

DON'T MIND ME. I'M JUST MAKING THE WORLD.

No, this isn't laundry, this is living art.
Meet the Minister for Comfort, J. Morgan Puett.

Words [Aaron Hicklin](#) Photography [Guzman](#)

Puett on her continuously evolving stage. Clothing worn by Puett in this feature is created and made by J. Morgan Puett.



The story of Mildred's Lane belongs to two women. The first is Mildred Steffens who lived in a small farmhouse deep in the Pennsylvania woods where she died in 1988 at the age of 86. The second is J. Morgan Puett, a furiously inquisitive artist who stumbled on Steffens' vacant property in 1997. "I fell in love like you fall in love with a person," says Puett, snow twirling past the window, and a fire crackling in the grate. "I remember when I put my foot on the ground, I felt it." She mimics the sound of lightning hitting a utility pole, and faux-convulses, eyes wide. "I felt this jolt up my whole body — it was physical. Later, I lay down and kissed the soil."

We are sitting in a room awash with curiosities — a medical skeleton, legs amputated below the knees; animal skulls; a stuffed toucan; books piled on books. Puett is dressed in her signature off-white smock, worn loosely over a cream turtle-neck. On her face is a pair of round Harry Potter-style glasses. Her smocks seem to nod both to the historical role of women in the home and on the field, and to the artist in her studio. But for Puett, fashion is part of a broader dialogue about modes of work, craft, and community as exemplified at Mildred's Lane where textiles are indices of comfort and part of the performance of home — or what Puett calls "housesness." What could be more inviting, after all, than



Opposite, clockwise from top left: Puette with her *Design Pattern Block*, 2010. An antique bullfighter's jacket and an early painting by Puett, *Two Rivers: The Limpopo and The Nile*, 1988. A convenient outdoor sink, opposite the wall is an outdoor shower. A jar of Puett family honey, Big Island Bees, Ohia Lehua. This page: The amazing Historic *Mildred House* and art installation, *Mildred/ Lillie Archaeology*.



a welcoming dinner set on cotton tablecloths. For Puett the exercise of making a meal, setting a table, sharing a bottle of wine is communal and social. It's the engine of ideas.

It's been over 20 years since Puett and the artist Mark Dion took on the project of restoring and expanding Steffens' property, turning various barns and sheds on the grounds into installations that pay homage to the property's story (many are now available as Air BnB lodgings). Then they opened their doors — quite literally — to artists and fellow travelers the world over. Every summer Mildred's Lane hums with the energy of the people who come to experience Puett's unique way of synthesizing life and art. When they arrive in early summer, each artist is handed a compartment manual that is central to the practice of Mildred's Lane. "It's about redefining really important environmental relationships, relationships between each other and the animal world here, deep in the woods, and it's political," says Puett. "It's political about how we behave as humans on this planet. Everyone is helping work that out here. It's about community including the living world — animals, plants, *houseness*."

In the kitchen, Puett heats up a cornbread stuffing she made for Thanksgiving and fries four eggs to serve on top. "This is my old southern stuffing mix," she says, as the skillet hisses and spits from the shock of the eggs. Food is a critical part of the Mildred's lane experience. Fellows are quickly absorbed into the daily flow of the household by picking cards that assign designated tasks. A card might read "Ministry of Comfort," meaning they are responsible for making sure the bedlinens are fresh, or "Digestion Choreography," which places them in the kitchen. Sometimes the menu will be determined by a collaborative game called Scramble Scrabble in which the players write down their names on a large tablecloth or piece of paper, and then see how many ingredients they can make out of the letters. Eventually a series of dishes emerges, aided by sketches and drawings of how the food might look and be presented. "The chef world is very inflated around one person, but here it's like a team sport," says Puett. "Every aspect of life is a rigorous engagement with the banal."

