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They're Soft and Cuddly, So Why Lash Them to the Front of a Truck?

By [ANDY NEWMAN](#)

A bear with a prominent grease spot on his little beige nose spends his days wedged behind the bumper guard of an ironworker's pickup in the Gowanus section of Brooklyn. A fuzzy rabbit and a clown, garroted by a bungee cord, slump from the front of a Dodge van in Park Slope. Stewie, the evil baby from "Family Guy," scowls from the grille of a Pepperidge Farm delivery truck in Brooklyn Heights, mold occasionally sprouting from his forehead.

All are soldiers in the tattered, scattered army of the stuffed: mostly discarded toys plucked from the trash and given new if punishing lives on the prows of large motor vehicles, their fluffy white guts flapping from burst seams and going gray in the soot-stream of a thousand exhaust pipes.

Grille-mounted stuffed animals form a compelling yet little-studied aspect of the urban streetscape, a traveling gallery of baldly transgressive public art. The time has come not just to praise them but to ask the big question. Why?

That is, why do a small percentage of trucks and vans have filthy plush toys lashed to their fronts, like prisoners at the mast? Are they someone's idea of a joke? Parking aids? Talismans against summonses?

Don't expect an easy answer.

Interviews with half a dozen truckers as well as folklorists, art historians and anthropologists revealed the grille-mounted plush toy to be a product of a tangle of physical circumstance, proximate and indirect influence, ethnic tradition, occupational mindset and Jungian archetype.

Like all adornments, of course, the grille pet advertises something about its owner. The very act of decorating a truck indicates an openness on the driver's part, according to Dan DiVittorio, owner of D & N Services, a carting company in Queens, and of a garbage truck with a squishy red skull on the front.

"It has to do something with their character," said Mr. DiVittorio, 27. "I don't see anybody that wouldn't be a halfway decent person putting something on their truck."

But a truck can be aesthetically modified in a million ways: "Mom" in spiffy gold letters across the hood; mudflaps depicting top-heavy women; flames painted along the sides. Why use beat-up stuffed animals?

One prevalent theory among truckers is that chicks dig them.

Robert Marbury, an artist who photographed dozens of Manhattan bumper fauna for a project in 2000 (see urbanbeast.com/faq/strapped.html), said he had once asked a trash hauler why he had a family of three mismatched bears strapped to his rig.

"He said: 'Yo, man, I drive a garbage truck. How am I going to get the ladies to look at me?' " Mr. Marbury recalled.

Mr. Marbury, who holds a degree in anthropology, added that the battered bear and his brethren had at least one foot in the vernacular cultures of Latin America, where the festive and the ghoulish enjoy a symbiotic relationship. Most of the drivers whose trucks he photographed were Hispanic, he said.

Monroe Denton, a lecturer in art history at the School of Visual Arts, traced the phenomenon's roots back to the figureheads that have animated bows of ships since the time of the pharaohs.

"There was some sort of heraldic device to deny the fact of this gigantic machine," he said. "You would have these humanizing forms, anthropomorphic forms - a device that both proclaims the identity of the machine and conceals it."

Whatever its origins, the grille-mounted cuddle object is found across the country. It has been spotted in Baltimore, Miami, Chicago and other cities.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, the artist in residence at New York City's Department of Sanitation, said that when she noticed the animals on garbagemen's trucks in the late 1970's, she "felt they were like these spirit creatures that were accompanying them on this endless journey in flux."

There are differences, though, between the dragon crowning a Viking ship - or, for that matter, the chrome bulldog guarding the hood of a Mack truck - and the scuzzy bunny bound to the bumper with rubber hose. The main one is that the grille-mounted stuffed animal is almost always a found object - "mongo," in garbageman's parlance. And in that respect it functions as a sort of trophy.

"I always felt," Ms. Ukeles said, "with these creatures that they withdrew from the garbage and refused to let go of, that there was an act of rescue involved."

That is certainly true for Julio Hernandez, a laborer for Aspen Tree Specialists in Brooklyn.

The GMC chipper-truck he rides in is graced with 11 figurines, each defective in one way or another - Hulk Hogan with both hands missing, a Frankenstein monster with a hole in his head, a nearly disintegrated black rubber rat. "People throw them out because they're broken," Mr. Hernandez, 38, said in Spanish. "They catch my attention."

