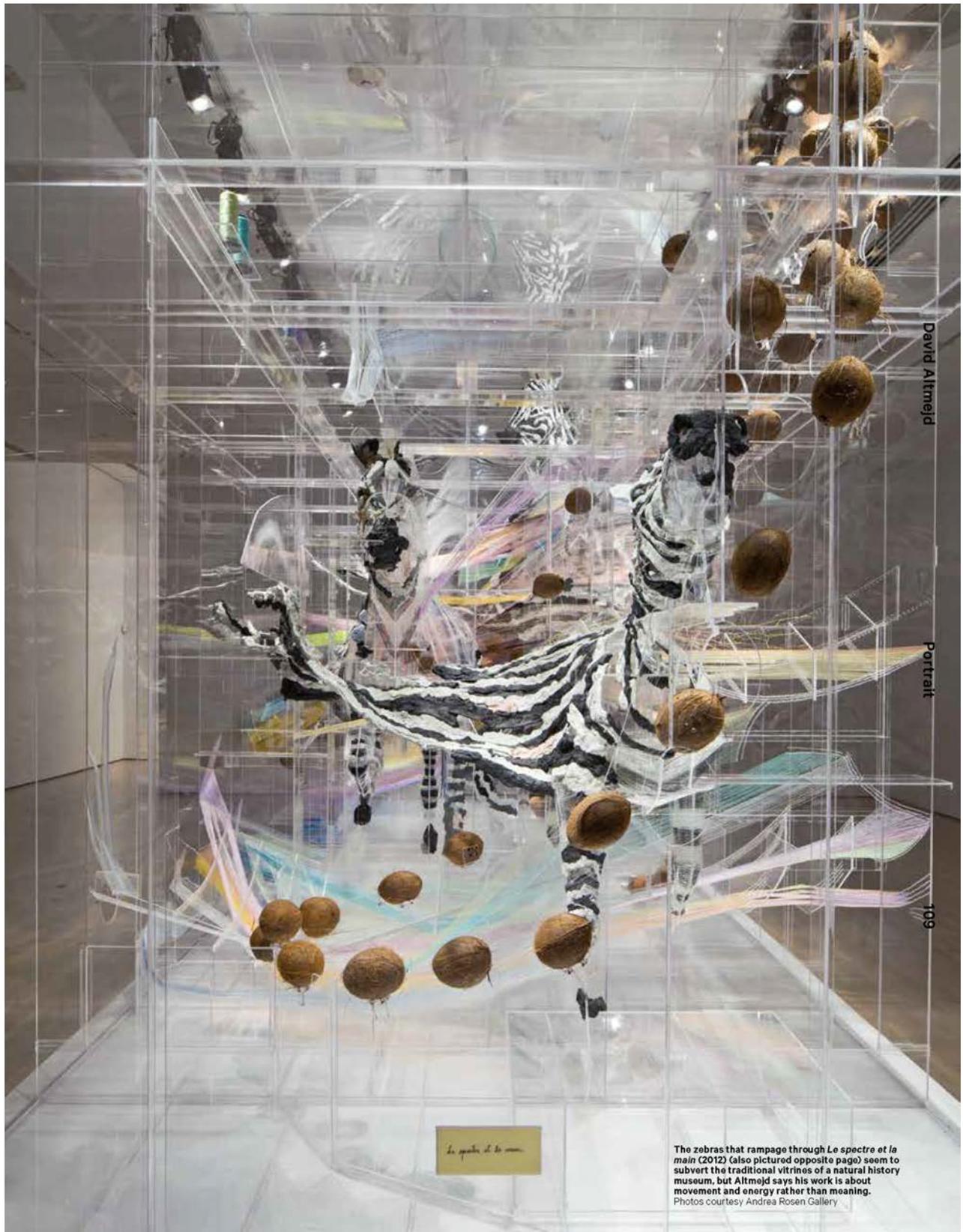
**I want to ask about your rock collection, because it's so compelling. You were telling me earlier that at first you started picking up rocks here and there before becoming a more serious collector.** I'm building a bank of minerals, so that instead of having to go to the store or look for something online when I need it, I'll have everything here. They will be organized by colour. I don't really believe in the power of crystals the way some people do. I started collecting crystals and minerals when I was a kid. But I do think that gluing a crystal to an object gives it a certain power. Even though I don't believe the crystal injects a real energy into the object, it does feel like that in a way. **You started making ceramics about a year ago.** The idea is just to integrate ceramic pieces into larger works – to put a ceramic bust into a Plexiglas box, for example, so it looks like it's floating. I'm trying to figure out how such pieces can carry water and become fountains. I've never worked with water, but the idea came from making ceramics. Realizing the very natural potential of the material, I started making busts and heads that release water from their mouths. \_



The severed head is a recurring symbol in Altmejd's work. They often appear embellished with crystals in a combination the artist calls 'seductive and grotesque.' Photo courtesy of The Brant Foundation Art Study Center



Hear David Altmejd explain *The Orbit* with Layar, or download the November edition of our iPad app (available on the App Store)



