

## J. Morgan Puett at Alexander Gray

In Alexander Gray's Chelsea space, enterprising installation artist and fashion designer J. Morgan Puett filled two rooms with various objects, many tidily sealed in fragrant beeswax, from the SoHo clothing store/workshop she operated until 1997. As Puett explains in her folksy Web site, her father was a third-generation beekeeper and her mother a painter, so bees and the artistic bent are surely in the genes. The Georgia native arrived in New York in 1988 and participated in the SoHo art scene, hosting various art-world events in her workshop.

Visitors to the show at Gray were greeted by a window painted with old-fashioned black and gold lettering that read:

"J. Morgan Puett / Wholesale/ To the Trade Only" (which, with the dates 1985-1997, was also the exhibition's title). This glass storefront-turned-vitrine was half filled with stacked fabric along with buttons, spools of thread, bits of beadwork and swatches of lace.

Beyond this entry was a sewing station built for two, its absent occupants identified as Huici Liang and Jaime Montano by timesheets and paychecks. The sewing machine was silent but the light was on. There were Huici's tools and personal effects: pincushion, sewing machine, coffee mug, sweater. Across from Huici's station, Montano's table displayed his framed work permit, passport and birth certificate along with a portrait of him wearing a smock in Puett's

pattern room. His portable CD player, coated in wax, rested on the table. A yellow silky waxed gown was laid across both workstations, completing an homage to the people who worked there and the fruit of their labor. Continuing on the time-capsule tour, there were rolling racks of Puett's signature loose-fitting, "shabby chic" clothing in cream, yellow, peach and burgundy natural dyes with dangling Kraft paper tags, all dipped in wax.

Waiting in the room beyond the workshop was an enormous

table that served as an altar to time, fashion, business and processes past. Papers were piled high and bolts of fabric stowed below. The wax-dipped documents included canceled checks and tax forms, neatly bundled. The back wall was laden with frames and objects forming an intricate tapestry of Puett's past. These included drawings, fabrics, photographs and even a framed check to Puett from her husband and occasional collaborator, artist Mark Dion, in the amount of \$4,250, dated 9/4/1996 with "debt repay" on the memo line.

The wall also displayed a shelf with jars of bark, herbs and dark liquid, likely used for dyeing the clothes and now serving as reliquaries. Above the jars, antique wooden rulers, a French curve and a T square were artfully arranged to frame tools of the pattern-making trade. The setup included a hanger and the prominent display of the company crest, dominated by a bee and crown.

Puett's archive-turned-wax museum recorded a bygone time, evoking an art district now given to fashion boutiques. In Chelsea's burgeoning gallery district, this historical arc provided ample irony.

—Tracey Hummer



View of J. Morgan Puett's installation "Wholesale: To the Trade Only 1985-1997," 2006; at Alexander Gray.