

CORRESPONDENCE 001

DAVID ALTMEJD AND CYDNEY PAYTON

28

Payton: In your interview in Sculpture magazine (December 2007, Vol. 26 No. 10) you talk about the way that your process works and that the story in your work always unfolds after the fact. You're a more process driven artist. And, STAR POWER: Museum as Body Electric was this open proposition and your piece was probably the cornerstone of the curatorial proposition. Here we are a year a later, and now you're in 'giant land,' tell me about that. Giants have become an even bigger extended part of your vocabulary. Can you just talk about from STAR POWER to now, in your work?

Altmejd: In STAR POWER I became comfortable enough with the giant as a frame, for example. In STAR POWER I was very conscious of the idea of the giant, not as a subject matter, but as a reference in my sculpture. Now, since then, I have more and more been able to just use it very loosely. Just as a frame. I forget about the giant. I start with the idea of the giant, but I forget about it very very fast. It becomes just about my relationship to material.

Payton: So the giants now dissolved in to space.

Altmejd: Right, well in STAR POWER they were...

Payton: dissolving in to space....

Altmejd: literally dissolving in to space because they were covered in mirror, so now they're sort of dissolving conceptually. I don't know if I can say that, but the idea of the giant, is less and less present.

Payton: I saw a picture of a recent one from your last show at Andrea Rosen Gallery (May 3 – June 14, 2008), and it was almost like strands of DNA. Very ethereal and...

Altmejd: right, abstract.

Payton: ...and abstract.

Altmejd: It was as if it had become pure process. You know, working on a sculpture of a giant has, since Denver, since STAR POWER, has become just pure process, just pure relationship with materials. No attachment to the subject matter. And so, probably I have reached the end now and I am going to move on to something else. Because I feel like there is nothing left. It just totally disintegrated in to... and I cannot grab that.

Payton: It was so tangible and even though for the installation of STAR POWER, the room was covered with mirrors and the giants were mirror, there was something about them, however, that was about reflection and presence. It was concrete in a way.

Altmejd: Right, I was aware of that when I started working on the project for STAR POWER. I was aware of the idea that there was this kind of contrast between the sort of visual lightness of the whole thing and its physical weight. It's truly heavy. All those sculptures are extremely heavy, extremely physical, dangerous, you can cut yourself on them, if they fall on you, you die. But, at the same time visually they look transparent there is a kind of contrast. I was aware that before I made the project, I thought it is probably going to act that way. The installation is probably going to act

29

that way. But I never expected it to be so effective. I was really just struck by how that contrast was clear between the physicality of the weight and the danger of those pieces, and their visual lightness.

Payton: Plasticity maybe would be the word.

Altmejd: Transparency. As if visually it was a material, but physically it was so material. I don't know if that makes sense, but.

Payton: That does make sense. If you're moving on from giants.

Altmejd: I used to do sort of really intricate architectural pieces with platforms and hidden spaces that I would use to hide objects that I would connect with gold chains. And I saw those architectural pieces as sort of architectural structures that would become like bodies, like organisms. The architectural structure contained staircases that connected one space to another, objects that acted a little bit as energy generating organs were connected with gold chain to make the energy circulate. There were channels that connected one side of the piece to the other. Very much like a body full of organs that are connected and a blood system that connects everything. So, I understood those architectural pieces as becoming organisms or even bodies. It was very interesting for me to start working on the giants, because I thought that the giants acted just the other way totally. It was just a very natural shift because, in the case of the giants, the bodies act as architecture. I was really interested in that very natural shift inside the work. The bodies would become architecture and it's pretty obvious in the STAR POWER installation.

Payton: But now maybe your ideas are dissolving, not to architecture, but to...

Altmejd: ...the figure. So what I am working on right now are figures. I think that maybe I needed to go through those giants. The giants were the passage between the architecture and the figure. They were the very

natural... I realized doing the giants that I really like the figure. I think it is the most amazing thing. The body is the most amazing thing. But in the case of the giants, I realized that it was impossible to identify with the giants because they are just too big.

Payton: Your work is about transformation.

Altmejd: Yeah, right.

Payton: And it's about human transformation; physical, figurative way of looking at the world in this regenerative way?

Altmejd: Yeah.

Payton: It seems that everything goes back in many layers to a regenerative origin. History, philosophy, biology. You're not afraid of death, or fairytales.

Altmejd: I guess, yeah, now I am back to the just life size figure. I guess at the beginning, the figure has always been present in my work, even at the beginning in those large architectural pieces, the figure was integrated to the architecture. Either lying on the platform or fragmented, chopped up. The body parts were placed in different areas of the sculpture, but I always used it as an element inside a larger thing.

Payton: You're making your own mythology.

Altmejd: Right, but now I realize that it has the power. The figure, the body has the power of containing everything. It doesn't need to be just a little part of something; it can contain its own environment, its own context.