A few months ago, Roberto Argueto spotted a floppy doll in the gutter near the headquarters of Sasco Construction in Brooklyn. The doll had brown

pigtails, a white bonnet and the bluest eyes. He hung her from the front wall of the flatbed of his truck with a coat hanger, and he named her Margaret.

"I like the doll," said Mr. Argueto, 39. "She's pretty."

The flatbed carries some unforgiving payloads - scaffolding, bricks, sandbags - but Mr. Argueto protects Margaret.

"When I put something back there, I try to cover her," he said.

For all the reclaimed toys that are fussed over, though, there seem to be at least as many that are mistreated: tied to grilles in positions that recall the rack, and exposed to the maximum amount of road-salt and mud-spray.

Why do this? Whence the urge to debase an icon of innocence?

This is the true mystery of the grille-mounted stuffed animal, and it is here that the terrain gets heavily psychological and a bit murky.

Ms. Ukeles, who claims to understand sanitation workers fairly well, having shaken hands with 8,500 of them during a three-year performance project, said they identified on some level with their mascots.

"There's a transference in this," she said. "There's this soft, flesh-and-bone sanitation worker, who knows very well they could be crushed against this truck. The creature could be the sanitation worker in a very dangerous position, so the animal could be a stand-in."

(Stuffed animals, sadly, are verboten on city garbage trucks and nearly impossible to find these days; they were against department regulations even in the 1970's, but perhaps sanitation men are not the free spirits now that they were back then.)

At the same time, Ms. Ukeles said, the trucker, perhaps uncomfortable with his soft side, may feel compelled to punish it.

"Binding a soft thing to a very powerful truck - there's a kind of macho thing about that," she said.

That double identification with both victim and agent of violence may reflect the driver's frustrating position in society. Stuffed animals are found mostly on the trucks of men who perform hard, messy labor, which, despite the strength and bravery it demands, places them on the lower rungs of the ladder of occupational prestige.

The motley animal, then, can function as a badge of outsider status, a thumbed nose to the squares and suits. In that case, the cuter the mascot, the more meaningful its disintegration.

Thus, while Mr. DiVittorio, of the Queens carting company, is quite fond of the red plastic skull that adorns his garbage truck, he will never forget its predecessor, a three-foot-high stuffed Scooby-Doo.

"Scooby was great," he recalled. "He covered the whole radiator and down to the bumper. You can't even imagine how many people took pictures of him."

Life on the road took its toll. "He got junked out riding in the front of the truck," Mr. DiVittorio said. "One of his arms was starting to fall off."

Mr. DiVittorio blamed the rivet-studded wire ties that held the dog fast. "You know how," he said, "if you have cuffs on your wrists, they dig into you?"

Eventually, Mr. DiVittorio said, Scooby's time came: "He went from the front of the truck to the back. We had to throw him away."

Scooby's story lends credence to the theory of Mr. Denton, the art historian, that the grille-mounted stuffed animal draws from the same well as the "abject art" movement that flourished in the 1990's and trafficked heavily in images of filth and of distressed bodies.

"That is part of the abject," he said, "this toy that is loved to death quite literally."

The externalization of an indoor object is another abject trope, Mr. Denton said. "An important aspect of the abject is the informe, the lack of boundaries," he said, using the French critical theory term, "the insides oozing out."

Charlie Maixner, a steamfitter for Deacon Corp. in Jericho on Long Island, has taken the informe to its logical extreme.

On the dashboard of his Econoline van is an adorable and pristine white bear, a gift from his 5-year-old daughter. But the bear is not for the outside world. On the grille is Mr. Hankey, salvaged from a chef's office during a kitchen renovation job.

Mr. Hankey, to the pop-culturally illiterate, appears to be a brown worm in a Santa hat. He is not. He is the carol-crooning excrement from "South Park," where he is formally known as Mr. Hankey the Christmas Poo.

"The bear on the dashboard, that's 'I love you, Daddy,'" Mr. Maixner said. "The other one is 'Daddy, what's that?'"

For that question, Mr. Maixner has a ready answer:

"I just tell her it's Mr. Hankey."