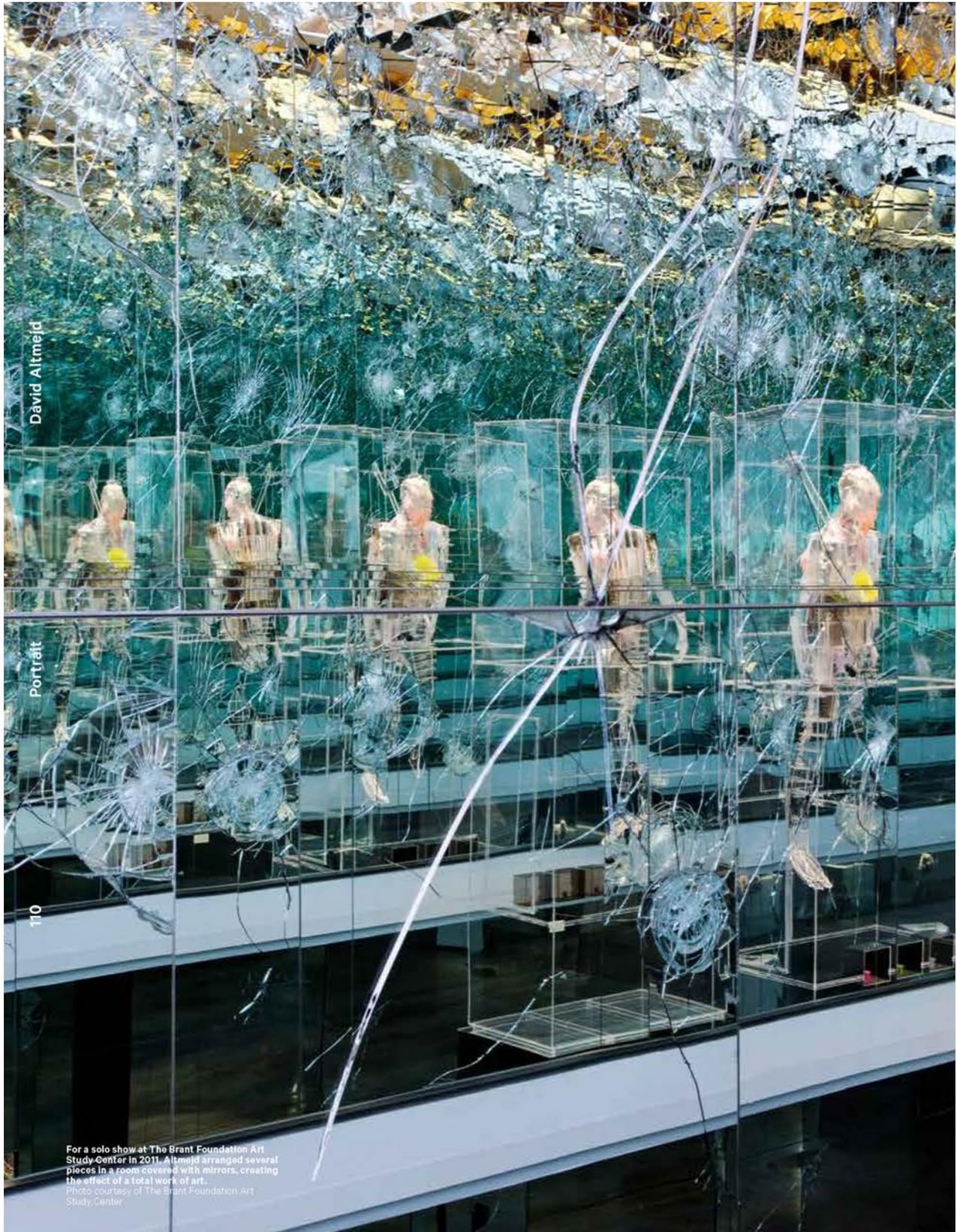
David Altmejd

Portrait

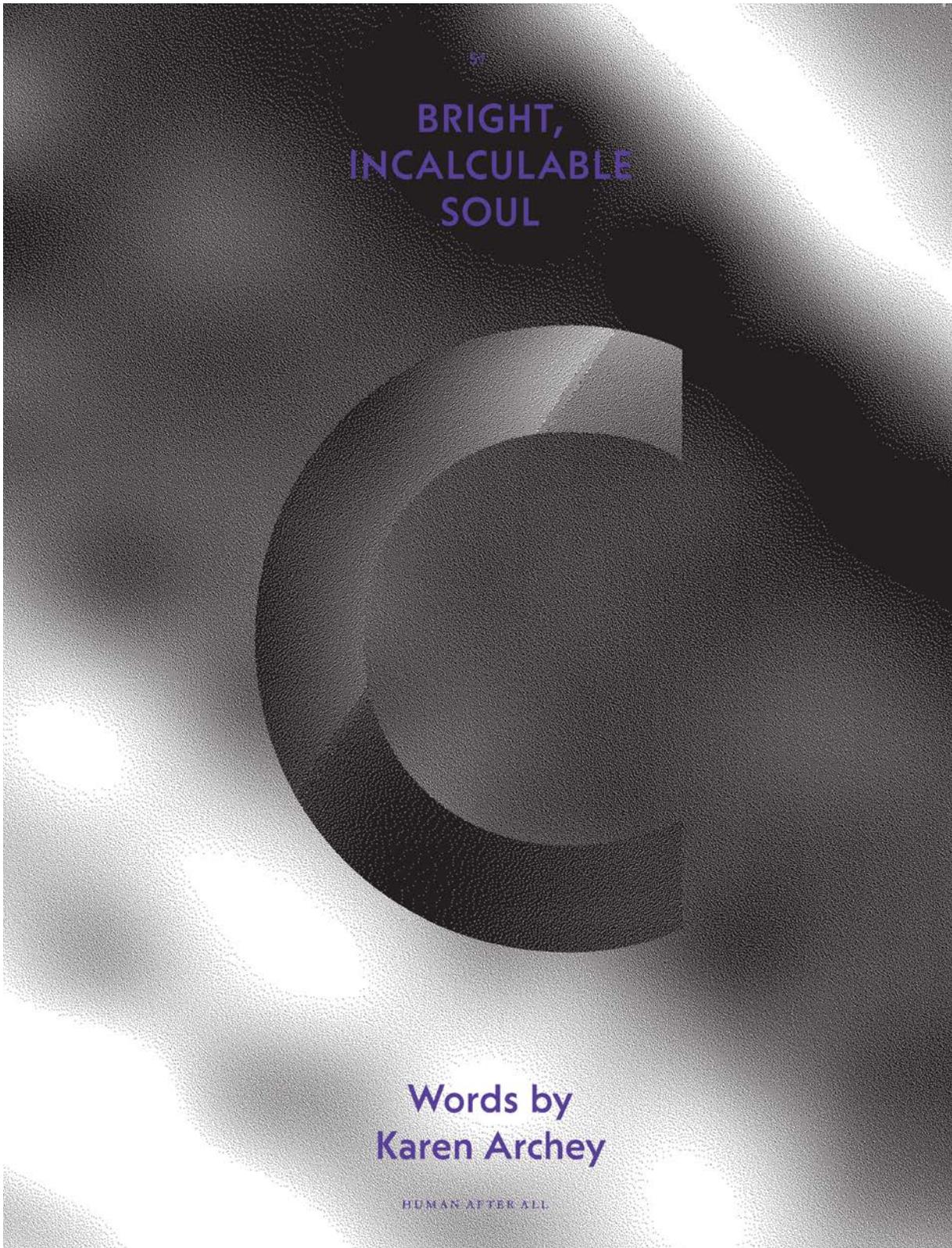
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de spectre et de main

The zobras that rampage through *Le spectre et la main* (2012) (also pictured opposite page) seem to subvert the traditional vitrines of a natural history museum, but Altmejd says his work is about movement and energy rather than meaning. Photos courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery







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**BRIGHT,  
INCALCULABLE  
SOUL**

**Words by  
Karen Archev**

HUMAN AFTER ALL

MAIN THEME

**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

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

MAIN THEME



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,

Untitled 1 (The Watchers), 2009



MAIN THEME

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 Altmejd'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 bevvies of younger artists making work



Untitled 4 (The Watchers), Detail, 2011

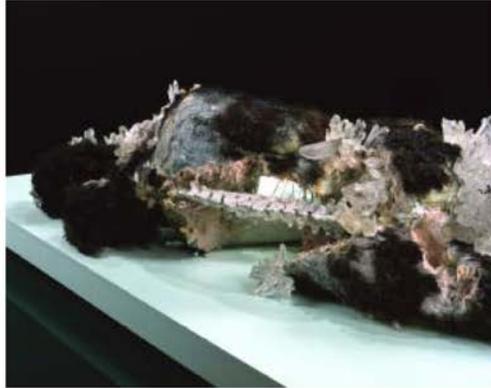
about theories such as natural selection, we find an overwhelming contradiction. The body, like life, is also seen as unknowable, ineffable and incalculable—yet it's with theory, which is bound up in the more limited tongue of verbal language, that such work is undergirded. Isn't it art that is most 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?

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

# ARTFORUM

JAN. 2005 INTERNATIONAL



David Altmejd, *The Lovers (det ail)*, 2004, plaster, resin, paint, fake hair, jewelry, and glitter, 45 x 90 x 54".

Opulent, complex, and evocatively incongruous, David Altmejd's sculptural scenarios have, in a relatively short time, insinuated themselves into the contemporary art world's collective consciousness. Of course, his idiosyncratic formal vocabulary—quasi-modernist display environments sexed up with mirrored surfaces, theatrical lighting, and costume jewelry, all orchestrated to create sprawling disco sarcophagi for broken werewolf corpses—is already a riot of psychological tropes. Death and desire, the self and the other, decay and transformation: All are explicit in the forms and contexts of Altmejd's gorgeous grotesqueries.

For viewers who first encountered the artist's work in group shows like "demon clownmonkey" at Artists Space in 2002 or last year's "Scream" at Anton Kern Gallery, Altmejd's first solo appearance at Andrea Rosen provided a fuller overview of his themes, as well as some minor variation. The gallery's main space, painted black for the occasion, contained four works but was dominated by a pair of large constructions, *The University 1* and *The University 2* (all works 2004). The former is an appealing riff on Sol LeWitt, an open lattice of mirrored linear elements built into a floorstanding cubic matrix that glitters beneath the dramatic spotlighting,

scattering reflections around the shadowy space. A primary structure given a darkly glamorous makeover, it suggests less the rigid mathematical order of its model than an atomization of perception that's entirely in keeping with Altmejd's preference for visual dynamism, not to mention his magpie fascination with shiny things.

If the relatively pure abstraction of *The University 1* hints at a more low-key strand of Altmejd's practice, its partner is a dramatic apotheosis of the artist's trademark gestures. Measuring seventeen by twenty-five feet and rising to almost nine feet in places, *The University 2* is a colossal, labyrinthine reliquary: its modular platforms edged with channels of white light like landing strips or fashion-show runways and shot through with warren-like compartments that open onto lit and/or mirrored interior spaces. Topped by vitrines (some of which are eerily vacant) and decorated with clutches of silk flowers, little wire trees festooned with dime-store charms, carved and painted birds, long strands of golden chain, and hunks of raw minerals (not to mention the obligatory decomposing Iycanthropes enfolded within its strange contours), the entire assemblage is an uncanny cross between a half-dismantled department store

display and a low-budget natural history museum.

