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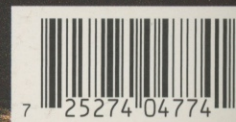
J. Morgan Puett,
Craft revival

SPARKLE...

Sequins,
Tinsel

SMILE...

St Catherine's Day,
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THE FABRIC OF YOUR LIFE: TEXTILES IN FASHION, FINE ART, INTERIORS, TRAVEL AND SHOP



Eccentric circles

J. MORGAN PUETT'S SIMPLE LIFE IN MILDRED'S LANE



In 1997 the fashion designer J Morgan Puett quit her life in New York to establish an artists' colony in Pennsylvania. Ten years in the making and continually evolving, Mildred's Lane is a modern take on simpler times.

Nothing in J Morgan Puett's life goes unstyled. A trip cross-country begins by dressing up the car. 'I travel in quite a baroque way,' she says. 'I take all my silver and glassware and my vintage fabrics. My luggage has to look gorgeous.'

At home in Pennsylvania, even the fridge contents are corralled into arresting arrangements. Today's composition includes a head of broccoli balancing on a silver candlestick and carrots cascading out of a tool bag, the shelves covered with antique tablecloths. 'It's a great way to use your grandmother's linens,' Puett, 51, explains. 'Conservationists freeze textiles to protect them, so it's a very practical thing to do. You can preserve them and show them off at the same time. And you will never be embarrassed about your fridge again.'



Everything Puett touches has her own indelible mark. In the 1980s and 90s, when she designed fashion in New York, people loved her stores as much for their idiosyncratic decor as for her original and eccentric clothes. In one venue she featured a cement-mixer and a charred wooden bed; in another she covered the floor with dirt and relished the fact that her customers (who included Brad Pitt, Michael Stipe and Suzanne Vega) got covered in muck while trying on her Amish and Depression era-inspired clothes.

When her fifth and final store closed in 1997, she petrified all the remaining clothes in beeswax and transformed them into still-lives (today sold as art works by Alexander Gray Associates in New York). Then Puett, who trained at the Art Institute of Chicago (where she is now a faculty member) and her partner, the artist Mark Dion (whom she refers to as 'Peabody' and whose work is collected by the Tate), embarked on a new project. They decided to create an art colony - ▶



'somewhere young artists and students could come and stay and locate their own creativity. It's like a little American Bloomsbury Group.'

It has taken 10 years to set up their self-styled art camp on 96 acres of hardscrabble land in north-eastern Pennsylvania. For the first two years, she and Peabody (who remain the best of friends even though they are no longer romantically involved) lived in a 10 x 14ft horse shed, with no running water or electricity, while Puett drew up plans for the house. The result is a three-storey structure made of rough-cut hemlock (an abundant local wood) and based on the vernacular of local barns and grange halls. Inside is a large library, a dining area and four bedrooms, including a magical indoor/outdoor sleeping porch whose slatted wood walls and hinged pop-up windows make you feel as if you are sleeping in a treehouse.

Surrounding the house are a motley bunch of outbuildings that are gradually being transformed into cosy cabins where artists and writers



can stay, plus an old barn that houses Puett's petrified clothing archive, and a little 1830s house that looks as if one good gust of wind would take it down. This was where Mildred Miller, the former owner of the property, lived until her death in 1986. In her honour, Puett has named the art colony Mildred's Lane.

Inside the main house, every room is a living, breathing art installation. One of the most beautiful is the kitchen/dining area with views in three directions over the valley. Puett describes its aesthetic as inspired by 'an old sewing factory'. It has a polished concrete floor, bare lightbulbs hanging from the ceiling and blue steel panels that line the walls and ceiling.

The inspiration for the library is the mill factory and 'how they constantly burn down', so the pine floor planks were hand-charred, while the furniture includes industrial chairs and a table made from patches of tin. 'My philosophy is very Gesamtkunstwerk,' says Puett, ▶







who is wearing an old boiled-wool jacket upside down to give it a new lease of life. 'My life is art. Being is my practice – eating, making, building. Being conscious of everything around you.'

Even the stair is designed in an algorithmic pattern based on her antique flour-sack collection. The result is a cascade of seemingly random steps of different sizes, which makes walking up and down an exercise in intense concentration. 'I like an environment where you don't take anything for granted,' she says with a mischievous grin.

Most of the furniture is sourced from flea markets. 'I love decay, stains and mould,' Puett says, flopping on to a patched couch as its arm plops off. Many of her old store props appear in new guises. For instance, the canopy over the cast-iron bed on the porch is an old burlap dressing-room tent. 'I am against disposability,' she says. 'I readapt my old things into new things.' In this way, a nightgown



becomes a tablecloth and flour sacks slip-cover the dining-room chairs.

Both Puett and Peabody are obsessive collectors. 'We shop and collect for each other all year long and then exchange the results between Christmas and New Year,' she explains. Dotted around the house are groupings of their favourite things. A flotilla of wood boats hug the upstairs landing, a series of giant wooden mallets, like chess pieces, march up the eccentrically uneven stairs, oil cans line the kitchen window ledges, and framed over the bathtub are a year's worth of nail clippings and two plaited pigtailed from Grey Rabbit, Puett and Peabody's eight-year-old son.

It should be no surprise to discover that cleaning this house and its prodigious contents takes more than a week, and while most would find that a nightmare, Puett is delighted. 'I use cleaning as an opportunity to rearrange,' she says. 'The house is forever emerging. It can't be finished. I'd die.' ●●● **Lucie Young**