

The Object Looks Back: A Conversation with David Altmejd

by Kay Whitney

Employing an invented language of the human form that re-articulates heads, hands, ears, limbs, and sexual organs, David Altmejd's figures present an assemblage of dispersed parts that give the impression of a body shattering and shuddering into being. In the process, the distance between the "real" and the "imagined" shrinks, making any difference between the two states somehow less consequential; they become more fluid, dream-like, mutually sympathetic. Intensely psychological in intent, as well as in the aggressive way they seem to come at you, Altmejd's objects and installations are fueled by a kind of hysteria and the performance of pure fantasy, consisting of acts of repetition, reuse, omission, and what Freud called "displacement." While realistic to an extreme, these casts of body parts are focused by their merger with the abstract and the conceptual, achieved through extreme interventions in the traditional working methods of sculpture and a use of materials that is nothing short of encyclopedic: Plexiglas, paints, dyes, resins, plaster, latex, bronze,

mirrors, gold chain, plastic flowers, hardware cloth, and costume jewelry.

It's hard to tell if we approach Altmejd's objects or if they rise to meet us. Simultaneously passive and aggressive, grotesque and romantic, his work is freighted with cultural symbols, classical forms, sheer bravura, and what he refers to as "symbolic potential." He creates a tense sculptural system invested in artifice, detail, and totality—either you develop a relationship with its intimate theatricality, or you can't get past its brutal insistence.

Kay Whitney: *Over the course of the past 20 years, you've made a lot of work, and very varied work, though there are thematic links. You've worked at a range of scales and within a variety of spaces and environments. I am not interested in questioning you about specific pieces; my goal is to get at your involvement with your work, your philosophy of it, what you think about, and how that turns into a material, physical engagement—how it all combines to create an*

OPPOSITE:

L'oeil,

2017.

Expanded polystyrene, epoxy dough, fiberglass, resin, epoxy gel, epoxy clay, synthetic hair, quartz, acrylic paint, glass eyes, steel, Sharpie, ballpoint pens, gold leaf, glass paint, artificial flower, and lighter, 37.25 x 30.5 x 26 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES

■ david altmejd



THIS PAGE
AND OPPOSITE:

***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,
coffee grounds,
and polyurethane foam,
129 x 252 x 281 in.



object. Could you describe how your instincts determine your decisions, what evokes them, and how they are contained in your work?

David Altmejd: The most important thing about sculpture is that it exists in the same space as the viewer. It doesn't exist in a state of re-presentation, like painting or photography. It breathes the same air, so it potentially has the same intense presence as a person, as a body. I like that intense power. Whatever story the sculpture has, it's just a big, heavy object. I like that a sculpture can do so many things and still be just an object, like a body, in the same room as you. Overall, the thing I'm most interested in is beauty. For me, the grotesque is necessary to understand beauty. 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.

More than anything, my work has to do with channeling my energy into an object that then contains and radiates it. I think of my work as a record of the ways it was made, the processes that went into it. I am

interested in how transformation happens in a multitude of ways—the transformation of the material into a thing, the transformation of what I'm thinking as it's expressed through the materials, the way my energy is absorbed into and mirrored by the object.

I'm interested in complexity generally. I want what I make to be loaded to the breaking point—that place where it balances between not enough and too much really interests me. I'm seduced by complexity. Although I say my work is intuitive, I can't say exactly how my process of association works—I get a kind of feeling from certain combinations. I feel like mixing things together is going to make something happen. The sculpture says what's going to happen; it's its own organism, and after a certain point, it makes the choices for me. It's always open to possibility. I'm not interested in communicating a fixed, specific idea—that would make the work a slave to my meaning. Even though I made the object, I don't get to determine what it is saying. I want my work to have its own

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THIS PAGE:

Sarah Altmejd,
2003.

Plaster, paint, Styrofoam,
synthetic hair, wire, chain,
jewelry, and glitter,
16 x 7 x 7 in.

OPPOSITE:

FROM TOP:

Second Werewolf
(detail),
2000.

Glass, mirror, wood,
lighting system, acetate,
Mylar, Plexiglas, foam,
plaster, paint, epoxy clay,
synthetic hair, quartz,
rhinestones, and silk
flowers,
80.75 x 48.13 x 70.5 in.

First Werewolf,
1999.

Wood, lighting system,
acetate, Mylar, Plexiglas,
foam, plaster, paint,
Sculpey, synthetic hair,
and rhinestones,
84 x 78 x 96 in.

intelligence. I want to be able to step back and say, "That's amazing, it's a thing on its own." I want it to be able to generate meaning but not have a meaning.

