anti-utopias

David Altmejd. Flux

In Events and Exhibitions / June 2, 2015

This major exhibition, the first collaborative undertaking between the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris and the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, provides a critical, retrospective survey of the work of internationally renowned Québec artist David Altmejd. It was first presented in Paris, from October 10, 2014 to February 1, 2015. Between Paris and Montréal, MUDAM Luxembourg welcomed an abridged version, reconfigured by the artist, from March 7 to May 31, 2015.

The presentation at the Musée features some thirty works produced over the last fifteen years, in addition to a new, site-specific piece. One of the key works in the show, *The Flux and The Puddle*, 2014, brilliantly sums up the main motifs and concerns that fill Altmejd's remarkable, vigorous imagination.

Images above: David Altmejd, The Flux and The Puddle, 2014. Photo by James Ewing.

His spectacular sculptures, meticulously crafted out of a wide assortment of components and materials, draw on a hybrid, cumulative aesthetic to conjure up the powerful forces of decay and regeneration, and to establish a metaphorical dialectic between the human world and the animal realm.

Altmejd quickly earned a reputation for his baroque depictions of the enigmatic figure of the werewolf, which constantly undergoes transformations. However, he does not offer stories or scenarios but, rather, reveals inspired iterations of a unique spirit and sensibility, in tune with the meanderings of a lucid dream.

Bringing together a minimalist structural rigour contrasted with unfolding fields of energy, Altmejd recognizes the primacy of the conceptual approach in shaping the cycles that run through his work: heads, constructed, architectural pieces, werewolves, bird men, giants, bodybuilders, guides, watchmen… The abrupt changes in scale (from the minuscule to the monumental), profusion of materials (crystals, mirrors, synthetic hair and fur, resin, wood, metal) and the various devices he uses to occupy the space (platforms, display cases, oversized cabinets) are all strategies that position the artist as a creator of all possibilities.

Universal in its scope, Altmejd's work merges the self and the other in the constant, repeated echo of the mirror image and the intensity of the primal, human, animal presence at different moments in the cycle of life.

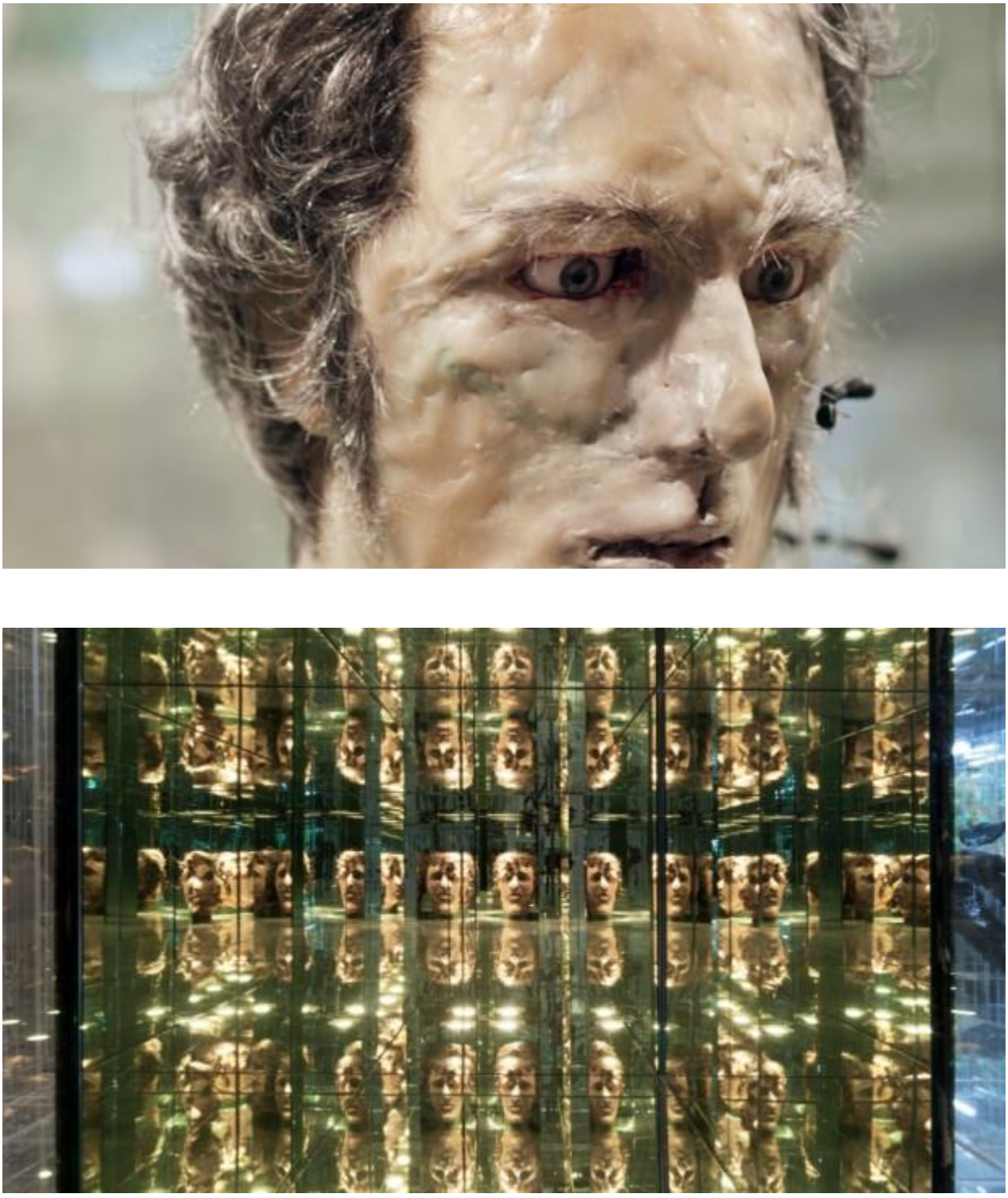
David Altmejd, The Flux and The Puddle, 2014. Photo by James Ewing.

Born in Montréal in 1974, David Altmejd lives and works in New York. He represented Canada at the 52nd *Venice Biennale*, in 2007, and won the Sobey Art Award in 2009. Other exhibitions include the 8th *Istanbul Biennial*, in 2003; New York's *Whitney Biennial*, in 2004; and the first *Québec Triennial* at the MACM, in 2008. Altmejd's work may be found in the following collections: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal; National Gallery of Canada; Art Gallery of Ontario; Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; Les Abattoirs, Toulouse; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; MOCA – Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and MUDAM – Musée d'art moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg. He was recently made a companion of the Ordre des arts et des lettres du Québec.

This exhibition was organized by the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris / Paris Musées and the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.

– Josée Bélisle, Curator of the Collections

The Flux and The Puddle (views and details), 2014. Plexiglas, quartz, polystyrene, polyurethane foam, epoxy clay, epoxy gel, resin, synthetic hair, clothing, leather shoes, thread, mirror, plaster, acrylic paint, latex paint, metal wire, glass eyes, sequins, ceramic, synthetic flowers, synthetic branches, glue, gold, domestic goose feathers (Anser anser domesticus), steel, coconuts, aqua resin, burlap, Sharpie ink, wood, coffee grounds, lighting system including fluorescent lights.
328 × 640 × 714 cm
Photos: Lance Brewer
Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York



David Altmejd, The Flux and The Puddle, 2014. Photo by James Ewing. Image courtesy of Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal. All rights reserved.

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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

ROBERT EVERETT-GREEN

MONTREAL — The Globe and Mail

Published Wednesday, Jul. 01, 2015 4:00PM EDT

"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.

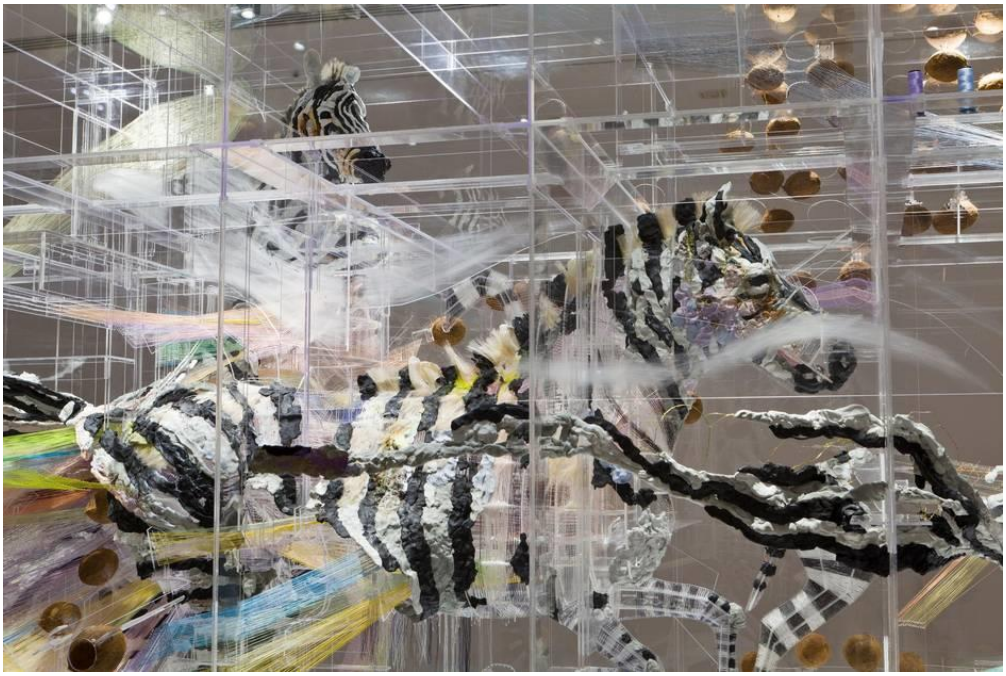
A nightmare, you might say, though Altmejd said he takes no direction from dreams, and is interested in surrealism and science fiction or fantasy only in that "they do offer a freedom to build and combine things." More surprisingly, perhaps, he said that he sees the hands that gouge the surfaces of his 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 Flux and the Puddle by David Altmejd is a gigantic block of lucite boxes in which numerous figures are encased.

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.

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.



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

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.

David Altmejd: Flux originated at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la ville de Paris, and continues at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal through Sept. 13 (macm.org).

BORDERCROSSINGS

Seductive Repulsions

An Interview with David Altmejd

Robert Enright · Interviews · Issue 133 · March 2015

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.

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

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.

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 wooly-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.

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

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

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 paeon 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 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 Samathrace*, in a series called "the Watchers."

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

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.

The following interview was conducted with the artist by phone from his Brooklyn studio in 2015.

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.

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

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 2015right 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.

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

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 connected to me and that came with

Untitled 1 (The Waters), 2009, plaster, wood, polystyrene, expandable foam, burlap, metal wire, acrylic paint, latex paint, overall dimensions 92 x 32 x 32 inches. Copyright David Altmejd. Photograph: Jeremy Lawson.

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 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.

Untitled 1 (The Waters), 2009, plaster, wood, polystyrene, expandable foam, burlap, metal wire, acrylic paint, latex paint, overall dimensions 92 x 32 x 32 inches. Copyright David Altmejd. Photograph: Jeremy Lawson.

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; its invisible, there's nothing there. But the second you smash it, it becomes a visual object that exists super-intensely in the world.

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

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.

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

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.

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.

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 ownhands to take plaster from its calf or its leg and dragging it up to its shoulders to make its

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

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.

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

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 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 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.

Untitled 6 (Rabbit Holes), 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. Copyright David Altmejd. Photograph: Lance Brewer. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

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 is it 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.

Installation view, “My Little Paradise,” May 26–September 15, 2013, Middelheim Museum, Antwerp. Copyright David Altmejd. Photograph: Joris Cassaer. Courtesy Xavier Hufkens, Brussels and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

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.

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. ❙

Art in America

View of David Altmejd's *The Flux and the Puddle*, 2014, quartz, polystyrene, expandable foam, epoxy clay and mixed mediums, approx. 11 by 53 by 59 feet; at Andrea Rosen.

DAVID ALTMEJD
Andrea Rosen

In "Juices," New York-based sculptor David Altmejd's latest exhibition, one message rang clear: more is most definitely more. The show was dominated by *The Flux and the Puddle* (all works 2014), a room-filling construction consisting of transparent display boxes whose potential Miminalist reference was corrupted by a cacophony of figurative and abstract forms, both charming and gruesome.

At over 10 feet high and about 20 feet per side, the installation contained a commotion of arranged mayhem, with a passageway for viewing around the perimeter. The sculptures within the boxes, fashioned from materials including polystyrene, quartz, expanding foam, thread, synthetic hair, mirrors and fluorescent lights, oscillated between themes of decay and fertility, embodied by abbreviated figures, human extremities, animals, ants and fruits. Repetitions of forms created sequences of mutation and movement, such as a succession of evolving eagle heads, each more human-featured than the last, and a series of apelike arms à la Muybridge caught flinging coconuts or cantaloupes at the gallery's mirror-lined side walls. Actual smashed spots in the mirrors refracted the sculptures, increasing the tumult. Throughout, there seemed to be an anagrammatic play at work.

A once-around the installation revealed several focal points, which came clearly into view when one stood directly in front of them—for example, a faceless woman in a blue-sequined dress, and a male figure with an intact head and a gnawed, flayed body, patches of his pink, exposed torso sprouting maggots of clear quartz crystal. Nearby was a tableau of crudely shaped figures seated at a table and pawing at a pile of the same claylike substance that forms their bodies, seemingly making themselves while simultaneously taking themselves apart—trapped in the Petri-dish ecology underpinning *The Flux and the Puddle*'s surreal sprawl.

This piling on of more objects, materials and types of forms was an exciting step forward for Altmejd, moving away from the practiced, sinuous figures of previous works. He seemed to almost be pushing his own system of creation to the brink of collapse in terms of coherence and legibility, challenging the viewer's willingness and patience to engage with such abundance. It was a timely theme and gesture, this collapse of meaning by way of systemic overproduction, given our own worldly ecological crisis.

By contrast, the second room presented *The Eve*, a much more subdued work. Again, Altmejd assembled a structure of Plexiglas boxes, but populated it this time with a single figure, seated upside-down and lit fluorescently from below. With six acid-colored kiwi halves suspended in a row at the figure's shoulder level and a number of split coconuts dangling beneath by way of ornament, this piece was a pared-down rest for the eyes that left one feeling a little deflated après *Flux*.

The artist has spoken before of his predilection for sculpting heads as a regular formal exercise instead of drawing sketches, and in a back room was a small epoxy clay and plaster head with a literally glassy gaze. Where one expects the top of the skull, a second inverted face—nose, lips, chin and neck stump—stretches upward. The mutation is a fitting microcosm of the artist's practice.

—Paige K. Bradley

ARTFORUM

David Altmejd

ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY
525 West 24th Street
January 31–March 8

David Altmejd, *The Flux and the Puddle*, 2014, Plexiglas, quartz, polystyrene, expandable foam, epoxy clay, epoxy gel, resin, synthetic hair, clothing, leather shoes, thread, mirror, plaster, acrylic paint, latex paint, metal wire, glass eyes, sequin, ceramic, synthetic flowers, synthetic branches, glue, gold, feathers, steel, coconuts, aqua resin, burlap, lighting system including fluorescent lights, Sharpie ink, wood, 10' 3/4“ x 21' x 23' 1/2”.

Aesop’s arboretum meets laboratory in “Juices,” David Altmejd’s latest exhibition, where three monumental works show life expanded by metamorphosis. The show’s centerpiece, *The Flux and the Puddle*, 2014, is a layered vitrine-like installation that spans more than twenty-four feet across the gallery and reaches nearly eleven feet into the air. It reads like an abstracted hologram that twists into focus as one approaches: Walls of mirrors surround and weave through the towering Plexiglas grid that outlines a seemingly alive terrarium-like ecosystem coursing with parades of insects, fruits, and fauna. Though often grotesque, Altmejd’s figures are tenderly embellished with quartz crystals where their skin, modeled in clay with the dimpled surfaces of Medardo Rosso sculptures, has split open. Transformation is shown through sequential progressions: From dark, abstracted human forms emerge businessmen, birds of prey, and apes. Hardened murky liquids in seminal white and black and light-fluorescent chemical hues drip and pool around the environment; this movement is repeated in cotton-candy-like looms of pastel threads that draw contours through the space.

The cosmic brilliance of *The Flux and the Puddle* contrasts with *The Eve*, 2014, a smaller, sparser vitrine: Like an inverted crucifixion of Rodin’s *The Thinker*, a single bisected male figure is suspended upside-down at an invisible table, his head carved out in small holes as if it were burrowed into by moths. A pair of hands pushes through the small of his back like a hatching larva. In a third room, *Untitled*, 2014, vertically reflects the same sculpted face twice over an axis of deep-set glass eyes—an isolated motif of symmetry and rebirth that unlocks the larger presentation.

“Juices” tells a story of metamorphosis, but also of reincarnation: The double face in *Untitled* implies both an ending and another, fated, beginning. Mirrors blocking and reflecting one’s views through *The Flux and the Puddle* render a fractured-infinity effect, suggesting a Hellenistic inevitability that carries through the show. As creatures transform and multiply, the Plexi cage grows around them like a tridimensional graph, asserting the mathematical interconnectedness of each living thing—their shared juices, categorized like science projects—while protecting and celebrating a delicate process of material and biological evolution.

— Anne Prentnieks

The New York Times

David Altmejd: ‘Juices’

FEB. 20, 2014

Part of the labyrinthine “The Flux and the Puddle” that dominates David Altmejd’s exhibition. Lance Brewer/Andrea Rosen Gallery

Art in Review
By KAREN ROSENBERG

Andrea Rosen Gallery
525 West 24th Street, Chelsea
Through March 8

A lot is going on in “The Flux and the Puddle,” the labyrinthine sculpture that dominates David Altmejd’s latest solo exhibition. Within a complex of mirrors and Plexiglas that nearly fills the main gallery, werewolves and birdmen perform nightmarish surgeries and excavations atop pits of plaster and puddles of gooey resin. Rows of ants are on the march, ready to attack decayed flesh or rotting fruit (all of it synthetic and adorned with crystals and sequins).

It’s certainly an ambitious effort from Mr. Altmejd, one that expands and develops a smaller vitrine sculpture from his previous exhibition at the gallery. Here, as there, he connects grotesque sculptural elements (disembodied heads, arms, hands and the occasional eyeball) with tidy vectors of Day-Glo-colored string. And the container itself dazzles, with a fractured grid and strategically placed mirrors that distort the already ravaged figures within.

You feel that Mr. Altmejd could push himself still further out of his camp-Goth comfort zone. But here, he has created a rich, intricately networked ecosystem in which frantic busywork staves off entropy and decline. In that, he may have even stumbled on an allegory for the art world.

A version of this review appears in print on February 21, 2014, on page C27 of the New York edition with the headline: DAVID ALTMEJD: ‘Juices’.

THE NEW YORKER

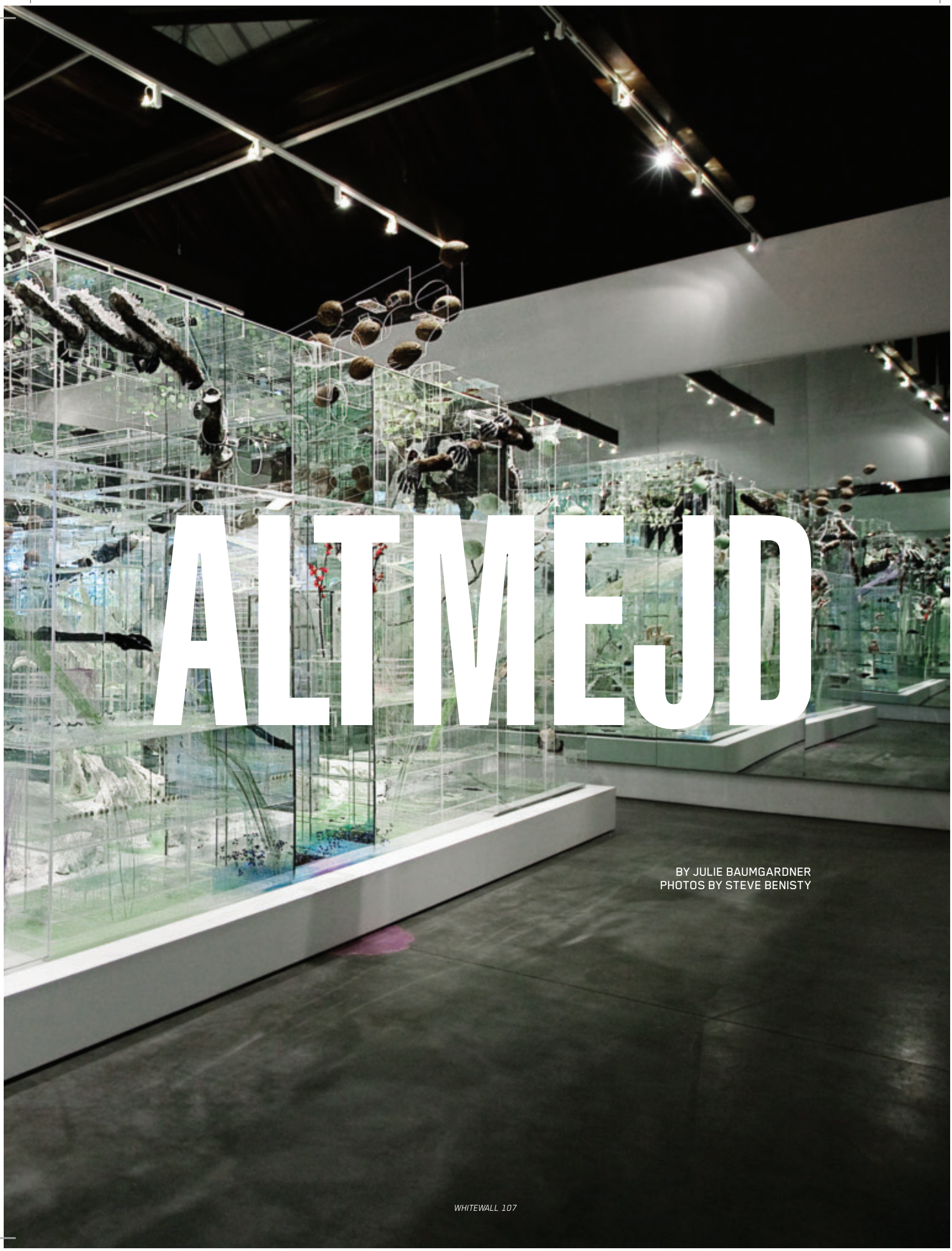
GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN: ART

DAVID ALTMEJD

In a dazzling twist on thinking inside the box, the Canadian-born artist installs a teeming dreamscape of a sculpture in a vitrine bigger than some New York apartments. The transformative powers of art and of sex—to create and to destroy—are among the work's subjects. As always with Altmejd, monsters abound. So does fruit. (Not familiar with the American melon head? Google it.) Industrious demons sit at a transparent table manipulating pieces of clay. Man-size suited figures with hawklike heads evoke Syrian gods of creation; loosened trousers suggest that the gods have been cruising. Disembodied werewolf arms float in midair, studded with crystals like lesions. Dark goings on are leavened by slapstick: note the pineapples baring their teeth. Through March 8.

ROSEN
525 W. 24th St., New York, N.Y.
212-627-6000
andrearosengallery.com

DAVID

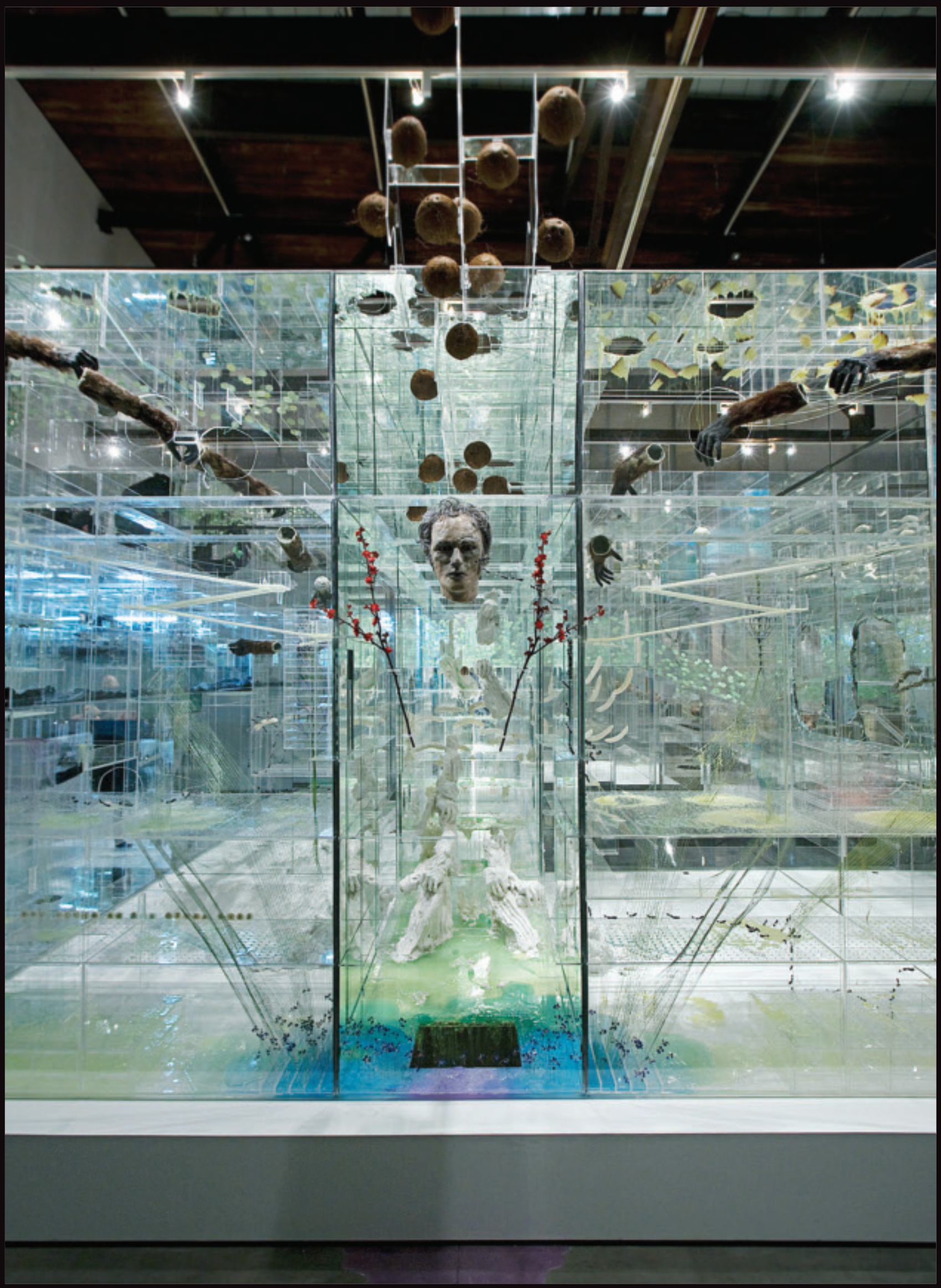


ALTMEJD

BY JULIE BAUMGARDNER
PHOTOS BY STEVE BENISTY

People have a lot of ideas about David Altmejd. That he's obsessed with the grotesque, controlling, set in his ways. In fact, though Altmejd's complex architectural sculptures are a detailed maze of private worlds devised of dismembered body parts, taxidermy animals, mirrors, fruits, insects, and much more, "I'm not a stuck-up person. I'm not uptight," he says. "Maybe I give the impression that I work lightly, but I'm very focused on what I'm working on." Like all artists seriously committed to the task of artmaking, Altmejd maintains that his work isn't personal. "I don't see my work as being expressive," he says, "but I don't see it as the making of something coming just from me, because I don't know why that would be interesting."

He is driven by intellect but not distracted by theory, and the top curators have been waiting for the right time to introduce his exquisitely difficult, self-contained sculptures to their curious crowds. (Hint: That time is now.) Their acquisition committees, on the other hand, have long approved: The Whitney Museum in New York, as well as the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, LACMA, the Dallas Museum of Art, and the National Gallery of Canada (his country of birth) all have selected his work for their coffers.



Altmejd's sculptural worlds have accrued various tropes, as he has worked with certain motifs—"Giants," "Body Builders," "Watchers"—since the early 2000s, when he signed with Andrea Rosen, who remains his gallerist to this day. Yet, whether intentionally or ironically, the 40-year-old Toronto-born, Manhattan-based artist draws from the personal, quite literally. Altmejd's visual vocabulary consists of hulking figures, disembodied heads, hands, and feet, instantly recognizable for their fantastical nature rendered in resin, acrylic, or other synthetics painted in vivid pastel colors. Entombed in Plexiglas boxes, impaled on iron stakes, or merely arranged on display surfaces, they "contain infinity," as he explains. They traditionally all take shape from his own form. "I use a lot of casts and it was very important to me that they were mine," he says, of a process he began developing while he was working toward his MFA at Columbia.

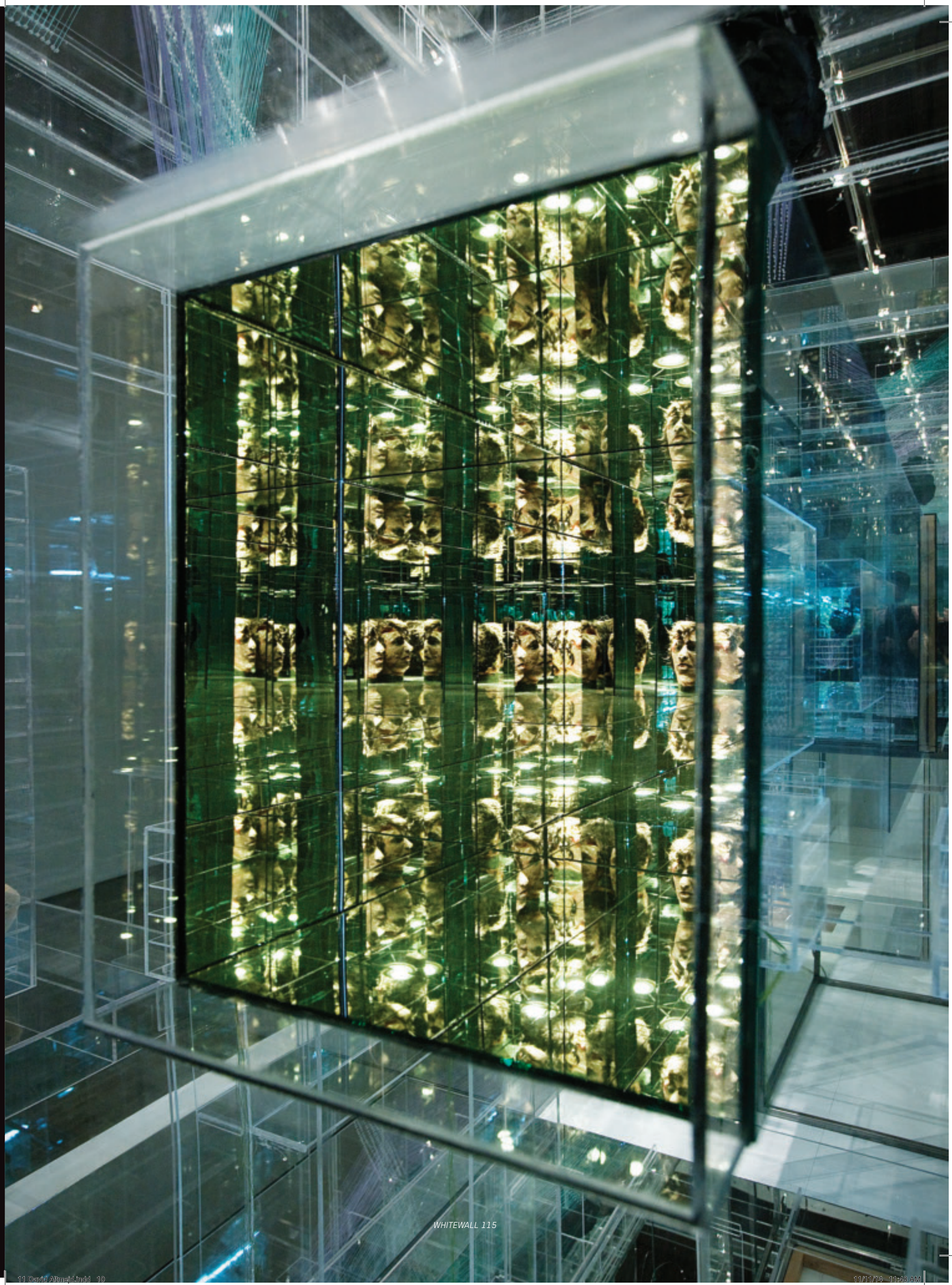
However, in his most recent show with Rosen, in February 2014, Altmejd debuted a new work, *Flux and the Puddle*, which in its sheer magnitude signaled a shift not only in his career, but in his precise process. It's a vast Plexiglas vitrine, an airtight box containing humanoid-figures in various stages of completion, shards of mirror, fluorescent lights, and radioactive fruit. These items are "of the brain as being a sort of structure that contains hidden spaces, corridors, screens where images are projected. Then there's a little hole and little corridor, an infinite one that leads to darker space," he says.