The two more modest works are similarly seductive: a small untitled piece lurking in one dimly lit corner featuring a lump of crystal-encrusted hair and the implausibly beautiful *The Lovers*, in which a pair of putrefying monsters lie entwined on a broad plinth in a chaotic embrace of bone, hair, and jewelry. Here, perhaps more than anywhere else in the show, viewers got a sense of the real delicacy Altmejd is able to conjure from abjection, as a network of body parts, caught in the spotlight, cast a morbidly elegant tangle of shadows in a recessed area of the platform. That Altmejd consistently manages to orchestrate real conceptual lucidity from these wild constellations of materials is a credit to his substantial skill. Yet it's also plain that the fact that they cohere around what has, in only a handful of shows, become so inevitable a mode of address has the capacity to become something of a liability (recently overheard on Twenty-fourth Street: "Did you see the David Altmejd show yet?" "Oh, you mean the werewolf guy?"), especially since the genuine flair he exhibits makes clear his potential to develop a more expansive, thematically diverse practice.

-Jeffrey Kastner



## DAVID ALTMEJD

[ARTIST]

"I WANT EVERYTHING IN MY WORK TO GENERATE.  
I WANT EVERYTHING IN MY WORK TO BE GENERATED INSIDE THE WORK."

Conceptual elements of retail-store counters used in Altmejd's work:

*Desire*

*Energy*

*The display of the sacred*

**“W**hy not fashion?” David Altmejd asks me. Why not, indeed? I’m a fan of fashion; he’s a fan of fashion. So when I went to interview him about the spectacular sculptures he creates, we decided that fashion would offer a fine entrée to a conversation. Fashion feeds his work. Clothing, jewelry, and wigs pop up in his sculptures. Birdmen sport natty suits. Rhinestone flowers sprout from the corpses of werewolves. Gold chains swarm like insects through mirrored counters and cabinets. The fashion world furnishes him with many of his materials; he transforms them into the flora and fauna of a world that’s entirely his own design.

It’s small surprise that fashion designers—Marc Jacobs and Raf Simons, to name two—admire his work. But they’re not alone: his art is both original and engaging, critically acclaimed and crowd pleasing. At thirty-seven, he is an artist of international stature, his work collected by the Whitney Museum, the

Guggenheim, the Dallas Museum of Art, and the National Gallery of Canada, among others.

Altmejd was born and bred in Montreal. He started his studies at the Université du Québec à Montréal, then completed them at Columbia. Though he has been in New York since graduating, he still speaks with a francophone accent. He apologizes for his English, but he shouldn’t. He speaks well. Better still, his ideas are as idiosyncratic as his sculptures.

I met him almost a decade ago. If fashion is the framework for our interview, so, too, has it been a framework for our friendship. We talk about style. We go shopping together. He has much nicer clothes than I do. In my novel *The Show That Smells*, fashion icons Coco Chanel and Elsa Schiaparelli battle for the soul of a country singer. Altmejd created the novel’s cover art, a crystal-encrusted werewolf head with tufts of shocking-colored hair. For those who know fashion, the cover makes it clear: Schiaparelli wins.

—Derek McCormack

### I. ART IS A BROOCH THAT YOU WEAR ON A BLOUSE

THE BELIEVER: Years ago, when we first met, we walked around midtown Manhattan looking for costume jewelry for you to use in your work. You bought a brooch with the word *ART* in rhinestones. What happened to that?

DAVID ALTMEJD: I don't think I used it. It would be too obvious.

BLVR: Still, it would look perfect on a blouse, don't you think?

DA: It depends on what blouse, and who is wearing it. It would be cool on an older lady.

BLVR: I'm an older lady. Can I have it? [*Laughter*] I mention the *ART* brooch because brooches, and jewelry in general, play a big role in your work.

DA: I really use a lot of jewelry.

BLVR: I'm fascinated by the way your work incorporates clothing and jewelry. I'm fascinated, too, by the way it plays with display and merchandising principles—plays with them and perverts them.

DA: I'm interested in display, though it's not the main aspect of my work. It's an aspect among other aspects. I'm not even against the idea of using the same sort of strategies as stores. I've never really taken things from a store display; I mean, I've never walked into a store and thought, I'll do that, I'll do that. I just end up using the same strategies that stores do. I feel as if I do it instinctively.

BLVR: Where do you find your jewelry?

DA: I used to go to these wholesale stores where they hand you a basket when you walk in. You could buy a brooch for two dollars. I don't buy jewelry pieces anymore; instead, I buy the parts of them: the chains, the stones. It's more like I take the parts and put them together my own way.

BLVR: Do you ever incorporate precious jewels in the work?

DA: No, it's costume jewelry. I do use real crystals now, though, real rocks. I will use real amethysts. But precious stones, no—I don't need a diamond, I can use a fake diamond. It's not how much it's worth that matters, it's the effect.

BLVR: How about when galleries or museums stage shows of jewelry? Does that interest you at all, the work of jewelers?

DA: I am interested in beautiful artifacts, of course. I'm not so interested in the history part of jewelry, the chronology of creators and what was made. I like individual pieces. When I'm really working on something, I feel as if I'm a jeweler making jewelry.

BLVR: When you're constructing a sculpture, what dictates where a piece of jewelry will go? Is it a sense of rightness?

DA: It's symmetry. I like things to be symmetrical, or at least balanced. Since we're talking about fashion, I will say this: it's sort of like a designer staring at a model and putting that final touch to her outfit, that final accessory, and saying, "That's it!" [*Laughter*]

BLVR: Can jewelry be art?

DA: Yes, I think so. It's more likely to be art than fashion is. I can see a jeweler completely absorbed in his work and forgetting about what the purpose of it will be. It seems like a fashion designer would always be thinking of what the final result will be, which is people wearing his clothes.

BLVR: Can fashion be art?

DA: It's a different game. Fashion is much more respectful of taste. Even if it pushes boundaries, it's always tasteful; even when it tries to be distasteful, it's tasteful. In art, it feels like you can push it further.

BLVR: A designer can do something outrageous, but he

still needs customers who want to wear the outrageous clothes, and who can pay for them.

DA: I think the idea of cool is important in fashion; I feel that when fashion designers do something outrageous, it's supposed to become cool right away. With art, there's the hope that it will remain outrageous or shocking, at least for a while.

BLVR: Fashion works at a frantic pace. The most shocking look is meant to be recuperated at a ferocious speed. Art, too, can be recuperated right away, but sometimes it isn't; sometimes it stays difficult and unsettling for a while.

DA: I feel like art is different; it's so conceptual, in a way, that it lets you do anything, whereas fashion is not really conceptual. When it says that it is, as with Hussein Chalayan, it's not true; it's really a style, it's "the conceptual" in quotation marks. It's the look of "conceptual." I'm sorry, sometimes there are moments when my English is really, really bad.

## II. WEREWOLVES DON'T WEAR SILVER PINS

BLVR: I met you in 2004, when you were in the Whitney Biennial.

DA: You wrote an article about me and called it "Hairy Winston."

BLVR: That was about the time you bought the *ART* brooch. I thought it might wind up in a werewolf sculpture. I thought, Don't put a silver brooch in a werewolf!

DA: I didn't.

BLVR: At that time you were making sculptures with decaying werewolves. The werewolves were covered with costume jewelry and crystals.

DA: Jewelry, because it's shiny, it vibrates visually; I see it as something that has a little pulse. If you place it on something that's obviously dead, it's going to seem like a strange organ that generates real energy.

BLVR: The werewolf sculptures weren't really about dying and decay at all; they were about alchemy. Jewelry and crystals were somehow produced by the processes of death; they were growing. They were magic.

DA: Maybe it was magical. I like to think of it as physical, as biological. The jewelry plays a part in the transformation. Gold chain, for example, I use to connect elements. I see it as a way of making energy travel from one point to the other.