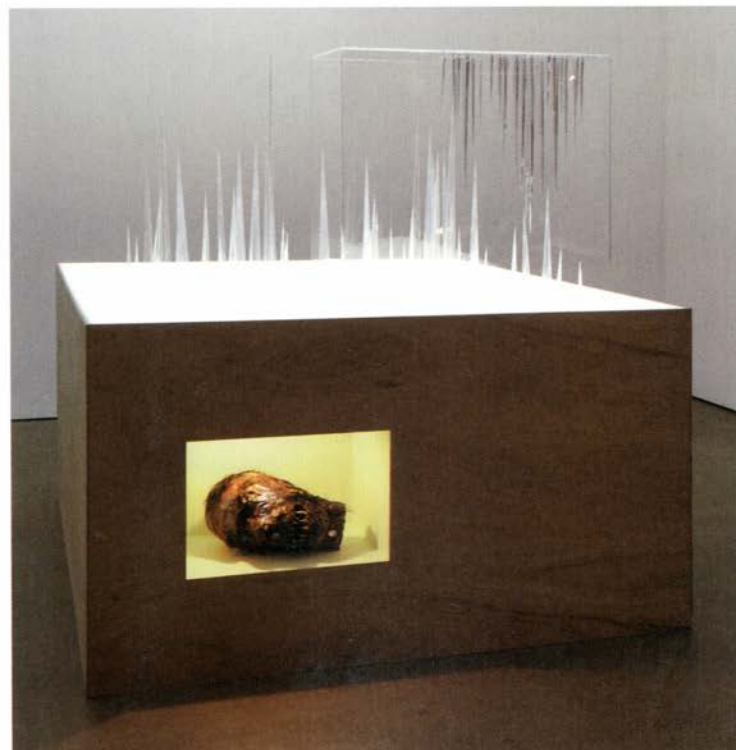
KW: How does the process start?

DA: I 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. I totally forget about the drawing. As I make the sculpture, it makes its own choices and takes directions I didn't expect. I make mistakes that are good and that open new spaces I hadn't explored. At the end, the sculpture is always completely different from the first sketch. My work is totally instinctual—I rarely do any pre-planning. Although there are specific ideas and conditions that interest me, my work proceeds from previous pieces. If I'm working with assistants, all my instructions are verbal and made on the spot. I don't like knowing what's going to happen. If you're going to make something that says something new, you have to be able to use intuition and not have a plan—if it's controlled, you get nothing new.

KW: I'm struck by how much you talk about energy and transformation and how it happens along the way during your process, as if your thoughts and gestures develop into something that takes on its own life.

DA: I know that when I talk about my work, I use the term "energy" a lot, but I don't mean it in a New Age way. I'm talking about how all the elements create energy. Some of the materials or words that I use are charged and have a lot of potential for meaning. I inject them into the piece, and the potential for meaning transforms into energy. I want to create something that's alive, that's able to say new things. An object that seems most perfect to me is one that's seductive and repulsive at the same time. The energy of these abstract things depends on everything about them being unresolved and uncontrolled and full of tension.

It's important to me to make objects that feel alive. Transformation is just one aspect of my work, because



■ david altmejd

I also use the strategies of contrasting intentions—contrast within an object creates tension that creates an energy that makes the object look alive. The architectural structures I have used in some of my installations present the object in such a way that triggers this energy and circulates or channels it throughout the piece. I became interested in mirrors because they multiply light and space and create a kind of visual energy. Viewers can see themselves in the piece, and when the mirror is broken or fragmented, you get a kaleidoscope effect that's disorienting but also expands what you're seeing.