It's not the internal tableau in *Flux and the Puddle* that points to an evolution in his practice, as Altmejd has long worked with vitrines. His breakthrough work, *The Index*, was "a significant new direction in contemporary art," said David Moos, former curator of the Art Gallery of Ontario, which acquired the piece after its debut at the 2007 Venice Biennale. This time around, Altmejd had to branch out—*Flux and the Puddle* was such an undertaking that five others filled in as models. "I was just working with male figures because of what I am and what I desired," the artist says—though his homosexuality has never been a point of personal contention nor a theme in his work. "Now I just feel like for the work to evolve, it's nice if it's more inclusive and complex," he adds. Likewise, the piece swallowed his Long Island City studio completely, with only a foot or so of space in which he and his assistants could navigate around the room. "I had to make most of the work inside the work itself," he says. "So it became kind of my studio."

The work's significance is layered: It exists both as the nucleus of his command center set up for viewers to peer inside, but is itself a retrospective of his canon. "I never get rid of materials. I don't just use them for a year and then that's it," Altmejd explains. "I just build up a bank of materials—that piece, they're all in it: every material I've used since I started being a sculptor." That it's a self-reflective archive (it ain't just the mirrors) was not lost on museum curators who ache for such work to light up their halls. It's hardly any wonder that that the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris, nestled deep within the eastern wing of the Palais de Tokyo, has staged his first major survey, which opened on October 10 and runs through February 2015. Nearly 60 of Altmejd's sculptures have been included in the exhibition, which hinges around *Flux and the Puddle* but also has devoted sections to his stand-alone statues, from *The Giant* (2006) to the plaster, Hellenistic art–steeped *Untitled 5 (The Watchers)* (2011), and even to his hollow-faced adaptation of his sister, *Sarah* (2003). Though his sororal portrait may suggest a sense of violence, Altmejd insists, "I started digging into the face to make a black hole that would look like it was infinite. I was really lost . . . in the hole."

Altmejd is famous for being a process artist. "I test things inside of an object," he says. "Risks, tests, failures, if all that's contained in one object, it gives it a lot of power." And power is what Altmejd seeks in his own practice. "I don't think art is inherently powerful. I just think that it has that potential," he says. With his shy but affable way, he would probably never admit to such a description, but his role as an artist is to unlock that potential. What he does say to such a question is, "I've always expected a lot from sculpture." Altmejd revels in the contradictions. "I don't necessarily feel I exist unless I feel a tension, I feel my presence in the world," he explains, keenly aware that "these tensions generate energy," therefore obfuscating his own personal and artistic narratives. "People either love me or hate me. That sounds obnoxious," he says, wavering. "But I wouldn't want to be liked by everyone."

All images: Installation details of David Altmejd, "Juices" at Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York (February 1–March 8, 2014), photographs by Steve Benisty.

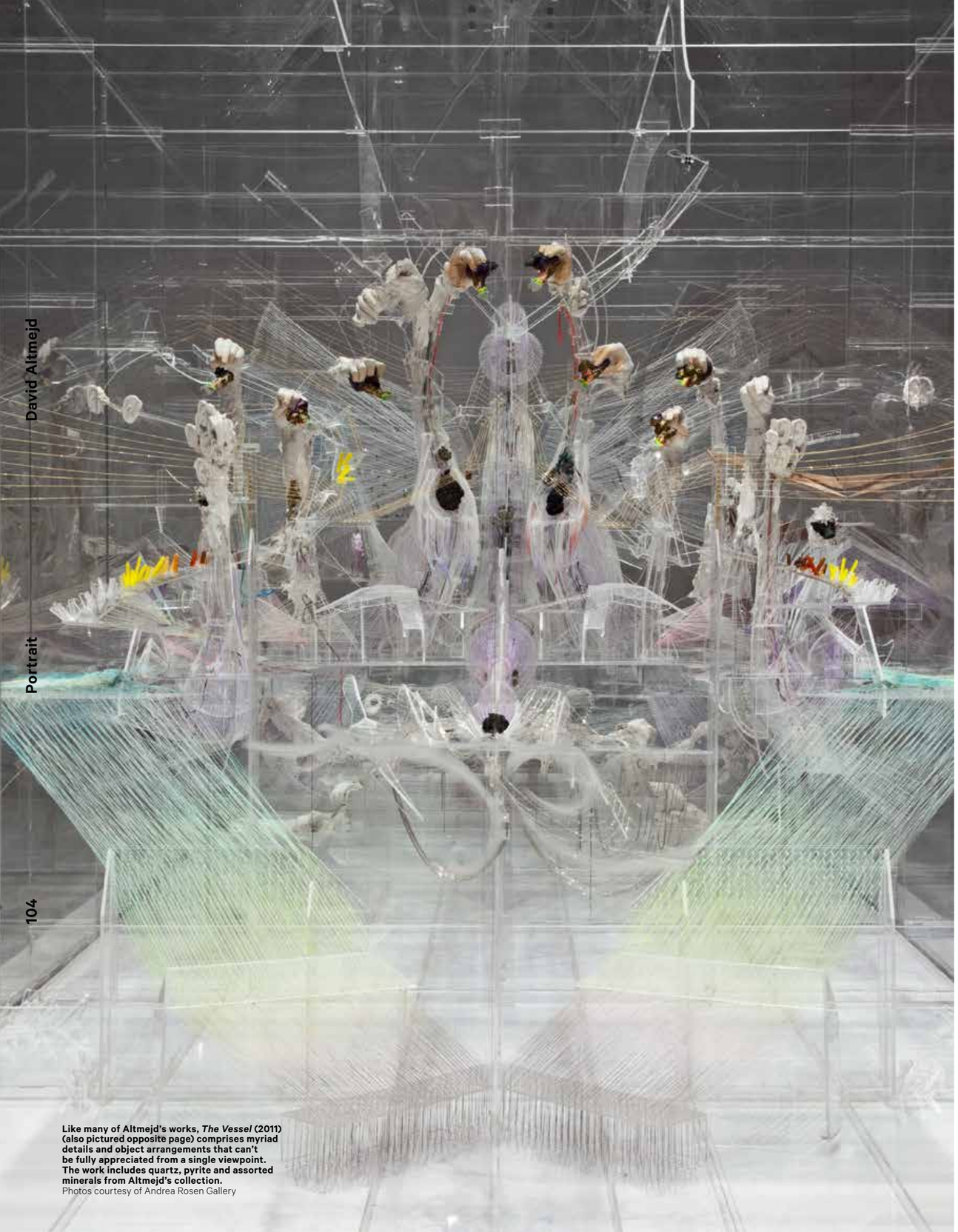


Dream Weaver

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 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.



Like many of Altmejd's works, *The Vessel* (2011) (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'

On 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. **...**

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.

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 Hufkens, Brussels

‘I discovered that sculpture could function as a body’

David Altmejd

… 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.

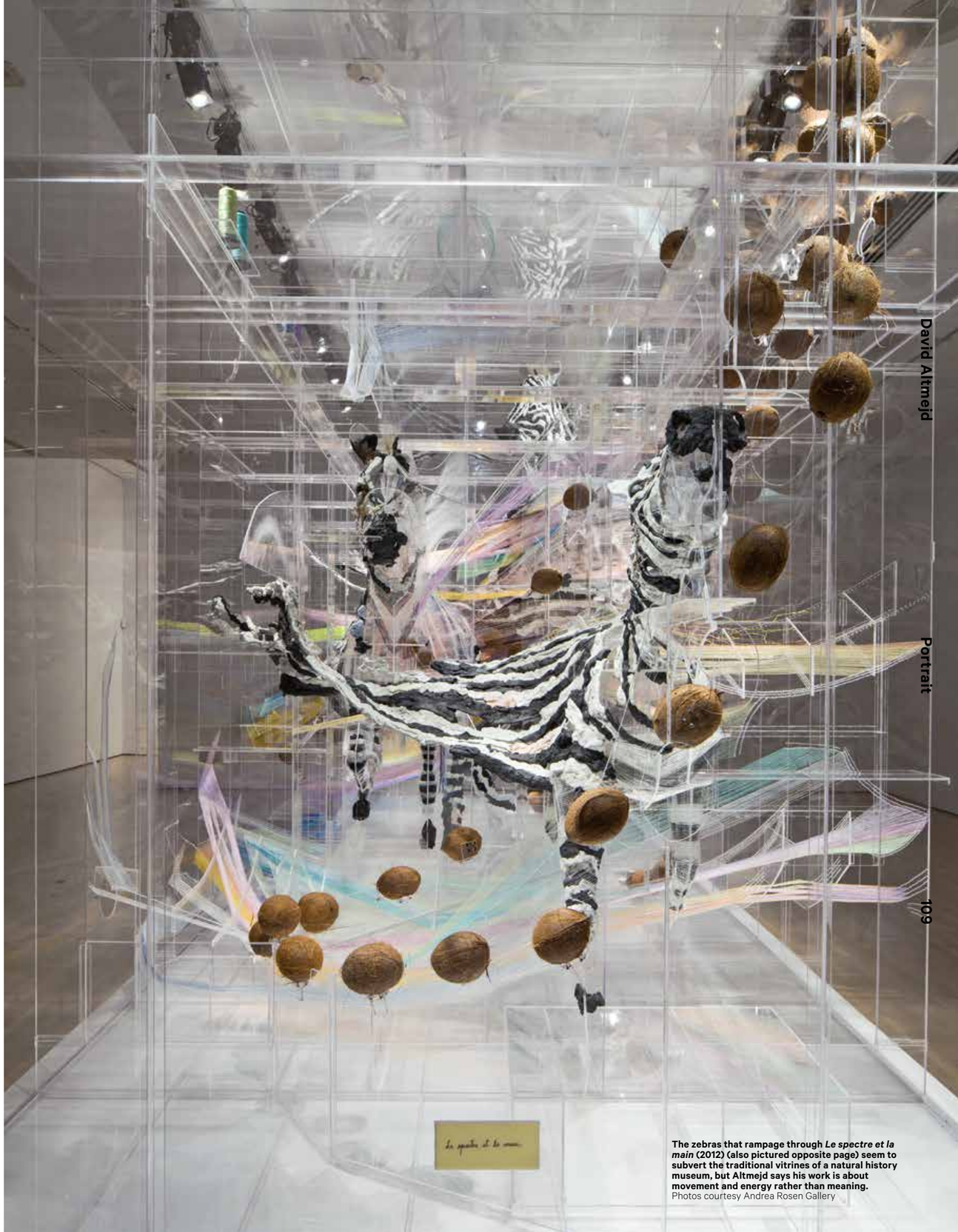
I want to ask about your rock collection, because it’s so compelling. You were telling me earlier that at first you started picking up rocks here and there before becoming a more serious collector. I’m building a bank of minerals, so that instead of having to go to the store or look for something online 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

FRAME

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



The zebras 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

For a solo show at The Brant Foundation Art Study Center in 2011, Altmejd arranged several pieces in a room covered with mirrors, creating the effect of a total work of art.
Photo courtesy of The Brant Foundation Art Study Center

DAVID ALTMEJD

Trinie *You are famous for making werewolf heads. From what I've read, you see werewolves the same way I do, as a positive force of transformation. It's important to recognize our animal instincts. Do your pieces have sexual talisman, beyond the bodily energy that you have spoken of? Do you think of werewolves as symbolic of passion overcoming logic? Along with the "glamorous" aspects of your work—the beads, glitter, silk flowers, rhinestones—your wolf heads enter into the perverse realm of dreams. The way their expressions are frozen in time, for example.*

David I find werewolves to be the most seductive monsters I have ever heard of. I love that they are symbolic of passion overcoming logic. I also love all that hair they have. I really like what you say about the heads entering "the perverse realm of dreams", and about their expressions being "frozen in time". Thanks.

Trinie *I like your idea that after man transforms into wolf, his head is severed and he grows crystals. Did you invent this mythology to start work on the wolf sculptures?*

David It must be so intense for someone to go from one state of physical and mental identity, to a totally opposite one, in 20 seconds, or even 10 seconds. I like to think that the transformation is so intense, that if you chopped the head off at that moment, it would immediately crystallize. I'm interested in the idea that a very intense energy would be stuck in an object. I use that little story to explain what kind of weird energy I want the object to be charged with. I like that the symbolic complexity of the werewolf, the energy related to transformation, the violence of a beheading, and the seductive/magical aspect of crystals would all be contained in an object that has the size of a head. I like the size of a head.

Trinie *The werewolf is a fitting symbol for freedom, or breaking constraints. You have said that "when meaning is controlled, the resulting object is not alive, there is no tension in a logical system that functions...I want the works to have an intelligence of their own, not just to be slave to my meaning." I admire how you've chosen werewolves as your totemic animal, to show that the art object is made by a human, but it becomes something all together different. Can you elaborate on how you see your artwork as a part of yourself, but still separate? Like it's the Hyde and you're the Jeckyll? Do you see art as a monster, a twisted version of yourself?*

David I see my artwork as coming from me, as if it were my child. I like to think that my work is genetically similar to me (all the materials and subjects and references come from me in one way or another), but that it becomes something totally different. At one point, the piece starts making its own choices. It starts to say things I never said. Hopefully, it will become more complex, intelligent and intense than I am (because I'm only so complex, intelligent and intense). The werewolf represents a more violent and passionate and even sexy aspect, and it makes the piece go in that direction. I heard Cronenberg speak in those terms about his relationship to the movies he makes. He said that the movie would start to make its own choices, and would become a sort of independent organism, a body.

I love that. I love Cronenberg. I see my art as a more intense version of myself in every way.

Trinie *When did the werewolf seed get planted in your head? Was it from watching werewolves transform in movies and imagining it as "painful?" And what are your favorite werewolf movies?*

David At one point, I thought my work needed something grotesque and suggestive of transformation, so it could develop in an interesting way. So the werewolf was perfect, especially its head. I don't have a favorite werewolf movie. I think werewolves in movies are never sexy enough. I hate that the werewolf, in its human state, is unaware of his potential, or feels really bad about it. I would love a movie in which a young Terence Stamp would be totally aware of his werewolf potential, and would love it. It would give him an unbelievably sexy confidence. He wouldn't even need to transform (or maybe just for a quick sex scene).

Trinie *This relates to werewolves but also to the idea that the body is a site for decay and rebirth...since you usually (always??) have things growing out of the bodies, you are focusing mostly on what happens after the decaying process, right? I'm thinking of Matt's work, and how he is interested in the decay itself—you seem to investigate what happens after, almost as if there is life after death. Do you believe in life after death? Or do you think that there are just different forms the body can take after death, like becoming part of the earth again? What about the potential energy latent within the body while it is still alive?*

David Well, in a way, decay is a form of regeneration, because it's bugs and bacteria feeding on the dead flesh. It's life taking a different shape. But the thing is that it is quite repulsive, and tragic and sad. I want my work to be optimistic. Maybe, in my work, the pretty things growing out of the dead body are a metaphor for the potential inside the body while it's still alive. And I don't believe in life after death.

Trinie *Critics call your work Modernist, but I think it's more Scientific because there are geometric forms reminiscent of atomic structures, universal shapes in nature, and of course the crystallization process and the death process are both based in the earth sciences. Are you interested in science and how do you think science and art overlap? Do you see the chaos in the universe as similar to the chaos that comes out of "letting art make itself?"*

David I understand Modernism aesthetically, the same way I understand science, with no intellectual rigor. So a Sol LeWitt sculpture is as cool and mysterious and pretty as the structure of a crystal. But anyway, I love science. Especially evolution. It's fascinating. I have a childlike fascination for it. I think I saw *Jurassic Park* six times, and I used to collect crystals because I thought they were pretty. I wanted to be a geologist because I thought crystals were pretty. I love to think of the chaos in the universe as similar to the chaos that comes out of "letting art make itself". I think nature is the most thrilling and beautiful thing. I would love to make art like chaos makes nature. But chaos had billions of years to finally take the shape of a dolphin (I love dolphins), whereas I only have a second. So I can't totally rely on chaos to make my art (I would just end up with a pile of shit). I have to use a sort of controlled chaos. That would be intuition.

Trinie *Are you interested in alchemy and/or metallurgy and the ancient science arts? In medieval times they seemed obsessed with transformation, not only in the human body but in every natural substance. Is this something you think about?*

David I'm interested in transformation in itself because I like the energy that comes with it. But I'm more interested in transformation as a metaphor for something that's in the human body. So if I used the idea of alchemy in my work, it would have to be connected to the body in some way. But it's interesting to think of the artist as an alchemist who transforms gross matter into super precious things.

Trinie *I like your mention of werewolf "extremes": good/evil, human/animal, Jeckyll/Hyde. The*

werewolf is an extreme animal. It encompasses so many paradoxical ideas. When you make a sculpture, do you aim to include these paradoxes in your art, or do you now have a sufficient language so that these opposites are automatically conjured as you make the piece? What is your interest in opposites?

David I feel like things exist only when they are paradoxical. An object made of opposites, of contrasting elements feels more alive. Like an electrical circuit needs a positive and a negative side for electricity to run though it.

Trinie *The werewolf traditionally was the male form of the witch. Men would wear wolf hides to do hunting rituals and/or ask for help from the spirits. Rather than the werewolf as monster, the werewolf had a positive, albeit scary, connotation. I like this notion that powerful forces are scary yet positive. I wish that instead of eliciting pity from the viewer that monsters also represented the immense powers of nature. Nature is awe-inspiring and all-powerful. We have basically no control over anything. Are you interested in this aspect of lycanthropy? Is the idea that humans have little control over themselves or others a comforting one to you or disturbing?*

David Nature is so amazing. I can't believe an orchid is the result of chaos. But for me the werewolf is more psychological. It's about the nature inside. The nature outside, like the landscape and everything that makes it (mountains, rivers, thunder, animals), is better represented by the giant. So there's a monster for everything.

Trinie *What music do you like?*

David Everything on the mix CDs my boyfriend burns for me.

Trinie *Do you ever dream you're a werewolf?*

David No.

Trinie *Many people associate werewolves with the link between sex and violence. People get off on power-tripping, the ultimate taboo, even to the point of murder or rape. Any sexual reference in your work seems to involve comparing the aesthetically beautiful to the aesthetically repulsive. What are your thoughts on attraction versus repulsion? Are you fascinated by how objects and people can be disgusting as well as sexy?*

David Beauty is nothing if it's not put into perspective by something that contradicts it. Sometimes, when I look at cute young models in a fashion magazine, it's like looking at blank pages. Some of my friends don't believe me, they say I'm jealous. But it's true, they're not sexy. If I met a werewolf, I would be very attracted. But he would have to be nice to me. His violence potential would have to be transformed into a desire to protect me. I like when the powerful evil monster falls in love with the girl in superhero movies. Like in *Legend* when Darkness (the super buff red devil with the huge horns) falls for the girl and captures her and tries to seduce her. She should have chosen him. He's much more sexy and exciting than Tom Cruise.

Trinie *What books are you reading right now, or what books are your favorites?*

David I'm reading a bunch of books at the same time. One of them is Richard Dawkins' *The Ancestor's Tale*. It about evolutionary biology. It describes the journey of a human being on a path that goes backwards in time. So at one point, his path meets the chimp's, and so on. At one point he meets the sponge, and then the redwood. I think it's nice and I love scientists' humor. It's smart and so endearing. My favorite books are the ones Borges wrote, because I love labyrinths and mirrors and all that. And I'm fascinated with the fact that it makes me shiver like crazy and I don't know why because it's so abstract.

Trinie *Have you seen the movie* Don't Look Now? *The father, Donald Sutherland, is traumatized when his daughter dies. As a result, he has psychic disturbances that force him to reconcile his deepest fears about life and death. He eventually forsees his own death after he glimpses his own monster, the mirror image of himself. Since you use*

so many mirrors in your work, I thought that perhaps you are commenting on seeing, or being brave enough to see, your own worst nightmares. Like facing the scariest aspects of ourselves. Is this true?

David I don't know if it's that psychological, but there's definitely something creepy about mirrors. For me, it's because I might see something that is not meant to be seen and that doesn't want to be seen. The first time I used mirrors in my work, it was to create a kind of periscope that enabled the viewer to see a werewolf head that was hidden around a corner in a box. Things are scarier in a mirror. I consciously don't look at the bathroom mirror when I go for a night wee. When I was a kid, I was afraid of the closet. Not anymore. Now it's the mirror (but only at night). What I'm the most afraid to see are things that I should not see. It doesn't matter if monsters exist. But the horror will start if you look at them in the eyes, because they will see it as provocation. But these feelings occur only at night when I'm half asleep and it's dark.

Anyway, I think that mirrors in my work have lost their creepy effect, and have become a way to generate a more sparkling/disco effect. But that's okay. It's just the way things evolved.

Trinie *Have you seen Robert Altman's* Images? *In it, the main character, an author (who's writing a story involving unicorns, my favorite!) who tries to manage her schizophrenia, eventually loses the battle because she realizes she can't simply kill all of her alternate personalities. They keep coming back to haunt her. She kills people in reality when she thinks she's just killing them in her own mind. The idea of schizophrenia also seems pertinent to your work, in that with all the angles and mirrors (like a carnival funhouse) the viewer is asked to investigate all their personalities. To be a werewolf is to be schizophrenic. Are you interested in the line between reality and fantasy, or do you want your art to be firmly rooted in one world or the other?*

David I'm only interested in reality. If there's fantasy in my work, it's just a device I use to put the real physical and material aspect of the sculpture into perspective. Whatever tale or crazy story the work might tell, ultimately, it's just a big heavy thing, it exists in reality, it breathes the same air you do, and it's only 2 feet away from you. I love that about sculpture.

Trinie *Are you interested in other fantastic or mythological creatures?*

David The giant. I read a few things about it. It's present in mythologies as different as the Cherokee's and the Celt's (I think). The giant is always the first thing that is created (before men and women). Giants are also the only ones who dare rebel against the creator. So I think it's obvious they represent nature (the sea, the wind, the mountains, the trees). So I'm starting to work on the body of a giant as a landscape inside of which plants and animals will thrive.

Trinie *If you died and people remembered you as the werewolf artist, would this satisfy you?*

David When I die, whatever people say, I won't care anymore.

ARTFORUM

GREENWICH, CT

David Altmejd

THE BRANT FOUNDATION ART STUDY CENTER

With its rusticated glamour and strangely artificial natural setting, the enclave known hyperbolically as "backcountry" Connecticut—home to collector Peter Brant's elegant, capacious apple-barn-turned-quasi-public kunsthalle—proves a surprisingly sympathetic setting for the riotous dazzle and decay of David Altmejd's work. Set between an impossibly green polo pitch and a quiet stretch of road whose posh tranquility is disturbed only by the occasional lawn-service truck, the 9,800-square-foot space has been transformed by the artist into a series of ecosystems showcasing the various kingdoms of synthetic flora and fauna that make up his giddily complex, satisfyingly strange universe of sculptures, installations, and spatial interventions.

Altmejd remains one of contemporary art's most resourceful collagists—his eye for the resonant connections between superficially antithetical juxtapositions is as keen as ever—but the main message of this mini-retrospective is one of diversifying modes of address. To be sure, certain basic impulses have remained consistent across the artist's decade long practice: a fascination with the body as both site for and agent of material transformation; a pursuit of the latent poetry in taxonomic display; a courting of negative space via physical ruptures, voids, and rifts; and a recognition of the rich generative potential to be found in degeneration. But as he has honed his formal and technical capabilities and refined his conceptual strategies, he has transformed what might once have potentially read as gimmicky—lycanthropic corpses cracked open like geodes to reveal crystalline eruptions, towering giants enrobed in fur and feathers or dripping with Technicolor sphagnum—into persuasive, fully formed presences.

What has perhaps been the most dramatic recent development in Altmejd's work—the engagement of the surrounding architecture—is emphatic from the first moments of the show. Drawing the walls themselves into his scheme, the artist utilizes two brands of alteration in the first set of galleries: large-scale mirroring, which was seen most notably in his project for the Canadian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2007 and is here crazed and pockmarked with holes, and a striking illusionistic plastering technique debuted in his 2011 show at New York's Andrea Rosen Gallery, in which the very material of the wall seems to come alive, excavating itself and gathering into recognizable forms. The first conceit effectively puts viewers directly inside the kinds of display habitats the artist has made from the beginning of his career, destabilizing spatial bearings and adding extra dimensions of radiance to his already glimmering assemblages. The latter, meanwhile, is a fitting instantiation of Altmejd's view of space as active and tangible and of bodies as both occupiers and destroyers of it (in one of the show's occasionally too-literal choices, the form the wall matter repeatedly organizes itself into is the artist's hand).

Like the entire show—which, in addition to Altmejd's familiar forms, also features a sequence of peculiar heads (all 2011), often upside down, apparently trepanned, and set on stakes like marauders' trophies—the pieces scattered throughout these first galleries range across the years, from *Untitled (Dark)*, 2001, one of the very first of the artist's pieces to feature the encrusted "werewolf" heads, and the discofied LeWittian lattice *The University 1*, 2004, to newer works such as the enigmatic *La rose*, 2010, a curious Kaaba-esque Plexiglas box sporting a tiny golden rattail. (This last work is an engagingly simple anomaly within the artist's oeuvre, both its name and countenance nodding to the blankly evocative incongruity of Duchamp's *Fresh Widow*, 1920.) Plexiglas, with its paradoxically transparent confinement is, as always with Altmejd, a favored material, and here it is used to house several of the artist's now signature large-scale arrays, including the striking *Untitled*, 2009, and, upstairs, the even more colossal *Swarm*, 2011. Both of these works propose themselves as biomes of sorts, terraria within which inert materials-golden chains, pastel threads, crystals, epoxy resin—coalesce into intricate networks and systems, the ordering hand of the artist like a shepherd coaxing a flock into formation or a gardener teasing blossoms from carefully tended vines.

- Jeffrey Kastner

David Altmejd,
***The University 1*,**
2004, mirrors, wood,
66x 71x 106".

NUVO

INSPIRED BY QUALITY

DAVID
ALTMEJD
Artist's Wonderland

HAUTE HOROLOGY
Louis Vuitton Timepieces

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT
Miriam Toews

LACOSTE'S ACE DESIGNER
Felipe Oliveira Baptista

ALTMEJD'S WONDERLAND

FANTASY and **REALITY** are the ***undercurrents*** of **DAVID ALTMEJD**'s art. The ***Montreal native's*** large-scale sculptures of **ANTHROPOMORPHIC** figures explore the ***boundaries of traditional figuration*** by embedding **OTHERWORLDLY** elements in his subjects.

STORY BY **SIMONA RABINOVITCH**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **JODY ROGAC**

Walking into David Altmejd's studio feels like falling down a rabbit hole into some strange wonderland. Hidden on the top floor of a Long Island City warehouse that's just one subway stop from Manhattan, the large, bright space is a hub of activity in preparation for the friendly, bright-eyed artist's big (untitled) solo show at the Brant Foundation Art Study Center in Connecticut.

Four cheerful assistants scurry about, putting finishing touches on sculptures in various states of inhuman condition. One glues hair upon the thigh of a 12-foot giant. Another voraciously hammers a wooden skeleton that will become a plaster mannequin. Yet another collects countless tiny resin grapes, and dozens of disembodied heads—an Altmejd specialty—look on, duly impressed.

"Be careful, Lucas! Careful with your fingers," the 37-year-old artist calls to an assistant who looks like he might cut himself while slicing a block of foam into the shape of an enormous hand.

Altmejd's acclaimed work often delves into themes like transformation and containment, and his inclusion of mythical creatures, including giants, werewolves, and angels, invites science fiction and mythology references. Ultimately, it resists definition or narrative, and is all about potential. His sculptures and installations have shown at prestigious museums such as Grenoble's Le Magasin Centre National d'Art Contemporain and Barcelona's Fundación la Caixa Museum, as well as throughout the United States (where he is represented by New York's Andrea Rosen Gallery), in London, and in Canada.

In 2007, the Montreal expat represented Canada at the Venice Biennale. *The Giant 2* was a decaying aria of mirrors, taxidermy, and plants centred on a werewolf. A second piece, *The Index*, featured a cacophony of life-sized human figures with bird heads, more foliage and mirrors, and werewolf heads. The following year, his installation *The Eye* turned heads at New York's Metropolitan Opera House. In 2009, Altmejd won the Sobey Art Award, and recently, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts unveiled *The Eye* (another work with the same name), an outdoor bronze sculpture commissioned for the museum's new wing.

"It was extremely meaningful for me," he says of the hometown coup. "Also, it was unlike everything I've ever done. Just the fact that it's a public sculpture, it's a totally different logic. I had to think of things like timelessness, not just in terms of material but in terms of form."

Yet having no constraints also gave him a sort of vertigo. "I felt I was in space. It's hard to describe—I just feel like usually I'm not really responsible for the work, because the work is the result of every constraint that surrounds it. But for that piece, I feel really responsible. That piece is very connected to my work but it's also very different in how I conceptualized it: I thought the idea of the symbol was extremely important. Symbolic potentiality—shapes and forms and holes that were potentially symbolic."

Perpetually concentrating on the present moment, Altmejd has never really been able to step back and look at his career. "I'm just focused on the now. I don't have choice; that's all I see," says the artist, who studied biology

at McGill University before switching to art school at L'Université du Québec à Montréal, and then moving to New York to earn his MFA at Columbia; he's lived there since. "I'm fascinated with the living, with biology—especially evolutionary biology. I don't see big pictures—I never really step back—but I think my focus on details makes it possible for things to be made."

The past, not the present, used to occupy Altmejd's attention. "When I was a kid, I was totally obsessed with the past, with the idea of time passing. I started experiencing nostalgia when I was, like, seven or something," he says with a laugh. "That made me really, really, *really* sad. When I was eight and looked at pictures of when I was five, I was tearing up. Then when I was a teenager, everything changed and I became obsessed with the present."

