



Left: David Altmejd with Untitled, 2011. From The main, Montreal, Hannah Liddle, January 23, 2015

Below: David Altmejd, The Flux and The Puddle, 2014, view Photo, Richard Max Tremblay, 2015, courtesy of of Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal





David Altmejd, *The Flux and The Puddle*, 2014, detail with heads Photo, Poul Buchard Brøndum and Co. Courtesy of Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark

David Altmejd's Universe at Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal

by Emese Krunák-Hajagos

I was very excited when I heard that the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal was planning a retrospective of David Altmejd's work in the summer of 2015. I couldn't wait to see it. Altmejd is an international artist whose work has been included in important Biennials (Istanbul, 2003; Whitney, 2004; Venice, 2007 where he represented Canada) and large exhibitions in New York, Paris, Montreal, and in Humlebæk

(Denmark, 2016)) among others. He was born in Montreal in 1974 and, like many other successful artists, he moved to New York, where now he lives and works.

The Montreal exhibition fulfilled expectations as it displayed several important works from Altmejd's career so viewers could get an overall picture of his oeuvre. The piece that opened the show was the portrait of his sister

Sarah Altmejd. As he has said, this work is tremendously important in his oeuvre, since he wanted it to be the best sculpture ever, a very powerful, intense work. He shocked viewers with this sculptural approach as instead of Sarah's face, there is a black hole, framed by crystals and jewels, but Altmejd explained that he sees the hole as a metaphor for nothingness, a representation of the universe before the Big Bang. This is a nothingness that hides everything in its darkness. Altmejd's sculpture *The Werewolf* immediately caught the attention of critics. They tried to label him as gothic, or as someone interested in the supernatural – but the artist has disagreed with those terms. He doesn't like speculations of possible narratives of his work either – yet he invented a powerful tale about how his werewolf came into existence. "If a man transforms into a werewolf, it constitutes the most intense transformation experience that one can have on both a physical and a mental plane. In a matter of seconds, one goes from one state of mental and physical identity to a totally opposite one. Right after the transformation is over the monster's head would be chopped off and placed on the table. The head would be so filled with energy that it would be crystallized immediately, instead of rotting." This is a very painful transformation and both beings pay with their lives for this double identity since the decapitated head is both man and wolf. The werewolf heads are often ornamented with chains, jewels and beads, making them very decorative but still threatening, with their open mouths showing canine teeth. This grotesque, cruel beauty that others might see as horrible, seems to excite Altmejd.

Le spectre at la main (2012), a very seductive piece, is also a transformation of an animal but less dramatic. In a large Plexiglas container a zebra runs, really fast, so we see the movement similar to the way photographs try to capture a racehorse's motion but all that shows is a blurry outline of the animal and speed lines in the air. In

this work the miracle happens in front of our eyes, as we almost see this beautiful animal dissolving into the air. Its elongated body is going through a physical change, creating a tension and energy that kicks the surrounding coconuts into floating. The whole body becomes a vision of movement as the zebra is shimmering and almost disappearing. However, by some magic, it remains recognizable. This piece, like most of Altmejd's work, is realistic and abstract at the same time. It is also playful as the intricate vision of the movement and the beautiful pattern of the zebra amuse us.

I let out a loud 'Wow' when I first saw *The Flux and the Puddle* (2012). It reminds me of a museum of curiosities showing a temporary

exhibition on nightmares. The large, room-sized Plexiglas container is filled with hundreds and hundreds of objects that seem to be floating in midair. It challenges the viewer's patience but it is also entrancing with its many small, vivid details. It is overwhelming and mesmerizing.