BLVR: It's the energy, but also the conduit. The jewelry refracts and redirects energy, but it also consists of energy. It's playing different roles in different situations. I love that, I love that its functions can change so fast. I also love that the jewelry doesn't have to be a diamond; it can be some dumb dime-store rhinestone.

## III. THE SLOT IN A BOX THAT A RING SITS IN

BLVR: In 2004, at your first solo show at Andrea Rosen Gallery, there were lots of werewolves and jewelry. The show seemed to me to be at least a little bit about jewelry display.

DA: I remember a sentence you told me, something that you were going to put in your book. You said the slit in the head of a penis was like the slot in a jewelry box that a ring sits in.

BLVR: That line's your fault. In that first show of yours, dead werewolves were doing all sorts of sexual things. No, it had werewolves who had died doing all sorts of sexual things. Or were they dead? I don't know. They were covered in gold chains and costume jewelry and they were lying in incredible mirrored boxes and on counters.

DA: How do you activate an object? If you're given a werewolf head, how are you going to make it feel precious? For a really long time, that was an important part of my work: to position them in such a way that they would vibrate. I don't think there's an infinite number of ways.



David Altmejd, *The Swarm*, 2011. Plexiglas, chain, metal wire, thread, acrylic paint, epoxy resin, epoxy clay, acrylic gel, granular medium, synthetic hair, plaster, foam, sand, quartz, pyrite, amethyst, assorted minerals, adhesive, wire, pins, needles.  $102\frac{1}{2} \times 244 \times 84\frac{1}{2}$  in. Photo by Jessica Eckert. Image courtesy of the Andrea Rosen Gallery.

BLVR: I know that the chains and jewelry were acting as energy, and it made sense to me to think about retail: there are few places more fraught with energy and desire than store counters. I don't know what kind of store sells dead werewolves, or uses them as jewelry trays.

DA: I don't know.

BLVR: You were saying?

DA: If we think of the idea of activating an object, how do we do it? If you place it on a table, right in the center to make it look important, yes, people are going to think about store display. Throughout history, how did churches display sacred objects? A little bit the same way. It's not necessarily about store display; it's about making something seem precious.

#### IV. THE CHANGE ROOM CHANGES YOU

BLVR: At the 2007 Venice Biennale, you used mannequins in your sculptures.

DA: Yes, but I haven't done it very often, only in that piece. And they had bird heads.

BLVR: I think it was the first time you incorporated clothing into your sculpture, wasn't it?

DA: A couple of the werewolves I made years ago had underwear and shoes. I made the underwear dirty to make sure that it was sort of decaying with the body, becoming part of the body. It was involved in whatever transformation was happening with the body. I wanted them to wear a specific brand of underwear, which was

2(x)ist. It's a popular brand: if you go to a department store, you have a choice between Calvin Klein, 2(x)ist, and Hugo Boss. I wanted to allude to existential ideas, but through underwear. [Laughter]

BLVR: The mannequins in Venice couldn't help but conjure a retail space, at least in my mind. Not the men's department, but the birdmen's. Do you like mannequins?

DA: I don't think I've ever loved a dress or piece of clothing that was worn by a mannequin. I never stop at a store window to look at what mannequins are wearing. It's dead. It's not cool if it's worn by something dead; that's just my opinion.

BLVR: So with the mannequins, did you mean to convey a degree of deadness?

DA: If I had them wear clothes, it was sort of to make them seem more alive. It sounds contradictory. Putting a mannequin under clothes won't make the clothes look more alive; putting clothes on a mannequin makes the mannequin look more alive.

BLVR: Did you dress the mannequins in any particular designer's clothes?

DA: I don't remember. I used some new clothes and also some used ones. I didn't want them to look too much like they were in a store window.

BLVR: There was one bird-headed man in a booth that contained crystals and mirrors. It seemed to me to be a change room. Maybe he was trying on clothes, maybe he was changing from man to bird, or from bird to man. I considered that it could be a confessional booth, but it's mirrored, and that's really a retail thing.

DA: The mirrors are cracked and shattered. There are a lot of mirrors in stores and in displays, but you don't look at yourself in them; it's not like the mirror is a focus that puts you at the center. Of course, the mirrors on the walls are there for you to look at when you try your pants on. The mirrors that line counters and are

on columns are not looked at. Mirrors are materials that move and that multiply space and that vibrate visually. Do churches use mirrors? If I were to build a cathedral, I would place mirrors everywhere in it.

#### V. BEES ARE NATURE'S BROOCHES

BLVR: *The Vessel* and *The Swarm*, a pair of huge sculptures, dominated your 2011 show at Andrea Rosen. They were giant Plexiglas boxes filled with insects, plaster hands and ears, and yards of thread—thread fanning out, rising and falling, doubling back through holes, wrapping around shelves and objects. Was this the first time you used thread?

DA: There are a few pieces that I made previous to the show that used thread, but, no, I had never used it a lot before. It came about as an alternative to gold chain—the pieces you mentioned earlier, the big Plexiglas boxes with webs and networks of gold chain. I started using thread as a way to introduce color.

BLVR: You dyed them?

DA: Yes, some of them have a gradation of color. I painted them. I painted a bunch of threads with very diluted acrylic to create gradations that I wanted.

BLVR: The bees and the jellyfish you made from thread and Plexiglas—those struck me as the closest thing to jewelry I've seen you make.

DA: I really liked the insects. They are positive insects, insects that give. Not like ticks; ticks only take. I'm into using things that give and give and give: things that are generators. Bees give and pollinate flowers. Oh, it sounds so cheesy. [Laughs] I want everything in my work to generate. I want everything in my work to be generated inside the work. If there's gold chain, I want it to be coming from something, so I need a generator of gold chain at the beginning of the gold-chain segment; it has to be coming from something that generates gold chain. It has to be coming from somewhere. That's why I used those little Plexi bees, the chain-generators. If there's thread, it also has to be generated by something—that's

why I like spools. There were a lot of spools in that show as well, because they're thread-generators.

BLVR: What generates the spools?

DA: The spools are all handmade in Plexiglas. They're the same material as the box. In my mind, they're a mutation of the Plexi box that contains them.

BLVR: When I saw those Plexi boxes, I thought, It's offering a cross-section of what's happening in the gallery. There's always something happening, even if it's invisible. You made a box that lets us see what's happening all the time in secret.

DA: The purpose of the box is as a support structure to give me the chance—because it's transparent, invisible—to attach things and make them seem like they're floating.

BLVR: The spools are the same Plexiglas as the box: it's as though you had something rare and put it in a display case or window, and the case and window started generating what was inside it.

DA: I like those shifts. I like to use something as a frame, and pretend it doesn't exist, then all of a sudden it starts to exist. In one of the pieces, I pretended that the box was just an invisible support, and that the Plexiglas structure that I added inside did not exist. In terms of one specific narrative, the Plexi isn't there, it's simply a support. At the end I added some ants, and the ants started walking on the Plexi. For me, that was the moment when the structure started existing. They're not ignoring it. They're using it to get around. Again, from the beginning, the box doesn't exist, but it does sometimes. I like to go from pretending it's not there to using it and then going back to pretending again.

BLVR: It showed in the work, because it was like you were viewing an exhibit, but then you'd notice that the Plexi was fractured and it was participating in the piece.

DA: I liked the fractures in it. It's participating in the process of creation. I see it as something playful.

## VI. THAT NECKLACE IS WEARING YOU

BLVR: If jewelry can function that way in your sculptures, does the shininess function the same way on people?

DA: I think that jewelry offers transformative powers. I'm really interested in the positioning of jewelry on people. It's not random. It's not random, for example, with a necklace. It hits right in the center of the chest.

BLVR: Jewelry is close to perfume: it's worn where you would wear perfume, behind the ears, on the wrists, at the base of the throat. Where there's heat and blood.

DA: Yes, but you don't need heat to make jewelry glitter, you only need light. I think it has more to do with the fact that they're on sensitive areas. It's the same with the bindi: it's in an amazing position. Earrings—I question the importance of that. Do you think that's a good placement? Lip piercings, I think, are an abomination. They show a total disrespect, or lack of care. They're lazy. There's nothing that happens there. There's something too soft about the lips. Often when there's a piercing there, it's not in the center, it's off to the side. I think tongue piercings are interesting—I mean, I don't like them, because they make me feel pain.

