

BORDERCROSSINGS

Seductive Repulsions: An Interview with David Altmejd

By Robert Enright | March 2015



Untitled 7 (Bodybuilders), 2013, plaster, wood, burlap, polystyrene, expandable foam, latex paint, 86.5 x 36 x 48 inches. Copyright David Altmejd. Photograph: Kurt Deruyter. Courtesy Xavier Hufkens, Brussels and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

It begins with *Sarah Altmejd*, 2003, and the artist's intention, having just completed his graduate studies, to make an object of power and not to begin with a modest goal, but instead to direct his attention in earnest to making a work that would have significance for him. The seeds or small crystal elements in so much of his subsequent work can be located in this early, essential piece. What motivation could be more romantic and guileless than to make a piece whose subject is the person the artist loves most in the world?

The work is a sculpture, to be seen in the round and therefore would have no necessary front or back. Images of it are presented in the very fine book, *David Altmejd* (Damiani, 2014), as a sequence of three views, one on each of three pages. It begins with a head seen from the back and mounted for display on an iron rod. Lovely, rich and glossy, red-brown hair drawn into a ponytail with a blue elastic band, one earring visible—a hoop and dangling in the centre is a Star of David set with small sparkling stones—diamonds perhaps. A portion of the neck or bust, as would traditionally be the case in a portrait, is just visible. The second image is almost full face but the face is a black void surrounded by a lacy, jewelled encrustation of crystals in a mix of turquoise, silver and coral, from pale to an almost vivid, exposed-flesh tone. It is startling but not horrific; instead, almost tranquil in its calm self-possession. In the third image the full profile shows the concavity or absence of the face—surrounded by the carefully constructed frame and tracery of crystals.

For David Altmejd the void is a safe and infinite place, an entry or portal of limitless possibilities and an auspicious beginning. As a central motif the void appears often. It is a cut-out on the floor or ground in extended sculptural works like *The Old Sculptor*, 2003, or a recessed opening, "below stage" in *Delicate Men in Positions of Power*, 2003, or *The Student*, 2004, or the gaping jaw in *Untitled (Brown)*, 2003, resting on a mirrored plinth, some of which surfaces were shattered by what appears to have been a large-bore bullet, and revealing empty space beyond. Or the series "Rabbit Holes," heads severed from perhaps a human body, perhaps some other being but with features largely effaced—that is, mouths agape, or spaces highlighted in a Rabelaisian manner but not rude so much as pronounced and outlined to draw attention. Altmejd intends that these pieces be displayed on the ground and, Alice-style, these rabbit holes are meant as apertures into the earth and would go on, go down without end. Like subterranean caves, crystal stalagmites

and stalactites protrude from the floor and ceiling of these compelling maws. As with *Sarah Altmejd*, where he addresses his interest in the infinitude of the body and the lack of distinction between the human inside and outside, so the "Rabbit Holes" are connections between the outside and the inside of the earth.

The head detached from the body isn't seen as an anatomical fragment, although the artist argues that the severing, rather than being violent, is a generator of terrific energy. Instead, the head is beautifully and richly representative of this connection between inside and outside and as a form, is quite complete. Altmejd says, "I like to think that the universe was exactly the same size as a head just before the Big Bang."

The generative decay that is transformative works to mute and confuse the line between exterior and interior. *Untitled (Brown)*, for example, is a woolly-haired beast identifiable as a head through what remains of its mass, its still shiny, partial black snout and open jaws in which a few teeth remain. Entwined in its hair or fur are pearls, crystals, delicate silver chains and wires strung with a few beads. But its condition is such that what is interior or exterior is unclear. Its status has been turned inside out and outside in to entirely blur distinctions, and this borderless state will transmogrify endlessly into an ellipsis—that is, into pure potential. Into a state of immanence, the endless possible, which I think is the artist's desired mode. It's here that he draws a parallel between the void in the face of his beloved *Sarah Altmejd* and Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*. The *Rückenfigur*, alone and gazing endlessly over the vast and misty landscape would, if Altmejd could have him turn and face us, show the same limitless void, a reflection, Altmejd says, of the infinite inside him.

Altmejd's delicate touch is evident in the carefully balanced tone he maintains between the grotesque and the beautiful, between seduction and repulsion. *The Lovers*, 2004, is one example. Flesh and fur and skeletal bones conjoin. With infinite care thin gold chains link the finger bones to crystals and flesh. Only the British writer John Berger can make life after death so desirable. In *And our faces, my heart, brief as photos* (Pantheon Books, 1984), he writes, "What reconciles me to my own death more than anything else is the image of a place: a place where your bones and mine are buried, thrown, uncovered together....A metacarpal of my left hand lies inside your pelvis. (Against my broken ribs your breast like a flower). The hundred bones of our feet are scattered like gravel." The piece goes on, a paean to eternity, to infinity. Altmejd's pursuit as well.