Even being familiar with Altmejd's work, this is something different, something more – a very ambitious project just by its size. *The Flux and the Puddle* is the sum of everything Altmejd has done until now, a synthesis of the artist's last 15 years, involving the most important elements of his oeuvre in one monumental artwork. Altmejd creates his own universe inside the box, from inside the box. He used it as a studio, literally moving into it and building

his objects in it, creating a unique environment and ecosystem where everything is connected. As he said, "For me every object is an element and the whole thing is one sculpture." The process of making the piece and the energy put into its creation is as important to Altmejd as the final product. "I really understand myself as a process artist," he has explained, "I like it when the piece suddenly starts to make choices itself." He considers himself an initiator, a collaborator, perhaps, who carries out the decisions his art dictates – and loves it when it surprises him. "I seek to inject energy and create tensions in a work because in my mind, tensions create energy...I am much more interested in the objects being alive and ... able to develop its



David Altmejd, *The Flux and The Puddle*, 2014, view, Photo, Max Tremblay, 2015, Courtesy of Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal



David Altmejd, *The Flux and the Puddle*, 2014, Photo, Poul Buchard Brøndum and Co. Courtesy of Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark

own intelligence and generate its [own] meaning.” Through this method this piece becomes an independent entity with its own life force, meaning and intelligence – no longer controlled by the artist.

The Flux and the Puddle fills an entire room and the walls of the room are covered with mirrors. It is hard to know what is real and what is only a reflection, since everything duplicates – creating a labyrinth that’s confusing but also amazing. Altmejd, in the video accompanying his exhibition at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, mentioned that, as always, he started this piece at a microscopic level, accumulating details until the small parts combined in order to build complexity. Everything builds from the inside out, creating itself and its

own history. Making the sculpture also means experimenting since he never plans or knows what it will look like when finished. For example, he makes an object, places it, puts threads through it and start moving, fixing the threads with Plexiglas pieces here and there and at a certain point an idea will present itself for another object and another direction. All the ideas germinate from the inside.

Nature is an important element in Altmejd’s work. All plants come from seeds, represented by gems here, blue seeds coming from blue flowers that are also jewels. The diva’s dress is made of the same blue stones. Branches grow and reach out, produce fruit, and then juices pour from the fruit, like dripping pineapple slices. They are tempting with their sweetness that also

refreshes and regenerates the body. The werewolf’s arms break and multiply as they reach out to the point where he is able to grab the grapes and he eats them, crouching over them happily. All the juices find their way to the puddle. Altmejd explained that *The Flux and the Puddle* is like a human body, built around a heart, and the heart is the werewolf’s decapitated head. Everything is connected to it by thousands of threads that the artist coloured himself, creating a special nervous system so energy can circulate. In this way the life force of the werewolf travels through the threads connecting hybrid bodies and other objects. There are holes on the walls of the container, giving the illusion that it is actually breathing, connecting the inside with the outside.

It is an artificial world that seems organic with organic pieces that mimic the artificial. On one side melons are bursting out of the container, ears appearing on some of them, hinting of conversion into a head. Their hair is transplanted from the werewolf's head. Everything is fragmented, the objects are constantly broken, rebuilt so they become more solid, then broken and reconstructed again. Two large crudely shaped humanoid figures with cat-like heads and long tails are making heads while remarking themselves as well. Their hands are multiplied. There are so many of them, copying the artist's hands, very sensitive, beautiful hands. They are similar to the hands seen in Altmejd's *The Architect*, *Watchers*

and *Bodybuilders* where they rebuild themselves by grabbing flesh from one part of their own bodies in order to build another part. Nothing is final here. Everything is in a constant state of transformation. Life size humans with bloody organs or crystals in their open chests wearing white coats bring laboratories into the space; a hint at biological experimenting that can produce genetically modified beings. Animals and humans are no longer separate in this piece but lovingly united creating a mythology that is old and futuristic at the same time. We live in an age when this kind of new reality, however surprising, is no longer shocking but almost expected. Heads – maybe the artist's – appear in a

few spots, seemingly thinking, looking amazed or unsure of this bizarre world he's brought into existence.

Altmejd said that with *The Flux and the Puddle* he wanted to create "some big drama about wars and sex" and describes his intentions for this piece as "operatic" in scope. He was also obsessed with infinity and exploring the possibilities of infinite multiplication and details. He wanted the objects to have the potential for transformation to evolve and grow. The brilliance of this piece is how Altmejd incorporated all the elements and connected them in an open-ended structure that is gruesome and charming, repulsive and seductive, all at the same time.



Top and above: David Altmejd, *The Flux and The Puddle*, 2014, details. Photos: Poul Buchard Brondum and Co. Courtesy of Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark