

# Is soft sell enough for these oddball dolls?

Artists add adult angst to plush pals of youth

Can subversion survive mass production?

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At Plushtastrophe, an international amalgamation of, in the words of the show's host, Steve Cober, "the most celebrated plush artists in the world," spidery hand-knit bunnies — some fused liked conjoined twins — share space with pointy-headed sock dolls, their crude faces locked in a bewildered stare.

Hand-sewn creatures such as Scarf Dog, Cardigan Kitty and the Walrus lounge silently on a row of miniature sofas, some of them nursing tiny cans of Budweiser. A pyramid of Stovetops, a felt-grey, bullet-shaped critter with a quizzical eye roll, perches in the corner.

"It's like a demented Macy's window display," says Kristin Weckworth, contentedly surveying the scene. Weckworth is Cober's partner and co-owner of Magic Pony, the Queen St. W. shop hosting Plushtastrophe's first international stop. "Kind of like a winter wonderland on acid."

And just in time for Christmas, too. But first, a little background. Plushtastrophe, conceived by the Portland, Ore.-based artist Bwana Spoons, collects the handmade, cutesy-macabre quasi-toy work of more than 50 artists from the United States, Canada, Europe and Japan.

After showing in Portland earlier this year, the show moved to San Francisco, and then on to Toronto. (Plushtastrophe runs here until Jan. 2.) Along the way, the show has morphed and changed, picking up artists in the cities it visited.

Toronto has been particularly fertile ground. Seth Scriver, the prolific maker of the spiky sock dolls; Tara Azzopardi, creator and social convener for the soft-felt, couch-bound Bud-drinkers; and Tania Sanhueza, who made the Stovetops with partner Derek Hodgson, are among the many representatives in Plushtastrophe of a burgeoning local plush art scene.

Meanwhile, a little farther west on Queen St., Katharine Mulherin Con-



RENE JOHNSTON/TORONTO STAR

Magic Pony, a shop/gallery on Queen St., is hosting Plushtastrophe, an exhibition of 'plush art' — handmade, often creepy stuffed toys. They're created by artists from all over the world, but Toronto is well represented by creators who love the form, even if they're ambivalent about the prospect of mass production.

temporary Art Projects is showing about 20 dolls as part of the broad artistic oeuvre of Drue Langlois, a Winnipeg artist who is one of the component parts of the vastly creative and renowned collective, the Royal Art Lodge.

Langlois and Michael Dumontier, another Royal Art Lodge member, began making dolls as part of their practice several years ago, to go along with their music-making venture, Eyeball Hurt and the Medicine.

The work can be both endearing and unsettling. That paradox is what drives it. "It's about taking a very conventional form from childhood and making it slightly more subversive," Mulherin said. "It can lure you in with child-like imagery, and then introduce a rather adult angst."

Sanhueza and Hodgson are well-ac-

quainted with that idea. Their inaugural piece, a fat-lipped, eminently huggable puffy pillow creature called the Bluebee, became an instant hit in 2001 when it hung in multiple form at Delphic, a Queen St. W. shop.

**Bluebee was imagined as the result of an experiment crossing a blueberry with an ape. Sanhueza says it's 'such a tongue-in-cheek character.'**

Hodgson was interested in the darker notion of factory farming at the time, and Bluebee was imagined as an escapee of a genetic engineering experiment that crossed a blueberry with an ape. "It's such a tongue-in-cheek character," Sanhueza said. "Every time I see it,

it makes me laugh."

Perhaps more amusing was the interest of such high-end retailers as Selfridges in London, which pleaded for a mass-produced run. The notion of a mass-made subversive toy was appealing,

Hodgson said, but the logistics made it difficult.

"With just our little paws, we couldn't do it," Hodgson said. "And really, we had thought of it from the beginning as an art project, not a

commercial project."

At Plushtastrophe, the thin line between art and merchandizing is openly acknowledged, and embraced. Alongside the one-of-a-kind, handmade works of Scriver, Azzopardi, and Sonja Ahlers — creator of the spindly Fierce

Bunnies — are the mass-produced Ugly Dolls, as well as the work of Friends of Yours, a Miami-based collective.

Both Ugly Dolls — as good as their name, the felt, horned creatures are often missing eyes or teeth — and Friends of Yours show how easily the line can be crossed. Both started as handmade art ventures — Friends of Yours began as art students, with large scale plush installations — and turned over into mass-produced product.

Scriver says it's a relatively easy transition to make. The non-threatening nature of a squeezable, plush work of "soft sculpture," as he calls it, fits nicely with the familiar idea of something with which we're all well-acquainted: a toy.

"They can be really easy to sell," said Scriver, who has sold hundreds of his sock dolls. "It fills this space somewhere between art, crafts and dolls."

The difference being, of course, that the mass-produced are mass-produced. "I only make one duplicate, because socks come in pairs. And sometimes I don't even do that," he said. "I like to tell people that these are intuitive portraits of every individual foot that wore them. They're sock spirits. If you're making the exact same thing over and over, well..."

Sanhueza concurs to a point. "There's a certain element that's lost when you mass produce something," she said. Nonetheless, the lure of the larger commercial world is great. "Artists want to push creativity and expression with their work. The emphasis," she said, "is on preserving the essence of that expression" — which, of course, would necessarily be diluted by multiple production runs.

But Sanhueza doesn't see the sacrifice as too great. She's currently working on a business plan to make Hoboyard — the name she and Hodgson chose for their projects — into a full-fledged toymaker.

"I think we can retain artistic integrity, even if it is mass produced," she said. "These are our characters, and the ideas that created them are what matter most."

And then, there's that other consistent feature of the artist's life: Constant hunger. "I can see it from both sides, certainly," said Sanhueza of the eternal battle between art and commerce. "But really, my need to survive overruns my concerns about art."