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ON LOCATION

In Her Own World

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Right: The fashion designer and artist, J. Morgan Puett.

Left: Inside J. Morgan Puett's barnlike house, slatted-wood walls surround the porch, along with a polyethylene mosquito screen. Hinged slatted-wood windows, embedded in the walls, open to panoramic views of the property and river. Photographs by Phil Mansfield for The New York Times

BEACH Lake, Pa.

THE 21st century peels away along the half mile of Mildred's Lane, a rutted red dirt drive that winds among trees and rocky outcroppings in the hills of northeastern Pennsylvania. The road ends in a turnaround, beyond which stand several wooden buildings of indeterminate age. Even the tousle-haired woman who recently greeted a visitor at the door of the largest one — dressed like Huck Finn in baggy linen pants and blue suspenders — seemed somehow untethered from the present.

The woman, J. Morgan Puett, a fashion designer and artist, is also a kind of radical homesteader, having staked a claim here on land stalked by black bears, deer, coyotes

and porcupine. Along with her 8-year-old son, Grey Rabbit, and a changing cast of friends and romantic partners, she has built a home that is an ongoing experiment in art, design and aestheticized living, an artist colony conceived in the communal spirit of 20th-century institutions like Roycroft and Black Mountain College, with her own house, just now being finished, at its heart.

Visiting artists come to collaborate on performances, movies, books and installations; young art interns live out in the woods, in outbuildings and tents. Thanks largely to Ms. Puett's creative and stylistic vision, Mildred's Lane, as the property is called, functions "like a good ensemble play," said Jorge Colombo, a New York-based artist and filmmaker and a frequent visitor.

"Morgan has been making her own world as if the rest of the world didn't exist," he added. "She's designing her own universe, her own lifestyle, with remarkable consistency. Somehow it all works together when people are in that environment."

Jason Simon, another New York artist and frequent collaborator, praised Ms. Puett's energy and focus. "She's voracious — she eats up the whole world," he said. "I'm jealous of her ability to get so many people to collaborate on her homemaking."

The largely wooded, 96-acre property is dotted with architectural and landscape installations by visitors and sometime residents: a pavilion by Amy Yoes, a New York artist; an elaborate treehouse made from twigs and branches by Scott Constable, a sculptor and designer based in Oakland, Calif.; a garden designed by Ms. Puett and Mark Dion, Grey Rabbit's father, in collaboration with a group of Yale art students; an installation by Mr. Dion that appears to be an old cemetery, with granite and marble headstones recording the names of distinguished American naturalists.

The guiding spirit is unmistakably Ms. Puett's. Between 1985 and 2001, as design, fashion and art shifted from layered and loud to minimalist and neo-modernist, Ms. Puett went against the current in her work, designing seasonal collections and a series of Manhattan stores that shared a rustic, threadbare style and an aura of romantic decay.

Many of her clothes — smock-like dresses, oversized trousers worn with suspenders — were inspired by Amish and Depression-era garments, and her stores, which she designed down to the furnishings, had the same battered rural sensibility, with rusting metal screens, floors made from Georgia clay, old rocking chairs and curtains dipped in beeswax. (Bees and beeswax are recurring themes; her father was a beekeeper in rural Georgia.)

According to Ms. Puett, who is now 51, her signature style was never a simple matter of longing for the past. “It’s not about nostalgia or re-enacting,” she said. “I believe that all of these time periods and histories are pressing in on us at once,” contributing to the complexity of our present and future experience.

“What I’m really interested in is the future and what it looks like,” she said, and “in inventing a future through history and material culture and art.” Above all, she believes in creating and inhabiting environments, including domestic ones, with the same degree of care and engagement that artists typically bring to their studio practice.

She saw new possibilities for doing this in 1997, when she and Mr. Dion, who were living together in TriBeCa, found this piece of land two hours from New York and a few miles from the house in Tyler Hill, Pa., belonging to her brother, Garnett. They were immediately taken, she said, with its rolling hills, streams, ancient stone walls and old farm buildings that had been unoccupied since 1986, when a previous owner died.

The \$99,000 asking price was too much for them — Ms. Puett said her business, which she described as “more an ongoing art project,” was not profitable — so they persuaded two artist friends from New York, Renée Green and Nils Norman, to share the cost with them.

The idea was to create a place for themselves and other artists to escape New York, and to “move our art practice into a more interactive arena, where things could happen in

collaboration,” Ms. Puett said. “If you’re not doing it with and for your friends,” she added of that practice, “then who are you doing it for?”

Mr. Dion saw it as an experimental place for mingling ideas about architecture and environmental art, “a test zone in a sense,” he said. “All your friends come and make suggestions. It can drive you crazy or it can be an inspiration.”

For the first two years, Ms. Puett and Mr. Dion lived in an old horse shed with a wood stove and no electricity or running water. (Ms. Green and Mr. Norman came to stay only rarely.) From the start, visiting artists came and went, staying in sheds and outbuildings that the couple converted into guest quarters, and in a canvas tent with a plywood floor that they erected.

Meanwhile they started work on the main house, a three-level, barn-like building clad in rough-cut hemlock, which they built from scratch on the foundations of an old chicken coop. The project would take more than 10 years — during which time Ms. Puett gave up her business in New York; Grey Rabbit was born (and so named because “Mark and I wanted it to be an animal but not a predatory one,” she said); and Ms. Puett and Mr. Dion split up — or rather, evolved into best friends who collaborate, Ms. Puett said. She and Grey Rabbit are now the only full-time residents of Mildred’s Lane, though Mr. Dion, who lives part time in New York, still shares the house with them part time.