Payton: It's become more muscular, too. I saw some recent work and there's more tissue and... There used to be this ride at Disneyland when I was a kid called the Monsanto. At the very end of it you were looking at a

human eyeball, that you had gone on this journey in to the body and, not that you're kind of journeying through the body, but you started from the outside and now you're going in.

Altmejd: You know I've always been interested in complexity and infinity? But I think that we can find it by zooming in, not only by zooming out. Infinity exists in the smallest thing; each cells of the body. I can work all my life just on one figure. Zooming in, working on details, working on spaces inside of the body, making them more complex, hiding things inside of it. But I don't need those big architectural structures. The body contains all those possibilities.

Payton: You're not doing lycanthropes, either any more, right? Or are you going back?

Altmejd: Well, actually I am going back, because now that I am doing freestanding figures I thought, why not go back in what I've done before, and bring it back? Those werewolves...

Payton: So there was a pause in your interest in werewolves.

Altmejd: Yeah, actually the werewolves used to be in my work, but only as elements inside a bigger picture and now that I am doing freestanding figures that just present themselves as what they are without anything else, without any context, without any little architectural thing, I can bring them back. I feel like I wasn't fair to them.

Payton: I was surprised that you were abandoning them, because they do provide you a vehicle for a kind of tension. They're also about transformation They're also histories intersecting. Their history is a history of people misinterpreting the universe, misinterpreting the body. Like looking at a child who might have been born differently and then applying mythology to understand the human body.

Altmejd: Right.

Payton: It has expanded over time into all kinds of other histories. So you want to be back with the wolves?

Altmejd: Yeah, I want to give them the chance of being independent.

Payton: They were always tied to your cosmology of glamour.

Altmejd: I like to associate glamorous things to monsters.

Payton: Why?

Altmejd: I guess there is just contrast. Maybe it's just as simple as contrast. It's just because it makes me able to appreciate the seductive aspect of the glamorous better if it's growing on top of a monster.

Payton: When W magazine did that article on you, my quote that didn't make it into the article, which was that your work conjured up an image of Vincent Price and Audrey Hepburn standing on the street and looking in a Tiffany's window and having a conversation about metaphysics.

Altmejd: Wow, that's nice! That would've been a nice quote.

Payton: I thought it was a great quote, I'm sorry it got dissed. But, it was a good article. Anyway, you just returned from Liverpool. What was there? What was in Liverpool?

Altmejd: A giant, probably my last for a while. Until maybe Seinfeld comes back.

Payton: [laughing] You say that lying.

Altmejd: Exactly, I am. It's probably giants are probably going to come

back inside my work, but in a different state or at a different level. And so in Liverpool, it was a couple of giants. The biggest I've ever done, but they were lying on a platform together. One beside the other, kind of as a couple, but disintegrated together and transforming into a garden. So the whole platform became sort of garden. I think for me it was very obvious that the figures were present because I start with the figures and I eat them up, and I fragment them, and I transform them into something else. So that at the end there is not a lot of figure left.

Payton: That sounds like a love story: this beautiful plinth with these two giants intertwined, dissolving into a garden.

Altmejd: It was really interesting because I actually worked on it really as a garden. I worked on it from inside of it. I was on the platform, within the bodies, within the holes of the bodies just tweaking details.

Payton: Do you garden?

Altmejd: I did when I was younger.

Payton: I read in Bloom (Vol. 3, No. 1 – Winter 2007) that your favorite flower was the daisy on the side of the road, right?

Altmejd: Yeah, the roadside flowers.

Payton: Roadside flowers.

Altmejd: I don't know why, but since I was a kid I always wanted my father or my mother, whoever was driving to stop so I could go pick them. They're nicer than any other flower.

Payton: They're a contradiction again. The geometry is there, the divine proportion is all there, but then they're just laid upon some landscape and they have to fend for themselves. There's something sympathetic.

Altmejd: And also the fact that they're next to the dirty road, the highway, the pollution. And they're always sort of modest, also, which I really like.

Payton: The flowers that you do use in your work always have that kind of delicate... It's not like you're making the perfect rose.

Altmejd: I like the idea of freshness also. A beautiful, sophisticated orchid doesn't really convey that idea of freshness. I like field flowers.

Payton: Well, it doesn't convey the idea that it grew in a landscape.

I wanted to touch a little bit on gender and femininity and masculinity, the fluidity of gender because I think your work always moves back and forth between the feminine and the masculine. How is that, can you comment on that?

Altmejd: On the fluidity of gender inside my work? I think that in my work at a certain level, everything is masculine, just in terms of the figures. The figures are pretty much always male. I'm really interested on the masculine and feminine when you zoom in. Like when you actually look at details in the work.

Payton: Well biologically, there's a moment in your formation where you're kind of neither; you can move in either direction.

Altmejd: I like the fact that everything that I make contains both, in a way. And just for the simple reason, I see energy there and I see contrast. I see energy and I see life when something contains both. For the same reason, I know it sounds really simplistic, but I could compare it to something positive or something negative.