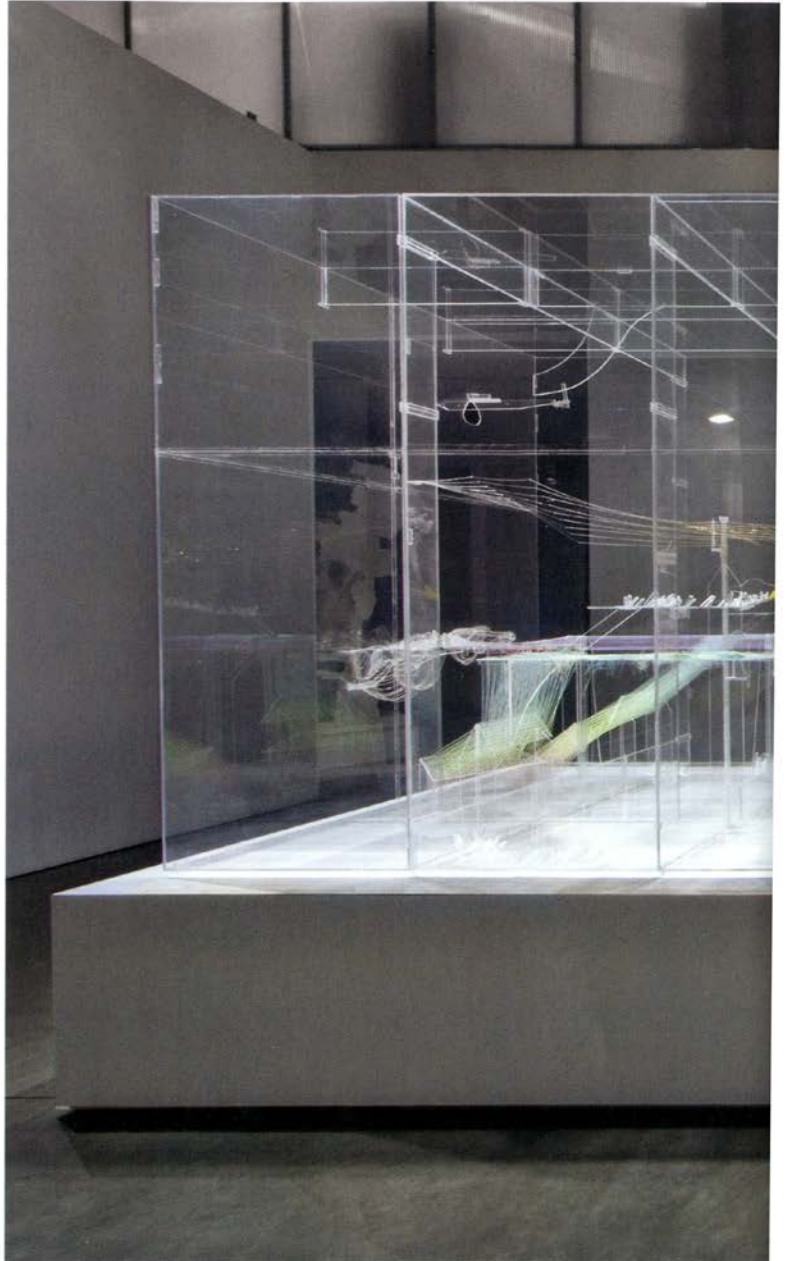
KW: You are perhaps best known for your werewolf heads. What was the attraction?

DA: I got interested in the werewolf because it's complex and symbolic. The series was a way of picturing the idea of transformation, because werewolves embody transformation—the change to something else, the shift from human to an expression of the animal. I wanted to produce an object that showed something in the process of transition. The transformation of a man into a werewolf is the most intense transformation physically and mentally. A werewolf goes from one state to the opposite in a matter of minutes or even seconds—that represents an enormous expenditure of energy. In a story that I made up about the werewolf, in the seconds right after the transformation, the head is chopped off. It is put on a table, and instead of rotting, the head crystallizes. The energy related to the transformation is kept inside the head, and it crystallizes and becomes an energy-generating object.

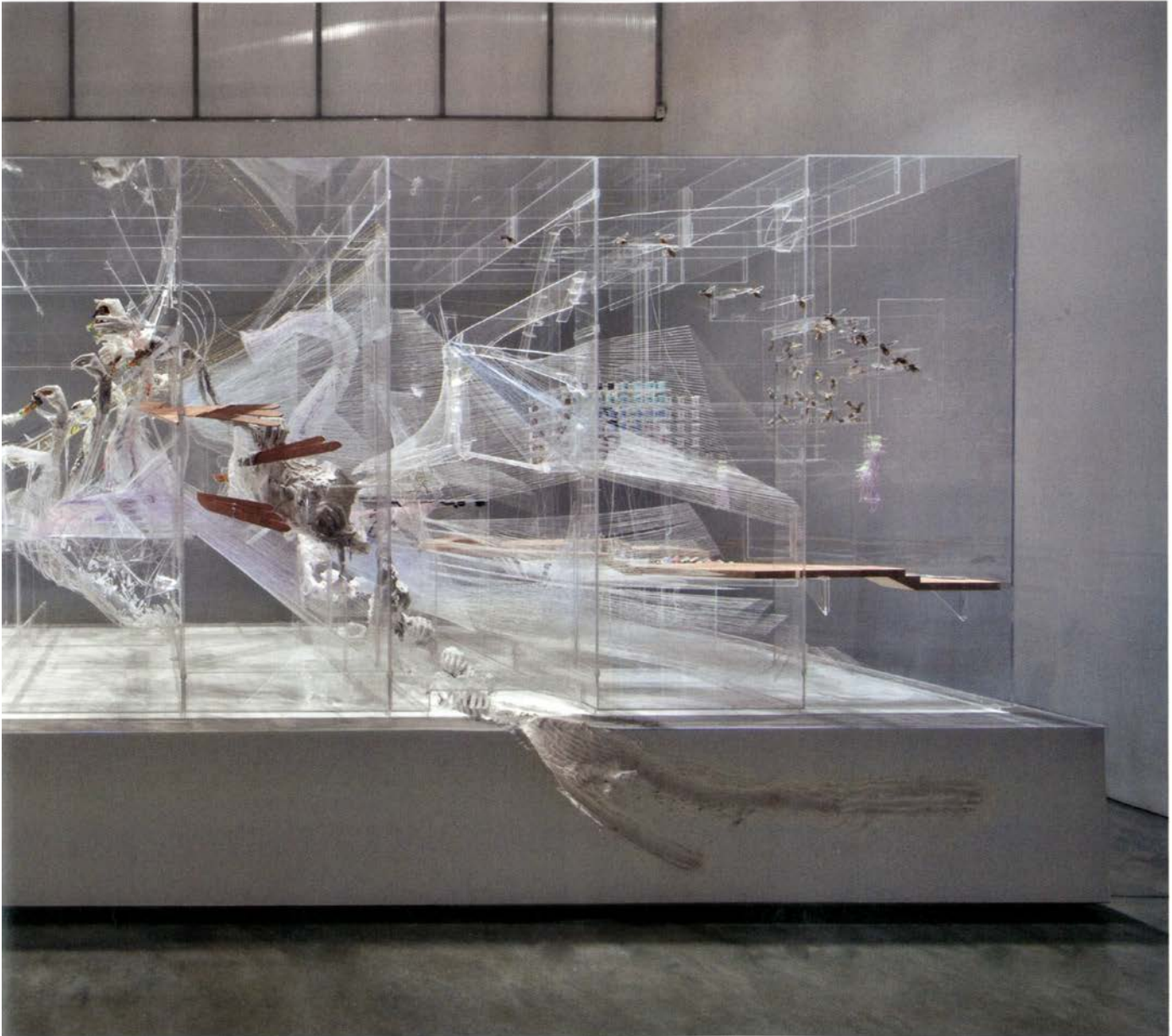
KW: Aside from the werewolves, you've done many severed heads—what is it about that image that claims your attention?

