

For Immediate Release

Robb Putnam

Visitors: A Mid-Career Survey Exhibition

11 March – 29 April 2023

Opening Reception: Saturday, March 11, 3:00 – 7:00pm

Walter Maciel Gallery is pleased to present *Visitors: A Mid-Career Survey Exhibition* by Robb Putnam featuring an overview of works from the past 25 years. The show includes an early plastic sculpture made in 2006 while Putnam was a graduate student at Mills College, several series of animal sculptures made from found fabrics and mixed media materials and his newest figurative wall works entitled *Orphan Suits*.

Putnam started his career as a painter and began exploring sculpture in grad school when he became interested in new materials and forms. He began using found fabrics that he stitched together by hand to create dog sculptures with specific colors and gestures that defined each animal's presence. Overall, Putnam's work is an examination of his childhood filtered through the lens of his adult experience. The childlike preoccupation with animal imagery is the essential motivation behind creating his animal forms and often relates to my own personal relationship to actual or imaginary animals from his youth. The works are a result of things that both comforted and scared him creating colors and textures as tactile reminders of these memorable moments and relationships. They explore dualities of fear and comfort, connection and alienation, the real and the imagined.

The earliest work in the exhibition is *Wombly*, a large sculpture of the exoskeleton of Putnam's childhood imaginary friend. The work is meant to be both a celebration of childhood and a melancholic reflection on absence like an adult looking back at an important aspect of his childhood only to find a vacated shell. It is made of melted plastic over a stuffed fabric form filled with materials such as blankets, shirts, fake fur, and rags that were later removed from its hardened plastic shell to make it hollow. The removal of these soft materials sparked Putnam's interest in working with the raw fabrics shifting the focus from the outer skin to the inner forms. Putnam began his series of dog sculptures in 2007 with some animals hanging from the ceiling by rope for support and evoking whimsical characters found in stuffed toys and children's book illustrations. Most of Putnam's characters have an intentional physical and psychological vulnerability like monstrously overgrown stuffed toys, wounded stray dogs and imaginary friends. They exist in a state of flux, somewhere between coming together and falling apart. Their skins are both invitingly soft and sensual in nature yet raw, exposed and vulnerable. The construction of the dog parts lead to a focus on the snouts which took on similar forms as a sock puppet. Shown in a cluster hanging from the wall, the playful snouts evoke the exaggeration of cartoons or characters from children's books.

Putnam's interest in animals grew to include other animal forms including bears, coyotes, rats, skunks and rabbits. In these works, he creates emotional subjects that are empathetic takes on misfit characters, both real and imagined. The real versions of these animals are all known to be scavengers, uninvited guests that intrude into places where humans reside. Like the earlier dog sculptures, they are metaphors for outcasts or misfits who are unwelcomed, shunned and perceived to be flawed while hoping for a chance to communicate their plight. The animal sculptures range from free standing to wall-hanging and are depicted true to life size and unrealistic in scale with a distinctions between the stuffed dense forms and the hallowed out versions weakened and robbed of their weight and proper volume. The essence of all of the work implies a former grandeur and prowess that has been compromised perhaps drawing associations to political issues of climate change and dwelling patterns.

In 2015, Putnam's work began to evolve into a more abstract direction with the Pelts series. These works are flattened, two dimensional figures with animated features made from stacked areas of colorful fabrics. They offer a stand-in for companionship on a deeper psychological level and offer emotional support for childhood explorations and trauma lodged in our memories. Continuing the format of working on the wall and exploring hollow forms, Putnam developed a series of figurative sculptures entitled *Orphan Suits* that represent a departure from the literal animal forms and suggest the sense of having once been inhabited

by a child who outgrew them. These sculptures allude to the innocence and delight of costumes or mementos from past Halloweens, parties and sleepovers, though they possess limp limbs and an emptiness inside. Here, the void is not a limitless, ominous black hole but is contained by layers of soft fabrics with elaborate textures that represent an accumulation of past experiences created out of the discarded materials to reinforce a sense of neglect. They also suggest a child's ingenuity to construct with the materials at hand. Putnam's intricate use of stitching brings to mind a tailor or a surgeon's handiwork where a needle can either mend or heal. The implied optimism in each work is shared with remnants of darkness, loneliness and loss we all carry within us. There is wisdom in looking back at past experiences in hopes of embracing and surmounting our vulnerabilities that began in the early stages of our lives.

Putnam received a BFA from the Maryland Institute, College of Art in Baltimore and an MFA at Mills College in Oakland. He is a recipient of a Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters and Sculptors Grant. His work has been included in several museum exhibitions such as *Encounters: Honoring the Animal in Ourselves*, Palo Alto Art Center in Palo Alto, CA; *Peace on Earth*, Museum of Art and History in Lancaster, CA; *New Threads: Perspectives in Contemporary Fiber Arts* at the Laband Art Gallery, Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles; *Sew What* at the Children's Museum of the Arts in New York; *Travelers: Objects of Dream and Revelation* at the Bellevue Arts Museum, WA and *Elements of Nature* and *Larger than Life: Exploring Scale in Contemporary Art* at the Bedford Gallery, Leshner Center for the Arts in Walnut Creek, CA. His work is included in the collections of the Palm Springs Art Museum, Oakland Museum of California, Frederick R. Weisman Collection and 21C Hotels and Museum as well as many private collections. We have represented Putnam since 2008 and his work has been included in five solo exhibitions and several group shows.