Sarah Altmejd, 2003, plaster, acrylic paint, polystyrene, synthetic hair, metal wire, chain, jewellery, glitter, 16 x 7 x 7 inches. Copyright David Altmejd. Photograph: Lance Brewer. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.



Sarah Altmejd, 2003, plaster, acrylic paint, polystyrene, synthetic hair, metal wire, chain, jewellery, glitter, 16 x 7 x 7 inches. Copyright David Altmejd. Photograph: Lance Brewer. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

In a sincere giving over of authorship, Altmejd sees himself as the works' collaborator. He may begin with a drawing, as a way of getting it out of his head, but as the sculpture progresses he says it makes its own choices. If he were to adhere closely to an original drawing he points out that what he would have would be "merely an illustration of an idea rather than something alive in itself and able to generate its own meaning." This notional or ideational displacement is also manifest materially. The plasterwork "Bodybuilders" appear to construct themselves out of their own being. Hands drag their self-same material from the legs up to become the torsos and heads constructed of hands. The process parallels a Gothic cathedral, an ascension which builds upward toward the light. The material assembled near the bodies' shoulders is transformed into wing-like extensions, conjuring images of angels and then, as part of the classical history of sculpture, become Altmejd's own winged work, his reading of the *Winged Victory of Samathrace*, in a series called "the Watchers."

His assertion that the pieces make themselves is what interests him. Surprise, transformation, serendipity and chance are his collaborators. "I'm not really using sculpture as a way of illustrating meaning that already exists," he says. "I'm constantly looking for a loss of control when I make something." Altmejd's phrase for the state he pursues is the "fetishization of potential." It's something more lyrical as well. The artist in a constant state of becoming—a wonderful anticipatory state of immanence and innocence.

The following interview was conducted with the artist by phone from his Brooklyn studio in 2015.

Border Crossings: Last year in a lecture you gave at OCAD (Ontario College of Art and Design) you began by showing a picture of your sister, Sarah, a beautiful woman, and then you showed the sculpture you did of her in 2003, which is also beautiful, but in a very different way. Why did you decide to make the portrait?

David Altmejd: I was trying to find a way of making the most powerful object I could make. I had just graduated and I found myself in this small apartment with no money; I didn't have a studio or any resources. All I had was my bedroom floor and a handful of materials but I didn't want to feel like a victim of circumstance. I wanted to prove to myself that I could make something extremely powerful with these limited resources. I thought that making a portrait of my sister with an infinite hole, instead of her face, would work. The result ended up being really interesting but the process of making that object and digging that hole was also weirdly interesting.

You're right about the black hole, but there is also a delicacy evident in the filigreed, jewel-like halo around the voided face. Your sister is someone you love, so I assume you intended the piece to be tributary?

Yes. My sister is the person I love more than anyone in the world. The idea was not to make a one-liner about destroying that person. The object had to be more complex than that; it had to contain a tension. I wanted to make some sort of infinite hole and I wanted to get lost inside it. That's why I spent time working on crystalizing details at the edge of the hole. I ended up spending a lot of time right in front of that black hole and forgot about the fact that it was my sister. Being safe in that void for a while was really powerful. I'd work on those little crystal formations at the edge of the hole for a couple of hours and then realize that I was only two inches away from this endless hole, which happened to be my sister. I learned a lot making that piece.



The Egg, 2008, wood, plaster, acrylic paint, latex paint, polystyrene, expandable foam, burlap, overall dimensions 53.75 x 96.25 x 60.25 inches. Copyright David Altmejd. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery,

Catholic and on your father's side, Jewish. You and your sister have classic Old Testament names. You've also talked about the energy contained in the symmetrical architecture of Catholic churches. Was that influential? I don't mean in a religious way but in a structural and architectural way.

Absolutely. I regard the whole system of visual symbols in the Catholic Church, not just the symmetrical architecture of the church, as beautiful and it touches me much more than anything else. I am really into the visual dimensions of the church being based on the shape of a cross. From above, the architecture of the cathedral is a cross and that shape is defined by the shape of the body. So when you enter the church, you are entering the body and I imagine the heart is at the centre of the building where all the lines meet. The architecture of the synagogue is completely different. When I was a kid I used to go to a temple but it was divided—the men were on the left and the women were on the right, and the ceiling was low. It ended up feeling much more like a brain divided into right and left halves. The fact that the ceiling was low made me think about the top and the inside of the head. If you think about it, the Kabbalah is much more geometric—there are ideas and numbers and codes. So in my mind it corresponds much more to the brain, whereas everything that is Catholic is much more about the body and that touches me greatly.

Catholicism is a religion of retrieval in that its central tenet claims that out of death comes renewed life. It is certainly possible to read your work through that framework.