Featuring new and old work, the massive scope of his new Brant Foundation show reveals Altmejd's hyperfocus to be a prolific one. "I decided to make as much work as possible so I could have something to play with, to give me options when I started installing," he says about the new pieces. "Midway, the direction clarified itself, so I decided to finish certain pieces." The Brant show includes *The Swarm* (2011), the largest Plexiglas installation Altmejd's ever done (2.6 x 6.2 x 2.1 metres).

His studio is filled with countless imitation body parts, which are magic ingredients in his baker's pantry. Plaster ears are laid out on a table, organized in pairs for easy access. Buckets of extra ears sit nearby. "They're casts of my ears," Altmejd confides. "Once you make a mould, you can make as many casts as you want." There are also baskets of fake ants, resin pears, and lots of coconuts. Real coconuts. A little man made of coconuts delivers a jaunty salute. Where does one procure so many coconuts?

"Ask April, she went coconut shopping," Altmejd quips, referring to the charming assistant with a faint Southern accent who combed New York markets for all the coconuts she could find. Besides their aesthetic qualities, Altmejd likes coconuts because they suggest containment—as do heads.

"I dunno, I'm really into fruits," he says. "Sometimes I make decisions just because it's weird and fresh—there's this idea of freshness or a caricature of the exotic. And there's this game I have on my iPhone, Fruit Ninja. It's exotic fruits and you have to slice them. It's very satisfying."

PHOTOS: Artworks in progress at Altmejd's studio in Long Island City, New York.

Which brings us to the heads. "Oh, the heads are here," he says, striding off to a table covered with them, mounted on sticks. Zombie-like, they are both creepy and, some may think, seductive, with rocks and minerals peeking out from gaping holes in their skulls. They slightly resemble Altmejd.

One wonders: Are these going to be on bodies? "No, I think these are going to be just stand-alone heads," he says confidently.

Does he ever do female heads? "Actually, no. That's really interesting. It's probably what I am, and also what I'm attracted to, to end up with an object that I find sexy in a way, you know?" The heads aren't modelled after anyone's visage, but inspired by the materials from which they are crafted.

Altmejd is obsessed with materials. He frequents an odd little Midtown shop that specializes in minerals. "Usually it's people who are interested in crystals for their New Age aspect. Not me," he says. "Very often I go through the store and I try to recognize the shape of a body part in a rock and that can become the start of a piece. The wig store is also a place I go to very often. They say it's human hair, but it's not—it costs $15, it's *not* human hair."

Even with the giants, the artistic process is less about the sum of the parts and more about each little piece. "I focus on the microscopic, even if I make gigantic pieces," he explains. "I make it so big you can focus on each individual part as an end in itself. I'm like the ant that's not intimidated by us because it doesn't really see us, it's focused on the inch by inch. When I work on [a giant] up close, the hole in the thigh can become a world. So it's an architecture and it's also a landscape. You know the cliché of seeing chains of mountains and seeing a giant in it, a fallen or sleeping giant—there's also that mythological aspect. But it's also what it permits me to do in terms of process: each little area becomes a space where I can have a relationship with material."

Altmejd's acclaimed work often delves into themes like **TRANSFORMATION** and **CONTAINMENT**, and his inclusion of ***mythical creatures***, including giants, werewolves, and angels, invites **SCIENCE FICTION** and **MYTHOLOGY** references.

Of course, once in a while he stands back and says, "Oh yeah, it's a whole." For an observer, the beauty of a sculpture is that it's different from every angle. Stand somewhere else and the giant acquires another shape, a new meaning. As with life, it's a question of perspective. Which might explain Altmejd's obsession with *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*.

"Oh, I *love* it," he says. "I love the drama. I don't like to live the drama—I'm not very sociable—but I love looking at it. I look at them like they're birds, you know? It's the best television I've ever seen. What's amazing is, there's real reality in that fake reality. They're having real nervous breakdowns. I seem like a horrible person or like a voyeur, but I can't stop thinking about it. I think it's the same as when I was in biology and I observed micro-organisms in a petri dish, or if I'm focused on materials and the way they react together on the giant's thigh. For me, it's all as fascinating. I like observing little things moving and reacting unpredictably and trying to understand why they reacted like that, and seeing beauty and drama and horror. Same thing with materials. I like to combine one type of paint and one type of mineral and see flesh come alive."

This fascination was particularly reflected in his recent plaster sculpture series "Bodybuilders". "I use plaster casts of my hands as a way of dragging matter from one part of the [sculpture's] body to another. Usually, these figures are filled with hands and they reshape their body by taking matter from one part of the body and bringing it somewhere else. So some of them have big holes in their abdomens because the hands are taking the matter from the abdomen and dragging it upwards on the head."

In a similar series called "The Watchers", angel-like figures sport wings "made from taking the matter—which happens to be plaster—from the body and dragging it upwards to shape wings."

Altmejd creates unity in space through materials, energy, and contrast, and incorporates many pieces, new and old, into each show. "It's important for me that an object is able to generate energy," he says. "The fact that

For an observer, the **BEAUTY** of a sculpture is that it's ***different from every angle***. Stand somewhere else and the giant acquires another shape, a new meaning. As with life, it's ***a question of*** **PERSPECTIVE.**

contrast leads to tension, which leads to the production of energy, makes the object function more like a living being. In the giant, for example, I could fill a cavity with ants," he says pointing to the figure he's currently working on. "They could actually go down his leg and start travelling in space. I'm not sure yet."

Mirrors are another obsession. "I like the idea that one object can create two experiences," says Altmejd. "Objects that are covered in mirror tend to visually disappear. They sort of become invisible, immaterial. It's a non-physical film. You can't light it—if you aim a spotlight at a mirror, you're just reflecting. But then I take a hammer and I smash them and all of a sudden the object becomes real and ultra-physical. Oh my God, I *love* this idea."

Considering his vivid inner life, fantastical imagination, and creative connection to mythical archetypes, it's no shock that Altmejd has been lucid dreaming since his teens. "I've never trained myself to lucid dream. It came naturally as a way of getting out of nightmares. I first found out that closing my eyes and counting—inside a nightmare—would wake me up. Then I guess I figured out that if I ever got to the point of closing my eyes and counting, for any reason, I must be dreaming, because I would never do that in real life. So from that point, I was conscious in about half my dreams." Recently, though, his nocturnal jaunts took an unexpected twist.

"As a teenager, it was all about sex," he explains. "I'd just look for people to have sex with. Now, I lucid dream less and less, but it happened a year ago, and for the first time I said, 'I'm not gonna have sex, I'm just going to use this dream to make an experiment. I'm gonna make art to see how it looks, to compare the art in the real world and the art in my dream.' So I tried to look for a piece of paper and a pencil but I wasn't able to find one or the other. The next night I lucid dreamed again. I said, 'I'm gonna do a different experiment now, I'm gonna look at myself in the mirror.' So I tried to find a mirror, and I found one. I had the courage to actually look at it, in this mirror inside my own head, and I saw myself but in a crazy, exaggerated caricature way. It really gave me goosebumps. So I said, 'Oh, maybe it's a funhouse mirror.' So I looked for another one and I saw the same thing!"

The next day, he did some online investigating and discovered that the consensus is to never look in the mirror while lucid dreaming. "I did and what I saw was horrible."

That night, he lucid dreamed again. This time, though, he decided to go back to his teenage strategy: sex. "I saw someone and I went up to them and turned that person around, and that person had totally black eyes and was horrible and started scaring me and confronting me and said I am the devil. It's the first time in my life that I lucid dream and someone is not cooperating. They're supposed to be zombies—they're in my head, I'm the master, it's my territory. Maybe when I looked in the mirror, I opened a door that I shouldn't have."

In Altmejd's wonderland, the intersection of good and evil, of fantasy and reality, of dream and wakefulness, is perhaps the subtle undercurrent of both art and life.

"The most amazing thing about making art is to realize that your work really exists in this world," he says. "Not just for you, but for other people. I'm sort of a loner and I don't really feel I exist physically in the world. I don't feel like I'm in my body—I grew up not being aware that I had one. Doing sculpture was a way of existing physically, not through my body but through a body I would make. Like a kind of avatar. That's why I want objects to be as intense as possible, to exist intensely in this world."

PHOTOS: Altmejd's large, bright studio space is a hub of activity.

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

"Why 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

Illustration by Tony Millionaire

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 says 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 ½ × 244 × 84 ½ 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. ✭

THE NEW YORKER

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
THE TRANSFORMER

Before he became an artist, David Altmejd, thirty-six, wanted to be an evolutionary biologist, and his sculptures, from compartmental tableaux to freestanding figures, are rooted in ideas of taxonomy and mutation. (Also transmogrification:

Altmejd is known for his gothic-glass werewolf heads.) Two new works at the Andrea Rosen Gallery are triumphs of ecstatic intricacy. Plexiglas vitrines dwarf viewers, suggesting giant Joseph Cornell boxes made in cahoots with the sociobiologist E.O. Wilson and a horror-movie fanatic. Swarms of bees and armies of ants (they might have marched out of a David Wojnarowicz film) attend phantasmagoric assembly lines. A corps of cast-plaster hands (shades of Rodin) form shadow-puppet swans in midair, their pinched white fingers evolving into crystalline heads and black beaks. Colored threads and cobweb-fine jewelry chains are laced through the multi-level interiors, like lines in a diagram. Is Altmjed charting the flow of the creative process iteself? Who knows. His art is not a puzzle to be solved; it's a mystery that continues to deepen.

-Andrea K. Scott

CANADIANART

Review

David Altmejd: Modern Myths

ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY, NEW YORK MAR 18 TO APR 23 2011

by David Balzer

David Altmejd *The Architect 2* and *Spectre* 2011 Installation view Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery New York / photo Jessica Eckert

In her self-titled “informal memoir” from 1965, the late Elizabeth Taylor described her electric relationship with Richard Burton thusly: “When we looked at each other, it was like our eyes had fingers and they grabbed hold, and perhaps something special did happen.” The line came to mind while I viewed Montreal-born artist David Altmejd’s spectacular new show at New York’s Andrea Rosen Gallery last weekend, and not just because of Taylor’s recent passing—although there is more than a whiff of decadent mortality to Altmejd’s sensibility. The artist’s work literalizes Taylor’s metaphor; here, a series of alarming plaster sculptures, some embedded in the gallery’s walls, have faces and bodies comprised of casts of hands and ears. In the main gallery are two of the artist’s characteristic Plexiglas encasements, in which creation myths, evolutionary biology and New Age doctrines merge in a grand meditation on the visceral nature of looking. Indeed, for Altmejd, as for Taylor, looking and being looked at are vital forms of becoming.

Entering the gallery, one encounters the first of Altmejd’s many statues in the show, *Untitled 4 (The Watchers)*, a winged form with a cluster of ears for a face. This and all the statues are constructed of wood, foam, burlap and, on their surfaces, plaster. Altmejd has made versions of them before, as early as 2008, but these most recent iterations are without colour. Allusions abound. Most obviously, with *Untitled 4*’s wings, one thinks of Daedalus and Icarus—a fitting introduction to a show that concerns metamorphoses of body and space.

David Altmejd *Untitled 4 (The Watchers)* 2011 Installation view Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery New York / photo Jessica Eckert

The figure's ear-face introduces us to Altmejd's eccentric efforts to illustrate the possible transference of sense functions: Can we look the way we hear, and touch the way we look? Throughout the gallery, the artist puts objects on the periphery, equating a visual experience of them with a kind of creeping: on the walls, tiny holes and small and large scrapes appear (on the north wall of the main gallery, a plaster ear looks as if it has skidded across the drywall). In a subsidiary gallery, *The Architect 2* (is the piece named after Daedalus' profession?) is a plaster figure in a Christlike pose, whose wings are long finger marks stretching onto three walls. The interventions are so raw they seem to take on sonic proportions; certainly, in the typically spare context of a contemporary commercial gallery, the interior equivalent of white noise, one feels conscious of a crunching, a breaking. In addition, a couple of mineral- and glitter-encrusted heads, also recurrent in the artist's practice and placed inconspicuously in the main gallery's corners, seem to scream "boo" when discovered.

David Altmejd *The Vessel* 2011 Installation view Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery New York / photo Jessica Eckert

In complement, Altmejd's two Plexiglas encasements in the main gallery are symphonies. Larger in scale than the encasements usually are, the pieces, named *The Vessel* and *The Swarm*, are about so much that they nearly defy synopsis. They seem to want to contain everything about life and death and, as such, are unable to contain themselves, revealing, on inspection, a series of cracks and fissures—as if a poltergeist has been disturbed. At the heart of *The Vessel* is an ostensibly symmetrical composition of plaster hands and arms, positioned like a fleet of swans with, cannibalistically, modelling clay in the shape of bird heads held in their finger-beaks. Girding these forms are an excess of hand-painted threads, meticulously strung on and around the Plexiglas. The rear of *The Vessel* is exploded; if the work is a living thing, this is its anus, the sight at the end of which is another of the artist's heads, suggesting an ourobouros, which has a beginning where its ending should be. Tellingly, out of the side of *The Vessel* come clawing plaster hands, which scrape into the plinth on which the piece rests. This is not a symmetrical work after all; its apparent design is a ruse. Just as life-energy cannot be contained, a closer look by the viewer lends as much chaos as it does order.

David Altmejd *The Vessel* 2011 Detail Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery New York / photo Jessica Eckert

Similar ideas are explored in *The Swarm*, its superficial disarray—flights of bees and swarms of ants, everywhere—calmed and problematized by the intricacy of Altmejd's threadwork, and of his other materials. (The bees, their bodies of Plexiglas, are given form by the lavish draping of gold chains.) Heads appear again, comically outfitted with wigs that are jarringly contemporary: Orpheus decapitated, but crowned with dime-store beauty.

More myths abound in this show and in all of Altmejd's work: in addition to Orpheus and Daedalus, Leda's rape by Zeus' swan comes to mind, as does Eve's genesis from Adam's rib, both stories about the violence and perversity, the inward- and outward-turning qualities, of the generation of life. It's no wonder that these are also the subjects of classical sculptures such as Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne*, wherein the figure is suspended in potentiality, its initial identity both expanded upon and eradicated. Altmejd's mastery as a contemporary artist lies precisely in this adherence to his discipline's basic principles and themes, but also in his own repudiation of any aesthetic confines. His forthcoming opera *Conte crépusculaire*, created with composer-performer Pierre Lapointe and opening May 4 at Galerie de l'UQAM, marks yet another creative shifting of shape. Altmejd's gaze, ever insatiable, doesn't merely touch; it tastes, smells and hears, too.

David Altmejd The Architect 1, Bodybuilders and The Swarm 2011 Installation view Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery New York / photo Jessica Eckert

David Altmejd *The Vessel* 2011 Detail Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery New York / photo Jessica Eckert

www.canadianart.ca/online/reviews/2011/03/31/david_altmejd/

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

CULTURE | By LINDA YABLONSKY | March 28, 2011, 2:15 pm

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 a 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.”

“David Altmejd” continues through April 23 at the Andrea Rosen Gallery, 525 West 24th Street.

Art in America INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

Inside the Box: Q+A With David Altmejd

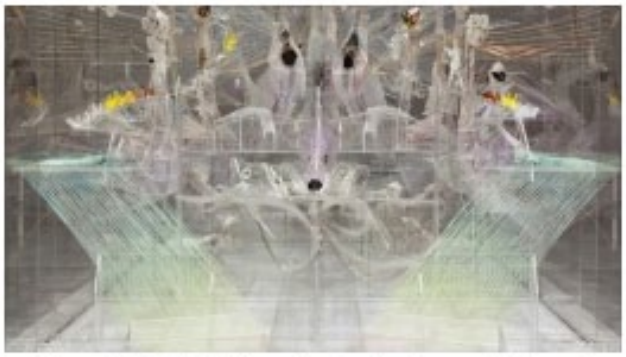
by Timothy Hull 03/23/11

The Canadian-born, New York-based sculptor is best known for his “werewolves”: anthropomorphic compositions comprising fabricated, fragmented creatures, among other symbols of masculinity, desire and transformation. An exhibition of new work at Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York sees Altmejd turning the work inside-out, with two Plexiglas boxes that fill the gallery. Suspended within are elements of human forms diminished and diffused in order to articulate balance. Here the artist talks about creating a new realm of the invisible.

TIMOTHY HULL: There is an odd resemblance in these new Plexiglas works to the structure and circuitry of a computer mega-server or some ghostly mechanical information center. Do these sculptures somehow stand as metaphors for information and energy exchange?

DAVID ALTMEJD: Yes, but I don’t think about technology so much. For me it’s closer to the nervous system or natural aspects of the body. So if you frame the discussion in terms of energy, it’s more about the way it travels through the spine or the nerves rather than being contained in a box.

HULL: Why have you move toward the giant Plexiglas boxes? They immediately make me think of containment or a mechanical support.



VIEW SLIDESHOW David Altmejd. Photo by Jessica Eckert.; The Vessel, 2011. Plexiglas, chain, plaster, wood, thread, wire, acrylic paint, epoxy resin, epoxy clay, acrylic gel, granular medium, quartz, pyrite, assorted minerals, adhesive, wire, pins, needles. Photo by Jessica Eckert. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery.;

ALTMEJD: I started to think of the box not as a means of containing but as an invisible support to hold things—to suspend them in space. Everything is supposed to be in balance and the box is the field of energy. The box is essentially supposed to be invisible.

HULL: Tell me about what I cannot see. What is the nature of metaphysics in regards to your works?

ALTMEJD: I actually wish that everything were visible. I wish that even the energy and liveliness and the potential for transformation were visually evident. There is a history of personal art-making in these works that brought everything to its current appearance. These new sculptures didn’t start at a certain pre-conceived point; each evolved as I made it and there are the signs and marking of its creating throughout the piece. I like the idea that if someone were really to pay attention they could see the history of the piece being made-the actions that formed the object. You can draw connections

between all the parts of the work. They're all connected, therefore you can understand why I want everything to be seen.

HULL: In this work there's a lot of symmetry and ecstasy that you expect to see in Baroque imagery and architecture.

ALTMEJD: I didn't set out to make work that explicitly referenced Catholicism but, yes, it has a lot of Catholic aspects. But they are mostly manifest in thought rather than in image. I am drawn to Catholic imagery in general, especially thinking of the representations of bodies as icons. I'm interested in how Catholic visual codes are so connected to the body, the way anything is. Even the architecture of the church is somehow connected to the shape of the body. There is always a central point of energy in those spaces and images.

HULL: Two concepts often discussed in your work are beauty and abjection. What role do they play in these new sculptures?

ALTMEJD: I'm really just interested in beauty. I'm not too interested in abjection. But I realize there does have to be the aspect of its opposite to make beauty appear more real and true.

HULL: I notice there is an absence of mirrors in this show. For David Altmejd that could be seen as a major shift.

ALTMEJD: [laughs] Not really a major shift, as all the materials I've used I retain in my material library, metaphorically speaking, so nothing is ever truly absent or left behind. It might be interesting to have included the mirror here but these works are really about the idea of transparency and not perfect reflection or imitation.

HULL: Have you expressly moved away from the monumental figure in these new works and focused more on abstraction and formalism with only smaller references to the organic figure?

ALTMEJD: In these two large Plexiglas works, yes, but not essentially throughout my work. In these works here, the process leads to something sparser and less figurative. If anything, there's a disintegrated figure. As I worked on these large boxes, they just defined themselves and grew intuitively.

HULL: So the whole process is intuitive? What significance does that have for you?

ALTMEJD: Yes, there are no drawings or plans. It begins in a box very sparsely and grows as I see fit, essentially growing itself. It just happens but it certainly isn't coming from nowhere—it's very practical. The way I work is very close to the object, almost microscopically. Every little technical problem I encounter generates a new branch.

HULL: Can you say something about the incidences of handmade bees, ants and other insects inside these Plexi boxes?

ALTMEJD: I started with the thought that I'd like to make a swarm of bees, really. I didn't expect to have all this other material and stuff around it, per se. Once I installed a box in my studio with some bees in it, I felt like I had to begin working around it. I thought it was interesting to add the ants because they are actually the only things affixed to the Plexiglas, so they show that the invisible exists.

HULL: Although the giant Plexi boxes dominate the space, there are two ghostly figures embedded in the walls titled The *Architect 1* and *2* [2011], almost resembling the terrifying angels out of Tony Kushner's "Angels in America." Only the impressions of these figures are left. From what or where are these figures born?

ALTMEJD: These figures are literally made from the architecture. They are my first literal installation pieces and they are scrapings inside the wall. I built panels into the wall and then worked from that, making it appear as if the whole wall was scraped out in order to create the figures. There was a lot of technical problem solving that went into figuring out how to make these figures appear embedded. Maybe 80 percent of my work is just this type of problem solving.

THE GLOBE AND MAIL | ARTS

David Altmejd wins Sobey Art Award

$50,000 prize goes to Canadian sculptor, based in New York, who uses such materials as animal fur and Plasticine in his work

Sarah Milroy

Globe and Mail Update

Published on Thursday, Oct. 15, 2009 8:30PM EDT
Last updated on Thursday, Oct. 15, 2009 8:34PM EDT

The 35-year old, New York-based Canadian artist David Altmejd was announced the winner of the 2009 Sobey Art Award, in a ceremony Thursday night at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, in Halifax.

Canada's representative at the Venice Biennial two years ago, Mr. Altmejd received his first artistic training in Montreal, where he completed his Bachelor of Fine Arts at Université du Québec à Montréal, before heading to New York to complete his Masters of Fine Arts at Columbia University.

The $50,000 prize celebrates his accomplishments as a sculptor and installation artist, working in a broad variety of materials – from fine gold chain, crystal and mirrors to animal fur, Plasticine, taxidermied animals and black leather.

As the jury citation states, his work "represents the pursuit of metamorphosis and mutation as a means of releasing energy."

The Sobey Art Award is given annually to an emerging Canadian artist by the Sobey Art Foundation. The winner was selected by a panel of art experts from across Canada.

Other finalists for the 2009 award included Graeme Patterson (Atlantic), Luanne Martineau (West Coast And Yukon), Shary Boyle (Ontario) and Marcel Dzama (Prairies and North). The work of all the Sobey Art Award contestants will remain on view at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia until Nov. 5.

MESMERIZING LARGE-SCALE SCULPTURE BY DAVID ALTMEJD

ACQUIRED BY DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART

Major New Acquisition Immerses Viewers in a Dramatic Mirrored Environment;

Currently on View at the DMA in Performance/Art Exhibition

Dallas, TX – December 1, 2009 – The Dallas Museum of Art today announced the acquisition of a major large-scale sculpture, *The Eye*, by the celebrated Canadian artist David Altmejd. Among the artist's most ambitious works to date, *The Eye* measures approximately 11 by 18 feet and is an imposing and mesmerizing structure of mirrored glass and wooden support that engulfs the viewer in a spectacular environment of fractured light and reflection. Acquired by the DMA through the DMA/amfAR Benefit Auction Fund made possible by Two by Two for AIDS and Art, the work is currently on view in the DMA's exhibition *Performance/Art* through March 21, 2010.

"It's a pleasure to offer visitors the chance to explore David Altmejd's work, which overwhelms and entices the viewer with dazzling visual effect," said Bonnie Pitman, The Eugene McDermott Director of the Dallas Museum of Art. "This beautiful and dramatic sculpture is an important addition to our collections, and a fascinating component of our *Performance/Art* exhibition, which explores connections between visual and performing arts. Altmejd's work energizes the DMA's collections, which are recognized among the most important museum holdings in the country, and reinforces our city's standing as a major center for contemporary art."

Created in 2008, *The Eye* draws inspiration from the 2005 John Adams opera *Doctor Atomic*, which recounts the events leading up to the first nuclear bomb test under the supervision of Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer in 1945. The installation's dazzling mirrored facades give the piece a theatrical quality, as well as a sense of movement, drawing possible parallels to an explosion that has been suspended or frozen in time, or a spaceship that has just landed, or to any number of possible references dealing with science and science fiction, as well as the history of sculpture. Altmejd made *The Eye* for the art gallery at The Metropolitan Opera in New York, which presents the work of visual artists who have been asked to respond to an opera performed during the Met's season.

"*The Eye* is one of Altmejd's most abstract and amazing achievements," said Charles Wylie, the DMA's Lupe Murchison Curator of Contemporary Art. "The work confounds us with its beauty while challenging our sense of scale, creating an immersive experience. Altmejd's exuberant and complex vision makes his work truly extraordinary, and it is extremely exciting to have been able to bring this work to Dallas and have it stay here."

Altmejd's work joins other large-scale sculptures and installations in the DMA's contemporary art collection by artists such as Chris Burden, Mona Hatoum, Tatsuo Miyajima, Doug Aitken and Olafur Eliasson, among many others. Its acquisition is made possible through the DMA/amfAR Benefit Auction Fund, which is supported by the annual fundraising event Two by Two for AIDS and Art and which has allowed the Museum to acquire approximately 100 works of contemporary art since its founding in 1999.

About David Altmejd
In October 2009, David Altmejd was awarded the 2009 Sobey Art Award, Canada's preeminent prize for contemporary art. Born in 1974 in Montreal, Quebec, Altmejd has received significant international attention in recent years for his visually rich and complex sculptures. He was selected to represent Canada at the 2007 Venice Biennale, and his work was featured in the 2004 Whitney Biennial. Other recent important exhibitions of Altmejd's work have included the 2008 Liverpool Biennial at the Tate-Liverpool, UK, and the 2008 Triennial of Québec Art at the Musée D'Art Contemporain de Montréal. He received his BFA from the University of Quebec, Montreal in 1998, and his MFA from Columbia University in 2001.

About the Dallas Museum of Art
Located in the vibrant Arts District of downtown Dallas, Texas, the Dallas Museum of Art (DMA) ranks among the leading art institutions in the country and is distinguished by its innovative exhibitions and groundbreaking educational programs. At the heart of the Museum and its programs are its encyclopedic collections, which encompass more than 24,000 works and span 7,000 years of history, representing a full range of world cultures. Established in 1903, the Museum today welcomes more than 600,000 visitors annually and acts as a catalyst for community creativity, engaging people of all ages and backgrounds with a diverse spectrum of programming, from exhibitions and lectures to concerts, literary readings and dramatic and dance presentations.

The Dallas Museum of Art is supported in part by the generosity of Museum members and donors and by the citizens of Dallas through the City of Dallas/Office of Cultural Affairs and the Texas Commission on the Arts.

METAL
Mars 2009

TEXT: DAMIEN DELILLE / PHOTO: ELLEN PAGE WILSON

DAVID ALTMEJD
TRAVEL IN THE

The sculptural installations made by Canadian David Altmejd, can be seen as a series of meetings. My first encounter with his work was at the Rosen Gallery in New York during the winter of 2004, for his first solo show. His use of mirrors, fake hair, gold rings and glass windows created a seductive and imperious impression. The equilibrium of opposites comes from his very specific point of view towards sculpture, which he stretches to transform nature into artificial effects; chic to shock. The Venice Biennale in 2007 consecrated the artist prodigy at the age of 33. Here, the Canadian Pavilion allowed him to lay out a strange environment, composed figures half human, half animal, embed in glass and steel cages. For his next exhibition in Grenoble, the giant figure is the threshold of Altmejd's very big idea: to transform mythological monsters and fascinating objects into autonomous structures bursting with energy.

This venue organized by Le Magasin in Grenoble, dedicated only to his work is almost a premiere in France. Once the fascination induced by a certain taste for morbidity and an attraction to strangeness passed, the environment's plastic poignancy holds one definitely. Along the same lines as the artist-director Matthew Barney, for his use of organic material or of the shaman Joseph Beuys for the energy deployed, Altmejd owes his work to minimalist space. Human or animal nature, created with wax or just presented through taxidermies of squirrel or birds, transformed into mirrors or suggested by hairs, is inhabited by fantastic strength. This is where the artist seeks his inspiration, which is according to him "much too underrated."

Your next exhibition in the center of the Alpes, in Grenoble, will look different from environments you use to present. I notice especially an evolution concerning your monstrous figures, evolving from werewolf, to human giant and now to a more skeleton-like form. This exhibition deals with six giants that I already exhibited in Denver, Colorado. The idea is to rebuild a kind of maze that holds them together and is also linked to the architecture, covered by mirrors. I do not find them skeleton-like, even though they mirror consistency makes them look this way. I worked during several years on this werewolf figure. Including it into this architectural structure made me consider this question about the giant which presented the same issue of the body confronted to architecture. But the mirror is used as an organic effect: for instance, one of the giants has his intestines falling to the ground; others have their organs covered by mirrors. At that moment, the use of the mirror made want to shatter it, in order to create the effects of the organs' vulnerability.

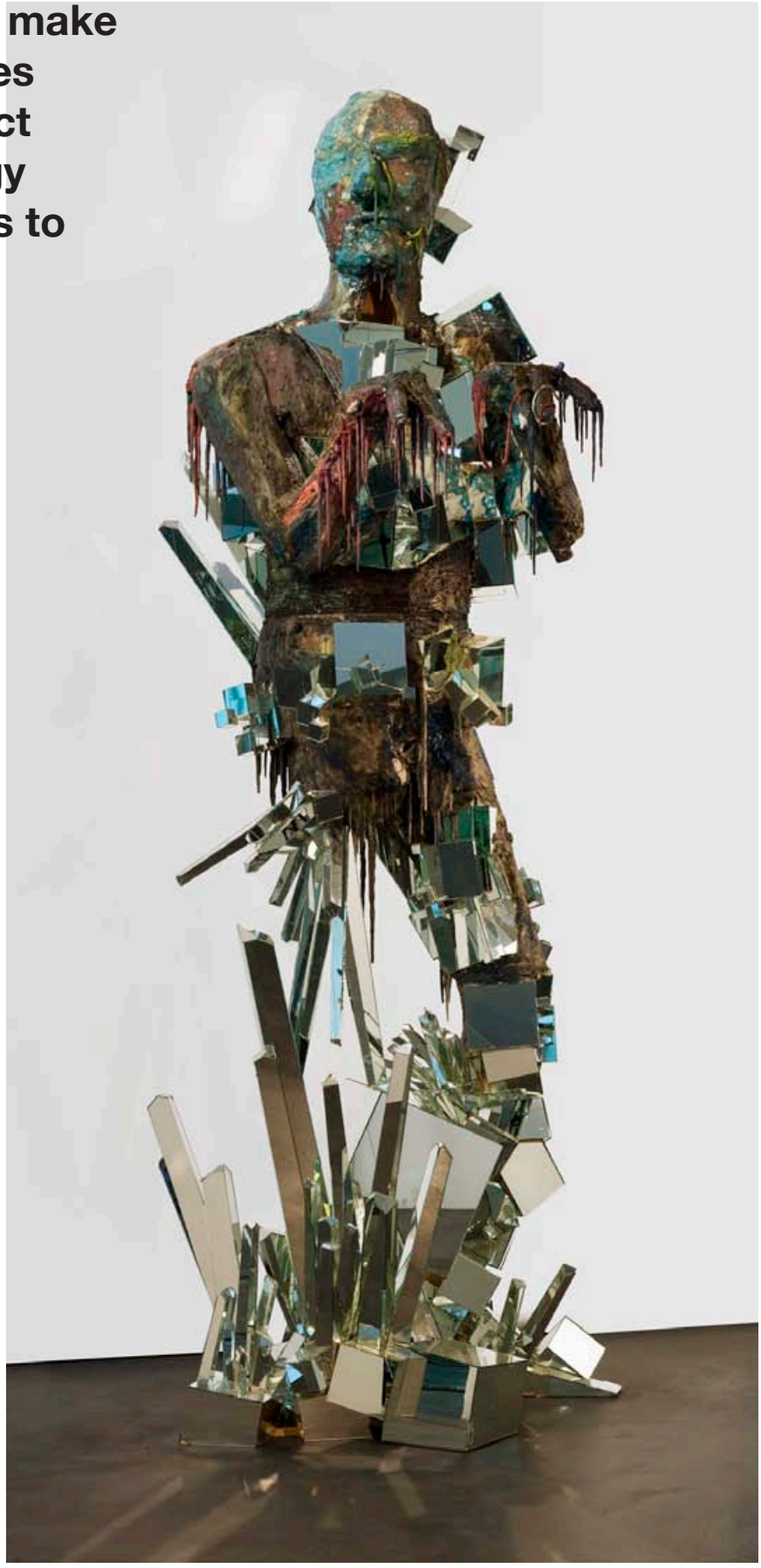
The giants have a more cubical structure this time and some have inscriptions on them... Indeed, language is integrated as a poetic energy, in reference to the body, to nature and to organism. The Jewish cross on one of the giant is like a signature, but it has no political reason and is really more intuitive.

