



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

By Linda Yablonsky | March 28, 2011



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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