That is totally plausible.

The writing on *Clear Structures for a New Generation* that you did in 2002 is bracketed by Stars of David and says, "DISSENT QUEER BUILD CLEAR." Who is that instruction for and who was issuing the message? Were they instructions you were giving yourself?

At the time I was interested in the aesthetics of activism and protest and all the energies that came with that. I was trying to make up sentences that were connected to me and that came with some sort of power. It was a way of using words that could have been coming from me and presenting them in ways that could transport energy and be more dynamic.

What made you make *Anne Frank 2* in 1999?

In a certain way, it functions like *Sarah Altmejd*. Anne Frank came with a very dramatic idea of life and death, so I wrote Anne Frank on a large board and then created glass-

You're a young artist living at home, with no materials and no money and you decide you want to make the most powerful object in the world. Where did that sense of ambition come from?

I don't have the pretension to say that I made the most powerful object in the world, but at that moment it was the most powerful thing I could do. It was about wanting to prove to myself that I existed.

A couple of other contrasting things stand out about the sculpture: the richness of the hair and the bright simplicity of the turquoise elastic that holds her ponytail in place.

The jewellery she is wearing is like that elastic. I bought it on Broadway and 30th Street in New York, in the kind of store where you get huge bags of jewellery for ten dollars. I wanted the object to be the result of the way I make sculptures, which is a process where I'm not always making super heavy gestures. I'm also making light gestures and those are very important for the piece. So, on an object which is very intense and grave looking, the presence of a cheap elastic band becomes a precious thing. It sparkles the way a real diamond would sparkle.

Your background is a rich one. On your mother's side you're



Untitled, 2011, epoxy clay, plaster, glass eyes, synthetic hair, acrylic paint, assorted minerals including quartz, 13 x 8 x 13.5 inches. Copyright David Altmejd. Photograph: Jessica Eckert. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.



Untitled 2011, epoxy clay, resin, chicken wire, 12 x 7 x 11 inches.
Copyright David Altmejd. Photograph: Jessica Eckert. Courtesy
Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

I would say that my work is more about details and less about the bigger picture. But since I've had the help of assistants, not for every project but certainly for the larger ones, I have had the freedom and enough time that I can afford to step back a little bit. When I was making my work by myself I was glued to the piece one hundred percent of the time and I didn't have the opportunity to look at what I was doing from a distance. Now I can and the whole composition has become quite important. One of the most important things about these Plexiglas boxes that I've been making is this idea of creating some sort of movement through the composition. To do that I need to be able to step back from the piece.

Was it a practical thing to have studio assistants? For a while you were resolute about wanting to do it all yourself.

I think it was practical. The projects were too ambitious and in order to finish them, I had to ask for help.

Do you still do a preparatory drawing before making a piece?

I do 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. Then I totally forget about the drawing. As I make the sculpture, it makes its own choices; it takes directions I didn't expect; I make mistakes that are good and that open new spaces I hadn't explored. So at the end the sculpture is always completely different from the first sketch that I made.

You have said you're not in competition with your material but you're there to help those materials find their own character. I gather that the making of work for you is quite literally a process in which you discover what the thing being made wants to be?

Absolutely. If I was trying to recreate a sketch in three dimensions and was attempting to make a sculpture that corresponded to the drawing, then it would only be about translation and nothing

beaded structures that seemed to be growing along with the name. I was taking Anne Frank, a name loaded with grave connotations, and pushing it in this optimistic direction. It was as if the energy contained in her name was making the glass structures grow. It's a little bit like my work functions.

Energy has always been and remains the key to your work. You constantly refer to the energy that comes not only out of making, but also out of the materials themselves. It is a mantra for you.

When I talk about my work it is the word I use most often. It's the way I think about making things.

In one way, you're still attempting to create that most powerful object you referred to earlier. You say you can't compete with a woman giving birth but I sense something incredibly complicated in what you're doing. It's as if you're giving birth to a world. Your work has become so ambitious that it is a whole cosmology.

But that's not what I'm focused on. I am not interested in groups of things or cosmologies or ensembles. I'm just focused on objects. It is true that when I look back I can see I've done a bunch of objects and together they create a cosmology but that is not something I think about. For me, it is one object, one universe.

So you move from detail to detail. I think you said at one point that you work microscopically, like an ant.

That's my way of making things. Much of my work ends up being enormous, and people think that is an important and defining characteristic. But in my mind it's not. I don't even see it as large because it is just an accumulation of details. If I accumulate a lot of details, then it ends up being large.

If you work detail to detail, does that alleviate the complexity of what you're doing? Is the larger idea of composition not something with which you have to contend?



Untitled 1 (The Waters), 2009, plaster, wood, polystyrene, expandable foam, burlap, metal wire, acrylic paint, latex paint, overall dimensions 92 x 32 x 32 inches. Copyright David Altmejd. Photograph: Jeremy Lawson.



