

## Robb Putnam @ Rena Bransten Projects

Posted on 27 September 2014.



Detail: Interloper, 2014, fabric, thread, vinyl, thread and mixed media, 71 x 29 x 27"

Dissected pieces of discarded clothing, twisted belt fragments, plastic bags, fake fur and indeterminate bits of rubber are just a few of the elements Robb Putnam cobbles together to create emotion-laden sculpture. Poised between ominous children's toys and sophisticated constructions that radically stretch aspects of handmade culture, Putnam's work taunts standards of taste and propriety. Like Mike Kelley, Elisabeth Higgins O'Connor, William J. O'Brien, and Kathryn Spence, Putnam wrestles shredded hobby and craft materials, clothing, stuffed toys, threads and string into objects that question the prevailing ideas about what is valuable. Rather than employing materials traditionally used for sculpture such as wood, marble, and metal, Putnam's work stands on alternative ground — quotidian entities rescued from second-hand bins, bound, tied, wrapped, and stitched into scruffy mutant forms that move us to humor, pathos, repulsion and play.

Putnam was first recognized for producing gawky, overgrown soft sculpture suggesting mutant animal refugees from a lonely child's night nursery. Only two pieces in the show refer to this three-dimensional body of work. A sort of large martyred bear, nailed to the wall, greets visitors at the door. This is followed by a colorful pack of life-sized fabric rats, scuttling ceiling to floor, down a wall as if possessed by rapacious hunger. The rats initially prompt a primal recoiling. The cheery fabrics out of which the rats are made quickly reverse any such feelings of repulsion and fear. A plaid rat is the province of charm, not terror. And while each rat is a deft, life-like composition of wrapped and bundled materials, it is only in numbers that the rats possess an emotional charge.



Pelt # 10, 2014, fabric, thread, vinyl, thread and mixed media, 12 x 6 1/4"

Small, flattened, thread and fiber animal abstractions that Putnam calls "pelts" indicate a new and promising direction toward pure abstraction. These pelts line another wall, morphing from fetish objects to downhome oven-mitts to stuffed animal road kill. The myriad layers of stitched and bound clothing parts point to a desire for accumulation and ruined promises of comfort and security. While the pelts still refer to child-bears and fantasy friends, the more they move into abstraction the more they interest and inspire. Putnam's small-scale figurative work risks becoming cute, if bedraggled collectibles: punk pelts for the hipster kid. The curious and eccentric combining of materials harvested from a make-do culture is the work's real and abiding strength. Putnam's aggressive, free-ranging manipulation of his materials conjures feelings of loss, innocence and hope.

—JULIA COUZENS

Robb Putnam: "Foundlings" @ [Rena Bransten Projects](#) through October 25, 2014.  
Photos: John Janca