

STUFFED ANIMALS – A photo poem on the finding of found art

PHOTOS AND TEXT BY ED BOWERS

THIS is just another day in San Francisco where since the '80s, there has been a growing stuffed animal problem. Due to the development of sophisticated video games, computers, and robotic toys that offer a wide variety of stimulation to the old as well as the young, stuffed animals have found themselves becoming increasingly passé.

So many were manufactured during the stuffed animal boom in the 20th century, that thousands of stuffed animal baby boomers now find themselves discarded, homeless, and forced to sit on street corners plying their trade by appearing desperately cute. A few find homes where they comfort those individuals not yet adapted to modern technology and who are still easily amused by artifacts from the past. But many end their lives in recycling centers, garbage compactors, dumps, or, in a worse case scenario, are held captive by individuals with bizarre and exotic sexual fetishes.

As yet, there are no organizations whose purpose is to advocate for the rights of stuffed animals and protect them from the obsolescence that forces them to the streets. Despite that in the past they served as loyal and uncritical companions of children, lonely men and women, senile alcoholics and drug addicts, career criminals, wastrels, eccentric geniuses, sexual psychopaths, movie stars, knuckle-dragging idiots, saints, sinners, garage mechanics, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelists, bartenders, prize fighters, dictators, yogis and veterinarians, they are shoved to the side like a trophy wife who committed the unforgivable: the sin of growing old and ugly.

Bessie Smith once sang a song stating "...you've been a good old wagon, honey, but you done broke down..." and it would not surprise me in the least if, having rearranged her brain cells the previous night in a radical manner by imbibing a bit too much gin, she was suffering from a momentary bout of clairvoyance that resulted in her channeling the words of a song that predicted precisely the fate of stuffed animals in the 21st century. Not that Ms. Smith cared. She was having far too many problems with real men to be able to sympathize with Teddy Bears and Bunnies, but such are the accidents of great art.

Now I would like to draw the reader's attention to the photographs.



Exhibit One: A pile of plush animals is found abandoned on a Tenderloin street.



Exhibit Two: Spending time among stuffed animals can have an effect on them — and on you.

EXHIBIT ONE

My friend Veronica Faraday is sitting on the street in a pile of stuffed animals we discovered while she was delivering newspapers for the newspaper I work for as an art critic. These creatures are distinguished by their size that is approximately 10 times larger than the average stuffed animal a child would have played with in the 1950s or even '60s. This is because they suffer from the condition known as Stuffed Animal Inflation, a psycho-physical malady caused by the psychological stress many of them experience when they finally realize that they are to be terminally ignored. Naively hoping that if they increase their size more people will pay attention to them, they turn themselves into grotesquely cute parodies of themselves. After that they are no longer fit for the cradle because intimate contact with them by a child could lead to asphyxiation. After Stuffed Animal Inflation there occurs a downward spiral where only sexually eccentric individuals will toy with them until the thrill is gone and they are kicked out onto the street like a common prostitute to fend for themselves.

At the left side of this photograph a gentleman is standing stock still in utter amazement that such misery that he is witnessing could ever exist in a rational universe. The sight of so many abandoned, bloated, previously adored creatures leaves him speechless. He is no doubt wondering whether there truly is any justice in the human world and experiencing an existential crisis of faith.

EXHIBIT TWO

Desperation and despair go hand in hand, and some homeless stuffed animals have been known to get aggressive upon close contact with members of the human species. Ms. Faraday found this fact out the hard way. After sitting down with a tribe of homeless stuffed creatures suffering from Stuffed Animal Inflation, upon rising to her feet she was clung to by one who appears to be a cross between a cartoon character, a lizard, and a snake. This scene only goes to show that there is nothing more pathetic and desperate than a cute loser.

EXHIBIT THREE

Now this is the money shot here. Ms. Faraday, having weeded out from the bunch two truly evil stuffed animals, both of whom deserve to be out on the street, is performing an occult exorcism upon them.

Notice the oval light over the evil stuffed octopus' head. All the evil is being sucked out of him in broad daylight as he bows in resignation, shame, and surrender.

Under Ms. Faraday's left arm, a giant, demonic stuffed lobster waits its turn to be exorcised.

I love it when the spirit world channels itself through my camera. At the time of this event my feet hurt and I wanted a drink more than I desired to breathe so my mind was suitably empty enough to be able to take this shot and get one hell of a good look into the workings of the invisible world.

If I play my cards right by publicizing this photo maybe later I can put up a shingle and advertise myself as a medium.

I might make some money for a change so I don't end up hitting the streets like an oversized stuffed animal.

You see, a human being can be as ugly as sin, but if he runs out of money he's worth just about as much as a discarded cuddle bear.

So next time you observe a Teddy Bear or a Stuffed Lobster, think of the suffering in the background of their lives and have some compassion. If this article in any way contributes to that, then I feel I have been a success. ■



Exhibit Three: A supernatural aura appears over the octopus, removes all its evil in an occult exorcism.

Tenderloin benefit district bringing big mural to building on Jones and Golden Gate

A NEW wall mural is coming to the Tenderloin this summer. It promises to be the eye-catching equal of the sprawling, 340-foot-long bicycle adventure on the wall behind Safeway near the Muni tunnel at Duboce and Church streets.

Swiss artist Mona Caron did that one and has been contracted by the Tenderloin/North of Market CBD to paint a mural on the white, two-story building on the northeast corner of Golden Gate Avenue and Jones Street.

The mural will go on the west wall on Jones under the fire escape, said CBD Manager Elaine Zamora who pushed for the project. K&P Sewing Co. operates on

the ground floor where workers can be seen at their machines through the open door at the corner. At the building's east end is a sign over another door for Five Fortunes Sewing Co. The 86-98 Golden Gate Ave. building housed the X-rated Mini Adult Theater before the Jack Sen Benevolent Association bought the 1918 structure in 2001.

The mural is made possible by a \$53,750 Community Challenge grant from the city administrator's office. Each year, businesses can direct 1% of their city taxes to neighborhood improvement projects. Scores of art projects are funded this way. A 1991

voter-passed initiative created the option and set an annual cap of \$1 million.

A \$10,000 City Operations CBD grant received last year will sweeten Caron's budget, Zamora said.

"The artist is now working on a two-wall project in Noe Valley for the Farmers' Market on 24th Street," Zamora said. "I expect she'll get started here in early summer."

There are no sketches available and Caron will create the work as she goes along, as is her style, Zamora said.

"I consider her world renowned," Zamora said.

"She has a vision of the neighborhood rising and she'll have volunteers collaborating during the work, carrying paint and things. It'll be fantastic."

The mural has been a burning idea of Zamora's since she moved into her one-story law office next door in 2001. In those days, as soon as graffiti appeared on the building's Jones Street wall, she and her husband dashed outside to scrub it off, scarcely before it dried. But the Jack Sen Benevolent Association, she said, had no interest in sharing the burden to keep up appearances.

A rusty, overhanging, porn movie sign got Zamora's attention, too. She thought it was dangerous

to walk under — though the Department of Building Inspection didn't agree, she admits. The slippery sub-basement cover on the sidewalk was another danger she brought to the owners' attention. It wasn't until a woman slipped and fell on it that the owners fixed it.

"And they eventually took the sign down," she said.

The mural was an idea she brought when she was chosen manager of the new CBD two years ago. By coincidence, she had met Walee Gon, an association owner who was interested in the CBD when it was forming. He liked her mural idea and delivered the association's approval.

Zamora floated the idea in committee. Soon the CBD board approved it.

Contracting with Caron likely won't cost the CBD a cent, Zamora said, because she applied for the Community Challenge grant, and it was awarded in early February.

The mural may be a removable face fixed to the building. That's being explored and would need owner approval. It definitely will have a protective coating.

"Then graffiti washes right off within 10 hours," Zamora says. ■

—TOM CARTER