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

By Matthew Collings | January 17, 2018



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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