BLVR: Perhaps that's what some people want to do with their piercings: to make other people say, "Ouch, ouch, ouch."

DA: I don't have any piercings; I don't think I could have any. I can imagine wanting a piercing if I wanted to take control of my body. "David, your body is just skin and flesh, you can pierce it, you'll see, you'll feel you have control over it, it's not a bad deal. Don't worry, David, you can do what you want."

BLVR: You've never felt the need to get control of your body that way?

DA: Maybe it would be an amazing feeling.

BLVR: You don't wear jewelry.

DA: No, but I like the idea of wearing it. I don't wear it, probably because I feel like it's underlining my body. It's making it obvious that I have a body. If I wear a necklace or bracelet, it's going to be like saying, "Hey, look at me, I'm here." It would make me uncomfortable.

BLVR: It makes you uncomfortable that people would see that you are not invisible. Invisibility is important to you.

DA: It's not that it's important to me, it's simply a fact. I have always felt invisible, ever since I was a child. I mean, I know I am visible to you, but to most people I am not. I can walk down a street and not be noticed.

BLVR: That's a terrible feeling for a child to feel.

DA: It was hard. I always had the feeling that I would grow up and have—I don't want to say revenge, because that's not it. I had the sense that I would show everybody, you know? I think that because I was invisible I could go anywhere and nobody would care. It was an opportunity to think and to become critical.

BLVR: And you still feel this way.

DA: Absolutely.

BLVR: So jewelry would compromise your invisibility? It would be akin to the Invisible Man putting on a bow tie?

DA: I would be invisible, but people would notice the jewelry. Jewelry has no purpose other than to be noticed. It's always an exclamation. It's always showy.

BLVR: What about clothes, then? How do you decide what to wear?

DA: Clothes are different than jewelry. Clothes can either draw attention or they can make you invisible. I always wear things that accentuate my invisibility.

BLVR: How can clothes accentuate invisibility?

DA: Well, it's a matter of avoiding things that are trendy. In

terms of color and cut... [Pause] Oh, I have an honest answer, but I've never talked about these things. I have codes, I have systems, but I don't know if I can put them into words.

BLVR: I think a lot of gay guys develop ideas like yours as boys, that they're invisible or monstrous or evil in some way. Me, I would rather be invisible than be disgustingly ugly, which is what I've always been.

DA: You have never been disgustingly ugly!

BLVR: You have never been invisible! It's difficult for me to comprehend all this, David, seeing as you're so good-looking. You have sex, David; you have boyfriends. Men notice you. Men see you.

DA: I don't believe they do. It's always dark when I meet them. [Laughter]

BLVR: I can't help but think of your 2008 show at Andrea Rosen, which featured colossi. These were giant statues, David, giant figures.

DA: Yes.

BLVR: You're invisible, yet you build statues of yourself that dominate the gallery. And some of them were made of mirrors, though they didn't function as mirrors: they somehow demanded *and* deflected attention.

DA: That's why I'm a sculptor. I think that it's very satisfying to make sculptures so that I can create things that aren't invisible. My physical and visual anchors in the world are my sculptures. The mirrors in the figures were sort of deflecting attention, which was a different level.

BLVR: It must be very unnerving when people criticize your work.

DA: But at the same time, there's something really satisfying about it—it's a reminder that I exist. I mean, no one would ever criticize me or my body, because I'm invisible. It would never happen. It's amazing to know that I really exist in the world through those sculptures.



David Altmejd, *The Center* (and detail, right), 2008. Wood, foam, epoxy clay, resin, horse hair, metal wire, paint, mirror, glass beads, plaster, glue, feathers, glass eyes. 141 × 72 × 48 in. Photo by Ellen Page Wilson. Images courtesy of the Andrea Rosen Gallery.

BLVR: They represent you, but you also understand that they're stand-ins for you.

DA: I can't back away from them. I don't want to. I don't like seeing that. I like being aware that people are looking at my work, but I don't want to see it happening. It gives me a sort of vertigo. It's not supposed to be like that. It would be like being outside of my body and seeing people looking at it. It's embarrassing.

BLVR: So your sculptures are you; that is, they are visible, tangible things that allow you to have a visible presence. You have taken all sorts of shapes: decaying werewolves covered in crystal, mirrored mazes, bird-headed men, Plexiglas boxes that contain ecosystems of thread and insects. All these Davids wear jewelry, though you do not; all these Davids are showy, though you are not. The boxes are invisible structures, though they can become visible. I could describe you the same way.

DA: Yes.

BLVR: The sculptures are always bursting with life. The energy—your energy—doesn't die; it's always pulsing and mutating.

DA: I'm wondering if with time it will change. I can imagine a piece so dusty that the energy will be held inside. What happens if the jewelry gets tarnished? What if it doesn't shine? Does it mean that the piece is dead? Does it have the same power? Is the magical aspect only connected to the shininess?

BLVR: Who in the world would let their David Altmejd get dusty?

DA: I'm not worried. I don't think that dust can kill anything. ✨



# Artifacts | The Cute and the Gross: David Altmejd's Gorgeous Gothic

By Linda Yablonsky | March 28, 2011



Courtesy of the Andrea Rosen Gallery "The Vessel," 2011, by David Altmejd.

One reason the grotesque is so compelling is its ravaged beauty. Bound up in the distorting horror, at least in art, is an absurdity that also makes its appearance rather comic. All of those elements are in play in David Altmejd's dazzling new show at the Andrea Rosen Gallery, where decapitated heads grow glittering crystals, fossilized angels are crucified within the walls, and agglomerations of human ears ornament plexiglass cages swarming with jewel-like, plastic bees.

As a mediator of the sacred and the profane, Altmejd makes every object a thing of beauty, the driving force of his work. "For me the grotesque is necessary to understand beauty," he said the other day. "Things that are pure, I can't feel them. They have to be infected or else they don't exist — they don't have a presence."

There's no shortage of charisma in this show. Just inside the gallery entrance is the plaster figure of a man with a big hole where the heart should be — apparently a self-inflicted wound. It gets your attention right away. Hands tear at the figure's ribs and rest beside a ridiculously

small skull atop shoulders embedded with the incongruous ears. Its flying, winglike appendages give it the look of the Louvre's Winged Victory of Samothrace, the goddess that once adorned the prow of an ancient Greek ship.

"I like holes," Altmejd said. "I like orifices. They're what lets in light and air."

His inorganic organisms definitely seem to breathe. "The Vessel," a 20-foot-long plexiglass diorama of disembodied hands and noses, fairly shimmers in the gallery's main exhibition space. It features a pair of flayed, swanlike plaster arms, their hands clasping bird beaks of a particularly phallic shape. A kind of Greek chorus of raised fists grasping more beaks surrounds them, all trapped in a rigging of cascading colored threads set off by plantlike crystals.

For Altmejd, who is 36 and once thought he would be a biologist, the strings represent the blood vessels of a circulatory system connecting the parts to the whole, though the work's confounding transparency makes it impossible to take in at a single glance, or even many. The picture changes with every blink.

Just as difficult to comprehend, though no less fascinating, is "The Swarm," a companion piece of the same size. Instead of hands, it contains swooping vectors of the plastic bees, each wrapped in fine gold chain. Strings of ears also dangle within, while large blank ants crawl up the sides of the container — clearly a metaphor for a conflicted body that is sprouting plaster heads coiffed in ridiculous toupees.

The ears are new to Altmejd's work, which usually proliferates with casts of just his hands. "Ears are softer," he said, "like butterfly wings. They're sort of pretty, though they're also kind of gross."

While "The Vessel" seems ordered and symmetrical, "The Swarm" presents a cosmos of chaos within the natural world. Presiding over their gothic splendor is an abject plaster angel embedded high on one wall; multiple hands tear at its ribs, ripping itself apart. The sight of it reminded me of the scene in "Silence of the Lambs" in which Hannibal Lecter strings up a victim like a butterfly or a kite. Altmejd's is both tragic and saintly, a martyr punishing itself for its narcissism with extreme self-loathing. Its Christ-like appearance is deliberate. "I've really been into Catholic visuals in the past few years," Altmejd told me. Not that he's religious. "I just like the metaphors and the imagery," he said.