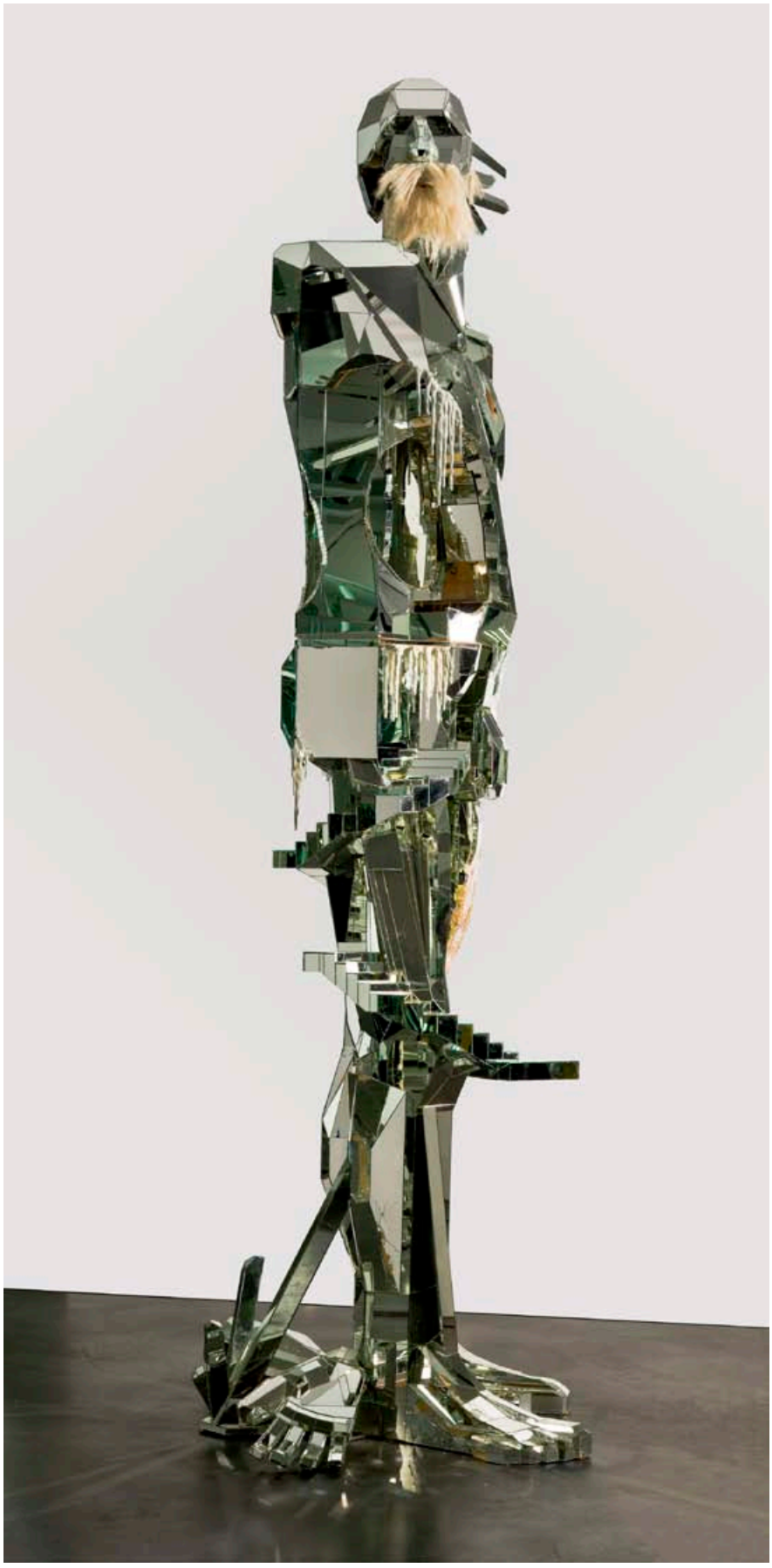
It seems as though we are moving away from hybrids which were half human, half animal, towards statues which are more made of monolith and completely transparent. I have this impression that before, we were going into organic structures and that now, we have to climb them? That is what I like about giants, this impossibility to be identified to our own body, because they are too tall. But the mirrored objects give an impression of more transparency, which creates a kind of contradiction between heavy and imposing dimensions, and the ghostly side of the mirror. I always try to find ways to make my sculptures alive, to inject poetic energy in references to nature. The use of crystals for instance suggests growth and transformation, whereas gold chains give birth to certain energy. I like the idea that if the viewer would come in two days, the sculpture would be totally different. This effect is the same with the mirrors, where the transformations are never-ending.

A few figures are closer to robots and seem inspired by science fiction movies from which you extract a lot of your imagery. Movies are very seductive elements which offer a real framework. I think fantastical films give me more freedom than realism in general.

To have seen your work in Venice for the Canadian Pavilion, viewers played an important role. How do you use objects inside your environment to integrate the viewer? I enjoy the power of objects, but I think their relation to the viewer is very limited. I try to give new insights to experiences like fantastical films do. For instance, my first use of the werewolf needed a view of different parts of the body. If one object was lying on shelves or in a box, in

“I always try to find ways to make my sculptures alive, to inject poetic energy in references to nature.”





a corner, hidden or for all to see, the perception was completely different. That is why I create boxes full of mirrors, to create a periscope and to notice what we are not willing to see.

I was thinking about Canadian movie maker David Cronenberg, who gives a view on biological evolution, without falling into robotic images that science fiction often suggests. Some of your giants see to move away from this biological vision and are more into a robotic perception... The robotic effect is not on purpose, even though mirrors give this metallic impression. A few critics asked me the relation I perceive between the body and technology, but this is not something of interest for me. It may be for Cronenberg. I personally prefer the power of strangeness, which is totally underrated, when it is as significant as humor or horror. However I like the feelings that Cronenberg transmits to his viewer, faced with strangeness.

What about his metaphor of sexuality, especially in his movie Existenz? The idea of his "game part" being linked to something umbilical which and that goes through a hole close to the anus totally fascinates me.

Some of your giants wear costumes, leather **sadomasochistic-like exhibited during Basel Fair 2006 or more classical business suits in Venice. Is the subject of identity evocated through these works?** What interests me is the vulnerable side of Man. The werewolf is the incarnation of this. I like to make him vulnerable by laying him on a decaying base, in a delicate position with feminine ways. A businessman would have been sexier, but the effect is different when having an animal head.

Does your gay sexuality inform us on your work? It is certainly relevant but I am no aware of it. My feeling of being different certainly pushed me to be an artist, to be transformed into something positive. But formally speaking, it is less obvious like the reference to leather suit. Also, mirrors are not related to a form of narcissism but more to a wish to reveal hidden objects. As time went y, the mirror took a more glamorous dimension, but this was not intentional. I love the way Jorge Luis Borges way of saying: "Mirrors and copulation are identical, because the multiple human being." I find this sentence so horrific!

A generation of artists has been called "modern gothic", like Bank Violette or Sue De Beer among others. Do you feel close to them? Classifications are easily made. Human beings love doing these sorts of things. I do not feel close to Bank Violette's work, even though I like his work and know him rather well. Many artists were interested by "modern gothic" a few years ago in New York. I see myself closer to fairy tales!

Finally, can the degeneration and regeneration of human body be considered as pessimistic or optimistic way of thinking human evolution? I simply think that life is more obvious when it co-exists with something it contrasts with, especially with grotesque elementswhich have been added. I am deeply optimistic when the giant disintegrates, because it allows a plant to grow or an animal to hide its food. As is fragmented bodies offer a shell which can be inhabited by living things. I am sure that in a million years, there will be no trace of human bodies, but the energy and memories will remain.

THE ANTHROPOLOGIST

"I love the idea of a structure that develops in a complex way. It becomes like a living organism with its own intelligence and even its own sexuality."

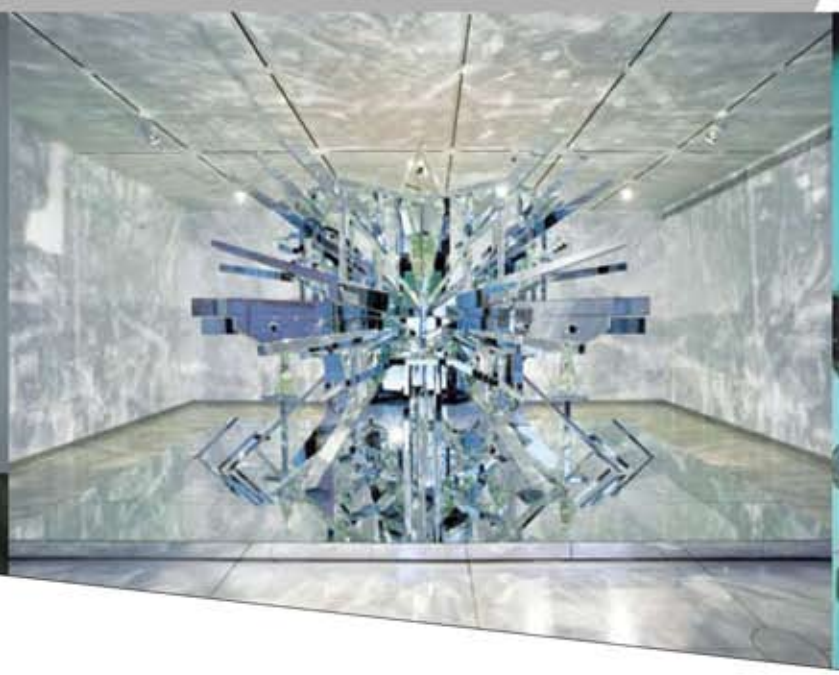
David Altmejd's sculptures and installations are embedded with otherworldly fantasy narratives, what he refers to as "symbolic potential." Included in the 2004 Whitney Biennial and representing Canada at the 2007 Venice Biennale, Altmejd's pieces incorporate fragments of the human form in which small universes lodge themselves like secrets. Altmejd says, "When I work, the body is like a universe where I can lose myself. It is a metaphor for the landscape, nature and the mountains."

Dense, macabre formations composed of werewolf heads, stained underwear, plastic flowers, digital watches and crystalline mirrors emerge from piles of fur and from crevices in the human form. "I make sculptures of architectural structures and bodies of giants because they contain enough space to allow little worlds to form inside."

Represented by Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York and Stuart Shave/Modern Art in London, Altmejd has a show at the Centre National d'art Contemporain de Grenoble until late April and is working on a project in a prehistoric cave near Toulouse, France, set to open in May.

"I love the idea of a structure that develops in a complex way," Altmejd says about how the illogical and the organized coalesce in his micro-worlds, reminiscent of Archigram's conceptual cities that extended the parameters of the possible. "It becomes like a living organism, with its own intelligence and even its own sexuality." II

DAVID ALTMEJD



PHOTOS: ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY, NY (BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT) ELLEN PAGE WILSON; TOM POWEL; THIBAULT JEANSON

DYSTOPIAN VISIONS: The artist David Altmejd; (Bottom, left to right) "YOU" (2008) is an amalgamation of materials such as burlap and plaster; Constructed of shattered mirrors and wood, "The Eye" (2008) is more than 10 feet in height; The grotesque and elaborate mingle in "Delicate Men in Positions of Power" (2003)


DAZED & CONFUSED
DAVID ALTMEJD
SCULPTURE, SEX
AND WEREWOLVES
STEVE MCQUEEN
ON THE YEAR'S MOST
FEARLESS FILM
FASHION MEETS ART
MAISON MARTIN MARGIELA
BY TERENCE KOH,
GILLIAN WEARING,
AGATHE SNOW,
AND MORE
DEVIL INSIDE
GRACE JONES &
CHRIS CUNNINGHAM
WELCOME YOU TO AN ISSUE OF ART WITHOUT LIMITS
PLUS
ED TEMPLETON
GANG GANG DANCE
FRIEZE'S NEVILLE WAKEFIELD
AND A UNIQUE CURATED ART
PROJECT BY KATHY GRAYSON,
PAUL PIERONI AND MORE
VOL 2 ISSUE #67 NOVEMBER 2008

BEAUTY IN THE BEAST

MYTHOLOGY MEETS TAXIDERMY IN THE AWE INSPIRING WORK OF DAVID ALTMEJD ART'S YOUNG ALCHEMIST TALKS TO FRANCESCA GAVIN ABOUT MONSTERS, METAMORPHOSIS AND MEANING

PHOTOGRAPHY TODD SELBY

Visitors to the Canadian pavilion at last year's Venice Art Biennale were confronted with a startling display. Entering through a hall of mirrors, they were met with reclining giants, whose faces were semi-obscured by plants, and taxidennied animals that seemed to disintegrate into the world around them. Exposed bones could be seen through the gaps in their decaying, hairy limbs, whiJe shards of crystal and glass refracted their reflections, distorting all sense of perception and scale. Weeds and flowers thrust out from surrounding comers. In one space, a large tuft of fur revealed an almost-human face in turmoil. In another alcove, a man in a suit stared impassively into the distance with a plastic chicken face. Irs safe to say that stumbling upon Davld Altmejd's artwork for the first time is a very disorientating experience.

Attmejd is a young artist currentty gathering serious momentum. When he exhibited at the 2007 Biennale, he had no problem competing with neighbouring art giants such as Tracey Emin, Sophie Calle and Iza Genzken - and for many, his contribution surpassed them all. His work is raw, weird and awesome, like scenes from ancient mythology filtered through An American Werewolf in London.

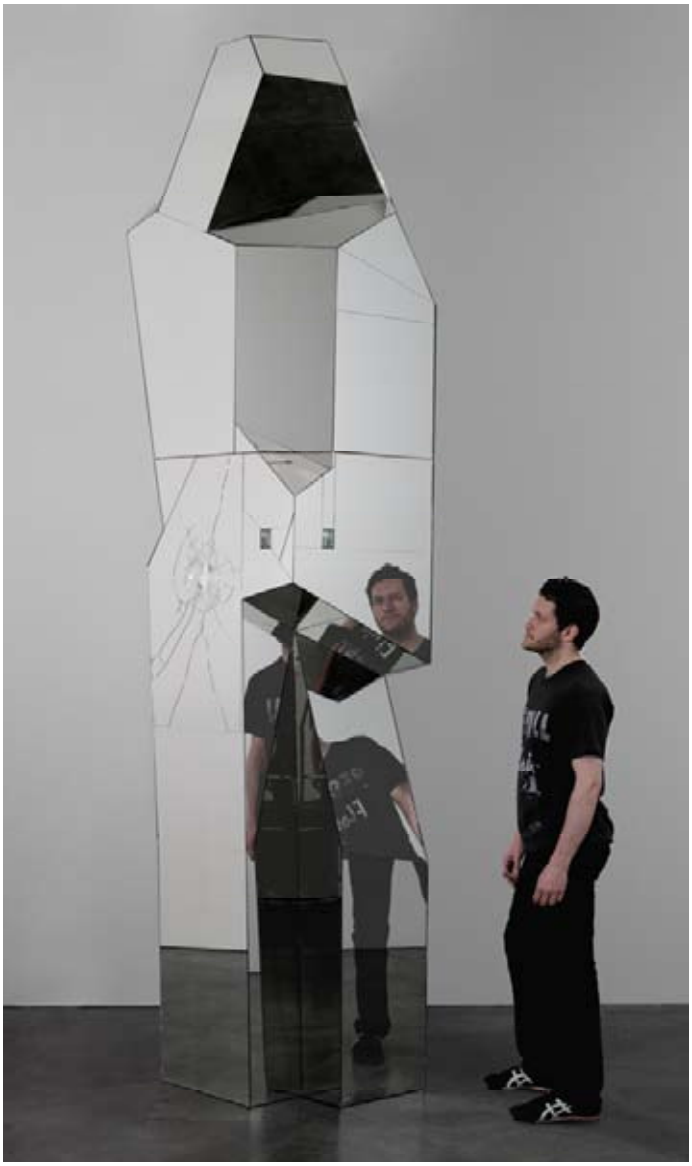
Altmejd was born in Montreal, Canada, and studied undergraduate art before moving to New York for a Master of Fine Arts at Columbia - and it was here that he recieved studio visits from the likes of Vanessa Beecroft, and gained the approval of Matthew Barney. He graduated in 2001 and, just three years later, was one of the stars of the 2004 Whitney Biennial, for which he created a number of mixed-media monsters in glass vitrines placed in the middle of Central Park. He covered two werewolf heads in beads, glitter and crystals, the gritty fur contrasting uncomfortably with the pearly glean. But it was last year's installation at the Venice Biennale that really took Altmejd to the next level, even incorporating the kooky 19705 architecture of the building itself into his vast installation of giants, mirrors, monsters and crystals.

"I USE A LOT OF STRATEGIES THAT ARE INSPIRED BY BIOLOGY -I'M TRYING TO BUILD THE PIECE SO THAT IT FEELS LIKE IT'S ALIVE..."

"THE AMAZING THING ABOUT SCULPTURE IS THAT IT EXISTS IN THE SAME SPACE AS YOU...IT BREATHES THE SAME AIR

The artisfs work sits somewhere between installation and sculpture, and the enormous amount of work that goes into its creation is evident. For Altmejd, the only medium he ever really considered was sculpture. "I think it started when I saw Louise Bourgeois's work for the first time," he explains. "It was the first time I saw work that felt completely alive. I realised what was really amazing about sculpture. That you cannot find in painting or photography, is that it exists in the same space as you. It breathes the same air. It potentially has the same presence as a person."

The materials that Altmejd uses always surprise - his work is filled with taxidermy, plants, glitter, crystals, glass beads, shards of mirroo, plaster, paint and small tights. "It's as if I never get rid of anything, to he says. "My relationship with material is the most important thing in my art... sometimes I really fee/that ifs all about the material, that everything else is a pretext. But perhaps that's extreme." Some of these materials could seem banal and childish in their "normal" state, but by employing them in such a surprising context. Altmejd breathes new life into them. His focus is on contrasts - hair against mirror. or flesh against crystal. It brings to



mind Matthew Bamey or Joseph Beuys's fascinatfon with the visual tension between dlfferent materials and textures.
By now, Altmejd has created a unique visual vocabulary. His is a world of hybrids, of half · human charade's that haunt someinvisible landscape. "I think I start with the human body and add other things to it because it gives me more possibillbes sculpturally, he explains excitedly. "Maybe for formal reasons, maybe symbolic. But it's important for me that It's related to the human body because the viewer is then able to identify with it. If it was a totally different organism, a big blob, say, then the viewer would not relate to it in any way. I like the idea of adding a half-man, half-wolf or half-bird, because it gives me options. I feel like I'm more free."

In his most recent work, that freedom to play with the body is seen in the figures made from plaster casts of the artist's hands. "I was very interested in the ambiguity - is the hand holding the body, or is it shaping the body?" he asks. "If a thigh is made of hands, It looks like the hands that are holding it are actually forming it at the same time."

Altmejd's maze · like installations and fragmented bodles explore that unsettling sensation of seeing something that appears human but is somehow not human -it is a feeling that is both magnetic and repulsive at the same time. "I don't do it in a conscious way," he says, "but I've always been extremely excited by the notion of the 'uncanny'. I think the fact that you have a reaction when you're in front of something, and have that feeling that is so weird, means a lot. Just as much as being seduced by something."

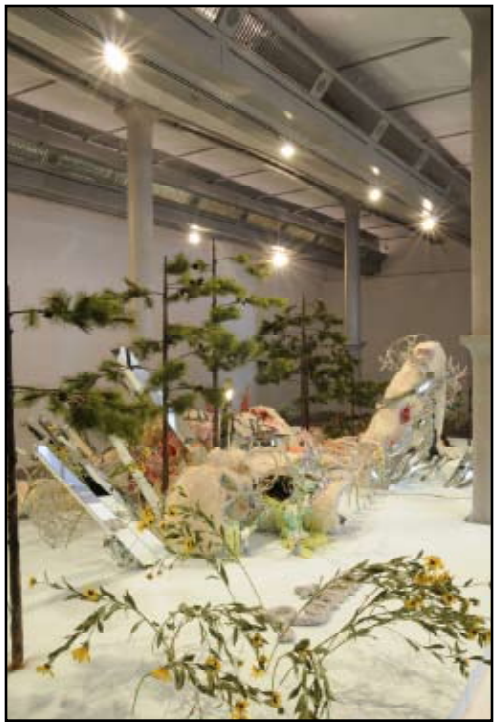
It's tempting as a viewer to try to read narative into Altmejd's work, but he strongly resists specifics. Instead, he claims to open doors to potential meanings. "I was trying to think what were the strangest things I've ever seen," he says of the installation. "I think it was the first time I saw that stupid video of the autopsy of an alien. In my mind, culturally the alien was always supposed to represent something specific - it was a symbol of the 'other'. It wasn't about its organs, It wasn't supposed to be opened up. So, that feeling of seeing the inside of something that you're not supposed to see was really interesting to me."

London/Liverpool

Biology, nature and evolution turned on their head

On the eve of two exhibitions in England, the Canadian artist David Altmejd discusses his fantastical creations

ARTIST
INTERVIEW
LOUISA BUCK



Montreal born, New York-based David Altmejd's opulent, and highly disquieting sculpture has been attracting attention since the 2004 Whitney Biennial with his display of two bejewelled werewolf heads, installed in Perspex boxes in Central Park. But it was Altmejd's labyrinthine installation in the Canadian Pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale with its kaleidoscopic fantasy of taxidermied beasts and a colossal fragmented figure of a crouching giant, all reflected and refracted in a maze of mirrors, that confirmed his international status. This month the UK is embracing Altmejd's bizarre vision with two shows of his most recent work, one at Tate Liverpool as part of the Liverpool Biennial and the other in London at Stuart ShavelModern Art. ***The Arl Newspaper: Your two huge giants (The Holes) fill the ground floor of Tate Liverpool. You've also shown a particular fondness for making werewolves. What draws you to these fairytale subjects?***

David Altmejd: I always try to choose the most potentially symbolically interesting reference, but it's very intuitive. I didn't have any specific reasons to choose the werewolf, it just felt much more interesting than the human body or any other creature. It had more symbolic potential, it could open doors and start conversations.

TAN: Your earlier werewolf heads were enclosed within mirrored boxes which both concealed and revealed them.

DA: I see the combination of display structure and the object that was displayed on it and in it, as a sort of organism. It was as if the werewolf heads were energy-generating objects, a bit like organs in a body, and these were hidden inside a bigger structure which acts like connecting elements in a nervous system. I liked the idea that the display could transform itself into a body.

TAN: But with your giants it seems to be completely the opposite, it's their bodies that have become the means of display, with all their shelves, nooks and niches.

DA: Yes, it's just the reverse. When I got the idea it gave me a totally new perspective to my work. The giants in Liverpool are lying on platforms and the bodies are almost unidentifiable as they are transforming into trees, wire structures and crystal structures and plaster hands. So the bodies themselves end up creating a mini-environment.

TAN: What are you showing at Stuart ShaveIModern Art?

DA: Instead of giants I have decided to show lifesize figures. The giants were so big and architectural that they gave me the chance to lose myself inside of them; I could work on a little part of the thigh and forget that it was a body. But this time 1 thought it would be interesting to work on bodies that you could actually identify with, which would let me relate to them in a more intimate way. You can more easily imagine inhabiting a giant than you can imagine being it .

TAN: What kind of figures are they?

DA: I've brought back the werewolf which has been breaking up within my work. In Venice it was still there but it had almost totally disintegrated: the birds were actually using it as food, now it's presented as a body which contains everything.

TAN: How will they look?

DA: Very hairy! They have holes and crystals that seem to be growing inside and wire structures are coming out and transforming themselves; the body is sort of morphing in a certain way.

TAN: In your work it is often unclear whether the structures are growing or decaying.

DA: I would say the decay becomes a sort of positive thing because it's also a form of regeneration. I've been told that my work is really morbid but it's not so much about death as life.

TAN: And also about exploring the boundaries between seduction and repulsion?

DA: I'm really interested in beauty, and to really experience beauty it has to be contrasted with something that is in opposition to it.

TAN: Your use of mirrors helps to highlight this tension between culture and nature.

DA: In the beginning I used mirrors because I was interested in displaying an object in such a way that the viewer wouldn't be able to see it directly. But what I didn't expect was that the periscope could also have a sort of kaleidoscope effect.

TAN: It also makes it difficult to see where reflection ends and reality begins.

DA: I really like the idea that the work is infinitely complex, that you always notice something that you didn't the first time you saw it, that it feels like it's growing and transforming as you walk around.

TAN: I read somewhere that you felt your sculptures should be approached with a mindset akin to watching a film.

DA: Or even like walking in nature and being able to see the landscape as a whole and then zooming in on a mushroom and being fascinated by the fact that things are infinitely complex. 1 started studying biology when I went to college and I've always been fascinated by it. I guess I tried to find a way in art to recreate the same fascination I have for biology, nature and evolution.

TAN: Then there's also the sense of high-end retail conjured up by the sparkly mirrored elements that often resemble display units.

DA: Yes I am also seduced by very specific things: the glittery stuff, the mirrors and the display and even fashion, just a little bit.

TAN: Is the installation of your work part of the creative process?

DA: Absolutely! I never finish a piece in the studio because the studio is messy. I love having the work unfinished in this clean gallery space and having a few days to work on a few details, it's almost a luxury to be able to do this.•

I am a tall man. But walking around Chelsea this past May, I sometimes felt practically Lilliputian. In gallery after gallery, giant-sized works of art dwarfed viewers, forcing us to re-define our relationship with the surrounding physical space and, at times, to undertake conceptual shifts. The resulting experiences ranged from the playful to the abject. At Gagosian, for example, Robert Therrien's installation, an enormous card table and folding chairs , instantly transported me to my childhood, bringing back memor ies of mornings when I would awaken early to inspect the remains of my parents' parties from the night before: the rearranged space, leftover junk food, and strange smells were all appealing mysteries to me. Meanwhile, over at PaceWildenstein, Zhang Huan's fifteen-foot-high Giant No.3, 2008, was equally wondrous, though the cowhide colossus of a pregnant woman and child evoked raw physicality and visceral discomfort rather than specific memories. Then, at Andrea Rosen Gallery, David Altmejd 's sculptural installation asserted itself as the most comp elling of these Brobdingnagian projects [May 3-June 14, 2008].

Here, a grouping of twelve-foot-tall giants fills the space. Each stands on its own pedestal, which limits its interaction with its neighbors, but also allows us to engage with each on its own terms. For the most part, Altmejd's giants are of two sorts: abstracted humanoid constructions with a cold and somewhat cubist sensibility, and variously representational sculptures whose flesh strategically gives way here and there to reveal other structures, types of material, or body parts , conveying an otherworldly naturalism. The show includes four baroque behemoths of this supernatural type-in various states of wholeness and hairiness. The -Spiderman , 2008, is most arresting. Standing erect with eyes shut and arms to his sides, the hirsute leviathan's body is covered in lesions. Intricate webbing emerges from these fissures to form dancing abstractions before his body, suggesting that we are witnessing a healing of sorts.

Although most critics have described these sculptures as golems, Wookies, or wolfmen, I can only think of them as variations on Bigfoot. As I stood in front of these creatures, it slowly dawned on m-e that the thrill of their presence had less to do with the quality of their construction-beautifully, even seductively clunkythan with my own childhood fascination with the North American yeti. The longer I stood eye-to-penis with Altmejd's constructions, the more I was able to remember about my youthful obsession. Still, it took me several weeks to grasp that much of my delight also stemmed from my favorite episodes of The Six Million Dollar Man and The Bionic Woman when the television heroes teamed up with Bigfoot, who was revealed to be an advanced alien robot. The combination of advanced technology and ancient myth excited me then, just as the juxtaposition of abstract metallic forms with decaying natural flesh enthralled me when I was standing there, amidst the giants, in the gallery. For Altmejd , as for other artists showing in Chelsea in May, monumental scale is a way to reintroduce wonder into our lives. For many of us, that means revisiting aspects of our childhood only to realize that things are not so very different now.

- Sam Watson

NEW YORK

June 1, 2008

Statuary Story

David Altmejd's otherworldly figures create narrative just by standing still.

By Jerry Saltz

A view of David Altmejd's installation at Andrea Rosen Gallery. *(Photo: Tom Powel/Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery)*

Standing in David Altmejd's gothic-surreal show is like being in a forest of freakish giants from the dawn of time. Nine twelve-foot-tall colossi tower above you like oversize werewolves, rotting Wookiees, or sculptures of pharaohs from some sci-fi porn planet. It's an Oedipal grove of powerful deteriorating fathers and beautiful but monstrous sons. These creatures have mirrored derrières, plump penises decorated as if by a jeweler, gashes in colorful torsos, dozens of hands holding giant testicles or crystalline daggers. One figure has a peacock encircling each thigh; two have twisting energy fields or stigmata sprouting from hands and heads.

Altmejd's exhibition is a combination sideshow, intergalactic cyborg showroom, and kitsch emporium. It's simultaneously hideous and beautiful—and transitional. He's gone from integrating hairy decapitated wolfmanish figures into room-filling architectural-sculptural installations, complete with sprawling bases that were themselves surreal landscapes, to the figures alone.

The good part of this transition is that Altmejd is letting fly his ideas about growth, decay, polymorphous sexuality, handmade sculpture, autobiography, and scale. His use of craft, abstraction, and strange archaic materials like horsehair and mirrors connects him to excellent emerging artists like Sterling Ruby, Huma Bhabha, and Jessica Jackson Hutchins (who has a knockout exhibition at Derek Eller Gallery), as well as to the scratchy figures of Kiki Smith and Louise Bourgeois. None of these artists, including Altmejd, has a signature style; all are intentionally all over the place; when they fail they fail in garish ways.

Some of Altmejd's sculptures look like cheesy displays from Planet Hollywood. Yet his work is so scrupulously handmade that you sense him discovering it as he goes along. Materials and processes seem to assert themselves. He's the opposite of Takashi Murakami and Damien Hirst, artists who also create oversize figurative sculpture but who draw plans up, then job them out.

The bad news about Altmejd's transition is that removing the figures from their fragmented environments, which overwhelmed the eye and seduced the mind, limits them. On their own now, they appear somewhat forlorn. That's a significant problem, but it doesn't mean there's not a lot going on here. Altmejd, 33, who lives in New York and who represented his native Canada at the 2007 Venice Biennale, has said that he thinks of the body as "a little world" or "a total universe," and that he wants his sculptures to strike one as "being alive and being able to develop ... intelligence and generate meaning." This echoes Walt Whitman's "I contain multitudes" mania about the body and self. Altmejd is like some Dr. Frankenstein (whom he has called "the ultimate sculptor") making beautiful monstrosities come to strange life. He claims "things look more alive when they're growing on top of what's dead." As Hannah Arendt put it, "the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization."