Payton: It's more charged.

Altmejd: The way when both things are in one object, then you feel like

there is some kind of energy that's being generated from it. I don't know, maybe it's kind of a weird idea.

Payton: That's the sexualizing of your artistic practice in a way, is to create those energies always?

Altmejd: Exactly.

Payton: Whether it's between nature and science, or masculine and feminine, or myth and reality.

Altmejd: Exactly, exactly. Or beautiful and horrible.

Payton: Beautiful and horrible? You chose horrible over ugly.

Altmejd: Yeah, I just thought that ugly was...

Payton: It's cosmetic. Where as horrible is psychological.

Altmejd: I think that maybe horrible is not the right word either. I am still looking for the right word. Maybe you have suggestions. I just think that ugly is... I would never refer to my work and say ugly. Because I think that even if there's a darker...

Payton: To me, it's beauty and rawness. There's a naked quality to the contrast of beauty.

Altmejd: Exactly, I wouldn't say ugly.

Payton: It's without. Ugly is a terrible word, actually.

Altmejd: It's very simplistic; it's a very dismissive word also.

Payton: Well, it's meaningless.

Altmejd: Yeah, it's meaningless.

Payton: Beauty means everything. It's this composite of... It's just a great word, right? And then you have ugly; it's shrewd, it's sharp. Where as the opposite of beauty should also contain beauty.

Altmejd: Exactly, exactly.

Payton: So, I don't know what that word is. We'll have to come up with the new lexicon for...

Altmejd: Maybe if it doesn't exist, we should try to invent it or something.

Payton: Or try to not use it. Just make it more relevant; because things should only have descriptions that are multi-dimensional, they shouldn't be one-dimensional.

I think of your work as so different from everything else that is out there. And that was my first attraction to it when I saw it. How do you see yourself relating to contemporary art practice? In contemporary art today there is this academicization, everything comes out of the academy. It's meant to fit into a post-modern script and you can see... We're sitting here in New York and I've visited a bunch of shows and I saw 300 things that I can put into my little encyclopedia and for me, you're not there.

Altmejd: I think that I've always been aware, or I have always... Maybe I am not right, but I do think that art is what comes first, meaning is not what comes first; art is the thing that is able to generate everything else. I mean, if there is academia somewhere in relations to art, it definitely comes after art. Academia should transform itself, or develop itself, or kind of organize itself to fit art, and not...

Payton: Well it's meant to create jobs.

Altmejd: Right, my point is that art should not be the result of it, it should be confident enough to feel like it's able to generate meaning, and generate narrative, and generate academia, and generate whatever, you know?

Payton: I don't think that that's what's happening right now.

Altmejd: But I really believe in that. So maybe that's why it sort of...

Payton: Stands alone.

Altmejd: Yeah, maybe. It also probably stands alone because I put so much effort and when I was in art school and I decided that I was going to become an artist, I tried so hard to position myself in a very original place, you know. I didn't want to do stuff that looked like anything else, I wanted to distance myself from my teachers or the artists that I saw in ArtForum, or...

Payton: But the way that your work has evolved, and I'm sure this comes from way before, you know, almost from your core or your childhood, it continues to have the fantasy of play and well it's organized and matteristic, and it becomes all of these things. But fantasy, and a perception of the world as not complete, is something you can move in and out of. It seems to be what has driven the work to its point, it's freedom from the art world polemic.

Altmejd: Yeah, it makes sense; it makes sense.

Payton: Oh no.

Altmejd: But maybe that's going to be amazing.

Payton: [laughing] No.

Altmejd: No?

Payton: Somehow that is not going to be amazing.

Altmejd: Why? [laughing]

Payton: Ok, I'll try it. You're right it could be just amazing. Maple syrup and coffee.

If it could come full circle, I can't wait to see what the next chapter is for you. I'm kind of happy that the werewolves are back. [laughing] Because people believe in them so much. There is no giant culture, right? Except, it's real, giants are real, they're big tall people. Giants exist.

Altmejd: In Stuart's show at Modern Art I've decided to just look back at my work and look at all the characters, if I can say that, that are part of my production landscape, if I can say that. The werewolf is there somewhere inside the landscape, there's also birdmen, and more recently people made plaster casts of my own hands that are made with casts of my hands. So that the hand becomes something that's holding the body, so it's sort of sexual, but at the same time it looks like it's making the body like the hands of a sculptor, it's ambiguous. Those are new characters as well. I thought it would be really interesting to have all those characters meet...

Payton: In Stuart's gallery in London?

Altmejd: Exactly, and become part of the same space as they weren't there before, they were... All the characters were always part of very specific logics. The werewolf existed in one context inside my work and the birdman and such, listed in one specific context. I liked the idea that I would work on each of them in a very kind of equal way and make them meet together. Maybe something's going to happen, something strange. If characters or people, figures coming from different universes met, something kind of weird.