Untitled 1 (The Waters), 2009, plaster, wood, polystyrene, expandable foam, burlap, metal wire, acrylic paint, latex paint, overall dimensions 92 x 32 x 32 inches. Copyright David Altmejd. Photograph: Jeremy Lawson.

I don't like using the word "done." There is something sad about the idea of something being done. It would be sad if you said that about someone. I like the idea that things always have the potential of transforming and growing and opening themselves up. So a piece is done when it's not in my studio anymore, when I'm showing it to the world. As an artist I believe that in a certain way every state of the object I'm working on is perfect. So every morning when I arrive in the studio, wherever the sculpture is at is perfect because it is a result of its own making. Of course, I understand that it has to be presentable if I want to put it out in the world. I couldn't say I'm going to take five pieces in the studio that are being made today and install them in a gallery for people to see. I may consider them perfect but they also have to be presentable. It's like any person: you wake up in the morning and you're yourself, the result of your own history; you might have a cold but it doesn't make you any less perfect. You're complete, total, you're infinite, but if you want to go into the world you need to shower and put on some clothes. The last thing I do when I work on a sculpture is to make sure that it is presentable. Before that, the whole process of making the sculpture is not aiming at a specific goal; it is just making the thing grow and transform as it wants.

You have a lovely sense of the transformative. You used to talk about your werewolf heads as batteries. Now other containers hold energy. I'm thinking of the *Rabbit Holes*. They're perplexing. If I were to taste them, would I be a vegetarian or a cannibal?

They're just holes, so there is nothing to taste. The *Rabbit Holes* are heads that are meant to be displayed on the ground or the grass, and instead of a face there is a hole that goes deep into the ground. When you're on top of the head and you look inside the hole, it keeps on going and going and going until you don't see anything. That's why they're called *Rabbit Holes*. These works are about the connection between the outside and the inside of earth. I just thought that the head is an interesting symbol for that connection. That's what a head is anyway. It's the border between what is inside and what is outside.

What is it about the infinity of the inside body that you find so compelling?

I think one of the things that defines the body and that defines people is that they are infinite. People are more amazing than any art. Why is the most powerful experience you will ever have seeing someone in a room for the first time and completely falling 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 a person standing in front of you so powerful? Why is that presence so strong? I think it's because they contain infinity. When I make a sculpture I think of the body as a model, and I would love my sculptures to have that power but I know they will never have it.

new would happen in the process. I would end up with a sculpture that was merely an illustration of an idea rather than something alive in itself and able to generate its own meaning. I have to let mistakes happen, to find ways of making mistakes become positive, and let the material make choices.

Do the materials have their own logic?

Of course. For example, with the glass mirrors. Once an object is covered in a mirror, there is no way of transforming it unless I smash the mirror. When I build a wood structure and cover every facet with mirror, I end up with something that in a physical way is completely closed off. If I want to build an extension, the only way I can do it is to violently smash the glass so I can access the wood underneath. Then I can attach this new extension and I end up with an object covered with broken glass. I then have to find a way of making that interesting. So I learn to appreciate the effect, and I would even say the symbolic potential, of an object that is covered in broken mirrors. I often refer to symbolic potential because I'm more comfortable talking about potential than about specifics. Symbol is something that I understand intuitively.

The video of you in Paris taking a hammer to your own pieces is startling. The opening of that surface is a violent act.

It's aggressive but it is completely satisfying for me because mirrors don't have a visual identity, they don't exist visually. When you look at a mirror you're looking at what it reflects. It's not a surface; it's invisible, there's nothing there. But the second you smash it, it becomes a visual object that exists super-intensely in the world.

You think of yourself as a process artist but how do you know when something is done? Is it done when you stop working on it?



The Swarm (detail), 2011, Plexiglas, chain, metal wire, thread, acrylic paint, epoxy gel, epoxy clay, acrylic gel, granular medium, synthetic hair, plastic, polystyrene, expandable foam, sand, assorted minerals including quartz, amethyst, pyrite, glue, pins, needles, overall dimensions 102.5 x 244 x 84.5 inches. Copyright David Altmejd. Photograph: Farzad Owrang. Courtesy The Brant Foundation Art Study Center, Greenwich, CT and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.



The Swarm (detail), 2011, Plexiglas, chain, metal wire, thread, acrylic paint, epoxy gel, epoxy clay, acrylic gel, granular medium, synthetic hair, plastic, polystyrene, expandable foam, sand, assorted minerals including quartz, amethyst, pyrite, glue, pins, needles, overall dimensions 102.5 x 244 x 84.5 inches. Copyright David Altmejd. Photograph: Farzad Owrang. Courtesy The Brant Foundation Art Study Center, Greenwich, CT and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

Is the inside also a reflection of what is outside, so that your sculptures are a membrane that negotiates those two spaces?

