

FEATURE

**DAVID  
ALTMEJD**

**SHAPESHIFTER**

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

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portrait PHILIPPE AND CESARIE YARD

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FEATURE DAVID ALTMEJD

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

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

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



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

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





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

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



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

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

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





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

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

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

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

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

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

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