

Flash Art



DAVID ALTMEJD

HIDEOUS PROGENY

Brian Scholis

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

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

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

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

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

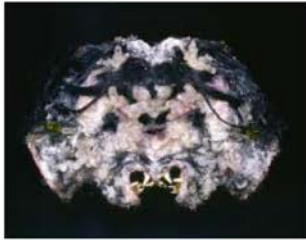
and, importantly, allow for a theatricalized placement of the heads. He carves boxes and tunnels out of these structures, placing a head in a form-fitting hall of mirrors that distorts perception, a gesture that calls to mind Robert Smithson's use of the material in the service of his exploration of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

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

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



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



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

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



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

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

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

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

Brian Scholis is a writer and critic based in New York.

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

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