ALTHOUGH she is best known as a fashion designer, Ms. Puett studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the 1980s and began her working life as an artist with an architectural bent. “I began to build little sheds, treehouses, forts and outdoor landscape pieces,” she said. “I’ve always had this fantasy of collecting vernacular outbuildings — the hut, the shed, the Thoreau cabin. Those kinds of little dwellings have driven my work. The humble composition is what attracts me.”

Ms. Puett was the amateur architect of the main house, drafting her own plans for its 3,200-square-foot structure. In keeping with her down-to-earth aesthetic, no paint or wallboard was used inside. Doorways have no jambs, and there is no baseboard or trim

around the floors or ceilings. Sliding doors are made from horizontal wooden slats, an idea that Ms. Puett borrowed from a barn on the property, and an upstairs porch is screened with the same kind of slatted wood.

The entry side of the house has a sloping shed roof with a rusting steel wall, and interior walls and ceilings are made from blue steel treated with a darkening chemical — “like the kind used in antiquing jewelry,” Ms. Puett said — applied in a drippy, hand-washed style and then sealed with linseed oil. “I’ve always been in love with industrial metal,” she said.

The main staircase is made from the same blackened steel, with steps that float out from a narrow steel beam in random sizes and shapes. Climbing this Seussian structure requires sober concentration.

The house is filled with Ms. Puett’s and Mr. Dion’s eclectic collections of art, antiques, hundreds of books, stuffed birds, skulls, outsider art and ephemera. It’s at once a private, family space and a public, multipurpose environment, as Ms. Puett describes it. “This is not my dream house,” she said. “This was designed as a central community kitchen and reference library.”

A ground-floor room holds her collection of antique textiles and clothing, amassed over a lifetime. She has even kept her junior high cheerleading uniform. “Clothes become part of us and they shouldn’t be stuffed away in an attic,” she said. “They need to be able to breathe.”

Toward the back, in the kitchen and dining area, there are hand-hammered metal tables and chairs covered with old flour sacks. Cowhides have been stitched together as floor coverings. Stacks of antique white china fill the metal shelves and the floors are made from smoothly polished concrete. High narrow windows on either side of this space make it feel like an old church.

Ms. Puett's vision reaches even into the refrigerator, which she has transformed into a strange, constantly shifting vignette of fresh food, old textiles and unusual scientific vials. "I buy beautiful and grotesque foods and try to put them in a new context," she said. A broccoli floret sits on an antique candlestick, a pomegranate and brown eggs in a glass vase, carrots in ceramic pots. All liquids are decanted into glass measuring vessels.

"It inspires me to cook an inventive meal," she said. "You create different games to shop by." Sometimes, she said, she buys only food that starts with a certain letter: "B" for beef and beets, or "C" for cod and cauliflower. "That's how you create new problems instead of solving them in order to break old habits and throw things out of equilibrium," she said. Dinner parties at Mildred's Lane are surreal affairs, with morsels of food skewered on 18th-century hatpins stuck into plates of moss.

Elsewhere on the property, an old barn has been converted into a performance space and a studio for visiting artists and students. The original 1830's farmhouse, set against a ridge with a quaint front porch, has been preserved much as Ms. Puett and Mr. Dion found it, 11 years after the death of the property's previous occupant.

Although they never met that occupant, Mildred Steffens Miller, who was 87 when she died in 1986, they have adopted her as the namesake of their compound. "She was a strong-willed woman who lived alone without running water or electricity," Ms. Puett said. In her old age, "she walked up and down the lane to go clean other people's houses."

At the end of May, Mildred's Lane is beginning a new phase of its evolution, as an "interdisciplinary art complex" offering up to 16 students at a time the chance to live and work with visiting artists, including Mildred's Lane regulars Allison Smith, Brian Tolle, Nina Burleigh, Jorge Colombo, Amy Yoes, Moyra Davey and Jason Simon.

"This is a way to formalize what we've already been doing and share it with a wider group of people," Mr. Dion said. (The students will pay \$1,500 for a three-week session plus about \$1,000 for room and board, though lower fees will be available as part of a

work-study program, Ms. Puett said.) To coincide with the new program, Ms. Puett's Chelsea gallery, Alexander Gray (526 West 26th Street, 212-399-2636, www.alexandergray.com) will mount an exhibition of participating artists' work beginning June 18.

During the first session, Mr. Dion said, he will work with 10 students on something called "Mildred Archeology," with the aim of creating the Mildred's Lane Historical Society and Museum in the old farmhouse, using artworks, photographs, videos and journals made at the compound in the last 10 years, as well as old letters, photographs and ephemera passed to them by Mrs. Miller's family or found in the farmhouse — where her clothes and furniture were untouched between 1986 and 1997.

Mary Jane Jacob, a professor and executive director of exhibitions at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (where Ms. Puett is an adjunct professor), is sending seven of her students to the program this summer: not "to learn how to arrange stuffed birds and dried flowers," she said, but "to experience how to locate their own creativity and how to live it."

"Morgan's great at creative chaos," Ms. Jacob continued. Mildred's Lane, she added, picking up on one of Ms. Puett's favorite themes, is "constantly the swarm — but she's not necessarily the queen bee."

"This is where everyone can be creative," she said.