Yes. I really like this relationship between the inside and the outside and the recognition that the infinity inside is the same as the infinity outside. It's interesting because that was the relationship I was thinking about when I made *Sarah Altmejd*. When it was in front of me I started to think of the Caspar David Friedrich painting that makes it on to the cover of every book about Romanticism.

***Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, where the man stands looking out into the abyss of Nature?**

Exactly. And what is he doing? I thought it would be amazing if you turned him around and saw that his face was actually an infinite black hole. In my mind what he is looking at is the infinity of the landscape and that is a symbol for the infinity inside of him. The infinitely large is the same as the infinitely small; the inside is the same as the outside. The inside may be less accessible structurally but it is the same. I think the head is the perfect object. I like to think that the universe was exactly the same size as a head just before the Big Bang.

In 1947 Antonin Artaud said the human face "hasn't yet found its true countenance," and he went on to say, "the face of man has suffered and grieved for thousands of years and it is still a field of ruins." He's accepting the romantic idea of the ruin but you have a different attitude about the human face. You see it as a space of regeneration and not a field of ruins.

A field of ruins? No, I see it as a portal, a sort of opening. I see eyes as being doorways. I know it is cheesy but that is the way I see it symbolically. My *Rabbit Holes* function like that, and so does *Sarah Altmejd*.

The upside-down heads from 2012 on, the ones that use glass eyes, seem to be different. I read them as more frightening.

You might be right. When I make these reversible heads, I work more or less realistically, making sure that I define a strong identity. Then I turn the head upside down and use the eyes as a reference point to build a new face. As I make a new face, I make a new identity and I forget about the old identity. 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 more direct and one that is more hidden. And anything that has a hidden identity is both really powerful and, in a way, creepy.

Maybe it's that creepiness I'm responding to. You have to look twice. You're seeing two things but they have an intriguing level of integration. Some kind of transition occurs. Do you have to work hard to orchestrate that sliding connection?

I work until I get it. What I said before about every stage being perfect doesn't work with this series. I need to achieve something, and the piece is done once that happens. It contradicts what I told you before about my process but I've never been embarrassed about contradicting myself.

Recently you have been able to achieve a kind of grandeur. I'm thinking of the piece that looks like your version of the *Victory of Samothrace* in the Louvre. You seem to be going after a sublime combination of awe and fear. Is that a conscious invocation?

Yes, it's conscious.



The Swarm, 2011, Plexiglas, chain, metal wire, thread, acrylic paint, epoxy gel, epoxy clay, acrylic gel, granular medium, synthetic hair, plaster, polystyrene, expandable foam, sand, assorted minerals including quartz, amethyst, pyrite, glue, pins, needles, overall dimensions 102.5 x 244 x 84.5 inches. Copyright David Altmejd. Photograph: Jessica Eckert.

The other thing that has emerged in the last few years is a lightness, a kind of airy lift. *The Swarm*, 2011, comes to mind. That work seems to be less about presentation than about atmosphere and mood. Is that because you are using different materials or is that something you're intending?

What do you mean, it is less about presentation?

Well, a lot of your pieces played into display culture and architecture. That is still evident but now there is something that seems more about the quality of atmosphere than the object itself.

In these pieces, like *The Swarm* for example, the architectural structure is transparent. Maybe that's why you read it as more atmospheric. You don't really pay attention to the structure because it is invisible, so everything looks immaterial, as if everything was disintegrated and floating. But it's not. The physical reality of the object is such that every little thread in the piece that looks like it's floating is held by a lot of structure, a lot of Plexiglas. There's a preoccupation with big engineering.

In the linear pieces, you have the chains acting like lines. They seem to be like three-dimensional drawings, or some version of a drawing in space.

That is how I thought about them since the beginning. I started this series of Plexiglas boxes with gold chain, I would only use gold chain and I saw the pieces as geometric drawings in space. Then when I started using different materials I added colours, threads and bits of plaster, and the whole thing became more like a painting in space.

In fact, an untitled piece from 2009 has a linear sense that makes me think of a Julie Mehretu painting. It's like an exploding or radiating cosmology of lines.

That is actually the first one that I made with more things than gold chain.

Is that simply a natural evolution, that it would get more complex?

Yes, and if it takes a new step it also justifies the existence of how it was before. The fact that I was able to enter the new territory of these multimedia pieces in Plexiglas justified or proved to me why it was so important to make those gold chain pieces. And the gold chain pieces offered me a doorway into a new space inside of which I could have an infinite number of new possibilities. I think that is what drives me. When I work on something I have to have the feeling that it is also a doorway to a new space, that it has this potential of bringing me somewhere else.

But at the same time you are doing these reduced and minimal chicken wire pieces. They get away with as little as they possibly can.

After making a lot of complex, heavily layered pieces with gold chain and detailed coloured thread, a very simple, modest and light gesture can be extremely precious. It has its place in the world. Making a piece that is essentially a little ball of chicken wire is a deep gesture.



The Architect 1, 2011, detail, plaster, wood, polystyrene, expandable foam, burlap, latex paint, 96 x 39 x 18.625 inches. Copyright David Altmejd. Photograph: Jessica Eckert. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

I want to talk about some bodies of work—and bodies seems to be the right word. Where did the “Watchers” and the “Bodybuilders” come from?

I don't know where the *Bodybuilders* came from. Mostly what you see if you look at the history of sculpture is standing figures, and so I felt it was worth exploring because it was already present in my work. I decided to make plaster figures, using a very fundamental material that is part of art history and then I decided to use the figure's hands as a way of displacing material on the body itself. So the figure ends up looking like it's using its own hands to take plaster from its calf or its leg and dragging it up to its shoulders to make its shoulders bigger. It ends up having the power to transform its own shape, its own body.

So the “Bodybuilders” are in the process of reconfiguring themselves, of pulling themselves into being?

I like the idea that the work itself possesses the power to transform itself. If you look at the Plexiglas box from 2009 that you mentioned with some floating figures, that Julie Mehretu thing, there is a lot of thread inside. If you follow the thread you realize it is coming from spools that are in the piece itself. So the piece contains the material that it uses to shape itself. The piece is self-generating. It's more alive. The *Bodybuilders* function like that. They use their own hands and then I added casts of my hands, so the body is covered with hands that are reshaping it. I call them *Bodybuilders* because that is what they literally are. But then something happened. I began thinking that the figure is taking material from the lower parts of its body and dragging it upward using a fundamental sculptural gesture. It brings material upward as a way of trying to transcend material and make the object look lighter. It ends up detaching itself from the floor. In the process, *the Bodybuilders* had accumulated a lot of material behind their shoulders to the point that this mass of material behind the object looked like wings. *The Bodybuilders* had transformed themselves into winged angel figures. I liked that and I ended up with a series that I decided to call *Watchers*. In my mind, that is another word for angel.

But you also connect it to sensuality. In *Untitled 1 (Bodybuilders)*, 2010, the figure auto-eroticizes himself in pinching his right nipple. You set up a very complex read in that piece because he has a pleasing pink and white palette but his legs have these gaping Francis Bacon-like mouths. And the hand on top of his head holds a body part that looks like a prop from a horror movie. How are we to read those competing messages in that piece?

I don't know that they are competing.

Let's try another piece. The *Figure with Black Arms and Strawberry*, 2013, grabs his own ass in an action of self-making, as if he were putty in his own hands. There are compelling gestures in these works. Their making themselves becomes an act of sensuality, too.

The piece that preceded *the Bodybuilders* is called *The Egg*, 2008, and it shows a couple made of plaster engaging in sexual activity. There are a lot of hands with which they are touching themselves in a sexual way but at the same time they are transforming themselves. So the hand that is represented as some sort of sexual tool is also the hand of the sculptor who is making the object. I like that ambiguity.

In *The Egg* the lavender-coloured man who is blowing his partner has hands on his back that become small wings. It's as if the piece is saying sex becomes holy.

I'm not disagreeing with that idea, I just wasn't thinking about it in connection with this sculpture. But for me sex is definitely interesting to think about in a biological way because it is an essential part of the cycle. Also, when I am grabbing matter and shaping a body as a sculptor, there is something sexual because I am actually touching every part.

In *Architect 1*, 2011, you get a richly ambiguous read, because the angelic figure could be from Rilke's "First Duino Elegy," which says every angel is terrifying because it serenely disdains to annihilate us. The hands in that figure look like they're about to pry open the chest cavity of the figure on the wall.

Absolutely. I went from *the Bodybuilders* and dragging material upwards to create wings so they could become *Watchers*, and decided to use the same logic directly on the wall. I dragged mate-



The Architect 1, 2011, plaster, wood, polystyrene, expandable foam, burlap, latex paint, 96 x 39 x 18.625 inches. Copyright David Altmejd. Photograph: Jessica Eckert. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.



Untitled 6 (Rabbit Holes), 2013, resin, polystyrene, expandable foam, epoxy clay, epoxy gel, plastic beads, quartz, synthetic hair, acrylic paint, overall dimensions 4.75 x 13 x 7.5 inches. Copyright David Altmejd. Photograph: Lance Brewer. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

rial from the wall to a point where it would accumulate and shape a body. It looks like a body is shaping itself on the wall using material that comes from the wall itself. That's why they're called Architects. But in that case they also ended up looking like angels, which is a result of the process. I love that because it produced a figure that is deep in human culture. The winged figure has been represented since Mesopotamia and the invention of language. It has always been there. I thought it was fantastic that as a sculptor the result of grabbing and displacing material would be to realize something as fundamental as the winged figure of an angel.

