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John Janca, Photographer / Courtesy Rena Bransten Gallery

Oakland artist Robb Putnam, who stitches together creatures using discarded materials, is showing sculptures and drawings at Rena Bransten Projects in San Francisco.

By Jesse Hamlin

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Robb Putnam, an inventive Oakland artist known for big drooping bears, dogs and other playfully disturbing creatures stitched together from scraps of discarded stuff — blankets and baseball gloves, fake fur and plastic garbage bags — has made rats before. But he's never sent a horde of them cascading down a gallery wall.

“I love rats,” says Putnam, gazing at the 55 pouring from the rafters at **Rena Bransten Projects** on Market Street, where his “**Foundlings**” show opened last week. These charming rodents come in many colors and textures: Scotch plaid, robin’s egg blue plastic, the shiny silver of an automotive sun shield. And like Putnam’s other work, his sculptures and his cartoonish drawings, they evoke a mix of delight and repulsion, the private pleasures and nightmares of childhood.

“I’m interested in things that are outcasts,” says Putnam, 43, whose imaginary friends when he was growing up north of Seattle included a 9-foot pink rabbit named Wombly, “these outcast animals that live alongside people. They’ve been very successful, and people tend to hate them. I’m interested in the bits of trash you see on the street, and the rats are part of that world.”

Putnam, who received his master of fine arts at Mills College under the tutelage of **Ron Nagle** and **Hung Liu** — both of whom show at Bransten and recommended Putnam to **Rena Bransten** — has always been intrigued by “things that were cast off and thrown away, and working with the materials to give some creaturely life or presence to them.”

On his website, Putnam aptly describes his animal-like forms, with their scraggly threads and torn skin, as “physically and psychologically vulnerable,” like “monstrously overgrown stuffed toys, wounded stray dogs or imaginary friends. ... Like mutant craft projects gone awry.”

The artist doesn’t know what form these mutants will take before he begins piecing together the detritus he finds in giveaway bins and surplus stores and his own junked cars, used objects with a “history of touch” that he salvages and transforms.

“I just start to play with it. You take whatever interesting accidents happen and begin to make something. I have an idea of the kind of thing I want to make but not what it’s going to look like. I’m trying to communicate a certain emotional presence in them, but it’s pretty intuitive how they come together.”

Looming on the wall visible from the street is a hulking bear with dangling, anthropomorphized arms and feet, a pulsing collage of plastic tarp and bits of stuffed animals, carpet padding and other throwaway things.

The sensuality of the material draws you in, Putnam says, “and there’s something friendly about the character. He’s not overtly threatening. But once you get up close you think, ‘Ooh, that could be skin that’s torn apart. Am I seeing internal organs?’ It looks a little gross in some ways, and you’re kind of pushed out. But then you’re pulled back in, and the second time it’s a more powerful experience. Viewers find things themselves that way.”

For more information, go to **www.renabranstengallery.com**.