



EMERGING ARTISTS

DAVID ALTMEJD

Jonathan T.D Neil on gothic horrors and crystal methods

'Lycanthropy'. Sometimes the English language can prove fugitive, but after seeing this word more than a few times in the slowly mounting literature on David Altmejd's work, I began to suspect that some of my fellow critics were relying a bit too heavily on a resource that, I must admit, I too always keep within arm's reach when writing. I'm speaking, of course, about Google. And a quick search for 'werewolves' – the term Altmejd uses for the figures of corporeal decay and crystalline growth that populate much of his recent work – returns a site that purports to 'explore the truths and myths around werewolf legends from a scientific point of view.' For those of us not already in the know, we quickly learn that a 'lycanthrope' is someone who behaves like, or believes they are, a wolf.

Consequently, psychoanalysis suggests itself as an apposite approach to Altmejd's work, but this foray into the nether regions of cyberspace, where the myths and legends about werewolves and other Romantic fabrications propagate in full view for those who go searching for them, might provide an alternative reading of Altmejd's eclectic sculptural assemblages – a reading which acknowledges what Jerry Saltz has called the 'Modern Gothic',

but one that does not buy into Brian Sholis's quick acceptance of Altmejd's 'hideous progeny' as all that meets the eye. For what is modern about the gothic at the moment would seem to be its having quickly recognized the mirror of its own message – something along the lines of 'belonging-in-alienation' – in the elastic form of information technology itself. Where else is the 'gothic' today if not online?

We are not dealing with some deep subcultural current then, but with a kind of interface, something very much out in the open. And here we must recognize that Altmejd's work begins and ends with surfaces, the most superficial of which are exactly those decaying werewolves that supposedly bespeak some deeper anxiety over transformation. The depth apparently signalled by the trope of decay and growth – so indicative of processes working behind, or rather underneath, the horizon of immediate perception – is negated when bones bear written inscriptions – as in *Delicate Men in Positions of Power* (2004) at last year's Whitney Biennial – or when so many of the werewolves' heads bear costume-quality wigs. There is nothing behind the scenes here; it is all being laid bare, so to speak. Even Altmejd's pervasive use of crystals – a



system of pure surfaces that are nature's answer to questions of energy efficiency – further suggests that depth is not in play.

To say that the werewolves are superficial is not to dismiss them as trivial, however. It is exactly this promotion of surface to a kind of reigning logic that animates the work. The jewellery, the birds, the flowers, all the items that populate Altmejd's elaborate minimalist-inspired displays draw one's attention over and across the work as opposed to into it. The *mise en abyme* of the works' mirrored surfaces is one more special effect for a 'cinema of attractions', to borrow a term from Tom Gunning. Yet here, viewers search and scan for more bits of information, for more moments of punctuation, and this leaves all the elements of the work, from the werewolves to the LeWitt-type lattice work, in a state of general equivalency. Perhaps this is why Altmejd's crystalline excrescences seem to mediate the juxtaposition between corporeal decay and the hard lines (and high sheen) of such designer displays: though these opposing facets of the work seem to generate some kind of tension, the opposition is not enough to make meanings, only more surfaces.

If there is a formal correlation here, it is in Altmejd's resistance to the well-made. Like so much of what one encounters in

Facing page
Delicate Men in Positions of Power, 2004, wood, paint, plaster, resin, mirror, wire, glue, cloth, synthetic hair, jewellery, glitter, 244 x 488 x 457 cm

Clockwise from top left
The Settlers (detail), 2005, wood, Plexiglas, mirror, glue, synthetic hair, glitter, moulding clay, wire, foam, electric light, 127 x 183 x 305 cm

The Builders, 2005, wood, glass, mirror, Plexiglas, magic-sculpt, foam, synthetic hair, synthetic flowers, jewellery, feathers, paint, lighting system, minerals, 183 x 193 x 259 cm

Untitled, 2004, plaster, resin, paint, synthetic hair, jewellery, glitter, 18 x 31 x 25 cm
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cyberspace, the works display a certain incompleteness at the edges, a haphazard construction that does not reveal process (in which the artist is self-admittedly interested) so much as impatience. Altmejd even claims to 'invent a logic of materials', a phrase borrowed – perhaps knowingly, perhaps not – from Richard Serra, who used it to describe work by artists such as Michael Snow, Yvonne Rainer, Philip Glass and Bruce Nauman. Process for these artists meant elevating the means of art-making to the status of a problem, one that demanded exploration in all media. If the rough edges of Altmejd's work are 'about' process, it is only artificially so. Here process is rendered as a Sign; yet another surface, now worn like a badge.

Work that generates such equivalences – of symbol, of material, of experience – may ultimately have more to learn from Marcel Broodthaers than Matthew Barney, whose sensibility Altmejd is often described as sharing. But Broodthaers was perhaps the first to recognize that, apart from Serra et al's specific investigations, the problem of process was one of increasing generalities, and this tendency demanded critical resistance; thus far, Altmejd's work appears to march under the flag of its celebration.

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