David Altmejd's work has always shown a rapt sensitivity to presentation, to how looking is guided by arrangement and apparatus. In his earliest works, pedestals doubled as architectural models, populated with disembodied heads, limbs, and tufts of fur. His latter forms grew in scale to inhabit the shell of gallery spaces themselves. Since 2005, Altmejd has returned to dealing more directly with the mechanics of display in an ongoing series of large-scale vitrines—some nearly thirty feet in length. With built-out interiors and invisible supports, they provide a seemingly stable casing in which the artist's miasmatic vision takes shape.

A confluence of glass, mirror, and shadows, The Orbit (2012) unfolds into myriad reflections and penetrations, enwrapping objects in the midst of transformation. Altmejd’s process is surprisingly responsive and improvisational, as each decision he makes cascades into multiple options and directions. Building chance into the structure is part of his mastery, the ability to delay certain aspects of the construction allows for more information to be squeezed in at the very end, adding density and impact. Close looking is a requirement for Altmejd’s work; each sparkling crystal and delicate chain, each hair on a raspberry or werewolf’s hand, elicits wonder. Every small part acts as a vital conductor of energy within a much larger system. Filled with mutating life forms, these intricate arrangements draw us deep into phenomenological realms. Light, for Altmejd, is the unifying agent of these complexities. But there is plenty of darkness, too. Holes are of particular interest; smashed mirrors and hollowed out heads act as thresholds to disturbing, interiorized zones. Altmejd is interested in where the eye goes, what it is able to see and not see, and where it sits in the body. In physics, “orbit” defines the gravitationally-curved path around an object, an extended field of force. In biology, the term is used to describe the socket in which the eye sits and moves freely. The eye links the body to the world, “but the orbit, without the eye,” Altmejd states, “is just meat.”

Though grotesque, Altmejd’s work is laced with a cheeky, if not romantic, punch of camp, disguised in thousands of surreal and elegant details: take the furry coconut oozing juices, or the purple nail polish on the werewolf’s fuzzy hand. Cast with an array of Queer iconography, from the prism, to the crystal, and a rainbow array of fruit. Altmejd’s reworking of these overloaded forms dislodges them just enough to let them bounce and crash into one another, seemingly for proliferation’s sake. Such costuming permits allusions to artist Lucas Samaras, whose own blend of theatricality and camp stretches deep into the realm of the tasteless and ugly. Tetsumi Kudo’s sexualized and diseased aquarium-bound landscapes also come to mind, for their clumpy biological drive. Likewise the fragile and self-reflective nature of Altmejd’s formations connects strongly to the poetic ephemerality of Paul Thek’s reliquaries. Like these artists, Altmejd is less interested in “things” per se than in how they give shape to phenomena. For him, these include the erotic pull of gravity, the pleasures of being edible, and the radical potential of self-transfiguration. Indeed, the constant flux from state to state inside The Orbit tends to obscure rather than inscribe; “truthness” resonates more as symbolic reference than definitive subject. But coherent representation and identification (here in terms of sexuality) are not the artist’s goal. With his work, Altmejd pushes for a discursive language of affects, intensities, and flows of movement as a means to articulate life.

—David Norr
DAVID ALTMEJD

David Altmejd (1974, Montréal, Canada) lives and works in New York. He holds an MFA from Columbia University and a BFA from Université du Québec à Montréal. He has been featured in solo exhibitions at The Brant Foundation Art Study Center, Greenwich; Oakville Galleries, Canada; and MAGASIN - Centre National d’Art Contemporain de Grenoble, France. In 2007 he represented Canada at the 52nd Venice Biennale.

WORK IN THE EXHIBITION

David Altmejd
The Orbit, 2012
Plexiglas, mirror, chain, metal wire, thread, acrylic paint, epoxy resin, epoxy clay, acrylic gel, synthetic hair, artificial eyes, plaster, adhesive
73 x 252 3/4 x 66 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Andrea Rosen Gallery Inc., New York

The Orbit is a special project for MOCA Cleveland’s inaugural exhibition, Inside Out and From the Ground Up.

Photos: Tim Saharnick Photographics. © David Altmejd