Here, decay turns into form that decays again. It's possible to read the exhibition as a kind of Genesis narrative, going from pure energy to prehuman form to post-human being. The story begins with The Cave, a tall mirrored spike that looks like a bolt of energy from heaven, and progresses through figures that variously evoke Michelangelo's Slaves, golem-shaped lymphatic systems or skeletons, and a blond creature in a state of dreaming or becoming. That last one turns into The Spiderman, the most typically human piece here—except that things shoot out of his forehead and chest. The Shepherd is overgrown with hair and holds his arm over his face; crystals grow from his feet and chest; a fantastic mirrored stairway coils around his body. This piece suggests that the best way through this transition is for Altmejd to merge the architectural and the figurative. Finally, in The Guide, the figure is all mirrored again, as if it were returning to the cosmos from which the original bolt came.

There's another narrative going on in that progression as well. Altmejd has recapitulated the history of freestanding figurative sculpture, going from Neolithic monolith to standing Egyptian gods to archaic Greek sculptures to Michelangelo's David to fragmented modernism. At a time when many artists are simply recombining Warhol and looking for clever ways to make cool art about commodification, it's enriching to see Altmejd make art not just out of the art world but out of himself.

ARTFORUM.com
May 29, 2008

PICKS

New York

David Altmejd

ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY
525 West 24th Street
May 3–June 14

Reportedly, American men are on average three inches taller and fifty pounds heavier today than they were one hundred years ago. In roughly the same amount of time, the average Dutchman has grown seven inches. Our anthropometric history might not have been on David Altmejd's mind when he assembled the nine splendid colossi that make up his second exhibition at this gallery (he was probably thinking Goya and Rodin), but standing amid his forest of giants, one can't help but imagine them as heirs to our strengths and follies, strange emissaries from a future race raised on steroids.

Altmejd's 2004 debut at the gallery was a dark, lubricious labyrinth filled with decapitated werewolves and allusions to Robert Morris and Sol LeWitt; while many of the themes (vulnerable, fractured figuration) and materials (broken mirrors, twine, sundry bibelots) are present in his current exhibition, he now works vertically rather than laterally, making statues using the same surreal architectural habits that informed his prior, installation-like work. The variation between each piece is astounding. From the look of it, Altmejd works heuristically, deciding on the shape and form of each being intuitively as he builds. (A rejoinder, perhaps, to the polished, overspecified, and overproduced statements of other contemporary sculptors.) As if to hammer home the point, the artist's hand is evident everywhere. Literally. Plaster casts of hands peek out from anuses (The Spiderman [all works 2008]), grasp throats and fondle testicles (The Center), or cluster along the entire surface like some sort of florid, Freddy Krueger nightmare (YOU). Sometimes his beings don't resemble beings at all, as in The Cave, an awesome, mirrored obelisk, or another boxy, reflective figure, The Quail. ("The Balzac piece," as a friend put it.) Then, to throw you off again, there's Love, a hollow, spindly, barely there bit of agita. Circling the sculptures, the viewer is repeatedly frustrated by the impossibility of a full view. One imagines secrets in every piece; they resist, and thus incite, scopophilia.

-David Velasco

YOU, 2008, plaster, wood, foam, paint, burlap, mirror, and glue, 13' 7" x 5' 1" x 4'. Photo: Ellen Page Wilson.

Time Out New York
MAY 29 - JUNE 4, 2008 ISSUE 661

David Altmejd

★★★★½

Andrea Rosen Gallery, through June 14, (see Chelsea)

David Altmejd's Brobdingnagian figurative work has been developing for a while now, having enjoyed star turns at the Canadian pavilion of the Venice Biennale and at the inaugural exhibition of Denver's new Museum of Contemporary Art. The titans in his current solo show demonstrate a new level of sophistication, indicating that bigger is indeed sometimes better. Once again, Altrnejd relies on mirrored forms, cavernous vistas, crystalline embellishments and a pastel palette, but his latest colossal brood evinces a newer, equally compulsive interest in hands.

There remains the same sense of the fantastical: Wings sprout from one figure's anus; a couple of other sculptures are covered by mirrors that give them a shattered Cubistic presence. Melding macroscopic proportions with microscopic detail, Altmejd sparks the imagination by thwarting conventional perspective. The artist's preoccupations remain rooted in the work's material construction. However, the kaleidoscopic effect once limited to individual structures has been opened up: Light and shadow now play over the walls and floor, creating a web between the figures. Altmejd's shift in scale parallels this emphasis on spatial dynamics. Whether the artist's visionary spectacle is meant to suggest some kind of social trauma is debatable. These objects distinguish themselves from other Goliathslike Damien Hirst's bronze, dsytopian Virgin Mother-because, while comparable in scale, they project a more benign sense of resilience against the potential of death and destruction. Walking among these gentle giants, it's difficult not to get lost in their hope for new possibilities.-*Ingrid Chu*

YOU

Beyond Tomorrow

DAVID ALTMEJD

With his installations of severed werewolf heads, taxidermied animals and decaying giants, sculptor David Altmejd certainly seems obsessed with the macabre. "A lot of people think that I'm really fascinated by death and morbidity, but I'm much more interested in life. I just think that things look more alive when they're growing on top of what's dead," he says, bending his fingers to mimic blades of growing grass.

Polishing off a Diet Coke and grilled cheese sandwich in a bustling diner in New York's Long Island City, the Montreal native is taking a break from his studio, where he's been working on a monumental installation for the inaugural exhibition of the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver's new building. Altmejd's work, along with that of his fellow Columbia M.F.A. graduates Sue de Beer and Banks Violette, is often grouped under the moniker "neo-gothic." But while decomposing flesh is a recurring motif in his fantastical, many-layered pieces, so is the idea of growth and regeneration. The 33-year-old was among the most talked-about artists at this year's Venice Biennale, where he presented a phantasmagoric aviary of mutant birds (*The Index*, 2007) and the rotting body of an enormous creature (*The Giant 2*) 2007) in the Canadian pavilion.

"I think about decay not in a negative way, but in the sense of creating a space for things to start growing," he explains. The furry, time-eravaged corpse of his giant, for instance, is full of holes and caverns inhabited by birds and squirrels. (Altmejd used tax dermied creatures he purchased on Ebay.) Meanwhile, crystals, plants and sparkling beads seem to be sprouting from the giant's flesh, which is also punctured with shards of mirrored glass. The end result is something undoubtedly horrific but

Below: David Altmejd in his studio with a work in progress for his Denver exhibition

" I think about decay not in a negative way, but in the sense of creating a space for things to start growing"

Matthew Ritchie calls his work "a series of gorgeous physical andmental ruptures in conventional reality."

Above, from top: Views of The Index, 2007, and The Giant 2, 2007, which both showed at the Venice Biennale.

also strangely glamorous. "I try to make it seductive," says Altmejd, who has arresting blue eyes, a slightly scruffybeard and a habit of accompanying his Quebecois-accented Englis with hand gestures.

Since 2002, when painter Matthew Ritchie included the artist in an attention-getting group show he curated at Artists Space, Altmejd's sculptures have proved seductive to major institutions and collectors. The Guggenheim Museum owns an Altmejd, as do collector Dakis Joannou, the Hessel Museum of Art and the Vanhaerents Art Collection in Brussels. "Although a few comparisons were made between our work at the time, David's sculpture has always been a unique and uncanny vision," says Ritchie, "a series of gorgeous physical and mental ruptures in conventional reality."

The Guggenheim's chief curator, Nancy Spector, compares the rising talent to one of the contemporary art world's reigning stars. "David has a really unique aesthetic vocabulary, combining the horrific with the sublime," she says. "Though his work is quite different from Matthew Barney's, both artists share a regenerative vision, one that finds expression in grotesque beauty." Spector spearheaded the museum's acquisition of *The University 2* (2004), a sculpture that resembles an architectural model of a modernist house, albeit one with decomposing werewolf-heads tucked away inside. "He's a very optimistic artist. It is very poetic and very intelligent."
For years werewolves were a particular obsession of Altmejd's. "It is really powerful to see a human body part on a table, but by now it's become commonplace," he explains, mentioning the work of Kiki Smith and Louise Bourgoise as the most obvious examples. "I thought using a monster would be just as powerful, but weird instead of familiar. I chose the werewolf kind of intuitively but also because there's a kind of symbolic potential there. You think about double identity and transformation."

Altmejd's fascination with monsters dates back to his youth. "It's almost too obvious when you look at my work, but there was this Jim Henson movie called The Dark Crystal that was like, 'Wow!' for me," he admits, with a touch of good-humored embarrassment. "I loved all that fantasy stuff, like The Neverending Story and Return From Witch Mountain.

" On trips outside the city (his mom is an administrator at Universite du Quebec a Montreal; his dad is an importer-exporter in the fish and steel industries), he would spend hours in the forest foraging for mushrooms and collecting precious-looking rocks. "I would build boxes for the rocks and sort of fetishize them," he recalls. "Like I was finding little treasures."
When he entered Universite du Quebec a Montreal, he originally thought he would be a biologist; after a year he switched to art. "I've always been interested in science and evolution," he says. "I still am."

Back in his studio, in an industrial building overlooking the elevated 7 train, Altmejd's team of five assistants is busy sawing wood and cutting hundreds of pieces of mirror to the strains of classical music. Working with so many assistants is new for Altmejd; he had to hire extra help in order to produce the Denver project in time. The site-specific installation, which will be on view starting October 28, centers on his new favorite fantastical creature, the giant. This time he is building a veritable army of mirror-encrusted colossi between 12 and 15 feet high, their bodies in various stages of decay. Altmejd points out the labyrinthine staircases built into the giants' body parts-one running down a thigh, another around a torso.

"For years I was making those sort of presentation structures, and using those spaces to hide weird objects inside," he says, referring to pieces like The University 2. "Now I'm really into the reverse, the idea of the giant transforming into architecture. I hate to get into specifics of symbolic meaning, but I think the giant can be seen as a metaphor for nature or the environment. And it's interesting for me to see that body as a little world, a total universe inside ofwhich I can lose myself for days."

Cydney Payton, the director of MCA Denver and curator of the opening exhibition, says that Altmejd's ideas mesh perfectly with her vision for the institution, which she describes as "a living, breathing physical environment, like a human body." (In fact, the show is titled "Star Power: Museum as BodyElectric.") And any shock or horror a viewer might experience at first glance is exactly what Altmejd is going for. "For me, in order to find something really beautiful, it has to be in this kind of context of contrasts," says the artist. "I think that a beautiful earring is more beautiful on the ear of a monster."

-CATHERINE HONG

MOUSSE

UNKNOWN PLEASURE

Alessio Ascaari

I wonder if you enjoyed losing and finding yourself inside the Garden of Pleasures of the Canadian Pavilion at the last Venice Biennale. For those of you who didn't get to see it, let's briefly recapitulate. Hundreds of small and wall sized mirrors breaking the space to pieces like a cubist painting. Everywhere plants and branches, both artificial and real. Stuffed birds and mushrooms in the form of dildos. Weird anthropomorphic creatures, with cock heads and testicle-like wattles. And much more. It looked-like Bosch having a cup of tea with Matthew Barney inside a 16th century 'Wunderkammer'. But it was an installation by David Altmejd (b. 1974), a young Canadian artist living in London and New York.

In February 2000, in the pages of the New York magazine The Village Voice, appeared an article by Jerry Saltz titled "Modern Gothic." What encouraged the pen of the famous critic was the group show Scream: 10 Artists X10 Writers X10 Scary Movies', which at that time was being held at the Anton Kern Gallery in New York. "Call it Modern Gothic" was the opening of the article, were sentence after sentence emerged the features of what would have turned out to be not a movement but rafher apervasive and lasting trend. The tendency was inscribed in the particular atmosphere, pervaded with paranoia and disorientation, of the posH/ll. Fear, the absurd; and their grim celebration started to take possession of galleries and museums in a way that had been missing for a long time. Art, just like a teenager, seemed to go through an introverted dark phase. A new aesthetics was making its way, and it was gloomy, odd, and ominously chic.

Saltz's article was accompanied by a picture. It was adetail of The Sculptor's Oldest Son (2004), a cryptic and disturbing installation composed of an irregular geometrical structure supplied with jewels, artificial birds, and monstrous werewolf limbs. The artist who created it was David Altmejd, a 1974-born Canadian artist, who only a few months earlier had made a big buzz inNew York on the occasion of his first solo show at Andrea Rosen Gallery. Shortly- after, the young Montrealian-born artist living between Brooklyn and London would have taken part in the Whitney and Istanbul Bienials, and he would have gained even. more public attention.

Three years later, this attention would have turned into an official invitation to represent his country at the Venice Biennale. It would have evolved into international fame. David Altmejd corresponds perfectly to the successful definition coined by Jerry Saltz for the Village. David Altmejd is 100% "Modern Gothic." His visual vocabulary has all the features of the new wave-it is dismal, enigmatic, and decadent. But he definitely goes beyond the label because his work is also marked out by an extravagant and loud disco brilliance, a malicious and enchanting glamour made of mirrors, crystals, and shiny fluorescent surfaces.

Altmejd's work is full of contradictions, or even better, in asense it makes contradiction that sometimes is striking to the point of impudence, a true trademark, a clear distinctive trait. Multi-colored flowers along with carcasses of dreadful fantastic beasts. Tropical birds and rotten flesh. Modernist architectural volumes covered with obscure, hostile vegetation. Aseptic geometries rudely interrupted by irrational forms. Artifice and nature. Donald Judd and Louis Bourgeois.. Bauhaus and B movies. Mary Shelley and Ziggy Stardust. A constant (and bold) shift of register. A labyrinth of contaminations, deceits, and reflections. David Altmejd drags you down in a whirlpool where nothing is like it appears; he gives you a few moments of heaven and then he damn skillfully hurls you down to hell. But what is perhaps most intriguing in the artist's tangled installatio·ns is their organic and throbbing nature. You have the impression of being in front of living, self-governing structures, inside of which each element has a specific and and decisive function and contributes to the magical balance of the whole, just like it happens in a nervous system. "I start working on my things, but from a certain point on, they go on by themselves; it's just like if they were alive, just like if I lost all control," he declared. And then: "When I have the feeling that the whole thing is alive, then it's done."

So there is something animated in Aftmejd's work. There is life, and sensuality. Even better, there is death and rebirth, decay and transition. Acontinuous metamorphosis that releases a magnetic force, a disturbing, turbid erotic charge.

Last summer you were struck down by this type of tension inside the Canadian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale; the climate was unwholesome, sexy and repellent at the same time. The Index (2007) is an excessive work, both brutal and sophisticated, half 'wunderkammer' and half funfair. But first of all, it is a work conceived for the bright, beautiful pavilion-a helicoidal structure in wood, steel, and glass designed between 1956 and 1957 by an Italian collective of architects called BBPR (those of the renowned Velasca Tower in Milan) and entirely constructed around an old tree rising on the spot.

David Altmejd started from here, from such an ambiguous architecture (almost hidden by the rich vegetation, almost squashed between the German and English Pavilions) where inside and outside. merge, and technology and nature court one another. By taking advantage of the almost alchemic affinities between his work and the hosting venue, he created a chaotic and immersive installation where it is hard not to lose your bearings and clearness; which, after all, is exactly what Altmejd aims at-to make you lose our way, your straight and narrow path. The Index is a deceitful work, alabyrinth of mirrors where you feel like you are chasing yourself (or your ghost), awinding path of meanings and possibilities. Altmejd thinks of Borges, of the labyrinth as an allegory of the complexity of the world, whose meaning cannot be entirely understood by reason.

Once having crossed the threshold of the pavilion, you are immediately catapulted into an adulterated, Dionysiac reality, alysergic wonderland with sinister implications. The sensation is to take part in a crazy, deviant celebration, a heathen rite that glorifies accumulation, ecstasy, and ravage.

MOUSSE / DAVID ALTMEJD / PAG. 65 issue 11 november 2007

In order to understand what you are looking at (and to feel slightly dizzy), it's enough to read the list of the materials employed by the artist for The Index-bronze, steel, foam, resin, paint, wood, glass; mirror, plexiglass, lighting system, silicone, taxidermy birds and animals, synthetic plants, synthetic tree branches, pinecones, horse hair, synthetic hair, burlap, leather, fiberglass, chains, wire, feathers, quartz, pyrite, other minerals, glass eyes, clothing, shoes, monofilament, jewelry, beads, and glitter.

Junkspace occurs, the (apocalyptic) essay by Koolhaas concerning space in the present time. "Junkspace is what remains after modernization has run its course or, more precisely, what coagulates while modernization is in progress, its fall-out," writes Koolhaas. And the 'experience Altmejd' at the Biennale doesn't differ much from this description-on one hand there are dream, desire, glitter; on the other hand there are abyss, nausea, and downfall.

Within such ahallucinogenic, both magnificently baroque and catastrophical scenery, nature (even though plasticized, stuffed, and retouched) plays adecisive role; it seems to represent achance of salvation, the link with apure, original, and liberating dimension.

Mosses, roots, barks, flowers, mushrooms. Also crystals, stones, and other minerals. And more or less horrifying animals-along with the recurring werewolves, there are squirrels, badgers, and birds. Especially birds, I'd rather say, of every kind and sort, because *The Index* is first of all conceived as an aviary, a large cage thought to house and classify different species of birds (and also in this case, Borges' ghost is round the corner; just think of his obsession for classifications, encyclopedias, the Handbook Of Fantastic Zoology, and so on).

Another work, The Giant 2 (2007), leans on awall of the pavilion. It is a superman that languidly lies on its side, covered with vegetation, translucent substances, nests, and here and there, bigdi.ldos in black wax. The giant seems to symbolize the crossbreeding between man and beast, culture and nature, and it also re-calls the mythical figure of the solitary hero, romantically swallowed up by asavage universe. In Altmejd's view, nature is aforce that sucks and wraps, and that creeps invasively, violently, and almost fearfully on every surface (perhaps on the ruins of Modernity?) like some parasitic plant.

In *The Giant 2* and *The Index*, as well as in all of the artist's previous works, everything is in its place, it is where it should be. For the Canadian artist, the aftention to details is in fact of essentiai importance. And this iswhy his installations are always at risk and on the edge of failure-If one element was out of place, just a few centimeters. off from its established position, everything would collapse.

Once he declared to the New York Magazine: "There's a big difference between placing an object on asurface and hiding it behind a corner. An object behind acorner becomes creepy, like you're not supposed to see. It is this assertion conveys a definite attitude that of someone whose decorative sensibility has turned into an obsession.

Altmejd doesn't leave anything to chance- he deals with his 'fetishes' as if they were sacred relics; he disposes them with maniacal attention on pedestals that become Sort of altars, or inside of glass cabinets that change into prisons; he creates environments where everything Is strictly ordered despite the seemins chaos, The outcome is magical, You get hypnotized as if looking into a kaleidoscope, and experience an (unknown) pleasure that leaves a bad taste in your mouth, about which at the end you feel guilty, I wonder why.


Art Review:
Issue 12 £4.90
In Altmejd's universe nothing retains its identity for long – werewolves are adorned with jewels, corpses with gold chains
JUNE
2007
Isa Genzken:
Is chaos the new world order?
Richard Serra:
Forty years of sculpture at MoMA
Robert Storr:
The pros and cons of curating the Venice Biennale
Chéri Samba:
Congo's Hogarth
David Altmejd:
Shapeshifter
Summer of Art
Sophie Calle
Tracey Emin
+
Jeff Koons
Robert Gober
ARTR

DAVID ALTMEJD SHAPESHIFTER

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

words J.J. CHARLESWORTH
portrait PHILIPPE AND CESARIE YARD

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 AL TMEJD 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 littel 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

Photography Jason Schmidt

V MAGAZINE
49
FALL 2007

DAVID ALTMEJD

Canadian Pavilion

I finished installing much faster than I thought, so I had all this extra time to do new things to the piece. I did things like carve vaginas on the owls' chests, scratch words on the trees, and break some of the mirror with a hammer (to release tension). Doing these intuitive things was very exciting, and it felt like I was injecting more life into the piece. In this picture, I'm building an intricate wiry structure that looks like it's growing out of the head of a long-necked bird. From the front side, the wire structure is shaped into the words "eyelid" and "liver." **DAVID ALTMEJD**

TORONTO STAR
www.thestar.com

January 27, 2007

David Altmejd's Metamorphosis

Peter Goddard

"I feared sometimes that they would begin to veer off from reality; other times, that I would see my face in them disfigured by strange misfortunes."

–Jorge Luis Borges on his fear of mirrors

QUEENS, N.Y.–Slivers of mirrored glass fastened to wood are scattered at the feet of a half-finished giant. Carved out of insulating foam, the big lug is destined to be propped up in one corner of the Canadian pavilion this summer as its creator, David Altmejd, represents Canada at the 52nd Venice Biennale of visual art. More mirrored shards clutter the workspaces crowded with stuffed birds that the Montreal-born sculptor is fashioning to a perch throughout a fantastic aviary that will fill the curved exhibition space in Venice.

Everywhere you look around Altmejd's studio, you find more bright glittery surfaces. Much the same thing can be found starting today at the Oakville Galleries, in a retrospective of work by the 32-year-old old artist going back more than 10 years.

Mirrors freak out and fascinate Altmejd (pronounced "ALT-made"), who's deeply influenced by Borges. The artist loves a mirror's disco razzle-dazzle, its tawdry, glitter-ball glibness. But like Borges, Altmejd is also genuinely bothered by what mirrors reveal. When he makes his way to his bathroom at night, he refuses to look in the mirror, he says. What if he's changed in some way? What if he's transformed?

The Oakville Gallery exhibition, the artist's first major Canadian show outside of Montreal, is a mirror in its own way. It reflects the highly theatrical, almost operatic romanticized imagination that led to Altmejd's fascination with werewolves. In the Oakville show, The Lovers (2004) depicts mating werewolves expiring while having sex and beginning to rot as their skin sprouts jewellery and crystals.

"I like my work to have something elegant and seductive," the sculptor says against the heavy-metal clatter of a passing elevated subway train just across from his sooty sixth-floor window. "Having a reference to the Victorian (period) is a way of making something elegant. But the Victorians were also fascinated with death and the fetishism of weird things. I really get something from that because, well, to me everything else is slightly boring.

"The weird is underrated. But to me, weirdness is just as important or as exciting as humour or any other kind of fundamental feeling. I just love looking at something and thinking, `It's so weird.'"

Weirdness alone barely begins to explain the substantial, even scintillating critical interest that's come his way from all the right sources. "A nature morte (still life) for the post-modern generation," said Sarah Schmerler in Art in America in March 2005.

It's tempting to see Altmejd, with his rotting corpses tucked into crevices of glittering models of archly modern architecture, as the latest of art's angry young men and women commenting bitterly on the sickness of modern global society.

But Altmejd's work isn't bitter or ironic. It really isn't about life and death either but the electrically alive twilight zone between the two, like the transformational point in the metamorphosis of man into animal when the creature is neither man nor beast.

Indeed, the entire body of his work is energized by the appearance of one form mutating into another, architecture into mythology, science into sorcery, as werewolves were described possessing during the 17th century by Richard Verstegan in his Restitution of Decayed Intelligence (1628).

No surprise that his career is thoroughly energized as well. His dealer is Andrea Rosen, a heavy hitter. He's been picked for big things by Vanity Fair.

"The career aspect of my work is taken care of by other people," Altmejd explains simply. "I have galleries that do great jobs."

The truth is, he's not entirely comfortable with so much attention, particularly after many years of finding so much energy in feeling like an outsider.

His father, Victor, a Polish Jew, arrived in Montreal in the early 1970s. "In Poland he was considered Jewish, not Polish, and in the '60s he was very politely asked to leave," says Altmejd. "I grew up speaking French. But I never identified with the majority. I'm gay as well. So I always felt like an outsider. But I owe my parents my sense of confidence. I turned the feeling of being an outsider into something positive. That's why I'm an artist."

He went to Université du Québec à Montréal to study painting. "But in my sculpture class I soon realized that there was something amazing about an object," he continues, "that it exists in the same space as you and I, that it has the same presence.

"My work has included elements of architecture, space, light and nature. I see it as building an architectural structure that can become like a living organism. I like it when my pieces feel like living bodies." Following last summer's announcement of his Biennale selection by the Canada Council, he says he first felt that "it was rather silly" to talk about the Canadian-ness of the work he was planning, or "that it had anything to do with my identity as a Canadian.

"But as I am working on the piece, as I'm building it, I realize all the Canadian connections," he goes on. "Just the fact that there are all the trees, all the pines, a few taxidermy squirrels, and that the birds I'm making are not exotic birds. They're northern birds."

The bird image provides Altmejd with more than further proof of his Canadian identity. The bird is another creature capable of transformation into quasi-human form. Indeed, Altmejd presently plans to craft a "bird-man" for his Venice installation, a full-size human with a bird's head, rather like the fantastic masks used for Venetian carnivals.

Altmejd's Venice installation will likely be the swansong for his werewolf fetish, though. "I'm still comfortable with that figure," he says. "It would be kind of fake if I eliminated it totally from my work, it would seem too strategic. So it's probably going to be in the Venice project. But it's not going to the focal point. Actually, the birds are going to become the most important characters.

"After Venice, I'm going to concentrate on making a series of standing giants. Before, the werewolves would inhabit the architecture I made. Now the little birds will inhabit the giant body, which, to me, comes from architecture. When you see a giant, you don't identify with it because of the scale. It's more like a building.

"Frankenstein making his monster. That's the ultimate sculpture."

sculpture

December 2007
Vol. 26 No. 10

International Sculpture Center

David Altmejd

Siah Armajani
Frank Stella

$7.00US $9.00CAN
12
0 74820 64837 7

Sculpture as Living Organism

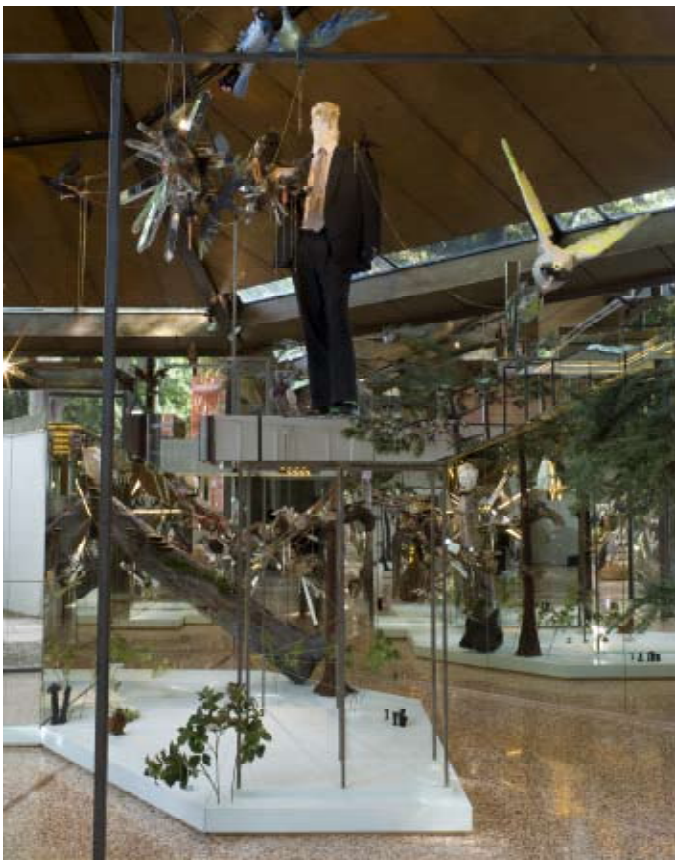
A Conversation with

David Altmejd

BY MICHEAL AMY

In 1998, when David Altmejd graduated with a BFA from the University of Quebec in Montreal, he was given two solo exhibitions and his work was featured in three group shows, all in Montreal, the city of his birth. In 2001, he graduated with an MFA from Columbia University's School of the Arts in New York City. At the time of this writing, he has already had more than 10 one person exhibitions and has participated in numerous group shows, including the 2003 Istanbul Biennial and the 2004 Whitney Biennial. This year, Altmejd represented Canada at the 52nd Venice Biennale. His sculpture, with its highly idiosyncratic mixture of materials, techniques, and images, seems most akin to Surrealism, though its sensibility is difficult to nail down. Hovering between cool indifference and romantic pathos, it allows for a wide margin of interpretations. One influential critic labeled it "Modern Gothic" Altmejd's work seems very much of our time with its juxtaposition of clumsiness and technical sophistication, horror and beauty. It begs for explication, incorporating werewolves (loups-garous, in French), mirrors, crystals, allusions to Modernist architecture, birds, and giants- images undeniably linked to ideas that Altmejd has made his own. This sculptor, who had planned to become an evolutionary biologist, renders things in a state of flux. Altmejd lives and works in Long Island City (New York) and London.

Opposite and this page: The Giant 2, 2007. Foam, resin, paint, wood, glass, mirror, plexiglas, silicone, taxidermy birds and animals, synthetic plants, pinecones, horse hair, burlap, chains, wire, feathers, quartz, minerals, jewelry, beads, and glitter, 100 x 168x 92 in. Two views of installation at the Venice Biennale



***The Index,* 2007. Bronze, steel, foam, resin, paint, wood, glass, mirror, Plexiglas, lighting, silicone, taxidermy birds and animals, synthetic plants, pinecones, horse hair, burlap, leather, wire, feathers, quartz and other minerals, glass eyes, clothing, shoes, monofilament, jewelry, beads, and glitter, 131 x 510.5 x 363.25 in. Four views of installation at the Venice Biennale.**

Michael Amy: *Let's begin with The Index, your piece for the Venice Biennale. What is it about, and how did you arrive there?*

David Altmejd: It is always more about how I arrived than what a piece is about. I am uncomfortable talking about what a piece is about. All I can talk about, really, is how I got there. When I visited the Canadian pavilion for the first time, I was struck by the building's unusual shape. It resembles a croissant, half enclosing a courtyard. Tall walls of glass separate the interior from the courtyard. A tree grows inside the building. The space is quite chaotic and organic. There is real ambiguity between what is inside and what is outside the building. The glass walls allow you to see the trees outside, but there is also the tree situated inside the building-so you never quite know where you are standing.

I can imagine that some artists would be annoyed with this space because it is so awkward and has such an overwhelming presence. Instead of trying to hide the peculiarities, I decided to push them further in an effort to make something almost crazy. Since the space is both overwhelming and awkward, the only way to take it over is to fill it with things. I thought that by making an aviary, I could inhabit the space by placing birds here, there, and everywhere. I thought of an aviary because ofthe trees outside and inside the building.

Since the birds were already in my work, this was a natural step for me. The birds originally had a very specific purpose. They were used as tools and were very one-dimensional. I used them when I decided to integrate gold chain into my work-a decision that resulted from my interest in the idea of the sculpture itself becoming a sort of living organism. I am talking about the whole becoming akin to a body, and not of the individual bodies appearing in a sculpture. So, at one point I began using gold chain as a way of making energy circulate through a piece. This nervous system gave the impression of the whole thing coming alive. Then, I was stuck with purely formal decisions, which I do not like to make. I, of course, decide to make the gold chain go from one corner to another,

and in and out of a hole, just to make the work look good, but I am uncomfortable with the fact that these kinds of choices are so arbitrary. So, the first time I used birds, I used them as little helpers to carry the chain from one corner to another. That way, the formal responsibility shifted to the piece. It was not me who chose to make the chain go there, and there, and there, it was really the birds. I was able to pretend that the shape of the whole was generated by a logic inside the piece itself. That's why the birds are there, and they also add little bits of energy and color. As far as my older pieces are concerned, the birds are almost meaningless

MA: *Your sculptures reveal an interest in horror and the grotesque. The birds bring to mind Hitchcock's movie. They also have links to dinosaurs, those great monsters of the past.*

DA: Yes, definitely. I became aware ofthis especially while working on *The Index*. In the beginning, however, I did not think about the symbolic potential. The birds were just helpers, and the main elements were the decaying bodies of the werewolves, or the architecture. In Venice, the birds have become the central elements, and the werewolves and the architecture have become secondary. Their only purpose is to provide hiding places and food for the birds. Somewhere in the installation, a werewolf's head is hung as a birdfeeder.

MA: *You use somewhat poetic language to describe imagery that some would consider unsettling.*

DA: I do not have the impression that I am speaking in a poetic way. I am talking about a very genuine relationship to materials and references. For me, it is all so practical.

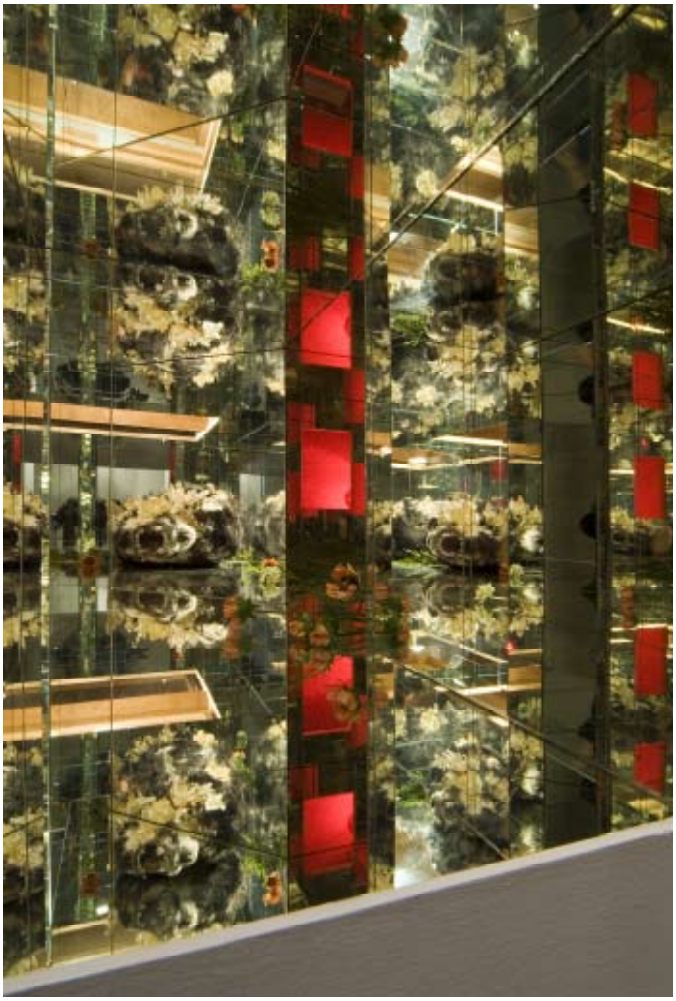
MA: *You speak as if things do not have meaning.*

DA: I am much, much, much more interested in energy. I seek to inject energy and create tensions in a work because in my mind, tensions generate energy Think of the negative and positive poles in an electrical circuit. I am much more interested in the object being alive and being able to develop its own intelligence and generate meaning. I do not want to use the piece as a tool to communicate meaning. I want it to be able to generate its own meaning. I realize that this is probably a cliche. Everything in a work is physically connected to something else in that work. I always refer to a work as sculpture, and never as an installation, because I want the work to be like an organism

People in Venice kept telling me, “Wow, David, I don't know where I am going, I don't know whether I am looking at the piece or its reflection, I don't know whether what I am looking at is inside or outside, or whether I am looking at another person or not:” The intensity of the reaction was surprising. People had a hard time making sense of the space. Some had no idea where they were going and bumped into mirrors. That was what I was after. Several people, who were really careful, let down their guard as they were leaving and crashed into the pavilion's glass walls.

MA: *You speak about your work as being alive, yet it often depicts death.*

DA: I am much more interested in life. I consider myself a total optimist. There is nothing morbid about my work. Life is so much more palpable than death. Life becomes clearer and more visible When it grows on top of something that contrasts with it. A bird looks much more alive when it is standing on



Top: *Loup-garou 2* (detail), 2000. Glass, mirror, wood, lighting, acetate, Mylar, Plexiglas, foam, plaster, paint, synthetic hair, quartz, rhinestones, and silk flowers, 80.71 x 48.03 x 70.47 in. Above: Installation view with (left) *Loup-garou 2*, 2000, and (right) *Loup-garou 1*, 1999, wood, lighting, acetate, Mylar, Plexiglas, foam, plaster, paint, synthetic hair, and rhinestones, 84 x 78 x 96 in.

Top: *The Settler,* 2005. Wood, paint, PLexigLas, mirror, foam, resin, hair, lighting, shoes, wire, moLding clay, beads, gLitter, and gLue, 40 x 46.4 x 90.6 in. Above: *The Settlers* (detail), 2005. Wood, PLexigLas, mirror, gLue, hair, gLitter, moLding clay, wire, foam, and electric Light, 50 x 72 x 120.75 in.

a dead carcass than when it is standing on a table. I am much more interested in how things grow on a dead body than I am in the dead body itself. It's post-apocalyptic. There is disaster in the beginning, but I am more interested in what happens after that.

MA: *Your work is filled with opposites, contrasts, counterpoints, and dualities.*

DA: Yes, absolutely. The more I think about it, the more it seems to be the driving force in my work. That's the way I think in terms of materials, colors, even the meaning. The werewolf appearing in my work comes from culture; it is filled with meaning. I see the meaning inside my references as a kind of charge. I see everything in terms David, the image acts like a of energy and noth hing intellectually. Even if it's a Star of David, the image acts like a battery- it contains electricity because it is so highly charged.

MA: *Do the mirrors in your work function as conductors, drawing one thing into another realm?*

DA: In a way; I never thought of that. I first used mirrors to create infinite spaces. I like the idea that a sculpture is like a living organism, like a person-I like that it is infinite in all sorts of ways. In *Loup-garou 2* (2000), you see an open box hollowed out of the side of a rectangular structure. The box is shaped like an L. The werewolf's head is placed inside the box, but around the corner, so that you cannot see it directly. I placed mirrors inside the box to create a periscope of sorts, allowing you to see the head. By doing this, I created an infinite space. The mirror acted as a metaphor for the infinite space inside the structure. I am~ always interested in filling my work with energy and contrasts and the idea of infinity, and the mirror suggests that, as well as transformation.

MA: *How did you arrive at the image of the werewolf? What were you looking for?*

DA: I made *Loup-garou 1* and *Loup-garou 2* while I was at Columbia. I was making structures at the time. Since my studio at school was very small, I decided to build a light table filling almost the entire space and leaving me with only a foot and a half around it. All semester, I used this thing as my worktable, and everything I made, I made on that table. At the end of the semester, I found a way to integrate everything I had done on top of this structure or inside it. The work contained the memory of its own making. It was both an action surface and a presentation surface. However, there was something too cold about the things I was using, the surface, the wood, and the light, and I felt that I needed a strong concentration of grotesque to pull it off-a head or a body part would do the trick. I love Kiki Smith and Louise Bourgeois, but the fragmented human body had become too commonplace in contemporary art a human head would have been boring. I thought that if I placed the head of a monster inside the piece instead, it would be just as powerful, but strange and not familiar, and I liked that. So

Right: *Delicate Men in Positions of Power,* 2003. Wood, paint, plaster, resin, mirror, wire, plastic, cloth, hair, jewelry, and glitter, 96 x 240 x 120 in. Below: *Untitled (Dark)*, 2001. Plaster, paint, hair, resin, and glitter, 8 x 14 x 8 in.

that's the first time I placed a monster head in my work. I opted for the head of a werewolf because that creature's transformation is very interesting to me. I went on to produce a series of werewolf heads.

I like that the werewolf looks like a human being-you relate to it, which is nice. I like the idea that it has complex symbolic potential- it could be a metaphor for double identity. Then there is the idea of transformation, which always features in my work. Things grow: crystals growing on things, plants growing, birds flying, so that you have the impression that the piece is alive and that if you went away and came back a week later, it would look different. Then, there is the hairiness of the creature, which I find seductive and almost sexy. I immediately thought of making the werewolf crystallize, so that there is a contrast between its hairiness and the purity of the crystals.

I invented a little story to explain the sort of weird energy that interests me. If a man transforms into a werewolf, it constitutes the most intense transformation experience that one can have on both a physical and a mental plane. In a matter of seconds, one goes from one state of mental and physical identity to a totally opposite one. Right after the transformation is over, the monster's head would be chopped off and placed on a table. The head would be so filled with energy that it would crystallize immediately, instead of rotting. However, this story did not precede the making of the sculpture. It's not the way in which I imagine Matthew Barney going to work. I imagine that he starts with the narrative and then makes the story generate the objects. That doesn't happen here. The story came afterwards.

MA: *What attracts you to the work of Louise Bourgeois and Kiki Smith? Their ideas about the body? Their narrative drive?*

DA: I think most of all it's the freedom with which they handle materials-how they are able to create something precious and lively looking by combining the most banal materials, materials you would never think of combining. Bourgeois's cells, those little enclosed spaces you can peer into, with glass objects and other things inside them, for me, those were like bodies. I had never seen anything so interesting in terms of a self-contained sculpture, but made from so many different elements.

MA: *Is your work baroque?*

DA: I think it is-though I am not an expert. Isn't there a respect for chaos in the Baroque? Don't Baroque artists use spiraling columns to create the idea of infinity? I totally relate to that. In *The Index*, there are stalactites that multiply infinitely, which creates a kind of infinite grotto.

MA: *Are you interested in Surrealism?*

DA: I have always thought that Surrealism was conceptual-it was really about the idea of making reference to the psyche and to dreams. I am not interested in those concepts, but I am drawn to certain of Surrealism's formal qualities. Some of Max Ernst's prints are really beautiful, and I am crazy about some of Dali's paintings.

MA: *Which other artists interest you?*

DA: I really like painting. Dana Schutz seems to have the same interest in process that I have. Her images come out of her relationship to the materials and references she uses. She creates problems, and her paintings are produced in an attempt to solve those problems. I relate to that. When I was in school, I was
interested in trying to come up with an attitude for myself. I was looking at certain American artists like Paul McCarthy, Cindy Sherman, and Mike Kelley. Their delicate mixture of sarcasm,

***The Old Sculptor*, 2003. Hair, glue, glitter, and mixed media, 60x 40 x 110 in.**

humor, and the grotesque constituted a specific attitude. Then, when I started making work, I forgot all of that.

MA: *Are your compositions preceded by preparatory drawings, or do they grow organically and intuitively?*

DA: They grow organically. I always make a drawing first to mark down what remains so abstract in my head. However, the moment I start working with the materials, the sculpture starts having a life of its own. I let things go, because what comes out of the process seems so much more real than what was in my head. I start by making some structural elements. Then, I make objects and start placing them. Then, I go back to the structural parts and build a hole, figuring that it would be much more interesting if one ofthe objects were hidden. Then, I think it would be more interesting if little objects started growing out of the hole. There is continuous adding, subtracting, changing, and extending.

MA: *I read that you are fascinated by Borges. What do you get out of his writings?*

DA: I love labyrinths and mirrors-they give me the shivers. Borges's work is so abstract, but it makes me shiver, so I am fascinated by it. How does he do it? How can I make a labyrinth feel as worrying as in a text by Borges? It's impossible. Writing is abstract. Sculpture is real. Since it is real, I would have to place a monster inside the sculpture in order to create a sense of fear. But Borges does not have to do that. You feel there is a monster hiding somewhere, but Borges never mentions it.

MA: *Your work is about loss - the loss of innocence, the loss of one state in favor of another.*

DA: Perhaps, if you focus on death and decay in my work. But that is just a small element of the work, which is crowned with optimism. At the beginning, there is death, but it is followed by life, optimism, and energy.

MA: *You also overlay the sculptures with fake jewelry, which is fraught with intimations of kitsch and romance.*

DA: We talked about contrasts. Life and death is a contrast. Something seductive and something grotes.que also constitutes a contrast. I thought that a beautiful earring would be much more beautiful when worn by a monster. If I were a jeweler, I would use monsters as my models. There is also a lot of humor in my work.

MA: *Which many viewers may be missing.*

DA: I think a lot do, indeed. Some people see it. I don't really think about it when I make the work because the humor is so fundamentally there. To put a pink brooch in the shape of an eagle head on a werewolf is humorous. What I make is able to generate a certain nervousness, or emotion, or laughter. For example, a bird-headed figure in The Index has testicles hanging under its beak. Now that's humorous. It is hard to understand how people can miss that.

MA: *The figures appearing in your work are always male.*

DA: There are also female werewolves, but the ones I make are all male. I am a man, and as a gay man, I am attracted to men. I am consistent. The idea of a world only filled with men is aesthetically quite specific. I can appreciate that.

MA: *Those men would have no way of reproducing themselves.*

DA: That's true. But I don't use the same logic we find in nature that would be too literal. I feel that my work is about trying to generate energy and life, but through other means than natural logic.

MA: *Does your work aim to express beauty while playing with the abject and the grotesque?*

DA: Yes, indeed. I feel that the only interesting way I can express beauty is by showing what contrasts with it.

MA: *Good versus evil?*

DA: That is a little too moralistic. But I am interested in the contrast, of course.

MA: *Is there a religious component to your work? In your sculpture, objects are displayed almost as if they were relics or fetishes.*
DA: I never thought of it that way. I am quite fascinated by relics and fetishes. I like the idea that an object becomes precious because it contains something-an energy, a soul, a history. I am not religious, but I like the presence and the feel of sacred things.
MA: *Do other writers interest you, besides Borges?*
DA: At one point, I was really into J.G. Ballard. In The Crystal World, everything, all of a sudden, becomes covered with crystals. I quite like Dennis Cooper. I also like certain filmmakers, like Cronenberg. When I was talking about Dana Schutz, I mentioned her appreciation of process and how her work kind of happens by itself. I feel the same way about Cronenberg. I have heard him talk about his movies as being bodies that have their own intelligence and make their own choices, and I really like that. David Lynch has great humor. The way that he mixes the psychological, the humorous,
and the abject reminds me of Cindy Sherman and Mike Kelley. But his films go beyond that and become the most elegant and emotional things. And I love Eric Rohmer's work more than anything, but I don't know why.
MA: *Have you thought about making videos?*
DA: There would have to be a logical connection to my sculpture, but it will probably never happen, although I have always been into imagining videos. I want to make things naturally. Even though I love painting, I would not make a painting because it would be too uncomfortable.
MA: *Why is your recent work titled The Index?*
DA: That goes back to Borges. It could also have been called "The Library."
MA: *Is there a Borges story called "The Index"?*
DA: No, but I could imagine one. It's also because the title contrasts with the chaotic nature of the piece itself. The title suggests something ordered, cold, and structured, while the piece itself is totally chaotic. I also like that the title is mysterious sounding and not literal. The title of my other Venice piece, on the other hand, is quite literal. *The Giant 2* depicts a giant, and since it was preceded by an earlier giant, this one was given the number two. Giants will continue to appear in future works of mine, though they will be shown standing. This one is seated because the pavilion ceiling is
too low to allow him to stand. If this giant were standing, it would be 18 feet tall.
MA: *By being seated, the giant becomes a landscape of sorts.*
DA: Yes, that's exactly what I wanted. I was interested in the body as a universe or landscape. The giant is a metaphor for nature and landscape. *The Index* can be seen as an abstract, inside-out version of the giant. I looked at different mythologies. The giant is always created before men and women, and I imagine that the forests, the seas, the winds -

nature -would likewise be created before men and women, so the giant and nature are one. Even when appearing in fairy tales, the giant is never truly mean; it is not good, it is sort of dangerous, but you can easily go around it. The Venice giant is inhabited by animals and plants. The plants are not real: I like suggesting transformation and decay rather than having it take place in my work. I am into the idea of building rather architectural structures. Then, I find a way to make the whole piece look like a living organism, a body. In the case of the giant, I was interested in going the other way, by making the body into a kind of architecture that would be inhabited by animals. I ordered the taxidermy birds on-line. A stuffed skunk descends a small staircase, way inside the torso. For the giant's hair, I used horsehair, which has just the right amount of coarseness to look realistic. It came in either black or white, but! wanted a brown haired giant, so I used hair dye.
MA: *Is your work autobiographical?*
DA: I see my work as being a combination of things that come from me. Every reference, color, and material comes from me in one way or another: I used to collect crystals, I wish I were the sexy werewolf, I'm Jewish, hence the Star of David, I love pastel colors. My work is a more intense version of myself. But even though it has my genes, it's also an independent thing with its own history and its own internal logic. In that sense-and I know
this may sound corny-it's like my child. It comes from me, but it becomes something else.

Michael Amy is afrequent contributor to Art in America, Sculpture, and tema celeste and an Associate Professor of Art History at Rochester Institute of Technology.

FT WEEKEND

Arts

American evolution

At the Venice Biennale, **Jackie Wullschlager** is impressed by the North Americans, by Tracey Emin's new work and by a Palestinian memento mori

The Venice Biennale is not a competition but North America has won it anyway. In Felix Gonzalez-Torres: America, the US has the best, most seductive national pavilion. Canada has the most spectacular one and the most original reinvention of human figuration with The Index, David Altmejd's painterly sculptures of bird-men and fantastical plants in a mirrored grotto. American artists also dominate the biennale's international exhibitions and the city's most distinguished off-site shows: the Guggenheim's Matthew Barney and Joseph Beuys and

This is a strong, gripping biennale because the director's serious moral imprint is felt at every turn, taking the pulse of contemporary art

Museo Correr's Sargent in Venice.

Yet all this has been achieved by being as un-American as possible, by underplaying those characteristics - macho, loud, brash, monumental - that we associate with American art. By talking in whispers and asides instead of screams and assertions. A century ago, Henry James mourned the Boston twang ringing across the Grand Canal. It is here again, but the revelation of this biennale is that American art is returning to the international forefront by, extraordinarily, listening to the rest of the world.

At the Guggenheim, a crystalline presentation posits American postmodernist Matthew Barney as a follower of European modernist Joseph Beuys: both self dramatising narrators whose sculptures and performances recount romantic creation myths, one fetish-ising fat and fur, the other petroleum jelly and self lubricating plastic. At the tiny 16th-century Chiesa di San Gallo behind St Mark's, Bill Viola's triple-screen video "Cycle of Life", installed on three altars, dovetails poignantly with old Venice. And most surprisingly, the US is represented this year by an artist who is Cuban, gay and dead.

David Altmejd's "The Giant", attended by all manner of stuffed and sculpted birds, from Canada's spectacular pavilion

At the mini-White House pavilion, Gonzalez-Torres's largest, final light bulb string "Untitled (America)" graces the rotunda entrance and public courtyard, where two looped circular pools in white Carrara marble, erotically just touching, reflect the Venetian sky. Paper stacks, one black-edged like a funeral announcement, the other printed with brooding, dark photographs of an ocean surface, form a two- towered memorial. A carpet of black liquorice shaped like missiles invokes a slick oil spill and the Bush government's militaristic stance. A billboard of a lone bird soaring through an open sky is illuminated by a single light string called "Untitled (Leaves of Grass)", referencing Whitman's ode to the individual spirit. Gonzalez-Torres's generous, inclusive art - help-yourself paper stacks, replenishable candy spills - uses minimalist

rigour and romantic refinement to question myths of power and privilege. He looked, he said, "for cracks in the master narrative those cracks where power can be exercised". This delicate, almost decadently gorgeous installation,' fresh and relevant a decade after the artist's death, sets off chimes across Venice in favour of an art that speaks from the sidelines so eloquently that the margins become the centre.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres: America contains within itself the story that pulses across this entire biennale. In 1990s America, Gonzalez-Torres, HIV-positive Cuban, refused a fringe position and forged instead an art of the mainstream. A decade later, can any centre of stability hold in the rush towards culture by the emerging nations, and what will China, Mrican countries, India, central Asia - many showing

The revelation of this biennale is that American Art is returning to the international forefront by listening to the rest of the world

here for the first time - bring to the global feast? In answer, Robert Storr, this year's eminent director and the first American to hold the post, has constructed the biennale exhibition Think with the Senses, Feel with the Mind around the work of 100 artists from seven continents. The two big pavilions, Africa and Turkey, that he co-opted as part of his Arsenale show, look thin and almost quaintly local. Other leading nations also disappoint - notably Russia, whose onion-domed pavilion's exterior is vandalised with an LED display in 50 languages called "Click I Hope", responding to visitors' clicks on a touch screen, while inside a video of androgynous teenagers fighting in cyberspace looks fatigued already. But it doesn't matter: overall, this is a strong, gripping biennale because Storr's serious moral imprint is felt at every turn, taking the pulse of contemporary art, catching the beat of a global scene that is fraught, uneven, decentralising, shifting into myriad formations where fragility, excess, belonging and dislocation are urgent themes.

At his Giardini show, Storr opens with Nancy Spero's maypole hung with prints of tortured heads, "Maypole/Take No Prisoners", before giving over room after room to vast, sober, new canvases by Ellsworth Kelly, Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, Robert Ryman. They look superb, masterly, but also a barely tenable holding operation. All these artists are elderly and their rooms are like pass-the-parcel layers to what for me is this exhibition's core: a labyrinth of white cubes centred on Palestinian Emily Jacir's exquisitely calibrated memento mori installation "Material for a Film".

This tells the story of the night in Italy 30 years 'ago when the Palestinian intellectual Wael Zuaiter was shot dead. Twelve bullets entered his body but a 13th lodged itself in the spine of the book he always carried in his pocket, an Arabic version of 1,001 Nights. The mutilated text is encased here, surrounded by enlarged photographs of Zuaiter, a collage of paperbacks -Genet, Eliot, Dostoevsky - retrieved from his Roman apartment, videos of his homeland, and a double soundtrack merging his favourite version of Mahler's Ninth Symphony with the insistent buzz of recordings from his tapped phone.

At the Arsenale, Storr plays out the same multicultural humanist references, taking resonance from the rougher shipyard setting. Another giant American piece of festive deathliness, Jason Rhodes' sprawling 50-chandelier "Tijuanatanjierchandelier"- the artist's final work - holds court like amesmerising jester here but it takes

The revelation of this biennale is that American art is returning to the international forefront by listening to the rest of the world life from its multilingual neon signs and African fabrics.

There is plenty of tedious political proselytising around it but also dazzling individual expressions that cross all cultural boundaries. Yang Fudong's "Seven Intellectuals in the Bam¬boo Forest" references European 1920s cinema and impressionist painting. EI Anatsui's stitched fragments of gold and scintillating textiles in "Dusasa I" tumble down from the ceiling like a Klimt canvas. In his series of iconic portraits "Les Africains chantent contre le SIda", Malian Malik Sidibe - first African winner of the Golden Lion for lifetime achievement - recalls August Sander's preservation of individual likenesses while recording social revolution, but also looks to Gonzalez-Torres's oeuvre of dying beauty. The edges become the centre - contemporary art cannot breathe without them - and Venice, old meeting ground of Byzantium and the west, is the most exhilarating place in the world to watch that evolution

www.labiennale.orglen

Globe Review

ART THE VENICE BIENNALE

Meet the art world's latest sensation

Canada's David Altmejd has always been and underground phenomenon.
As **Sarah Milroy** writes from Venice, his work in the Canadian pavilion is making him a star

In an age of globalism, the national pavilions in the Giardini della Biennale in Venice seem like quaint throwbacks to another time, particularly when you can read in their lineaments the features of a nation's self concept. Britain's is a lordly neo-classical manse overlooking the tree-lined allythat forms the central spine of the gardens. The French pavilion sports a voluptuous deco curve. Germany's has a handsome but authoritarian facade. The American pavilion is a democratic, one storey Jeffersonian affair, its two outspread wings evoking reason and high purpose.

And then there's Canada. Designed by Italian architects BPPR Group in 1957, ourpavilion is a diminutive teepee shaped structure of glass, brick and steel. Centred around a tree, which grows up through its central atrium, it says "modern" and it says "nature," but it also whispers "tourist information centre," or even "toilette pubbliche." Not good.

Over the years, Canadian artists have struggled to mount exhibitions in this eccentric space, usually with limited success. Never, though, has it been turned to advantage,as is so spectacularly the case this summer with the installation of work by 32-year-old Canadian artist David Altmejd.

The artist grew up and received his early art training in Montreal, and he is now based in Brooklyn, showing regularly with his dealers in NewYork and London.

His presentation at Venice has done two things: It has reintroduced him to the country that formed him, Canada, and it has brought him sudden international acclaim. Until now, Altmejd has been a well-regardedbut somewhat underground phenomenon. Now, with the pollen from this year's Biennale blowing in the wind, he's a star. .

This was a shrewd pick on the part of the Canadian jurors (Vancouver Art Gallery's Bruce Grenville, the Universite du Quebeca Montreal's Anne Marie Ninacs and Illingworth Kerr Gallery director Wayne Baerwaldt): He's terrifically talented, we've caught him on the rise, and his work marries naturally with the pavilion's architecture.

Pavilion dispatches Canada's polite reputation

Mirrors, faceting , arid glass have long been elements of his art -along with decorative floral elements, gems and jewellery, crystals, birds, and the decomposing corpses of the furbearing faux werewolves he fashions by hand, symbols of transformation and regeneration in his art.

At Venice he is presenting two major works. The first, titled The Index, is a sprawling quasi-architectural structure, its metal armature seeming like an internal extension of the building's steel support struts.Within this mirrored, manyfaceted'armature, he has arranged plastic trees and flowers, shrubbery and mushrooms (made from Sculpey), assorted squirrels, and an array of fake and taxidermied birds (including owls with human, glass eyes and bizarre vulva-like openings in their chests).

He adds to this threads of fine gold chain, and a mini gallery of black, hand-sculpted dildos and butt plugs, some of which appear to be morphing back into mushrooms.

Within this aviary-like space, he has also placed several man-sized birdmen dressed in snappy menswear, one of which sports a hairy, scrotum-like appendage dangling from beneath his chin (in lieu of wattles). All of this unfolds within the pavilion's mirrored walls, a phantasmagoria of sexual display all the more pointed during the flaunting and strutting peacock afternoons of the Biennale opening.

The other piece in the pavilion is titled The Giant 2: an enormous semi-reclining manwhose body cavities have fallen in, seemingly in an advanced state of decay. Where rot has set in, crystals erupt. His arms and legs sprout a variety of vegetation and moss-and his penis lolls to one side like a great scoop of half-melted vanilla ice cream. If our nation still had a reputation for excessive modesty and politeness, I think we can consider it dispatched. Altmejd has created an imaginary erotic realm that is extraordinarily intense and entirely his own. (In this regard , the American artist Matthew Barney, who is showing this summer at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection on Venice's Grand Canal, may be his only living contender.)

The Canadian pavilion was one of the favourites during the press days, but we had lots of great company. Britain, next door, housed an unexpectedly moving exhibition of drawings, paintings and neon works by Tracey Emin, a YBA celebrity who has been notorious for her in-your-face bad girl sexuality and publicity mongering.

Here, though, she stunned her critics with her subtle touch, and intimate painterly confessions.

One work, titled *Abortion: How it Feels Now*, combines a descriptive passage' of writing by the artist and a series of watercolours that reveal her vulnerability, .complexity and intelligence. Another series of languid paintings in violet pigment describe the lazy, splayed legs of a nude woman. And her suite of caustic, small-scale drawings read like a sexual, Rake's Progress, except the Rake in question is female, visited by a variety of phallic assailants. .

One of these drawings features a nude female body suspended upside-down with parted legs. Above her, the in scription reads: "studio"(crossed out) "stupid girl." Forme, this drawing provides thekey to the whole pavilion. Having posed for years as a sensationalist and a slut, she has come to Venice to finally set the record straight. It turns out she's the studio girl after all. Emin has presented her softer side but the same cannot be said of French artist Sophie Calle, who has turned the French pavilion into an extended, highly detailed iteration of white-hot female rage, which she expresses with a kind of rarefied, diamond cutting precision. On entrance to the pavilion we learn from a wall plaque that Calle's boyfriend recently broke UP with her via e-mail. The document, which Calle includes in her, exhibition, displays the writer's penchant for heroic self-aggrandizement, narcissism and cowardice, concluding with the false endearment "Take care of yourself," a phrase that she has borrowed for the title of her show.

Offering his letter to' 107 women in a variety fields (an actress, a Latinist, a dancer, a proofreader, a chess player a Talmudic exegete, etc.), Calle has invited each to respond, either with text or in the form of a video, or both. The results are exquisitely funny, and would wilt even the most fiercely tumescent males among' us. An editor subjects him to a mutilating grammatical comeuppance. A criminologist profiles him for symptoms of psychiatric dysfunction. A clown reads the letter aloud, grasping with mock rapture.at .the crumbs of positivity amid the bitter diet of rejection. Taken as a whole, the work takes on the human (particularly female) capacity to overanalyze emotional life to absurd extremes. Calle makes a wry monument to emotional overfunctioning. you could spend hours here.

Spectacular as this was, the centre of gravity for this years Biennale was undoubtedly the American Pavilion, which housed an exhibition of work by the latae Felix Gonzalez-Torres, a Cuban born American artist wh odied of AIDS in 1996. This artist lived and died by some of the more painful contradictions in American democracy: The exhibition felt like both a moral and aesthetic triumph.

Organized by Nancy Spector, chief curator of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the show took a disciplined, carefully edited view of the artist, combining his hanging light bulb sculptures (one, titled America, made with black electrical cable and white bulbs, hung in the pavilion's neo-classical rotunda) with a limited selection of.other key works: stacks of his giveaway posters (a dark sea, a black edged death announcement titled Republican Years); a rectangular floor sculpture comprised of black, individually wrapped licorice candies, there for the taking and the sucking; and a series of 13 black-and-white photographs of sometimes litter-strewn stone benches at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Carved into the stone wall behind these benches are the words "scholar," "explorer," "statesman,""humanitarian," "ranchman,""conservationist," etc., designations that describe that museum's founder, Teddy Roosevelt, but that also seem to evoke an American ideal.The piece feels like an elegy. The final room combines a white hanging light bulb piece from 1993 (Untitled: Leaves of Grass) with a mural-sized photo-image of a flying bird against the open sky, a poignant image of the fleeting nature of life. Gonzalez-Torres created a number of such muralsduring his lifetime, and .the exhibition organizers, following his lead, have arrangedf or this image to also be exhibited at locations around the fringes of Venice, where it will be seem by passing motorists. It's a light touch, not the kind of touch the world has come to know from the U.S.in recent years. GonzalesTorres's exhibition came across as a solemn act of atonement to America's fellow nation states, a moving monument to the best of teh American legacy of democtic thought and compassionate stewardship that now seems so deeply imperilled. Along with U.S. art history professor Rob Storr, who served as artistic director of this year's Biennale as a whole, Spector emerges from this show as indisputably one of the leading curators working today. Her timing is perfect, and her eye is too.

The Venice Biennale continues until November 21.

The centre of gravity for this year's Biennale was undoubtedly the American pavilion, which housed an exhibition of work by thelate Felix Gonzalez-Torres, a Cuban-born American artist who died ofAIDS in1996.