DA: For me, sculpting heads is a kind of regular formal exercise that takes the place of drawing or sketching. Generally, they begin with a cast of my own head. I work more or less realistically, making sure that I define a strong identity. Then I turn the head upside

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, and needles,
102.5 x 244 x 86.5 in.



“ For me, the grotesque is necessary to understand beauty. Things...have to be infected or else they don't exist—they don't have a presence. ”





down and use the eyes as a reference point to build a new face. As I make that new face, I make a new identity and forget about the old one. 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 that is more direct, and one that is more hidden. And anything that has a hidden identity is both powerful and creepy.

KW: Your work is almost operatic in the way that you expose and orchestrate the labor you've put into it. The viewer is always conscious of the details. There's sweat there. Sometimes it's crude, but at the same time, your work is highly refined and beautifully made.

DA: When I make an object, I want it to show that I've touched and worked every part of it. I work very close to the object, almost microscopically. Every little technical problem that I encounter generates a new branch. Much of my work ends up being enormous, and people think that's an important and defining characteristic. In my mind, it's not however, because it is just an accumulation of details. If I accumulate a lot of details, then it ends up being large. For me, sculpture generates energy that's connected to the energy of making—I want it to be as evident as possible. I would say that my work is more about details and less about the bigger picture. I'm constantly looking for a loss of control.

I bought a rock tumbler because I want to stop using eyes that I get from the taxidermist; they look dead to me. I want to make eyes myself. I'm experimenting with different materials to see if I can get them closer to what they really look like. A lot of the pieces I've made have come out of struggling with the material. The big standing figures started when I was using plaster—I made an upward gesture that ultimately turned into an ankle and swept up into a wing—my hands just grabbed plaster from the calf and dragged it up. I always have a tendency to go up because in sculpture you're working against gravity, and the plaster accumulated on the back and ended up making wings. I wouldn't have tried to do that—I'm not into angels or anything—but I think it's amazing that the simple process of working with the material ends up giving birth to



figures that have been there since the Egyptians.

I do a lot of layering of one material over another. I'll start with expandable foam, carve a hole in it, and then put resin clay over that. Then I'll add something to it like hair or casts of ears or hands or hundreds of quartz crystals. I've put artificial flowers, clothes, and costume jewelry on the figures as I work on them.

KW: Why are you so interested in the body?

DA: I think one of the things that defines people is that they are infinite. People are more amazing than any art. Why is the most powerful experience you'll ever have that of seeing someone in a room for the first time and falling completely 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 the presence of a person standing in front of you so strong and so powerful? I think it's because they contain infinity. ■

OPPOSITE:

enter,
2020.

Wood, steel, resin, expandable foam, epoxy clay, epoxy gel, artist's hair, poodle hair, acrylic paint, quartz, glass eyes, glass rhinestones, and pencil, 30 x 22 x 17.5 in.

THIS PAGE:
David Altmejd