

## Art evolves as fabric of labor.

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'Cottage Industry' weaves history

into textile exhibit

The creaking old single-house has peeling paint, disintegrating plaster and weathered boards. But the once-abandoned space has come to life in the past few weeks with the busy hands of textile artists building a garment bridge from the 18th century into a new millennium.

J. Morgan Puett's "Cottage Industry" is part of the Spoleto Festival USA's three-year "Evoking History" program and visual arts exhibition "The Memory of Water." The working exhibit interweaves the history of the U.S. textile industry and the part American women played in its development. From women who spun their own yarn and loomed fabric in their homes, to the exploitation of women in mills, Puett's vision is translated into reality as a collaboration with artists. They will create a line of clothing for sale and patterns for the do-it-yourself seamstress as they stitch.

"You work together in the same way you work in a business. But in the business world, it's the employee and the employer. In this context the work is a collaboration," Puett said during a recent tour of the "Cottage Industry" installation.

As you move through the rooms, which also play a part in the unfolding history of what Puett calls a performative exhibit, one becomes a witness to the process of garment construction and the history of the garment industry. All are intimately tied to local history through the fingers of the women who created and wore the now-vintage garments on display.

The artisans working with Puett cut and stitch recently loomed homespun fabric in a parlor-turned-cutting room. Upstairs is a room for the workers to reflect, another to display garments from history. A child's vest hangs with other textile artifacts in remarkably good shape. A century-old pattern adorns one wall, a testament to the industry that was soon to come. A collaborator works on a computer set up to create a pattern that can be purchased as a souvenir.

"People can buy the pattern, take it home and create their own cottage industry by making the clothes. The clothes we are making here will be for sale by special order," Puett said recently from the living room turned into production studio at the 35 Calhoun St. site. "But they will be very expensive. The pattern is an inexpensive alternative."

The multi-class, multi-part garment has a stream of history included in the making. One of the more intriguing garment pieces is the stomachers: one embroidered with a map of Charleston in the mid-1700s, another with a local legend or any of a number of relevant motifs. The stomacher is a removable centerpiece for a dress, heavily adorned and intricate.

Antique materials that are part of the new garment construction are in evidence in each room. Jars of old buttons sit on a kitchen shelf. Tubs of dye for just-loomed fabric and yarn are in a small pantry area.

"The employee lounge is also the dining room. What I'm doing here is making this the hang-out place," Puett said. On one wall stands a sewing machine supported by a wine rack.

"We will be serving red wine, because that is what the woman who once lived here served to all her guests. The quilts on that wall are quilts that people would not normally see as fine collectibles, but I am using them in the house because they are very authentic, a social history. They belonged to the owners of the house.

"Things that would normally have been thrown away, I have stuffed in the cracks of the house," said Puett, pointing to blue bits of cloth sticking out of the small chinks in the crumbling walls.

The single-house in which "Cottage Industry" is installed is owned by a family that traces its ties back to slaves at Drayton Hall. After the Civil War, the family lived in "The Borough," the now-erased African-American section of Ansonborough.

"Every one of the rooms is loaded with meaning. There is an inventory of books in each. People will be able to come into a room, pick up a book and read about the items," Puett said.

Puett likens "Cottage Industry" to one of today's haute couture studios where clothing is designed and constructed on-site. But Puett's additional nod to history is an essential ingredient in her final designs and constructions.

In addition to the sounds of clothing construction, there is special music enveloping the project. Music composed to stimulate contemplation in a slowed-down walking-through-water tempo was created by composers David Lang and Wilson Fontaine.

J. Morgan Puett is a Georgia-born artist who creates art as a working system in response to the issues of commerce, history and labor. Puett's major ongoing project for more than a decade includes integrating her artwork into the framework of working small businesses in Soho and Tribeca. According to Puett, her work is described as many things - collaboration, installation, sculpture, community-based art - but, in essence, is a hybrid of all these forms.

Her art was recently shown at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London and she is currently working on a collaborative project with Mark Dion for the Fabric Workshop Museum in Philadelphia.

"Cottage Industry" is open to visitors daily from noon to 6 p.m., free of charge, through Sunday.

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