A similar figure spreads its tentacle-like wings across three walls of a rear gallery, as if to embrace the quartz crystals on display in a plexiglass case at the center of the room. Crystals have been a recurring element of Altmejd's work since his first shows in 2002, when they decorated the werewolf cadavers he laid out in modernist sarcophagi. Later, they gave the hairy giants for which he is best known the look of fetishistic dandies. In this show, they jut from the decayed cheeks of plaster-flocked heads that lie in two corners of the gallery, as if they had rolled off the giants and mutated into life forms yet to be identified.

I couldn't help but wonder if Altmejd was subject to bad dreams. "I do have nightmares," he admitted. "They're very sophisticated, but they don't look like my work at all."

FEATURE

**DAVID  
ALTMEJD**

**SHAPESHIFTER**

He makes sculpture, but not as we know it.  
Now the Canadian artist is taking his curious productions to Venice...

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words J.J. CHARLESWORTH  
portrait PHILIPPE AND CESARIE YARD

Charlesworth, J. J., "David Altmejd: Shapeshifter," *Art Review*, June 12, 2007, pp. 76-82





FEATURE DAVID ALTMEJD

facing page: *The Settlelr* (detail), 2005, mixed media, 142 x 335 x 229 cm.

this page, top: *Untitled*, 2005, plaster, resin, paint, synthetic hair, jewellery, 23 x 25 x 20 cm.

this page, below, from left: *Loup-garou 2*, 2000, mixed media, 24 x 183 x 213; *Loup-garou 1*, 1999, mixed media, 214 x 198 x 244.

photo: Richard-Max Tremblay



DAVID ALTMEJD LIKES TO CALL HIMSELF A SCULPTOR. but when it comes to this London-based, Canadian-born artist, the common-sense idea of sculpture is stretched to breaking point. Not just stretched, but warped, twisted, fractured and refracted, unravelled, kaleidoscoped, extended, condensed, exploded. Altmejd's densely worked assemblages, which draw on primal and mythological symbolism as much as they do on the cool of minimalism, on the shock of the abject as much as the cloying, refined delicacies of kitsch, probe the fault line of how we understand and describe objects; the point where the prosaic and the recognisable fuse and recombine to open on the sudden materialisation of the imaginary. Sculpture, for Altmejd, is the energy of transformation. And he'll be bringing that charge to Venice, where he is representing his country in this year's Biennale.

Altmejd's mesmerising, albeit sometimes disturbing, objects are about alternates, opposites, polarities. There are dismembered heads and limbs, often those of a werewolf, a recurring myth-figure in Altmejd's visual universe. The werewolf is the idea of transformation made flesh: from human to animal and back again, according to the phase of the moon. But in Altmejd's universe-in-flux, nothing retains its identity for long - his werewolf heads find themselves adorned with jewels, or are already host to a growth of crystals, or have their desiccated corpses decorated with gold chains and cheap jewellery. One form of fascination - the macabre vision of the seemingly dead werewolf - is melded with another - the glitter and sparkle of precious metals and precious stones.





*The macabre vision of the seemingly dead werewolf is melded with another - the glitter and sparkle of precious metals*

this and facing pages: *The Index* (details, work in progress), 2007, mixed media, 425 x 015 x 915 cm overall. Photos: Ellen Paige Wilson



It's partly because Altmejd dares to take the logically unexpected combination into the most unlooked-for places that his work causes such a jolt. He declares a lasting interest in the work of Kiki Smith and Louise Bourgeois, but mentions that, with Smith for example, while her works are 'always extremely powerful... they're very familiar in terms of experience'. It takes some nerve to describe Smith's work as familiar, but you can see how Altmejd comes to this conclusion when you realise that his ongoing exploration is driven by a focus, on how constantly to extend the possibilities of the unfamiliar, through the contagious incorporation of wildly dissimilar contents and approaches.

That's why, for example, much of his recent work seems to hover between object and installation: his large constructed stages and platforms, which present and incorporate his myriad organic and fetishistic forms, seem to use the language of exhibition presentation, or of luxury boutique display. Yet Altmejd is clear that they should be seen as parts of a whole that is, in the end, a more diverse and complex unit of sculpture. Instead of installation, he considers the arrangement of the many smaller parts and discrete combinations of objects as following something that is somehow closer to the logic of a film, as if one might follow, within the bounds of the bigger object, multiple lines of connection and continuity to produce a narrative that doesn't operate in ordinary time, but as a product of looking, and then looking again.

Altmejd's work is a sort of ecstatic celebration of the moment in which anything is in between two states. The moment between life and death, the moment between human and animal, the moment between stasis and continuity, the moment between sculpture and installation, between art and object. So, just as the werewolf epitomises mutability and transition within the scope of what human identity could be, Altmejd's recurring use of mirrors develops the theme of instability and reversal in the scope of architectural and non-organic form. In his early 1999 table-box sculpture *Loup-garou 1* [werewolf], Altmejd presents the werewolf's decapitated head





*The Index* (detail, work in progress), 2007, mixed media, 425 x 915 x 915 cm overall. Photo: Ellen Paige Wilson. All images courtesy the artist and Stuart Shave Modern Art, London and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

## *It's the sensation of what Altmejd loves to call 'the object around the corner'*

lying in a little mirror lined chamber built into the side of the platform - the chamber extends around a corner, where the head lies, and the viewer can only see its reflection, while remaining fully aware that it is there - both present and hidden. It's the sensation of what Altmejd loves to call 'the object around the corner' - physically and metaphorically - delving into that shadow world in which things are and are not, where rationality and the clean lines of Modernism open onto the crypt and to the unconscious energy of myth.

How will Altmejd's introspective, sometimes claustrophobic vision translate to the sunlit avenues and spaces of the Biennale's Giardini? For Venice, Altmejd took his cue from the intriguing modernist architecture of the Canadian Pavilion. Designed by the Italian firm BBPR in 1957, the pavilion's eccentric steel, glass and timber space, curving around a windowed partition and full of sharp angles, is already uncannily sympathetic to Altmejd's fascination with the refractory, mirrored and crystalline, while the surrounding trees - one even growing through the space and roof, enclosed in its own glass vitrine - brought about the notion of an aviary. So, for his project here, titled *The Index*, Altmejd invades the space with a complex of platforms, mirror structures, illuminated

channels, rock formations and arboreal forms, an accumulation colonised by a multitude of birds; some real, taxidermists' specimens, many others of Altmejd's invention. The werewolf has largely disappeared; a fragmented likeness lies stretched out on a white platform, subsumed and absorbed by an explosion of mirrored stalagmites. The werewolf is replaced by the watchful figure of the birdman, a move that Altmejd describes characteristically as a 'power shift' away from the darker energies of his werewolves, towards a more open and dynamic interconnection between the iconography of natural and synthetic, animal and human, static and generative. Elsewhere Altmejd is working on *The Giant 2*, a five-metre figure reclining against a wall - a monstrous humanoid whose body is full of absences and cavities, to be inhabited by a host of sculptural flora and fauna, an owl looking out from its eye socket.

Riffing on the inescapably bucolic setting of the Giardini, Altmejd's previously urbane clarity seems to challenge itself to dissolve the lines of demarcation between symbolic, fictional and formal genres further, rather than holding them in taut stasis. If Altmejd's previous work explored how a static sculpture could produce the sense of contained energy, of the potential of something nevertheless endlessly stuck, charged without release, his excursion to Venice suggests the expansive unravelling of those charges, in which mirroring, interpenetration and organic excess replace their previous frozen forces; Identity and non identity in accelerating dialectical translation, sculpture as the energy not of things, but what they become. :

*Work by David Altmejd is in the Canadian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, from 70 June to 27 November*

# MODERN PAINTERS

DECEMBER 2004 / JANUARY 2005



## EMERGING ARTISTS

## DAVID ALTMEJD

Jonathan T.D Neil on gothic horrors and crystal methods

'Lycanthropy'. Sometimes the English language can prove fugitive, but after seeing this word more than a few times in the slowly mounting literature on David Altmejd's work, I began to suspect that some of my fellow critics were relying a bit too heavily on a resource that, I must admit, I too always keep within arm's reach when writing. I'm speaking, of course, about Google. And a quick search for werewolves' - the term Altmejd uses for the figures of corporeal decay and crystalline growth that populate much of his recent work - returns a site that purports to 'explore the truths and myths around werewolf legends from a scientific point of view.' For those of us not already in the know, we quickly learn that a 'lycanthrope' is someone who behaves like, or believes they are, a wolf.