***Untitled 4* is figurative from one angle and when you move around it, the read becomes architectural. Your work has often played inside the terrain of architecture. Forms can turn into architecture; so can bodies themselves.**

That interests me a great deal because if the body becomes an architecture, if the body starts having holes and staircases, then it enables you to imagine existing inside of it. It draws attention to the inside space and transforms it into a container, something that you could imagine inhabiting.

Your work is self-generated. In doing one kind of work recognitions come that suggest other directions in which to move. But when I look at those open mouths I think of Francis Bacon and Tony Oursler. How do you want the mouths to be read in a piece like *Untitled 1*, (*The Watchers*) from 2009?

I was at a point where I wanted to make something visually very powerful. It was about creating an object that would have a strong effect. I had the need to make something that was going to exist intensely in the world, a little bit like fire. I was thinking of fire a lot. The specific decision to use open mouths was really a way to help me make an object that would have that sort of power.

When I look at a piece like *Son 1 (Relatives)*, 2013, I see echoes of Rodin's *Walking Man*, 1877, except your figure is upside down and his feet are on the ceiling. Then in *Figure with Cantaloupe Shoulders*, 2013, the gesture of the arm and the finger is similar to one of the figures from *The Burghers of Calais*. Were you consciously invoking Rodin?

Probably. I never reference something consciously but I've been visiting museums since I was a kid, so it's really ingrained and has helped shape my vocabulary. But I rarely make specific references to art history, except for the piece you mentioned that looked like *The Victory of Samothrace*. That was a deliberate echo because I had made it specifically for my retrospective in Paris. It was the introduction to the Paris show and I had the staircase as a place where I could place it. So I did want to make references to *The Winged Victory*, which is one of the most elegant objects I have ever seen.

Rodin raises a question about the function of the fragment in art. In the 1995 Venice Biennale, René Clair curated an exhibition on the body and art. He included two sets of vitrines: in one were cast body parts by Thomas Eakins, and in the other were many plaster hands and appendages by Rodin. It made me realize that the parts were sufficient to stand in for the whole body. How do you view the idea of the fragment in your work?

Certain fragments can be whole and others not. It depends on the fragment. It reminds me of the way we were talking about the head; the head contains everything in my mind, so it is whole. It is the whole universe. One head contains infinity. I think that the hand, too, is complex and has enough potential. If you think of the hand of the creator, it becomes symbolic of every thing we can create. Certain fragments have that potential. For me the hand is symbolic of building infinity. I wouldn't see that in a foot or an ear.

When you made *le spectre et la main*, 2012, that piece with zebras in front, were you thinking about Damien Hirst?



Installation view, "My Little Paradise," May 26–September 15, 2013, Middelheim Museum, Antwerp. Copyright David Altmejd. Photograph: Joris Cassaer. Courtesy Xavier Hufkens, Brussels and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

Oh no. That piece is in the same line as *The Swarm*. It is made of thread and a few other materials. So those zebras look like they're disintegrating, or you don't know if they are disintegrating, or reshaping themselves, or crystalizing. I wasn't thinking of Hirst because when he places an animal he cuts it up. I feel like the zebras in my piece are actually born from the insides; they have been crystalizing. They started with nothing and they have been growing. It is the opposite way from Hirst's process of fragmenting things. My piece is shaping itself.

Where did the idea for the fruit cornucopias come from?

I felt at one point that my work needed a new energy. I felt exactly like you might feel when you are sick, or hung-over. It might sound really silly but the work needed vitamins in the same way that a body feeling under the weather does. So I decided to integrate fruits inside the work as a way of injecting a new energy, a new colour, some humour and a new texture. It ended up working the way I wanted.

Now the human and fruit and vegetables are hybridizing in the same way that humans and animals have done, and humans and minerals. Your Nature is constantly finding things in common, and generating transformative moments when one thing begins to show how it is connected to another thing.

Right. When I integrate I must have the intuitive feeling that it is going to open a new space. So if I integrate fruit inside the work I have to have a feeling that in the next piece these fruits are going to create something new. I also realized that the fruit can act as seeds—that's what they are—and things can grow from that. They can also produce juice. I have the chance to let them drip and accumulate new material, make it travel in troughs through the piece. I can play with that and make the juice become something else. So the fruit has opened doors. I integrated them for a very simple reason but then it has become something else.

Is *Untitled 7 (Bodybuilders)* your *Nude Descending a Staircase*?

I say I never reference art history. But I did realize that a body descending a staircase has such a specific position and weight. It's different from a figure walking down the street. When a body descends a staircase it has a very specific elegance that you can't find anywhere else. I thought it could be a motif in art history. The position of that body should have existed since the Greeks, but it doesn't. I can only think of three pieces by Muybridge, Duchamp and Richter. So I was conscious of that when I made my piece.