Time Out London
LONDON'S WEEKLY LISTINGS BIBLE
April 19 - 26, 2006
No. 1861

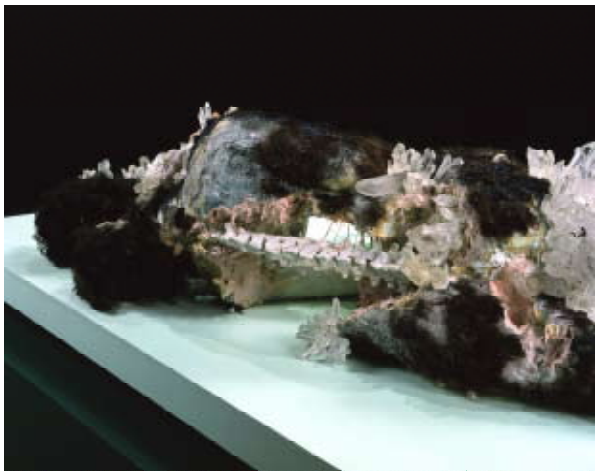
David Altmejd

Modern Art East End

More than twice life- size, David Altmejd's "The Giant is a Gothic fairy-tale of fusion of the flesh, fur and mineral deposits. With arms folded and nose in the air, the huge male figure seems rather smug and haughty; his hairy body is composed of a powdery, pale green crystal substance that contains large holes and hollows, in which taxi-dermal squirrels perkily squat and store their acorns. Oher recesses gouged in his head, back and legs are lined with pieces of mirror or seem to be growing large mirrored crystals or glittery black stalactites. A headless but more human-sized figure lies alongside him on an elaborate, pale green wood and mirror structure that with its complex arrange-ment of shelves, platforms and steps, wouldn't look out of the place in a Selfridges' window display. Within it are placed for cones and springs of fir tree, gold, brooches and chains threaded through perspex and the figure's head, encased in a black leather bondage mask.

Over the road another hairy figure lies twisted as if frozen during some hideous tranformation; protruding from the hair that obscures its face is a canine nose and ears. In Altmej's world, damaged or dis-membered flesh doesn't rot or decay but mutates into something glittery and new; with space manipulated through scale and reflection, teh groesue becomes gorgeous. Surreal and undoubtedly seductive.
Helen Sumpter

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 th e 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 I* 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 I* 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 twentyfive 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 conto urs), the entire assemblage is an uncanny cross between a half dismantled department store display and a low-bud get 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

THE BVRLINGTON MAGAZINE

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

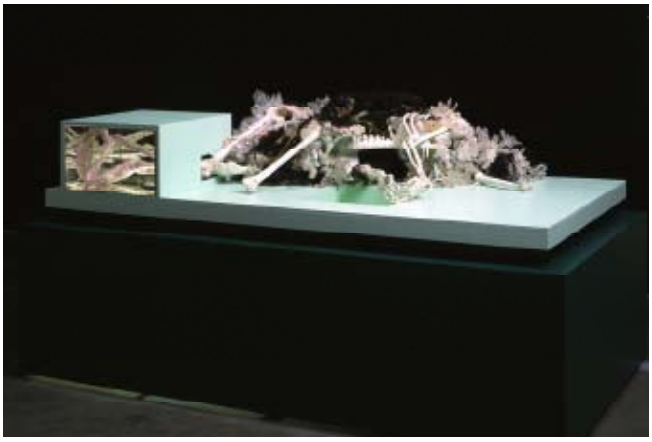
Contemporary art
New York

by JAMES LAWRENCE

David Altmejd's multimedia sculpture *Delicate men in positions of power* (2003) prompted considerable discussion at the Whitney Biennial, and his solo exhibition at Andrea Rosen Gallery (closed 27th November) provided a useful opportunity to weigh his future prospects. Altmejd's work has gained from a resurgent interest in the grotesque, the theme of this year's Santa Fe Biennial (see the review below), and his operatic, labyrinthine constructions suggest a nineteenth-century literary sensibility. The University 2 (Fig.66), the centrepiece of his exhibition, includes most of the artist's favoured elements: calcifying lycanthropic forms, crystalline eruptions from matted nests of fake hair, delicate strands of gold necklace, and geometric compositions of mirrored glass that are reminiscent of Sol LeWitt's open cubes. Altmejd's work has often been compared with that of Matthew Barney, mainly because both seem to have developed an overwrought vocabulary. Altmejd is the less wilfully obscure ofthe two: his work connotes a set of ideas that are familiar from gothic horror, popular culture and the early days of modem science. More important, he has a far superior sense of humour, and there is generosity in his wit. The sideshow qualities in the work - scruffy, unfinished construction, crude eroticism, and cheap glitter - confer a warmth that is absent from work by many artists with similar approaches. It is likely, however, that Altmejd will soon exhaust these themes, and it will be interesting to see whether he can sustain the best qualities of his work as he matures.

66. The university 2, by David Altmejd. 2004· Wood, paint, plaster, resin, mirrored glass, Plexiglas, wire, glue, plastic, cloth, f.1ke hair, jewellery and glitter, 171.8 by 546. by 640. cm. (Exh. Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York).

frieze Contemporary Art and Culture Issue 88 January/February 2005 UK £4.50 US $8.50



David Altmejd

by Christopher Miles

Platforms and plinths, werewolves and crystals, severed heads, discos and skeletons

The work of Canadian-born sculptor David Altmejd was a highlight of the 2004 Whitney Biennial, where he installed an elaborate tableau that functioned like a small multi-level stage in the round. Entitled Delicate Men in'Positions of Power (2003), the piece is an amalgamation of platforms, plinths and pedestals, spiralling up from a base oflarge painted wooden boxes to ever diminishing blocks like a convoluted architectural model, a rock concert stage or an over-the-top boutique window display. The nature of the setting, whether intended for an experiment, ritual or performance, is as uncertain as its condition; it could be under construction, just recently completed or in the process of breaking down.

The main player on this stage is a were wolflying across a broad platform as if on a morgue slab. Looking quite dead, seemingly decomposing and perhaps partially dissected, the creature also seems very much alive. The inertia of its board-stiffness and the entropy of decay are contradicted by the pervasive dynamism of crystalline outcroppings that seem to grow from the flesh and bone, as well as the tiny intricate cubic constructions of clear plastic and mirrors emerging from the carcass. Topping the piece - suggesting wig-shop displays, portrait busts, lab specimens or war trophies on stakes - are a pair of severed heads sporting lush mops of hair, their gutted faces filled with quartzite crystals. The scene sparkles with glitter, drips strands of pearls and sprouts faux flowers and little birds, all reflecting and refracting endlessly in the faceted mirrors and glazed surfaces.

Delicate Men in Positions of Power was accompanied in the Biennial by a pair of oversized decaying werewolf heads installed in Perspex cases in a bucolic, out-of-the-way hillock in Central Park - and is a grand display ofAtmejd's preoccupations. Werewolves and other monstrous human/animal/mineral hybrids populate the artist's world, and the geometry of Modernism in its high and low incarnations, from Bauhaus to discotheques, lies beneath it all. Altmejd's language of objects and styles was explored further in a trio of new works recently exhibited at the Andrea Rosen Gallery in NewYork. The University 2 (2004), Altmejd's largest tableau to date, provides a theatrical laboratory for the study of his creatures and scenarios.

The Lovers (2004) comprises a pair of spooning figures, all but skeletal remains, their feet jacked into a mysteriously glowing box, with one creature plugging its finger into the other's rear end. The third piece, University 1 (2004), an elaborate cubic construction of mirrored surfaces, shiftingly transforms the world it reflects as the viewer moves around it.

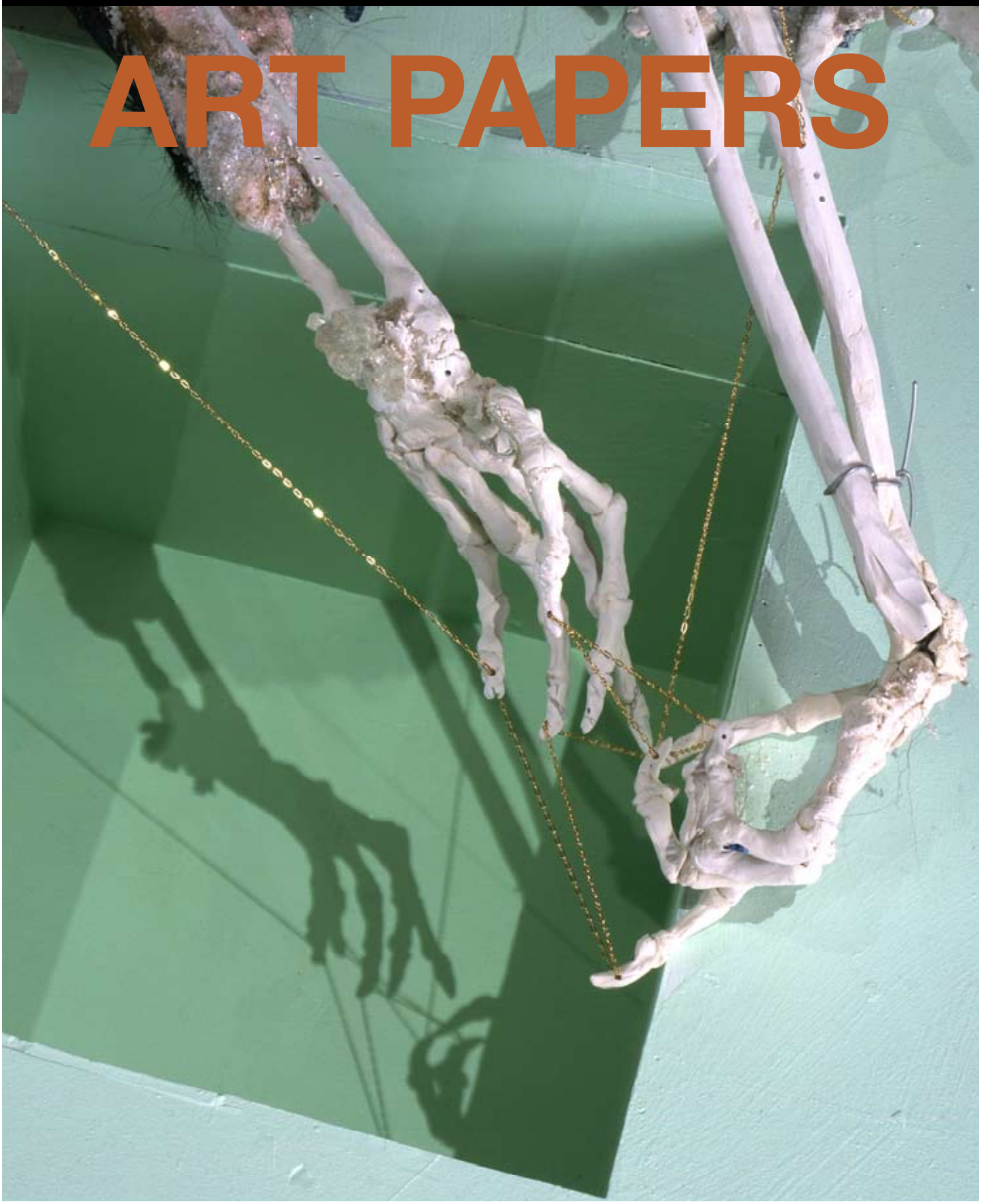
The werewolf becomes the central metaphor. While it easily fits with a surge of interest in horror and all things Gothic among the current generation of emerging artists, this connection seems second- . ary. Horror and Goth preoccupations are born of a basic desire for there to be more afoot than we imagine, even if that unseen reality is terrible or sinister. Altmejd's works do suggest a romantic search for the other-worldly, either for its own sake or, as seems the case with so many young Goths and horror fans, as a means of escaping ennui. But for all their suggestions ofgore, Altmejd's werewolves are actually rather bloodless and pretty. While they sport impressive pelts, it's hard to imagine them with much hair on their chests. (They seem more likely to break into some fey soliloquy than go for your jugular.) They are perhaps only slightly more brash versions of the sort found in movies such as I Was a Teenage Werewolf(1957) or its update Teenwolf (1985), in which the monster as the personification of society's discomfort with the collective id is replaced by the monster as a metaphor for the anxious awkwardness of teenage transition and sexual awakening. The werewolves seem to decay, but might well be caught like film stills pulled from a transformation scene in which they begin some other kind of metamorphosis. Even if decaying, Altmejd's bodies and heads rot in the most lovely way, their decline giving rise to stalagmites and crystalline extrusions. Troubling and anxiety-producing as Altmejd's scenarios may be, they are shot through with desire and hope.

Perhaps the most telling elements in his works are the hairy tresses and locks that crown his figures. It is in examining the terrific he/she shags adorning these creatures that one recognizes their kin to be less the monsters of Mary Shelley than the likes ofZiggy Stardust, Gary Glitter, Liberace or Siegfried and Roy. The werewolves are glamwolves, and the possibility and magic they embody - which comes perhaps with a howl, a snarl and a hint of dread and terror - is that of a glamorous transformation from the scripted life one is doomed to live into the force one imagines oneself becoming.

CHARLES ROSS/STAR AXIS
GIUSEPPE GABELLONE

MILLIE CHEN
DAVID ALTMEJD

ART PAPERS



Monsters *in the closet*

Learning to love David Altmejd's werewolves

BY DAVID VELASCO

David Altmejd: I am really not interested in gore . What I make has to be positive and seductive. Instead of rotting, the characters in my work are crystallizing. This makes the narratives of the pieces move towards life rather than death.

Randy Gladman: *So even where there isa decapitated werewolf you are being optimistic?*

DA: Yes, totally It is intended to be alive.Maybe weird and dark, but certainly alive.'

In a nation polarized over social and mor al questions, international institutions, immigrant rights, gay marr iage and celebrity divorce, taxes on inheritance, sex education for U.S. minors and African adults, and where popular opinion is often evenly divided, fear remains the most effective bond. When citizens hip is produced by a general sense of dread over border patrols and sexual sanctions, there remains little room to define community outside of the very terms of the division. This current exigency provides fertile ground for the imagination of artists like the young, Montreal-born David Altmejd, whose exquisitely detailed sculptures, creepy proto-narrative instances of B-movie camp encased in a tessellation of light and plastic, feed our insatiable and telling fascination with horror and monstrosity Werewolves provide the most immediately striking and characteristic image in Altmejds work. As if the appropriation of this historically rich symbol were not enough, he startlingly manipulates these models of transformation and becoming to unsettle the commonplace categories. Lying supine on minimalist beds of mirrors and fluorescent light, or decapitated and displayed in Plexiglas boxes like spectacles from a medieval freak show, these built beasts expose their damaged insides, bones and crystallized organs laid bare. If Altmejd speaks of them as being alive, critics have frequently highlighted the Gothic dimension of his sculptures, arguing that they look like crime scenes or morgues, or that the werewolves appear to be corpses

While these monsters seem frail, vulnerable, and, well, dead, I'd like to suspend the apocalyptic dimension of these interpretations and hold open the possibility that they may be creatures in recovery or in the process of birth. There are certainly elements of Altrnejds recent installations, notably his repeated use of artificial spring birds carrying strands of twine and wire, which could just as easily signify healing or resurrection. Indeed, the cinematic tradition instructs us that a werewolf always resumes hum an form upon death, and Altmejd 's beings are still a far cry from human."

Having chanced upon Altmejd's work at the 2004 Whitney Biennial, I was attracted to something so immediately right and now about his art. If dangerous, these feelings are sometimes necessary, and they pushed me to explore the reasons for this emotional provocation. Altrnejds work manifests as found scenes, installations inmediasres. They are thus doubly liminal- internally invoking transformation and , in the context of the exhibition, functioning as a threshold. The work's interregnal appearance inspires a sleuth- like analytical approach.

I subsequently became motivated to learn his vocabulary and complicated grammar. I located a potential key to his werewolf argot in his solo show at New York's Andrea Rosen Gallery In a corner of the gallery, sharp crystals jutted out of a mess of hair propped up on top of a pedestal. Much like his recurrent birds and flowers, the wig was an artificial reproduction of a natural object, a falseness Altmejd made no effort to conceal. Emerging from the nu trients of the styled mane, the crystals were solid and inert . They nonetheless seemed more natural than the hair. This interplay between artifice and nature, the organic and the inorganic, thoroughly informs Altmejd's sculptures.

Though the unsettling of accepted binaries can generate boundless discussions, there always remains the sense that it doesn't lead nearly deep enough into these sculptures. Their aftermath aesthetic reminiscent of Michael Haneke's film Time of the Wolf', which could easily be an accompanying text to Altmejds work-vertiginously debilitates normal strategies of interpretation. The sculptures feel like puzzles, deliberately unfinished, with seams and glue still showing. Moody, they somewhat obscenely stradd le the border of public and private where, quivering with suspense, they display a staged an campy edge. You get the queasy feeling you've stumbled across something you're not sup posed to see, even though the work practically hams it up, wearing its theatrics on its sleeve.

Art in America

March 2005

The University 2, 2004

David Altmejd at Andrea Rosen

Given how many reflective surfaces (mirrors, Plexiglas, crystals) David Altmejd uses in his sculptural installations, it's apt that his underlying meanings stare us bakin the face wiht a perplexing symetry. Was this show (his first at Rosen) a young artist's dark, ironic take on a beautiful world of surface appearances? or is altmejd truly striving to uncover a more elusive beauty lurking in the seamier side of things?

Installed in a gallery painted as black as an experimental theater was a large (approx. 9 x 18 x 21 feet), multitiered installation piece titled *The University 2* (all works 2004). It is something like a serious theory driven architectural model with a little disco glam thrown in. Mirrored staircases lead to platforms topped by empty Lucite shelving units; mirrored doll-house - size rooms are strung with gold costume-jewelry chains. Altmejd has an exhibiition designer's command of display tropes recessed lighting, pedestals, vitrines), but he also has a bad boys love of horror film gore, and here he marries the two. Inhabiting the piece ar elarge dead creatures, part man and part beast, with fur and "decaying" flesh (the artist refers to them as werewolves). Their arms and heads puncture the otherwise clean reflective walls.

Altmejd's carcasses are positively alluring. Glittering metallic dust clings to the edges of a snout; exposed innards grow clusters of what seem to be precious gems. Like some even handed alchemist, Altmejd merges worlds biological and mineral rendering them approachable and sinister in equal parts. Within this strange terrain, it's hard to pin down our feelings of revultion. Altmejd's touch with glittery, if rotted, flesh is so loving, yet the attendant surroundings are so cooly discordant, that we can come away from the show more horrified by the consumer - culture decadance of an average department store jewelry display than by the inevitable way of all flesh.

The Univerisy 2, though the tour-de-force work here, ultimately falters under it's own ambition. A simpler, wooden platform piece featuring two decayed werewolves in an eternal embrace (*The Lovers*) outshines it. And when the artist ventures into complete abstraction - as he does in *The University 1*, an over teh top send - up of Sol Lewitt in the form of hundreds of clustered mirrored cubes-he is more successful still. Paring down his means might solve some of the unresolved formal issues through it might also mean losing the creepy pleassure we so crave.

Altmejd's is a vanitas for the *Artforum* set, a nature morte for the postmodern generation. Certainly we'd like to think we're more evolved than we are. But Altmejd makes us stare into the mirror, showing us just what sort of culture-consuming creatures we have become.

-Sarah Schmerler

contemporary
no 70
2005

NEW YORK: ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY

DAVID ALTMEJD

22 October - 27 November
www.andrearosengallery.com

David Altmejd. "The University 2", 2004 Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York: Copyright: David Altmejd

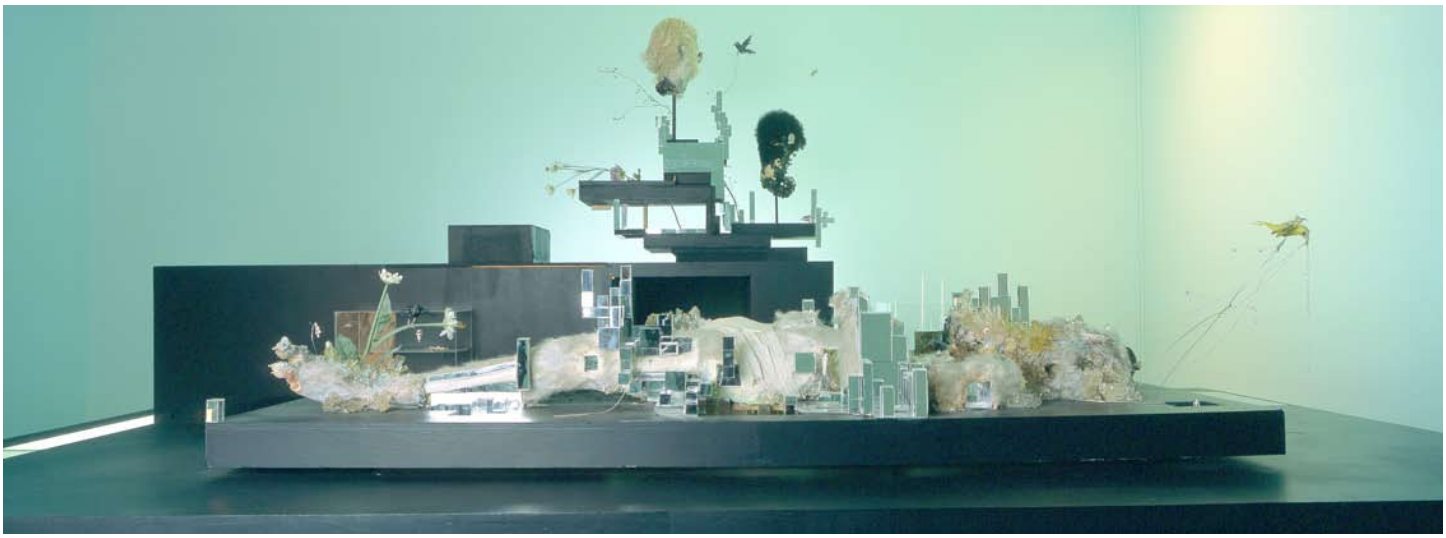
It's rare that an artist can get a viewer down on their knees in a gallery, and even rarer that the viewer enjoys it. *The University 2* (2004), the large-scale highlight of David Altmejd's first solo exhibition at Andrea Rosen Gallery, got people peering into floor level nooks recessed into the sculpture's multi-levelled platforms. Those that did look were rewarded with Altmejd's dollor-store icons: plastic flowers, birds grasping cheap gold chains, werewolf masks sprouting crystals and sometimes one's own face multiplied infinitely in a tiny hall of mirrors.

There are references to minimalism in the work - especially in The University I (2004), an abstract accumulation of mirrored boxes reflecting everything in the room - though it feels like Altmejd is using these forms because they are material for the taking, like the yards of gold chain from Chinatown. These materials have a sense of movement and energy in common. In The Lovers (2004), on a body-sized platform, the decay of two blondewigged, glilter-covered werewolves seems fuelled by their lost lustful moment. Werewolves as a symbol of transformation and Altmejd's depiction of decay as an energy-creating process explain the sprouting crystals (well-explared by both Altmejd and the critic Brion Sholis). Glamour is also transformotive here. The work's 18th century roots suggest an artifice achieved through magic, which takes cunning and can disorient the viewer. Standing back, surveying the black-painted room, everything looked elegant. In fact, Altmejd mode the gallery disappeor. The black-walled space required the same decorative touch that outdated rules would suggest for a small, windowless room: mirrors, bright colours, a red bird- just there. Upon inspection we can see behind this glitz and glamour; bits of smudged mirror don't fit at the corners, some of the nooks ore bore or badly painted ... and those cheap blonde wigs.

Altmejd's aesthetics allude as economically as possible ta the nineteenth-century Romanticism and the history of sculpture, although recesses and layers necessitate active looking rather than intellectual decoding of well-worn symbols. Altmeid has cited Louise Bourgeois as influential - an artist who has mode a successful career through picturing her own hermetic universe - and he understands how to let just the right amount of air in to keep people moving.

AMOREEN ARMETIA

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 fexplore 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 llycanthrope' 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 of1belonging-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

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 bi~ 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 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.

Facing page:
Delicate Men in Positions of Power, 2004, wood, paint, plaster, resin, mirror, wire, glue, cloth, syntheticchair,jewellery,glitter, 244x488x457cm

Clockwise from top/left
TheSettlers(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, lighting system, minerals, 183x 193x259 cm

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

ALL IMAGES COURTESY ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY.

Elusive, deluded, and chic, a new version of an old style takes hold among young artists

MODERN GOTHIC

BY JERRY SALTZ

Detail of David Altmejd's " The Sculptors Oldest Son", 2003

Call it Modem Gothic. As cringe-worthy as my term for it is, there's a lot of work around right now that fits the designation. Young critics are keen on it, magazines are featuring it, galleries are showing it, and next month's Whitney Biennial will have a fair share of it.

When certain things become visible they become visible all at once. It was that way with neo-expressionist painting and graffiti art in 1981, Neo-Geo in'1986, and scatter and slacker' art in the early '90s. The current Gothic revival is less a movement than a trend. Nevertheless, "Screan: 10 Artists x 10 Writers x 10 ScaryMovies," the group show at Anton Kern; has caught the zeitgeist.

Initially, it's hard to see how. "Screan" makes a weak first impression and looks decidedly un-Gothic in this space. (Actually, the best Modem Gothic show in town is Olaf Breuning's demented video installation, Home, at Metro Pictures.) I like two of the artists in "Scream" very much: David Altmejd and Sue de Beer. Both will be in the biennial. Both impress here--he with one of his exquisitely odd tabletop sculptures of werewolf parts, artificial birds, and jewelry (the piece conjures an immense fallen symbol in weirdly World Trade Center-like setting)- she with her amazing sense of color in an otherwise cryptic video. Brock Enright's kidnapping piece is incredibly annoying but intense; Cameron Jamie is better than this work indicates; ditto Bjame Melgaard; and I'm still trying to figure out if BanksViolette is more than a latter-day Robert Longo.

The claims made for "Scream" are more interesting than thes how itself ACCC irding to its curators, Fernanda Arruda and Michael Clifton, the lirtin "Scream" "combs the darklandscapes of Goth, Black Metal and Sadomasochism," and deals with "horror . . . ghostly shadows ... unease and terror." In their catalog essays, the 10 writers, including Johanna Burton, Brian Sholis, and Massiiniliano Gioni, concur. They Use terms like "morbid," "monsirous," "sinister," "sordid," "stalkers," "uncanny," "unnatural creatures," "archaicfears," "secretrituals," "aestheticized death," "the coming terror," and "the fundamentally. horrific nature of the human animal."As Meghan Dailey writes in her text on the underdeveloped, overly familiar. Spanish moss-like paintings ofMatt Greene, "Horrors within. Horrors without" Indeed,inlich ofthe workin "Screani" has a creepy, melancholy look.

So why Gothic now? First, we need to remember that ever since the Enlightenment killed off Satan in the18th century the artistic imaginations relished filling the void. The Gothic has never really left; one hell was replaced by another. Still, the present materialization has a sense of timing to it. On September 11 we all witnessed what could be described as a manifestation of the demonic. Even before then, the bright, busy globalism of the '90s was wearing thin. Since 911 Americanas experienced an alarming reawakening of fundamentalist religiosity and events have unfolded with an air of inevitability.

None of us knows what will hit us next. but things feel heavy. In the art world, fear and confusion have brought about a return of the metaphysical, even if it's only skin deep. There's been a shift from the big picture to the little one, from the cultural to the sub-cultural, the outer world to the inner one. Cults are more absorbing to artists than society; optimism has turned into skepticism. But things aren't black and white. Although many claim it's dead, irony thrives. Indeed, almost all art that could be called Gothic has an ironic edge: It's aware of its position position, even the absurdity of its position, yet it persists with sincere tongue in ironical cheek. Artists are using images and symbols in ways that attempt to short-circuit the sense that things are controlled from without; they're trying to make the more expression controlled and are investigating smaller systems of making meaning.

The Gothic has always had a contradictory relationship to authority: It believes in hierarchy, but also sees it self as transgressive. In the Gothic, the hero and the villain resemble one another; the wicked can be redeemed. Thus, fluid definitions of sexuality, self, and subject matter are typical. This keeps the Gothic elusive, deluded, and chic. Forerunners to the presentmoment include Cady Noland, Karen Kilimnic, Mike Kelley, Richard Prince, Paul McCarthy, and the abject art of the early '90s. Punk figures in here too, although itwas always more proletarian. Still, we're talking about suburbia, Dungeons and Dragons, Doom, Ann Rice, teenage angst, masculine overdrive, and the Cure, not Poo and Hawthorne.

Modern Gothic is many things, Some of them promising. Lest we forget however, most art that is primarily Gothic is and always has been schlock. It's campy, corny, nostalgic, and shallow. Indeed, any art that is essentially one thing is in danger of becoming monotonous. Forms stagnate; cheap thrills and cliches predominate; potent symbols and mock horror are readily embraced. The best Modem Gothic art is way more than Goihic, and that's What makes it worth looking at and thinking about right now.

TheWorld's Leading Art MagazineVol.XXXVII No.235 March-April2004 US$7 € 7,00 International

Flash Art

DAVID ALTMEJD

HIDEOUS PROGENY

Brian Scholis

New York ARTIST David Altmejd's grotesque sculptures, usuall y 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.

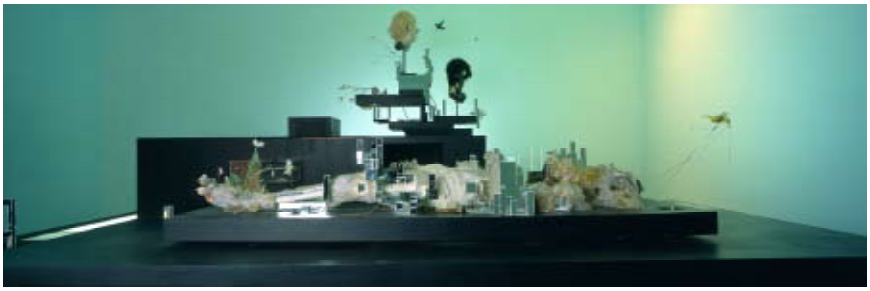
Altmejd rarely knows how a work will look when it is finished . He is an obsessive conjurer, bringing implausible sculptures into being as if in a trance or channeling spirits through the Ouija board. Often grouped with "new Gothic" artists, his use of the werewolf as a horror movie cliche touchstone 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 toprocess 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

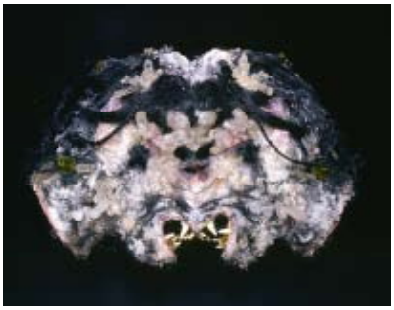
and, importantly, allow for a theatricalized placement of the heads. He carves boxes and tunnels out of these structures, placing a head in a form-fitting hall of mirrors that distorts perception, a gesture that calls to mind Robert Smithson's use of the material in the service of his exploration of entropy. Yet unlike Smith son's work, Altmejd's structure s seem sound (his 2002 NewYork 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 tran sformation 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 peeringclosely 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 (delaiI),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 daisie s. 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 psychologic ally 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 thegallery, however, the viewer encountered adoration gone astray. One sculpture depicted her with three-quarter s 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 tum 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 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 wri ter and critic based in New York.

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

Photo: Ron Amstut z. The Old Sculptor (detail), 2003. Mixed media , 180 x 335 x 120 em. Courtesy of Dean Valentine.