Consequently, psychoanalysis suggests itself as an apposite approach to Altmejd's work, but this foray into the nether regions of cyberspace) where the myths and legends about werewolves and other Romantic fabrications propagate in full view for those who go searching for them, might provide an alternative reading of Altmejd's eclectic sculptural assemblages - a reading which acknowledges what Jerry Saltz has called the 'Modern Gothic', but one that does not buy into Brian Sholis's quick

acceptance of Altmejd's 'hideous progeny' as all that meets the eye. For what is modern about the gothic at the moment would seem to be its having quickly recognized the mirror of its own message - something along the lines of 'belonging-in-alienation' - in the elastic form of information technology itself. Where else is the 'gothic' today if not online?

We are not dealing with some deep subcultural current then, but with a kind of interface, something very much out in the open. And here we must recognize that Altmejd's work begins and ends with surfaces, the most superficial of which are exactly those decaying werewolves that supposedly bespeak some deeper anxiety over transformation. The depth apparently signalled by the trope of decay and growth - so indicative of processes working behind, or rather underneath, the horizon of immediate perception - is negated when bones bear written inscriptions - as in *Delicate Men in Positions of Power* (2004) at last year's Whitney Biennial- or when so many of the werewolves' heads bear costume-quality wigs. There is nothing behind the scenes here; it is aU being laid bare, so to speak. Even Altmejd's pervasive use of crystals - a system of pure surfaces that are nature's answer

# MODERN PAINTERS



to system of pure surfaces that are nature's answer to questions of energy efficiency - further suggests that depth is not in play.

To say that the werewolves are superficial is not to dismiss them as trivial, however. It is exactly this promotion of surface to a kind of reigning logic that animates the work. The jewellery, the birds, the flowers, all the items that populate Altmejd's elaborate minimalist-inspired displays draw one's attention over and across the work as opposed to into it. The mise en abyme of the works' mirrored surfaces is one more special effect for a 'cinema of attractions', to borrow a term from Tom Gunning. Yet here, viewers search and scan for more bits of information, for more moments of punctuation, and this leaves all the elements of the work, from the werewolves to the LeWitt-type lattice work, in a state of general equivalency. Perhaps this is why Altmejd's crystalline excrescences seem to mediate the juxtaposition between corporeal decay and the hard lines (and high sheen) of such designer displays: though these opposing facets of the work seem to generate some kind of tension, the opposition is not enough to make meanings, only more surfaces.

If there is a formal correlation here, it is in Altmejd's resistance to the well-made. Like so much of what one encounters in

Facing page:  
*Delicate Men in Positions of Power*, 2004, wood, paint, plaster, resin, mirror, wine, glue, cloth, synthetic hair, jewellery, glitter, 244x188x457cm

Clockwise from top-left:  
*The Settlers* (detail), 2005, wood, Plexiglas, mirror, glue, synthetic hair, glitter, moulding clay, wire, foam, electric light, 127x 183x305cm

*The Builders*, 2005, wood, glass, mirror, Plexiglas, magic sculpt, foam, synthetic hair, synthetic flowers, jewellery, feathers, paint, fighting system, minerals, 183x 193x259 cm

*Untitled*, 2004, plaster, resin, paint, synthetic hair, jewellery, glitter, 18x31 x25cm

ALL IMAGES COURTESY ANDREA ROSIN GALLERY.

cyberspace, the works display a certain incompleteness at the edges, a haphazard construction that does not reveal process (in which the artist is self-admittedly interested) so much as impatience.

Altmejd even claims to 'invent a logic of materials', a phrase borrowed - perhaps knowingly, perhaps not - from Richard Serra, who used it to describe work by artists such as Michael Snow, Yvonne Rainer, Philip Glass and Bruce Nauman. Process for these artists meant elevating the means of art-making to the status of a problem, one that demanded exploration in all media. If the rough edges of Altmejd's work are (about) process, it is only artificially so. Here process is rendered as a Sign; yet another surface, now worn like a badge.

Work that generates such equivalences - of symbol, of material, of experience - may ultimately have more to learn from Marcel Broodthaers than Matthew Barney, whose sensibility Altmejd is often described as sharing. But Broodthaers was perhaps the first to recognize that, apart from Serra et al's specific investigations, the problem of process was one of increasing generalities, and this tendency demanded critical resistance; thus far, Altmejd's work appears to march under the flag of its celebration.

# ARTFORUM

## REVIEWS

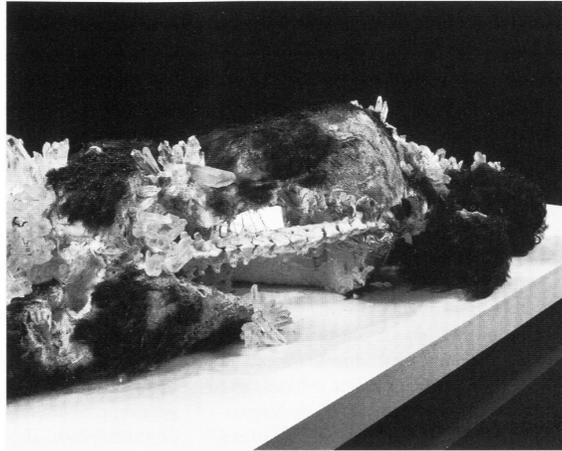
### DAVID ALTMEJD

ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY

Opulent, complex, and evocatively incongruous, David Altmejd's sculptural scenarios have, in a relatively short time, insinuated themselves into the contemporary art world's collective consciousness. Of course, his idiosyncratic formal vocabulary—quasi-modernist display environments sexed up with mirrored surfaces, theatrical lighting, and costume jewelry, all orchestrated to create sprawling disco sarcophagi for broken werewolf corpses—is already a riot of psychological tropes. Death and desire, the self and the other, decay and transformation: All are explicit in the forms and contexts of Altmejd's gorgeous grotesqueries.

For viewers who first encountered the artist's work in group shows like "demon-clownmonkey" at Artists Space in 2002 or last year's "Scream" at Anton Kern Gallery, Altmejd's first solo appearance at Andrea Rosen provided a fuller overview of his themes, as well as some minor variation. The gallery's main space, painted black for the occasion, contained four works but was dominated by a pair of large constructions, *The University 1* and *The University 2* (all works 2004). The former is an appealing riff on Sol LeWitt, an open lattice of mirrored linear elements built into a floor-standing cubic matrix that glitters beneath the dramatic spotlighting, scattering reflections around the shadowy space. A primary structure given a darkly glamorous makeover, it suggests less the rigid mathematical order of its model than an atomization of perception that's entirely in keeping with Altmejd's preference for visual dynamism, not to mention his magpie fascination with shiny things.

If the relatively pure abstraction of *The University 1* hints at a more low-key strand of Altmejd's practice, its partner is a dramatic apotheosis of the artist's trademark gestures. Measuring seventeen by twenty-five feet and rising to almost nine feet in places, *The University 2* is a colossal, labyrinthine reliquary: its modular platforms edged with channels of white light like landing strips or fashion-show runways and shot through with warrenlike compartments that open onto lit and/or mirrored interior spaces. Topped by vitrines (some of which are eerily vacant) and decorated with clutches of silk flowers, little wire trees festooned with dime-store charms, carved and painted birds, long strands of golden chain, and hunks of raw



David Altmejd, *The Lovers* (detail), 2004, plaster, resin, paint, fake hair, jewelry, and glitter, 45 x 90 x 54".

minerals (not to mention the obligatory decomposing lycanthropes enfolded within its strange contours), the entire assemblage is an uncanny cross between a half-dismantled department store display and a low-budget natural history museum.