Does humour play into the work? I always think that Arcimboldo is very funny and there are occasions when your work moves in his direction.

I think humour is fundamental. When I started making work I was really looking up to Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelley and Cindy Sherman. What I liked was their ability to create situations that were extremely dramatic and extremely humorous at the same time. So the viewer would be uncomfortable because they didn't know how to react. Should they laugh or not laugh? I loved that confusion. I see that in David Lynch as well. A lot of my work in art school came out of that attitude and the energy it produced. Is it funny or is it grave? Today the work has evolved on its own and sometimes I forget about the humorous aspect of it, and other times I don't. I remember that is one of the things that excite me, so I reintegrate it into the work like I did with the fruits.

In 2004 critics talked about your work delivering "the repressed underside of our imagination with a certain sense of cheap glamour." The glamour is still in your work but I wonder if it is less cheap than it was before? Is this high-tone glamour?



Installation view, "My Little Paradise," May 26–September 15, 2013, Middeheim Museum, Antwerp. Copyright David Altmejd. Photograph: Joris Cassaer. Courtesy Xavier Hufkens, Brussels and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

I know what they meant by cheap glamour. I think the work is evolving a little bit like a Bonsai. Instead of it being a spontaneous, energetic combination of materials, it's a little bit more layered and more elegant. I don't know that I would use the words glamour or cheap anymore.

It is interesting that while your werewolves may not have been drinking piña colodas, their hair was perfect. Beauty has always played into your work and I don't think you have ever lost that.

It is important to me that they have the power of seduction. A perfect object for me is an object that is extremely seductive and extremely repulsive at the same time.

You have also said that all of your works are an oddity. Do you still feel that?

I'm not interested in making things that I can understand, or that I can control intellectually. The objects I make are able to exist in the world in an odd way. They are not easily graspable. They're even conceptually weird. I like the idea of not being able to position them. I like to think that you can't classify people the same way because every one is different. Everyone is weird and has their own secrets and I like to think of objects that way.

You named your exhibition in 2002 "Clear Structures for a New Generation." You're a dozen years from that naming, and I wonder what has become clear for you and your generation? Is your Bonsai focus a kind of clarity that is generational, or is that your particular journey?

I would say that clarity is something that is actually felt through the work while at peace. I'm satisfied if I'm able to work and be at peace. I'm not interested in understanding clarity in a political or intellectual way. It is something that has to be understood through work and intuition. I mean, it seems contradictory; it should be something that you can describe with language but I like the idea that it is not.

Did the Paris exhibition represent a new level of achievement for you?

The most amazing thing was to see that things I did many years ago were able to live and have meaning. They held up okay and when they were placed next to more recent works, a new electricity happened. Meaning was generated. Because of the specific architecture of the museum, I had to display the work in a linear way. Rather than three huge rooms, it's long hallways one after the other. So I had to think of installing the show as if I were writing a story. I ended up trying to define a creation myth of the work itself. What was interesting was the story I ended up inventing was not chronological.

Your upside-down figure is not a riff on Baselitz but is the figure of the artist?

That's pretty complicated. In the show in Paris the first part is almost exclusively normal standing figures, right side up. The second part of the show is those huge Plexiglas boxes with little universes floating inside. When you walk through the first part it becomes clear you are sharing the same space as the sculptures.

You and the sculptures exist in the same space, which is real space. When you enter the second part of the show, full of Plexiglas boxes that contain universes, it's as if that real space has been confined inside those boxes. Now that reality is in the box, what is the space around the box? It's a new space. What was especially exciting to me as a sculptor was the idea that a new space creates the opportunity to think of a new logic and new rules. I thought, what could happen in this new space that is outside of real space? Then I thought, well, everything is going to be upside down. All the figures that are presented next to the Plexiglas boxes will be upside down because they are not in reality; they're in this new space. That was exciting to me. I don't know if that is clear but everything I just said is how I work.

The last time we talked in depth about your work was 10 years ago. You said then that you wanted your work to say things that you'd never said. I wonder how you have constantly come up with the not-yet-articulated, because I think your work is still finding things that haven't been said. How have you been able to sustain that quest over the decade?

Maybe it is too simple but I embrace intuition and I let it work. I'm not really using sculpture as a way of illustrating meaning that already exists. I'm constantly looking for a loss of control when I make something.

And you constantly find meaning in that process?

As I told you earlier, I use intuition to feel like the work can open itself to meaning. It's not something I can control. I have to feel that what I do has symbolic potential, or if there is narrative, it has to feel like it has a narrative potential. In a certain way, you can say that I fetishize potential. Maybe the most defining thing in my work is that it represents the fetishization of potential.