



David Altmejd

27 January to 25 March 2007
in Gairloch Gardens
curated by Louise Déry

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Exhibition opening and reception Friday 26 January at 8:30 pm in Gairloch Gardens.

Artist talk by David Altmejd on Sunday 28 January at 2 pm in Gairloch Gardens.

David Altmejd is produced by the Galerie de l'Université du Québec à Montréal

with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and Heritage Canada.

David Altmejd: Metamorphosis

The work of David Altmejd compels us toward strange regions, plunges us into the hollows of the imagination and allows us to glimpse a cavernous space where reality can spark its own reinvention. His sculptures present themselves as places of exhilaration, favouring sensory excess. They are a teeming world that distills memory and life, elicits something of memory and something of life. Paradoxically, the works also withdraw into their own recesses; define themselves as a sort of retreat. They exile themselves to the heart of a dense shadow that veils them in slumber, in a state of latency. The image of Jorge Luis Borges's library emerges; the galleries and well shafts, the balustrades and staircases, the bookshelves and cabinets that at once confine and reveal the richness of Babel.

The artist was trained in the 1990's according to the criteria of the North American schools of Montréal and New York and exposed to the aesthetic tensions between the dogmas of Formalism and the shibboleths of Postmodernism. Altmejd scrutinizes the features of several ghosts from artistic tradition—the pedestal, the ornament, the sculpted body, the *gisant*, the *vanitas*, the relic, the replica. This enables him to align himself with the tradition while at the same time seeking to *de*-figure it, to *un*-do its customary figure, to subject it to mirror effects both scintillating and transformative. His work strikes a chord with today's youth through a romantic sensibility based on humanistic thought with medieval overtones. He references legends, movies and characters from contemporary science fiction and graphic novels.

Altmejd rallies the symbol of life around a *homo naturalis* or *homo animalis*, a sort of werewolf which can be viewed as a metaphor of being, divided between good and evil, and of our own destiny in this age of cloning and genetic manipulation. More than that, his sculptures present themselves as a joyful playground, revelling in sensual excess.

When David Altmejd talks about werewolves, he reveals his attraction to the symbolism of crystals and his conception of energy as the catalyst of all change. He expresses what seems very close

to a personal philosophy wherein nature, despite its often-disturbing violence, guarantees the idealized immortality he seeks to express. Thus, after having executed works incorporating plaster casts of skulls, he set about making, with the greatest of care, werewolf body parts inspired by archetypal images from stories, legends, myths and especially science-fiction movies.

Altmejd chose this figure fully cognizant of, yet wishing to keep his distance from, the relationship it raises with the human body: "I've always been very interested in art that refers to the body in a fragmented way, like in Kiki Smith's work... Those pieces are always extremely powerful but they're very familiar in terms of experience. By using a monster body art instead of a human body part, I thought I'd be able to keep the strength and the power of the object but could eliminate the familiar aspect. I felt it was a more interesting experience because it was both powerful and weird. It did become stranger. There is also something complex about the werewolf because he can be a metaphor for being divided into a good and an evil part."¹ These hands, arms, knees, feet and heads—moulded in resin, coloured, then covered with hair and ornamented with synthetic flowers, birds, crystals, jewellery, beads—are enough like the human body to constitute a strict referent to it, a mysterious allusion, to the point of cracking symbolic power wide open. These strips of flesh and heaps of bone would be truly horrific to look upon were they not also magnetic, for they are body parts, remains.

The sculptures of David Altmejd could easily convey the impulse of a desire that clings to the organic and incarnate. "I see my installations as organisms. I start making something but at a certain point it starts making choices by itself," he says. It is the process that interests and guides him: "I like the feeling that I'm losing control and I'm not the one making the choices."² There is a phenomenological dimension to this attitude, resting upon a desire to explore and understand the internal structure of the world while allowing it to impose itself or build itself on its own. This perceptible reason, which supersedes mechanical creation, is a

Cover page: David Altmejd, *Untitled* (detail), 2004, paint, synthetic hair, jewellery, glitter. Opposite: David Altmejd, *The Lovers* (detail), 2004, Plexiglass, mirror, lighting system, plaster, foam, resin, synthetic hair, jewellery, wire, chain, glitter.



founding element of Altmejd's research and, by extension, takes the form of an act of faith in the face of nature.

Just as Altmejd resorts to sculptural archetypes like the pedestal to place himself at the core of art history, he also refers to the abstract notion of the intuition any creative thought requires by turning his attention to energy. He purposely leaves it to the active and aleatory character of intuition to make the work something that has life, something that could not be predetermined or strictly anticipated. "My involvement is to create something that is alive that will be able to say new things," he explains. "The energy of these living abstract organisms depends on the meanings of the work being unresolved, uncontrolled. When meaning is controlled, the resulting object is not alive, there is no tension in a logical system that functions... I want my works to have an intelligence of their own, not just be slave to my meaning."³

These sculptures are a theatre of forms and organisms in mutation whose enigmas and marvels belong to memory and time, although they are bound to be written in the present, in the inescapable moment of our existence assimilated more than ever to the *bios*. On one hand, what is said in this artistic work resounds between the lines of an account riddled with history, but this account nonetheless proves to be centred on a projection of the human — the human being's universal destiny and desire for immortality. On

the other hand, what we experience before these astonishing reliquaries forces us to plunge into the obsessive labyrinths of imaginings that must be evicted from their points of reference to find the *Urtied*, the *re-enchantment* being born from the incompleteness and fragile nakedness of such debris of fallow bodies. Finally, what there is to see, far from latent, invites indeterminate ages, recalls primeval joys, accosts persistent rhythms in the present.

— Louise Déry, Curator

¹ David Altmejd, in Robert Enright, "Learning from Objects, an Interview with David Altmejd", *Border Crossings*, no.92, (November 2004), p.69. ² Ibid, p.72.

³ David Altmejd, in Randy Gladman, "21st Century Werewolf Æsthetics: An Interview with David Altmejd", *C Magazine* (Toronto), no.82 (Summer 2004), pp.38–39.

David Altmejd, born in Montréal, lives and works in Montréal, New York and London. He has degrees in visual art from UQAM (BA, 1998) and Columbia University (MFA, 2001). His work has been shown in Québec, the United States and Europe. He has notably participated in the Istanbul (2003) and Whitney (2004) Biennials, and will represent Canada at the next Venice Biennale in an exhibition curated by Louise Déry and produced by the Galerie de l'Université du Québec à Montréal. In a few years, David Altmejd has very quickly achieved an enviable place on the North American art scene, and the exemplary individuality of his work makes him one of the most significant artists of his generation. This is his first major exhibition touring in Canada.

Above: David Altmejd, *Loup-garou 2* (left) and *Loup-garou 1* (right) (installation view), 1999–2000, wood, paint, Plexiglass, lighting system, plaster, polymer clay, synthetic hair, synthetic flowers, acetate, mylar, jewellery, glitter.