For the architect Mark Thomann, who has brought five groups of masters of landscape and architecture students to Mildred's Lane, the beauty of Puett's creation is precisely the freedom the property invites to break with convention. "Mildred's Lane brings so many things together from nature, to art, to people, to wildlife but it's the experience of all of these intertwined that makes it so cozy and magical," he says. "Mildred's Lane just is, which is why anything can happen there."

In a world of flux, there's something instantly transporting about arriving at Mildred's Lane, particularly following a daunting half-mile drive up a winding,



Opposite page, clockwise: *Brown Paper Packages / Unopened love gifts, 1994–2000* by Mark Dion & J. Morgan Puett. *Chair with textiles*, a Puett wall installation. Shower arrangement. The stair sculpture in the *Main House* at Mildred's Lane. Puett's *Painted Boots*. Above: *The Horse Shed House, 1997*, an art installation at Mildred's Lane, by Mark Dion and J. Morgan Puett. Left: a collection of birds from the installation of the *Mildred's Lane Library*. Below: a guest cabin.





"I am living art," says Puett. Sweeping, as performative art, on the field behind the *Main House* at Mildred's Lane.

unpaved, and rutted track through shadowy pines. Suddenly the land plateaus and the sky bursts forth. In summer Puett hosts a series of Saturday night dinners and discussions led by visiting artists — often outdoors in the bright evening light, or in a barn.

Lately Puett has begun thinking about her legacy. Although only 63, she is keenly aware that time is fleeting. Four years ago, she came close to death on the lane to her house, slipping on the ice in sub-zero temperatures after having to abandon her car because of a fallen tree. She remembers hitting the ground and seeing her leg sticking out at a terrible angle. It took three hours for her to reach home, walking on her fists and knees, and having to reset the bone in her leg multiple times. "I kind of quit," she says. "I fainted and had an out of body experience; I was floating up and looking down at my body lying in the lane and heard all these voices — 'poor Morgan died on Mildred's Lane' — and that woke me up. I was laughing in my head, 'No fucking way am I dying here.'" Her son, Grey Rabbit, then aged 15, found her convulsing in the snow.

Puett survived, but her near escape has focused her mind. There's a story to tell, and only she can tell it. "I'm a white-haired old lady to these youngsters now," she says. "So many people see Mildred's Lane at this given moment in time, for one week or three weeks, but they don't see the decades — a life." Never one to do things by half measures, Puett has 14 books mapped out, and plans to spend early 2020 writing in Hawaii, where her brother Garnett Puett continues the family tradition of beekeeping.

The particular story of Puett begins in Hahira, Georgia, where she was born, and with a quote that she recalls from the kitchen bulletin board, placed there by her father: "As long as you are green, you grow; but when you think you are ripe you begin to rot." You don't have to spend much time with Puett to appreciate the ways in which she has carried that epigram through life: discovery, passion, and curiosity animate the space she has created for herself. She is an incubator of ideas, a conductor of people. "We are social animals," she says. "It's really important that we exchange ideas and grow."

As a child, Puett was drawn to experiments that fused nature and architecture — digging holes and lining them with aluminum foil to make miniature swimming pools, or sprinkling glitter on the leaves outside her bedroom window to create an enchanted world. She describes a yard of wild and exotic bushes, of wisteria winding around pecan trees so thick that "I could walk up it like a fairy." There was never any doubt that she'd be an artist.

In countless ways, Puett sees the course of her life today as a simulacrum of the emotional landscape of her childhood. "The whole town was our playground," she says. "My mother was a do-it-yourselfer, she was a painter with a little art school,



Mildred's Lane Library in the Main House. Below: Puett sewing away.



Beehive Arts, and my father was a third-generation beekeeper but also a writer." There was music, too. Puett's father played banjo, her mother played guitar. Friends would come over at weekends to jam together. There was the time her father invited 16 Russians from an international honeybee convention to visit. "The whole town paraded by our house at five miles an hour with their heads out the window to look at the commies," she recalls. "He was a real democratic socialist, he was a wild thinker, he made everything exciting."