Art

The OK Corral

Leaving postmodernist and postminimalist strategies behind and breathing fresh air

by Jerry Saltz

March 9th, 2004 12:00 AM

Call this the OK Biennial. The 2004 Whitney Biennial never goes off-the-tracks bad but it rarely goes off-the-charts good, either. There's a lot of worthy work on hand, some surprises, and a few high moments. Artists I'm only mildly interested in impress. But overall it's tame. There's not a lot of heat here, and little that's juicy or transcendental.

Sometimes you feel the curators are just covering their bases, pulling cool artists from the right cliques. Politics are internal, not external. Still, at a time when biennials, triennials, and Documentas are as overblown, irritating, and automatic as Academy Award ceremonies, when it's not clear who or what these carnivalesque cattle calls are for, Chrissie Iles, Shamim M. Momin, and Debra Singer—the three Whitney curators appointed by former director Maxwell Anderson —should be cheered for giving us a biennial that has the virtue of being a fairly accurate, occasionally sparkling snapshot of what *now* looks like in American art.

"OK" isn't damning with faint praise: "OK" may be as good as one of these probably obsolete, regularly wretched beasts can be today. Maurizio Cattelan's alleged burial of his biennial piece somewhere on the museum's second floor is an apt metaphor for how artists are ill served by these circuses. "OK" means this is the best biennial since the 1997 edition. This exhibition captures art and the museum at a beguiling moment: Leaving postmodernist and postminimalist strategies behind and breathing fresh air. So this is also a Course Correction or Thank God Biennial, a show that says the last two biennials were flukes.

This biennial is the most art-center-centric one in decades: A whopping 80 of its 108 participants live in New York or Los Angeles. Twenty-one artists are over 50; 64 are under 40, and 15 of those are in their twenties. So you're seeing the tip of a new generation, which is exciting. Sadly, this show is short on artists of color. As for mediums, Iles observes, "We have something like 20 painters, 23 sculptors, and 15 film and video installations." Video and sculpture are strongest, and very painterly. Photography is almost absent, and painting is weak, although Laura Owens's buoyant imaginary tree and Elizabeth Peyton's stunning self-portrait are the two best works in the exhibition. Amy Sillman, James Siena, Mel Bochner, Fred Tomaselli, and Lecia Dole-Recio also look good. Cameron Martin and Tam Van Tran are passable but not biennial material and David Hockney looks lame, my soft spot for him notwithstanding.

Two things constrain this show. The first is that too many artists are present without affecting the exhibition much (e.g., Andrea Bowers, Laylah Ali, Robert Mangold, Sam Durant, Robyn O'Neil, Cory Arcangel/BEIGE, Terence Koh, Taylor Davis, Hockney, and, I'm afraid, Cattelan, and Paul McCarthy's towering inflatable on the roof). The other is the team's weakness for artists who are only moderately talented but immensely, if inexplicably, popular in curatorial circles (e.g., Craigie Horsfield, Sharon Lockhart, Mary Kelly, Lee Mingwei, Liz Craft, Katie Grinnan, and Dario Robleto—none of whom, it must be said, bomb here). In their savvy catalog introduction, the curators assert that "a significant sea change in contemporary art is under way." That change is evident here. It's just difficult to see because of these mid-range artists.

It's impossible to sum up 108 artists, but Raymond Pettibon, in his vivacious installation, includes a phrase that rings true: "The Piecemeal Kingdom." Much of the art on hand is ephemeral and looks as if it were made of parts or built step-by-step. Standouts in this piecemeal kingdom are David Altmejd,

Eric Wesley, Mark Handforth, possibly Christian Holstad and Matthew Ronay, and certainly Julianne Swartz, whose stairwell installation fills the air with the sounds of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." In addition to a sprinkling of sculpture influenced, however indirectly, by Jessica Stockholder or Rachel Harrison, there's a lot of what I call "little art": drawings or collages or sculptural arrangements done with lots of wee bits, things, marks, or parts. Interestingly, what this work is trying to supplant may demand just this kind of littleness. Call it termite tactics.

After Owens and Peyton, the most ravishing works in this show are Yayoi Kusama's walk-in room of colored lights and Slater Bradley's video love song to the cosmos. I also really liked Dave Muller's wall, Erick Swenson's elegant deer, Harrell Fletcher's James Joyce video, Andrea Zittel's kooky study center, Emily Jacir's Palestinian project, Aïda Ruilova's bombarding video snippets, the extraordinary music of Antony and the Johnsons, Eve Sussman's video Velázquez, Deborah Stratman's film in the Simparch installation, Marina Abramovic's poignant video, Jim Hodges, Spencer Finch, Yutaka Sone, Catherine Sullivan, and the best yet Central Park sculpture installations.

The art world is dying to like the 2004 Whitney Biennial. The opening was a lovefest. Previews in magazines and newspapers essentially implored, "Can't we all just get along and love the biennial?" Nearly all trotted out the cliché "the show everyone loves to hate." Disliking exhibitions is seen by some to be disloyal or obstructionist. This is traceable to the fact that in America today criticism and even civil disagreement are implicitly discouraged; people love to hate or even demonize those whose views differ from their own. But, criticizing flawed exhibitions isn't hating them. It's a way of treating them with respect. Mostly, the good wishes for this show stem from the fact that everyone wants the Whitney to be great again. This OK Biennial is an excellent step.

Related Story:
"Making a Wish List: Nagging Qualms About the Biennial" by Jerry Saltz

---

jsaltz@villagevoice.com

BORDER CROSSINGS

NOVEMBER 2004 ISSUE NO. 92 $9.95

In the following interview, the Montreal-born, New York-based artist David Altmejd refers to his use of minimalist forms-in this case the stacked geometry of Sol LeWitt-as having less to do with the history of pure form than with the construction of a present-day. labyrinth. Altmejd's insistence on reacting to what is immediate, as opposed to reading what is past, is a useful approach to keep in mind while moving through his work. In his sculptures there are references to various contemporary artists and artistic practices but, in an important way, they are amnesiac. Or, if not forgetful, at least respectfully indifferent.

"The Sculptor's Oldest Son", 2004

LEARNING FROM OBJECTS

an interview with David Altmejd

by Robert Enright

·preceding pages:*The Sculptor's Oldest Son,* 2004, wood.Plexiglas.cement, plaster,acrylic.67x 120x72", All photographs courtesy Andrea Rosen Gall ery, New York © David Altmejd.

Consider his signature use of the werewolf, one of the most resilient and promiscuous symbols in popular culture. There seems to be no limit to the layers of meaning that can be applied to this hirsute and toothy hybrid. A staple of gothic romanticism in literature and film, the werewolf is the ideal embodiment of our unregulated, uncontrollable nature. But Altmejd wants to harness that power in an act and through a specific part of the creature's anatomy.He fabricates only werewolf heads and imagines them as the focal point in a narrative of transformative energy. In the story he tells himself, he is obsessed by the energy that comes from a moment of imagined decapitation. He seesthe act-as he regardsallthe materialsand forms in his work--as evidence of a vulnerable beauty, in which the monstrous and the delicate conduct a fancy two-step.

He danced his way into this year's Whitney Biennial with a large installation (althoughAltmejd prefers to think of his work as a combination of sculptures) called Delicate Men in Positions of Power. The work looked like the kind of commercial display you might come across in an upscale department store, if it were made by a creative team including Sol LeWitt, Lucas Samaras and Matthew Barney (with the addition of some airy floral and bird arrangements by Anonymous). Altmejd is a material magpie, happy to use plaster, resin, glitter, styrofoam, jewellery, fake hair and mirrors' among much else, as the mix in his particular brand of mixed media. The result, interestingly, is more formal than you would expect,given their composition. Altrnejds sculptures give off an aura of order and elegance as your eye steps from platform to platform; they speak to an inexplicable logic of materials. This is where his sensibility intersects with Matthew Barney's; both artists are interested in the development of a new language of form that comes out of unexpected articulations of shape and unusual combinations of things. Their initial interest is in defamiliarizing the familiar, after which the compelling work of making this new language can begin in earnest.

What is most intriguing about DavidAltmejds art-and this may be a characteristic he shares with the best artists of his generation-is a sense of optimistic fearlessness. Regardless of how dark are his sources and origins, his take on them is guileless and anxiety-free. "I see my work as post-apocalyptic: he says in the following conversation. "The basis is disaster, but then its about how things grow on top of that. Theres nothing negative in mywork."

The following interview with Robert Enright was conducted on September 23, 2004. David Altmejd s most recent exhibition was at theAndrea Rosen Gallery in New York from October 22 to November 27, 2004 .

BORDERCROSSINGS: *One of the things thatstrikes me about your work is that a very strong minimalists ensibility coexists with a side that is excessive to the point of almost going for baroque*.

DAVID ALTMEJD: I like both things separately and I like their combination even more. The first time I made that association, it was intuitive and it happened by chance. But-I was very happy with the result; I felt there wassomething very personal in there that I had never seen before and with which I felt very comfortable.

BC: Had you specifically been an admirer of Sol LeWitt, DonaldJudd and other minimalists?

DA: Absolutely,but I tend to romanticize Minimalism. I got to know about their work in an art history context where it was used to illustrate what Modernism was. I always felt it had something more magical and more worrying. I see Sol LeWitts structures, especially his opencube structures, as weird and almost creepy. And, as I say, worrying. A little bit like Borges.

BC:As if they were a maze?

DA: Exactly. I see them less as a purification of form than the building of a labyrinth.

BC:Were you a reader of gothic and romantic literature as a kid?

DA: Not at all. I surfed over it a bit in high school, but I was never really that interested. I see it as a space from which I've taken certainimages. For example, I imagined the werewolfcoming from that kind of space at the end of the 19th century.

BC:I assume you're not a B-movie fanatic either? If you have any movie in mind, my guess is it would have been something closer to Coeteau's Beauty and the Beast than to An American Werewolf in London.

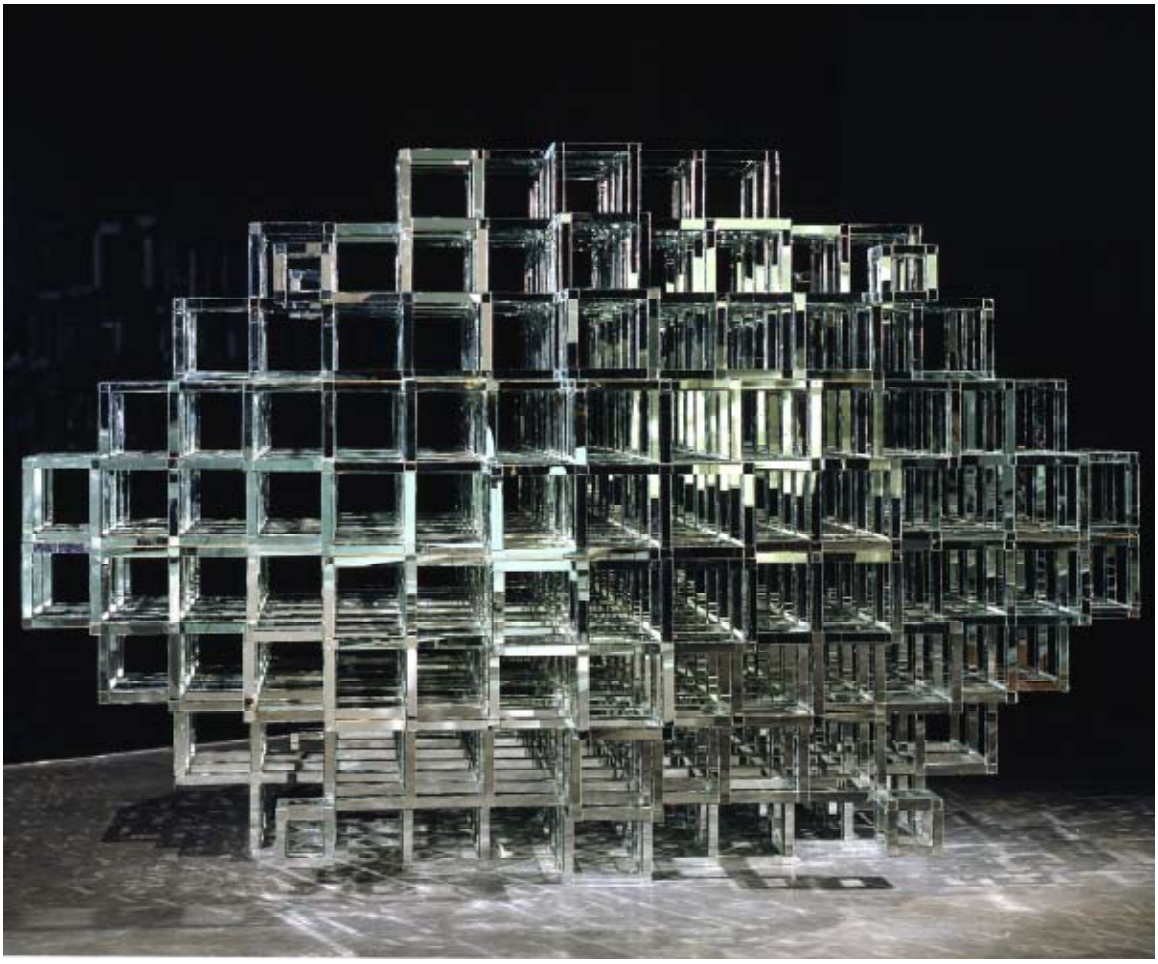
DA: Absolutely. I don't watch a lot horror movies and I don't read a lot of horror literature, but the first thing people tell me, especially here in NewYork, is that they think I'm referencing b-movies.

BC:Why has the werewolf become such an interesting icon for you, then?

DA: I guess the question is not necessarily why it came about but why I've decided to keep using it. At one point I thought I needed something like that inside my work. I've always been very interested in art that refers to the body in a fragmented way, like in Kiki Smiths work.

BC: So is it the ignition that comes out of the trans formation of man to animal and back again that holds your interest?

DA: I'm interested in energy related to transformation and that metamorphosis between man and animal is super-intense and generates a lot of energy. So I imagine the head of the



BC: And Louise Bourgeois.

DA: Shes one of my heroes. So I just thought that theres such a tradition of the fragmented human body in contemporary art . Those pieces are always extremely powerful but they're very familiar in terms of experience. By using a monster body part instead of a human body part, I thought I'd be able to keep the strength and the power of the object but could eliminate the familiar aspect. I felt it was a more interesting experience because it was both powerful and weird. It did become stranger. There is also something complex about the werewolf because he can be ametaph or for being divided into a good and an evil part.

werewolf being chopped offright after the transformation is over. The head contains all the energy of the transformation. At least thats the story I invented for myself.

BC: So you don't see the beheading then as a negative thing but rather as an essential element in that transformative process?

DA: Yes. There's really nothing negative in my work. I see everything as being positive although I do recognize there might be something macabre about the beheading . But I see it as a starting point. I'm actually more interested in what happens after the beheading. I see my work as post apocalyptic. The basis is disaster but then its about how things grow on top of that.

The University 1, 2004. mirrored glass. wood, mirror mastic, staples, 66 x 71 x 106". Photograph:Oren Sior

BC: Dana Schutz operates essentially out of the same logic. Her figure will litterally cannabolize themselves, but out of that process she forms a new kind of self-sufficient being. Your generation seems to have been able to ignore things thats an earlier generation would have seen as very negative.
DA: Yes, I would say that disaster is not necessarily aa negative thing. I see it as a given. It's more about what you do after.
BC: Is that why the crystal plays such an important part in your work?
DA: There's many reasons why I use it. I see it as very seductive but it also grows. So I see it as carrying life and energy. Then I start sounding really New Age.

I see my work as post-apocolyptic. The basis is disaster but then it's about how things grow on top of that

Facing page, top: Untitled (Dark), 2001 Plastic, resin, paint, fake hair, glitter, 8 x 14 x 8".

below: Untitled, 2004. Plastic, resin, paint, fake hair, jewellery, glitter, 9 x 12 x 10".

BC: How do you make the decision about what will go where and what will be the nature of the object? why a LeWitt structure, the a flower, a bird and finally a werewolf head?
DC: Everything happens intuitively. I guess I'm half-quoting David Cronenberg, who I heard refer to himself as a process director. I really understand myself as a process artist. I like it when the peice suddenly starts to make choices by itself. I'm just helping it stay alive, to build itself and create it's own intelligence.
BC: And you trust that process? When it begins to happen, you can give over to it?
DA: It's the most interesting thing for me and extremely satisfying. I like the feeling that I'm losing control and I'm not the one making the choices. When the peice is finished, I step back and I can't believe I made it. I would compare it to having children and watching them grow and become individuals. You're struck by the fact that they came from you but became something even more amazing. I always hope that my work is going to be bigger than me, that it will outgrow me. I want to learn from it. I want it to say things that I never said.
BC: You say the object speaks to you: does that mean there is a narrative going on inside the piece as well?
DA: I wouldn't go so far as to compare it to the narrative aspect of a novel. It's more abstract than that. It's more about combining colours and stuff, and there are no characters. But as a process, it funtions in the same way. Because I combine mint green, a mirror and a lot of glossy black, all of a sudden I realize that the work is totally like super-high fashion, like a christian dior store display. So then I decide to puch it in that direction.
BC: One of the things that struck me immediately upon seeing your work is that it does make reference to commercial display.
DA: Except that my work is not well made.
BC: So slickness isn't necessary for you?
DA: The slick is not good because in my mind it's just proof of control.
BC: Why do you resist control co much?
DA: I really need to feel as if the piece is not a product. I always want my piece to be an object that carries the energy rellated to its making. Like process art, I don't want my work to be an object that is there generate a certain specific reation.
BC: Do you think of yourself as a sculptor who makes environments, or as an installation artist?
DA: I think of myself as a sculptor, and I always try not to fall into making an installation. I know that the constructions I make are very sparse; there are a lot of objects but they're always self-contained on the platform. For me every object is an element and the whole thing is one sculpture. I like the idea that the sculpture could be extremely fragmented and that the process of making it would have many, many layers. I work on some parts in one space and other parts in another space; I'll work on the heads in my bedroom and on bigger pieces in the studio. I'm attracted to the idea that the viewer can go around around it. I want the sculpture to be seen and understood as one organism, one body. I also like the idea that it's never- ending. You take two mirrors, place one in front of the other, and it multiplies into an infinite number of reflections.
BC: I'm reminded of Lucas Samara's Mirrored Room From 1966.
DA: Yes. I like his work very mcuh.

I N T E R V I E W

BC: *I know that Matthew Barney visited your studio when you were a graduate student at Columbia. What kind of influence has he had--not spedfically on you but on your generation? Does he open things, up for a younger group of artists?*
DA: Hes definitely the most important and influential artist of the generation that proceeds me.Theres the way he uses narrative and his way of building a system to generate objects and to generate form.Thats very original and very few artists can do it. Theres Matthew Richie and Bonnie Collura. What they do is invent a system made of characters or ideas or places, but they don't necessarily talk about that system. They use it to generate objects. There are also other artists who are underrated but who have been extremely influential in this regard. I'm thinking of Paul McCarthy.
BC: *McCarthy is an artist whose performances embody thedilemma between control and lack of control.*
DA: Absolutely, but in his case its more literal. Lack of control in his work means people just throw up.
BC: *Is a generational thing going on with you and your contemporaries that would distinguish you from an earlier cluster of artists?*
DA: I wouldn't be able to tell you what defines my generation,apart from certain tastes and specific references to Pop culture. I feel like my work has

Delicate Men in Posions of Power, 2004,wood, paint. plaster, resin, mirror, wire, glue, plastic, cloth, fakehair.jewellery, glitter, 96 x 192 x 180". Inslallation Whitney Biennial 2004, Whitney Museum of Art, New York

been developing independent from its context. Maybe thats naive but I can see how its evolved in regards to itself and its past, but not in regards to a larger context.

BC:*Is it hermetic?*

DA: More and more. Before, I hadn't built enough of a vocabulary to make full sentences. I kept experimenting and taking things from the outside world. Now I've done enough to use my own work as an inspiration. I feel that the work is more self-referential now. It feels healthier than ever. Recently I had the idea that I would like to take a step inside my work in order to make something that would evolve within itself. I've always made and built sculptures that
were sparse and that grew outwards. I thought it would be interesting to explore infinity but towards the inside, in the direction of an inward infinity So instead of making things grow outside the frame, I would dig, make holes and make things grow on bones.

BC: *What were you getting at in the piece of public art you installed in Central Park?*

DA: I liked the idea that it was very delicate. I thought it would be interesting to make something fragile and beautiful and to place a Plexi glas cube around it. It 's the simplest thing in the world and it ended up being extremely weird in the landscape of the park.

BC:*You do walk a fine line in your work in which you are able to combine the delicate and the monstrous*.

DA: That vulnerable beauty is the only kind that interests me. Perfect beauty is not interesting; it doesn't exist.Things stan to exist when theres a tension. I know it's a cliche but I like people with big noses.

BC:*Do you care about originality?*

DA: I would automatically say no . But I'm touched when people tell me, "I'v e never seen that before." At that moment it almost feels that I'm making art because I want to make things that people have never seen before. So I guess the notion of Originality is important. But I'm not interested in making something Original within an historical perspective. I don't want to be part of art history I don 't want to start a movement.

BC:*Why do you make work?*

DA: That 's a question I ask myself every day. And my answer is to compensate for my existential discomfort. I mean, it sounds corny but unconsciously I'm very uncomfortable with the idea that I'm not here for a reason, that I'm going to die and it 's not going to make any difference. I want to make something beautiful just to have a reason to be here. Also, I want to be loved, not by the world, but by someone.

BC:*When you use objects like flowers and birds, do they carry with them a sort of natural romance?*

DA: For me, plastic flowers add something almost campy. But also they function like crystals, so they're
about life growing. It's democracy in a very simplistic way. But it does work like that: flowers grow next to a cadaver and it creates a tension . The pretty aspect of the flower and the gross aspect of the cadaver combine in a way that I like. The birds function in exactly the same way, although the reason I integrated birds into the work is a result of my process. I'd been using a thin jewellery chain to connect all the elements in the sculpture and to circulate the energy. They were a kind of nervous system. But then I was stuck with making a conscious decision about where the chain was going to go to make it look good. It's annoying when I have to make a purely formal decision , but I always like to have a reason . So I use the birds to carry the chain around. If the chain ended up in the corner, I could just say that the bird decided to take it there. It was a way of shifting responsibility towards the inside of the piece.

BC:*So there's an internal logic that governs the piece?*

DA: Absolutely; I invent a logic of materials. Thats what I use instead of making purely formal choices.

BC:*Do you work hard?*

DA: Obsessively But I'm not such a hard worker, it's just that I work all the time. I don't have any choice.•

The New York Times E41

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 26, 2004

David Altmejd

Andrea Rosen Gallery
525 West 24th Street, Chelsea
Through tomorrow

Horror-movie Gothic meets Mies van der Rohe in David Altmejd's minimal, miniaturized architectural structures, two of them occupied by dead werewolves or parts thereof. But the werewolves' decaying flesh (faked, mercifully), is bedecked with crystals and jewelry like that of ancient royal corpses.

"The University 2," the most elaborate of Mr. Altmejd's habitats, is a sprawling layout of platforms, boxlike rooms, mirrored surfaces and plexiglass towers, connected at different levels by flights of steps and lighted from many sources. Fake birds, flowers and craft-store glitter prevail. In one of the see-through boxes lies a gruesome mass, a hand protruding outside of it, the whole sprouting stalagmitic crystals and bits of gaudy jewelry. It is, tada!, a dead werewolf, whose similarly-accoutered mate lies in another box nearby.

The corpses of two monsters cohabit on an open platform in another piece, "The Lovers," a passionate tangle of bones, fur, hair and crystals impossible to separate with the eye. Ew, gross! But no such messes mar a pristine third work, "The University 1," an three-dimensional grid whose densely massed open cubes are made of mirrored glass. You can't keep the rough beasts — fairy tale or real — of our past from invading our glossy present, Mr. Altmejd, who brought his lycanthropic vision to the Whitney Biennial earlier this year, might be saying. Or not. In any case, with fiends like his you don't need enemies.

GRACE GLUECK

Hemlines


Young Men With Revolution on Their Mind, 2002

HAIRY WINSTON

I walk into woods. A rutted trail. Stone-studded. It's spring. Wind's wintry. Branches black as riding crops.

In a clearing I come upon heads. Werewolf heads. A couple of them. They're huge. Big as small men.

I inspect the decapitations. A snout's missing. A lower jaw gone. The heads look like they're decomposing. Skulls show. Crystals jut from them. Orange crystals. Phantom crystals in blues. White crystal needles called apophyllites.

David Altmejd did this. Altmejd's an artist. He studied sculpture in Montreal, his hometown. Then moved to Manhattan. He's a star in the States. The Whitney Museum of American Art commissioned the sculptures. Installed them in Central Park. They're there till the end of May.

Altmejd had his first solo show in New York City in 2002. The show featured werewolves. Life-sized. Altmejd used masks. The sort drugstores sell. He displayed them on pedestals. In mirrored vitrines. He dolled them up in crystals.

And cosmetics. Fur teased. To the consistency of cobweb candy. Tongues tinted shocking pink. What seemed to be cream oozed off heads. Night? Vanishing? I'm not sure. Do werewolves in night cream feel it's always night?

And cocktail jewellery. Skin sparkled. With sequins and beads. And jewels. Provenance: Woolworths. A stick pin stuck in a skull. A rhinestone brooch pierced a cheek. A bracelet of brilliants dangling from lips.

Eastern European werewolf lore. Sigmund Freud's wolf-man case. Pagan rituals. Altmejd's sculptures suggested all of these. Mostly they harked back to Hollywood. To *The Wolf Man*, a monster movie of 1941. That made werewolves a part of the popular psyche.

Lon Chaney Jr. plays Larry. A British count. With an American accent. Larry falls for Gwen. She clerks at an antique shop. When he meets her she's trying on earrings. Sterling silver. Half moons. He asks to buy them. She says they're not for sale.

She should have sold. The next night Larry turns into a werewolf. He tracks Gwen across the moors. Attacks. I always wonder: Is he after her? Or her half moons? Altmejd feeds off this confusion. His werewolves hunger for bodies and for bijoux.

His solo show was a smash. The Whitney invited Altmejd to show his sculptures. In Central Park. And in this year's Whitney Biennial (March 11 to May 30).

Altmejd had a room to himself. A monster morgue. Werewolf heads glittered like lupine Liberaces. Sculpted sparrows sat on them. Pecking at rhinestones. As if rhinestones were worms.

A werewolf skeleton splayed on a slab. Scratched in ink on an arm bone: the word "CLIMB." On a thigh bone: "FALL." Had Altmejd autopsied his beasts? Did he find out what did them in?

Vanity. That's what I say. Who makes jewellery for werewolves? Hairy Winston? Should werewolves even wear jewellery? It's suicidal. A silver bullet can kill a werewolf. Why can't a silver brooch? **DEREK McCORMACK**

Art

Something Else

by Jerry Saltz
April 30th, 2002 12:00 AM

"Demonclownmonkey," the funky, lively group show at Artists Space, is to the art world as MTV's deranged goth-u-mentary, *The Osbournes*, is to television: an aberration and a reminder of how weird art, life, and creativity are. This exhibition doesn't mark the end of the art world's dalliance with professionalism, but—in addition to having a cool, if Nauman-esque, title—it is a break in the business-as-usual action that surrounds us, and proof that "underground" energy is where you find it. Uneven and speculative, "Demonclownmonkey" does what a good group show should do: make work you mightn't have liked come alive, make known artists look new and new ones seem compelling, and mix everything together into a subtly assaultive, eye-opening whole.

Guest curator Matthew Ritchie, himself one of the smartest artists around, forgoes the title of curator ("too professional") for producer, which sounds just as professional to me, but which Ritchie defines as "being something closer to a pit boss." Whatever. He dispenses with wall labels and installs his show in a ramshackle six-room apartment structure complete with makeshift doors. This rattletrap funhouse is a welcome respite from the sameness of seeing art in so many refined white cubes. Strains of opera and John Denver emanate from within. The hands-on, low-tech quality saves it from "festivalism," while the general level of preposterousness in much of the work steers us to deeper psychic waters.

Ritchie brings together eight artists: five unknowns (including three recent Columbia graduates, all of whom I met while working as a visiting critic there), two underknowns, and Chris Heenan, a musician from Los Angeles whose body-noise soundtrack on the outside of the installation makes this antechamber into something like the waiting room to the afterlife in *Beetlejuice.* Adding to this outer-office oddness is Paul Wagner's graphic wall painting.

Once inside the plywood door, you're greeted by Michael Byron's painted papier-mâché sculpture, *One of the Ugliest Objects in America*, a klutzy-looking thingamajig in the shape of a biomorphic propeller. A mirror that reflects the piece's backside is self-conscious and lessens some of the fabulous flat-footedness of the object. But no matter. In an adjacent room, Carl Scholz's *Perfect Carl* consists of two disembodied brown arms and legs posed in a runner's starting crouch. The title, plus Scholz's first name, the skin color, some ribbon, and the allusion to running, all conjure the spirit of Olympic gold medalist Carl Lewis—and almost offset the Dalí and Kienholz influences.

Since every show has to have at least one dark room with a large video projection, this show has *Redshift*, a time-lapse landscape by London-based Emily Richardson. Clouds rush by, the aurora borealis shoots across the night sky, and ships whiz past. A mysterious track of clicks and whirs helps make this looping, para-scientific spectacle fairly absorbing.

Next come my three favorite artists in the show. First, in the only white room, are the conservative but awry figure paintings of Scott Grodesky, 34, whose work has been shown in New York for almost 10 years and deserves to be better known. In the largest and best canvas, a couple cuddles in bed. In two other quirky works, an enlarged eyeball stares at us. In another, an apartment complex is pictured from above or below, or both simultaneously. It's hard to tell, because everything has been subjected to a bizarre "reverse perspective." Space is unmoored and visual logic turned back on itself. With his illustrative illusionism and cheery color, Grodesky comes off as an edgier, more rigorous David Hockney.

With the last two artists we arrive at the fringe of what Gilbert & George call "the randy outside."

Karen Leo's 24-minute video, *Himrod Forever*, features the artist wearing—of all things—a knitted, head-to-toe Bruce Willis costume. This character works out, shouts at ice cream trucks, roams around an apartment, and finally sprouts a sock puppet from its forehead. *Himrod* is *Taxi Driver* by way of *Sesame Street*. The fiendishly perverse music track includes tunes by Cher, Willie Nelson, and Glen Campbell. Batty and beguiling, Leo's art is about fandom, aspiration, and doppelgängers. The abjectness of the narrative and the materials connects Leo to Mike Kelley—someone she may not care about, but who is surely an influence on her and a number of younger artists.

That influence echoes in David Altmejd's brilliantly titled, super-strange, room-sized sculpture, *Young Men With Revolution on Their Mind*. This eccentric whatever-it-is looks like a platform or a stage, and features mirrored compartments in the base, werewolf heads sprouting crystals, and strands of jewelry adorning abstract Plexiglas shapes that have been placed here and there. *Young Men* conjures Kelley as seen through a David Cronenberg-Larry Bell-Brothers Grimm looking glass. Wade Guyton's obdurate displays come to mind, as do Ritchie's intrepid myth- and story-generating installations. Altmejd is only 27, but his art eludes language and meaning in ways that are sophisticated and visionary.

"Demonclownmonkey" does two things especially well. It reflects how artists are attempting to merge conceptual practices with more visual means. And it helps us grasp that artists aren't scientists, politicians, priests, or professionals. They're something else. And that something else is what it's all about.