The two more modest works are similarly seductive: a small untitled piece lurking in one dimly lit corner featuring a lump of crystal-encrusted hair and the implausibly beautiful *The Lovers*, in which a pair of putrefying monsters lie entwined on a broad plinth in a chaotic embrace of bone, hair, and jewelry. Here, perhaps more than anywhere else in the show, viewers got a sense of the real delicacy Altmejd is able to conjure from abjection, as a network of body parts, caught in the spotlight, cast a morbidly elegant tangle of shadows in a recessed area of the platform. That Altmejd consistently manages to orchestrate real conceptual lucidity from these wild constellations of materials is a credit to his substantial skill. Yet it's also plain that the fact that they cohere around what has, in only a handful of shows, become so inevitable a mode of address has the capacity to become something of a liability (recently overheard on Twenty-fourth Street: "Did you see the David Altmejd show yet?" "Oh, you mean the werewolf guy?"), especially since the genuine flair he exhibits makes clear his potential to develop a more expansive, thematically diverse practice.

—Jeffrey Kastner

# Flash Art



## DAVID ALTMEJD

HIDEOUS PROGENY

Brian Scholis

New York ARTIST David Altmejd's grotesque sculptures, usually comprised of heads or other fragments of monster bodies, directly engage the repressed underside of our imagination and incongruously mix the things we dare not consciously consider with a certain sense of cheap glamour. His recent works, accumulations of small, sparkling found elements surrounding an incomplete werewolf body, spring from an intuitive process that serves as metaphor for peering into this realm of the unspoken.

Altmejd rarely knows how a work will look when it is finished. He is an obsessive conjurer, bringing implausible sculptures into being as if in a trance or channeling spirits through the Ouija board. Often grouped with

"new Gothic" artists, his use of the werewolf as a horror movie cliché touchstone instead of, say, the knife-wielding serial killer, is telling. His is a morbid, Victorian-era take on the heinous (typified by Mary Shelley's Frankenstein); the sculptures are absent of any explicit violence, preferring the dread of the unknown or otherworldly to a forensic analysis of cruelty. It's easy to imagine Altmejd's monsters as prot agonists in a cryptic narrative, yet Altmejd does not intentionally set any in motion. Instead, his creative energies are invested in the object itself - the artist likens his practice to process art - and the rest is left to the viewer. The sculptures are specimens laid out for us to examine, and they are dark, exquisitely beautiful (often employing eye-pleasing colors and

seductive materials), compulsive, meticulously detailed without being fussy or perfectionist, shiny, and just a little bit sick. The intensely appealing layer of crystals, glitter, rhinestones, jewelry, and other materials that seem to spring up organically from the plaster heads defers the horror of beholding such monstrosities. Altmejd highlights the tension between the need to avert our eyes and to take in every gruesome detail. His bringing together of opposite worlds - the horrific and the glamorous - suggests that the distance between them may reside in our perceptions alone.

The monsters are frequently integrated into table-like pedestals that recall midcentury furniture or modernist sculptures. They present horizontal surfaces at different heights, often

and, importantly, allow for a theatricalized placement of the heads. He carves boxes and tunnels out of these structures, placing a head in a form-fitting hall of mirrors that distorts perception, a gesture that calls to mind Robert Smithson's use of the material in the service of his exploration of entropy. Yet unlike Smithson's work, Altmejd's structures seem sound (his 2002 New York solo exhibition was titled "Clear Structures for a New Generation"); it is the body and vision - that inevitably decay.

This entropy is a metamorphosis from one state to another, and the critic Andrea K. Scott has perceptively noted the central role transformation plays in Altmejd's work; we can all call to mind films in which a character morphs from human to werewolf. His werewolves sprout crystals (liquid gone solid). But beyond the obvious transitions, Altmejd understands that the process of decay carries within it the promise of growth, and his objects arrest the moment where the former becomes the latter. Their energy is not kinetic, but potential, and lies dormant until activated by the presence of a viewer. When peering closely at the details of Altmejd's decapitated and decaying hand-crafted heads, it is difficult to shake the uncanny sensation that the werewolf eye may blink at any moment, springing to life like Dr. Frankenstein's monster.

His most recent works combine the werewolf heads with equally hideous bodies, rendered slightly smaller than life size and often with deformed or missing limbs. For *Young Men with Revolution on their Mind*, an installation shown at the recent Istanbul Biennial and coming to the Whitney Biennial this month, mirrored boxes were not only carved out of and protruding from the pedestal, but also from the body itself, exposing bones that traverse Altmejd's otherwise empty mirrored cubes. Words were scribbled on these bones (he is fascinated by the idea of a body, and particularly its bones, as a *tabula rasa* for language), and in the infinite reflections of this space, Altmejd introduced communication as another element subject to distortion and decay. Surrounding the decomposing corpse and two additional heads was a melange of inorganic found objects: toy birds, jewels, stacked cubes and pointed stalagmites made from transparent plastic, silver chains, crystals, and glitter, all lit from below. This perishing body became the site of ever more new growth and activity, a duality that *The Old Sculptor* and *The Sculptor's Oldest Son* (both 2003) amplify. Exhibited at group shows in New York, both works feature birds, connected via thin chains, tugging at the lifeless forms in an attempt to rouse activity. But the bodies are too far gone for that - *The Sculptor's Oldest Son* is missing an arm, a leg, and everything but the bones of his other leg



From top : *Delicate Men in Positions of Power*, 2003. Mixed media, 305 x 610 x 244 em. Sarah Altmejd, 2003. Mixed media, 28 x 18 x 23 em. Photo : Guy L'Heur eux  
Opposite : *Delicate Men in Positions of Power (detail)*, 2003. Mixed media, 305 x 610 x 244 em. Installation view at the 8th Istanbul Biennial, 2003.



and life moves on to the next cycle. The Old Sculptor sprouts flowers, and, as Chelsea is built on landfill, one can easily imagine these works sinking back into the muck beneath the galleries and literally pushing up daisies. The works would rest together, just blocks apart, like kin at a graveyard family plot.

An atypical recent project suggests a much more direct and psychologically complex notion of family than that evoked by The Old Sculptor and his oldest son. Sarah Altmejd (2003) is a double sculptural portrait of the artist's sister, first presented at Galerie SKOL in the artist's hometown of Montreal. The invitation card showed a snapshot of Sarah, and the press release



detailed David's love for her. Entering the small back room of the gallery, however, the viewer encountered adoration gone astray. One sculpture depicted her with three-quarters of her face missing, as if the flesh had been consumed by acid, and the other showed a lifeless head sprouting crystals. Like references to 'self' and 'child' in his other titles, Altmejd's turn from unknown figures to rendering a specific person intensifies the creep factor.

So does encountering Altmejd's work outside the confines of the gallery environment. His proposal for the Public Art Fund's "Art in the Park" portion of this year's Whitney Biennial places two heads—one white, one black, both shockingly

overscaled - beside an out-of-the-way path near the middle of Central Park. Even though we know it to be man-made, Central Park represents nature creeping back onto the island, disordering our order and interrupting our street grid, offering not only sites for Sunday relaxation but an overnight home to all manner of illicit activities. It is anything but the sanctified space of the white cube. That his work but the sanctified space of the white cube. That his work should end up there seems strangely appropriate, yet coming across these heads

while all alone on a crisp early spring evening will certainly unsettle the nerves. Altmejd's earlier works, laid flat on their pedestals in varying states of decay, are available for close scrutiny, like the monster felled by a hero's sword. Not so the works to be placed in Central Park. Like a mad scientist, having brought these unnatural creatures into being, Altmejd is now busy picking them apart and setting them loose in the environment. •

*Brian Sholis is a writer and critic based in New York.*

**From top : Untitled (dark), 2001. Mixed media, 36 x 25 x 20 cm, Photo: Ron Amstutz.**

**Photo: Ron Amstutz. The Old Sculptor (detail), 2003. Mixed media, 180 x 335 x 120 cm. Courtesy of Dean Valentine.**

