

Shauna Laurel Jones, “Transition Animal”

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And then there’s the bear, of a nature transformed: in myth and in metaphor, claws become ever sharper, fangs all the more grizzly; in plush and in storybook, button eyes are windows into the gentlest of hearts, ferociousness melts into tenderness. Few wild animals have captured humans’ symbolic imagination so much as the bear, and few have been subjected to such a broad spectrum of representations. As such, the family *Ursidae* is a blank canvas for the genus *Homo*, a surface onto which we have projected our fears and fantasies since the origins of our species—and into each next generation, each time we offer a teddy to a child’s eager embrace.

The teddy bear, of course, is a modern phenomenon, dating back only to that legendary day in November 1902 when Theodore “Teddy” Roosevelt refused the unsportsmanlike opportunity to shoot a roped and wounded black bear while on a hunting trip in Mississippi. The president’s show of compassion was immortalized first in a popular *Washington Post* political cartoon, then in the form of a velvet bear sewn together by Rose Michtom, a Russian Jewish immigrant in Brooklyn. Rose and her husband Morris placed the bear in the window of their candy store with the label “Teddy’s Bear,” and soon thereafter the couple found their fortune in the toy manufacturing business, going down in history as the inventors of the teddy bear.¹

Between its reproductions in the narrative, the comic, and the attainment of the American Dream, what of the original, the flesh-and-blood black bear in the Mississippi swamps? That bear, as the story goes,² was old and fat and chased into a watering hole by the hunting party’s hounds, several of whom had already been fatally injured in the struggle to corner the animal and afford the president a moment of glory. So Holt Collier—the Civil War veteran, former slave, and experienced bear hunter who led the expedition—assumed the gruesome tasks of bashing the bear over the head with his rifle, tying it to a tree until the president arrived on the scene, and killing it with a knife after a struggle in the water, finally ending its misery after Roosevelt refused to draw his gun. More than a century and millions of mass-produced iterations later, is there anything left of *that* bear in our children’s teddies of today? Perhaps a little of its essence remains,

¹ But of course it was more complicated than that: at the same time as the Michtoms created their bear, the German toy manufacturer Steiff also started producing plush bears of their own design.

² Different versions of the story include divergent details, but this retelling is based largely on Gilbert King’s article “The History of the Teddy Bear: From Wet and Angry to Soft and Cuddly,” *Smithsonian.com*, December 21, 2012 (<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-history-of-the-teddy-bear-from-wet-and-angry-to-soft-and-cuddly-170275899/?no-ist>).

as if through the process of homeopathic dilution; it is the spirit of a hapless creature who became the victim of circumstance, fallen prey to the strange whims and glories of human beings keen on making meaning for themselves.

That, indeed, is the spirit Kathy Clark makes manifest from the pre-loved stuffed bears she has collected, reassembled, and painstakingly revealed in her ambitious installation *bears; truths...* Like *that* bear, many of these teddies probably also found themselves in a critical place at a critical time: the moment when a child needed a form of comfort that no human caretaker could provide. Referring to the inanimate objects used to fill such voids, psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott coined the term *transitional object*, now virtually synonymous with the teddy bear. In Winnicott's view, there comes a point in early development at which the baby begins to realize that he or she is finite, a separate entity from Mother, who cannot fulfill every need at every instant. The blow of such an uncomfortable truth can be dampened if the child makes use of a transitional object of its own choosing, an object that serves as a stand-in for the relationship with Mother in light of her absence and her requisite inadequacy. It constitutes the first truly "not-me" phenomenon in the child's consciousness, and it facilitates the development of abstract symbolic thought while at the same time providing an outlet for the child's tough and tender love. At some point, however, it is no longer needed for daily psychological security and can be stashed away or tossed aside, a treasured memento or a forgotten crutch.

Clark's teddies include the latter, the used "bear castaways" that have found their way somehow into Reykjavík's charity shops. The distinctive wax coating she gives them is intended as a palpable reflection of the cuddles and/or abuse they once endured, a second skin comprised of the emotions they absorbed from their child custodians mixed with their own subjective reflections. Their experiences thus exposed, some of the bears are then piled up into cairns that guide the way through a surreal landscape of the collective childhood unconscious. Others have been torn apart, re sewn, flattened, tied up; and some are no more now than their fluffy stuffing, ghosts hovering above their wax-encrusted and mutilated brethren. Textual elements incorporated into the installation are testimony to the bears' perspectives on their wide range of human owners. Presiding over this scene that is at once sentimental and grotesque is the figure of the Mother Bear, an animal that draws together Norse mythology with the artist's own symbolic visions. With one paw in the air, and with maps both terrestrial and celestial tattooed on her limbs, she is poised to lead the viewer on a journey of sorts. She is the "guiding beast," as Clark sees her, on our individualized pilgrimages toward empathy, understanding, the past, the

self. Golden teats protrude from her underbelly covered with hundreds of dripping wax papillae; she is life-sustaining and vulnerable, as mothers tend to be.

It seems fitting that the bear would be cast into the teddy's role as the original not-me, the ultimate transitional animal. Whether black or brown, polar or panda, its charisma is undeniable, its power evident. Like a human, it can walk upright; like a human, its behaviors and moods can appear unpredictable. But it is wary of humans, and so we humans have learned to be wary of it. It postures to assert its dominance, and over time we have postured back, be it through bear worship or bear baiting. And now we ask the bear—or at least its plush effigy—to help us define ourselves by way of what we are not. Task complete, we can toss the creature aside and move on to our fully independent adult lives, lives that often take great pains to deny any psychological dependence upon animals.

The “truths” that Clark's glazed teddies reveal are not essential ones; they are co-created at the meeting of bear and human. In inviting us into her fantastical realm where the teddy bear's perspective reigns supreme, the artist also opens the door for us to consider the perspectives of other bears. *That* black bear, for instance, in the Mississippi swamp, or *that* brown bear ransacking a garbage can, or *that* sun bear in a zoo enclosure, or *that* polar bear on ever-thinning Arctic ice. We humans co-create meanings with *those* bears, too, directly and indirectly, intentionally and unintentionally. Clark's poignant installation demonstrates a certain indebtedness we will always have to our teddy bears, but the task is ours to remember our indebtedness and obligation to *those* bears.