

Reviews: New York

J. Morgan Puett, *Back Room installation view*, 2006, mixed media, dimensions variable.
Alexander Gray Associates.

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J. Morgan Puett's installation *Wholesale: To the Trade Only, 1985–1997* was something out of the ordinary. Its subject was, in many ways, Puett's former life, and its material was that life's detritus, lovingly, bizarrely preserved and presented here for our edification.

Though always an artist, Puett was also once a successful fashion designer. She developed a signature style that drew on the history of rural clothing and its romanticized reimaginings. She ran a series of workshop showrooms in Lower Manhattan—the most celebrated on Wooster Street in SoHo—which became as much social gathering spaces as retail outlets, as much galleries as business headquarters. Echoes of Warhol's Factory are often evoked in describing them. Puett shuttered the last of these spaces in 1997, but rather than consigning their contents to the trash or a simple storage space, she chose to preserve a great deal of stuff by soaking it in beeswax. (She comes from a long line of beekeepers and sometimes used beeswax in her fashion creations.)

These are the principal items from which she conjured this installation: finished and half-finished garments, folded and rolled-up paper patterns, and piles and piles of paperwork were imbued with a strange, Ed Kienholz-like ghostliness and a slight scent of honey. But what made Puett's piece more than a mere archival folly was its knowing references to the work's own strangeness and to its standing within Puett's artistic career. Behind a set of steel shelves sat a block of beeswax ready to be used in further preservation. Elsewhere, there was a strange braided wig and, up on a shelf, jars of what looked like biological specimens. Next to one of the sewing machines was a photograph in which Puett is shown reenacting a scene from an early erotic photograph. Meandering entertainingly between the real and the unreal, Puett produced a fascinating show.

—Robert Ayers