Puett was a few weeks shy of her 14th birthday when her father died suddenly, on the floor of the doctor's office where he was awaiting a check-up. "I was on my black and white checkered bedspread, reading, and my childhood ended," says Puett of the moment she understood her father was not coming home. Nine months later her mother married one of her father's beekeeping friends, and they all moved to Idaho. Life became nomadic, unsettled. "We moved around like migrant workers following the bees, because he was transporting trucks of beehives from North Dakota to Florida to Idaho," says Puett. "It was a culture shock." She focused on school, eventually skipping a grade to enroll at university in Chicago to study art. Later she took a year off to travel Europe, and returned to study film and theory at graduate school. "I was making these outdoor installations with film backdrops, with whole interiors, clothing as part of the installation," she says. A line in a nov-



The Horse Shed House, 1997, an art installation by Mark Dion and J. Morgan Puett.

el by the Italian write Jean Giono struck her with the force of revelation. "He said, 'I want to create a whole world that you move through,'" she recalls. "From that moment on, everything I did was about world making."

At the beginning of her career, Puett found herself unexpectedly in fashion. "I was learning cabinet making with a carpenter in Chicago, and I made a briefcase out of pine, stuffed some clothes in it, and someone told me to meet this person at Merchandise Mart," she recalls. "I opened up my wooden briefcase and unfurled these dresses and pieces of clothing and they put me in fashion show." Three weeks later Puett was on the front page of the *Chicago Tribune*.

When Puett first saw Mildred's Lane she had been living between her brother's upstate home in nearby Tyler Hill and various storefronts she operated in New York City over a 14-year period beginning in 1986. She was dating Mark Dion ("We met at an art salon uptown and we fell in love immediately"). Although she had not set out to be a fashion designer, her clothes proved popular — Patti Smith and Michael Stipe were among her fans, and legendary boutiques Charivari and Patricia Fields, among others, stocked her pieces. But Puett wasn't interested in treating her storefronts as places of commerce, but as installation projects — inconceivable in today's era of hyperinflated rents. A 1996 item, for *The New Yorker*, characterized one of her spaces as having a "Brothers Grimm aura, the elective affinities being oily, thick-

ly-cabled ropes dangling through three stories of space, old meat hooks stuck in the ceiling, baby-doll outfits, and a rusty merry go round."

When Puett decided to quit the city for good it was an act of resistance. "I left so that I could have my freedom without the constraints of all the capitalist-driven choices that must be made there — rent, deadlines, commerce, employees, trendy critiques, fashion, status," she says. "I wanted to create my own world — free and unhinged." By 1999 she was also pregnant, and wanted for her child the treasured freedom that had shaped and informed her own upbringing. "When I was 16 or 17, my sister, Lake, said, 'I want the quality of life we had as children,' and that really sums it up for me."

Despite the awards, the shows, the stream of visiting artists, Puett can sometimes feel defeated by the giant shrug that is the world spinning on, the sense that her work sails beneath the sight lines of even the local community. "I think my gruffness comes from constantly pushing back, resisting what capitalism insists on us following," she says. "It's like Thoreau talking about the beaten path — just walking off the beaten path in another direction is radical, but it takes a lot of work to do that and a lot of bushwhacking." Outside the window the snow falls ever faster; there is a sheen of ice on the windows. Puett sighs. "The life of an artist is huge — it's not about what hangs on the wall in a gallery, it's a way one lives around the hearth." ■

Learn more at mildredslane.com. Visit *The Mildred Complex(ity)*, Puett's gallery and studio in Narrowsburg, NY. Her brother, Garnett Puett, is represented by Jack Shainman Gallery. Aaron Hicklin is the editorial director at Document Journal and former Editor-in-chief of *Out* magazine. Visit his curated *One Grand Books* located in Narrowsburg, NY. onegrandbooks.com Guzman are regular contributors to UD and represented by *veronique-peres-domergue.net*