

Monsterrific!

Weird is wonderful. Today's most popular plush skips realism and sentiment in favor of

BY MEREDITH SCHWARTZ

The Teddy bear is here to stay, but it's not the 'be-all' and 'end-all' of plush anymore. Some of today's hottest soft toys are not realistic, humanized or even based on popular entertainment licenses. Instead, a free-for-all of fantastical shapes turns into a monster's ball.

"ANY SHAPE CAN BE a monster," says Kristin Daniels, co-owner of Kamibashi Asian Art, Leicester, NC, which sells monsters as part of its Koonin Family Pets line. "When we order we just say 'send us 500 monsters.' We never know what we're going to get."

ANIMATING INFLUENCE

Where is all this new weird coming from? In part from kiddie characters' old friend, cartoons. But this

is not your father's Saturday morning. David Horvath and his wife Sun-Min, creators of Pretty Ugly LLC's, Edison, NJ, Uglydolls, "both grew up on the same TV shows from Japan," he tells *Gifts & Decorative Accessories*. "Ultraman, Sentai, and Kamen Rider. Neither of us understood who these characters were, and they didn't match anything found on TV or in the toy stores near us. And we couldn't understand Japanese, so our minds would fill in the blanks.

"While Uglydolls don't really look like anything from those old TV shows," says Horvath, what he got from those influences is "the idea that something could just be appreciated for what it is without being connected to a popular TV show, and the idea that something others may consider 'ugly' could be seen as something unique and special." That said, the growing American popularity of Japanese-style cartooning in anime and manga shows there's life in more direct spin-offs, too.

Meanwhile, American animation is following suit, with blockbusters such as *Monsters Inc.* and *Shrek*. And yesterday's fright is today's friend: following the trend in adult books, movies and TV, especially the popular vampire genre, these days monsters are more apt to be the





f personality and imagination.

hero than the villain, perhaps helping children overcome their fear of the unknown.

Daniels says, "People who buy the monsters here I'm sure are influenced by anime and manga. Sure, artists are inspired by Japanese art, but then they make their own art as well." Interestingly, the cultural influence goes both ways. Daniels adds, "In Japan the monsters are huge. When we get orders from Japan it is 80, 90 percent monsters."

ADULTS, KIDS AND IN BETWEEN

As children "age out" of pure play faster, or at least the willingness to call it by that name and do it in public, quirky plush that doubles as pillows and expressive room decor is popular with tweens, teens, even hip adults. Daniels confirms, "Our

products basically appeal to all ages." Horvath adds, "The truth is, Uglydoll is enjoyed by all ages, male and female pretty much equally. Kids make friends with them, professionals buy them as gifts for other adults, pre-teens and 'tweens' grab them up just as fast, teens collect them and wear the smaller clip-ons on their bags, and adults decorate with them ... actually adults make friends with them, too. This is the way it's been since we've started and we're really pleased to see this continue! Our fastest growing demographic is everyone." This is a welcome development for parents fighting the 'age-compression' trend; too-grownup (and sometimes too sexy) toys for tweens, as well as those following the current craze for decorating their kids rooms in design-driven, and pricey, fashions.

Despite Horvath's egalitarian enthusiasm, "ugly" plush particularly appeals to boys, at least according to "Guys and Dolls: An Ugly Remake," a recent article in *The New York Times*. The article speculates that the appeal may be the creatures' own largely masculine gender,

To page 50

(Top) The Koonin Family Pets monsters are handmade and one-of-a-kind. Each comes with a birthday and motto. \$10. **Kamibashi Asian Art**, Leicester, NC. (828) 683-7994.

Reader service #812; (Bottom, left to right) Blinky stands about 12" high. \$15. **DooDolls** dist. by **macFABhome & Interior Excessories**, Toronto, ON, Canada. (416) 504-8047. **Reader service #819**; New for 2008, Uglydoll Cinko character is afraid of water. 14". \$20. **Pretty Ugly LLC**, Edison, NJ. (908) 620-0931.

Reader service #818; Pirate Pooki comes in mini size. Coordinating bag available. \$24. **Pooki & Co. USA**, Wimberley, TX. (800) 640-9676. **Reader service #813**; Based on the character "Billy" from the SaucerNauts Series One figure line, this plush toy is limited to a production run of 500 pieces worldwide. 6 1/2". \$20. **SaucerNauts**, Baltimore, MD. (410) 937-5404. **Reader service #817**; Kimochi Emotion Dolls are full of feeling — literally.

Made of felt and polar fleece, these unusual plush companions contain plush emotions that can be placed in and out. Square, \$40. **TOT Industries/Kimochi Life Inc.**, San Anselmo, CA. (415) 454-4600. **Reader service #821**; Tattoo Doodle Monster. Call for prices. **Play Along**, div. of **Jakks Pacific**, Walnut, CA. (877) 875-2557. **Reader service #822**



May 2008