

## **The Missing History**

By J. Morgan Puett

My professional life over the past seventeen years could be characterized as the struggle to negotiate the territories between fashion, architecture and fine art. Admittedly, these territories have been difficult to bridge. This is due in part to the rigidity of their respective disciplines, and also to the demands and limitations inherent in running a small business.

My development as a clothing and environmental designer arose out of a frustration with the limitations I experienced in the art world as an artist. I was interested in a method of cultural production that was more a form of public expression: something that could exist in the everyday, rather than being a rarefied field of experience, overcoded by conditions of exclusion. While drawn to the conceptually and materially complex field of installation art, I felt it was marred by its condition of reception. In fashion, design projects and architectural projects, I've been able to apply the conceptual tool box of fine art to a more accessible and public sphere.

A critical moment in my development as an artist/designer came about while attempting to research detailed aspects of working people's clothing from the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the archives of the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I was told that no specimens of such clothes survived; the curator explained that the clothes had been worn to dust – altered, patched, turned into quilts, passed down, and eventually used as rags. This reuse fascinated me; as well as the fact that virtually none of these items had become part of the museum's exclusive collections, which claim to represent the history of design.

During my years as an artist/designer, I've attempted to reconstruct aspects of this missing history, referencing photography (such as erotica and portraiture of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century); and referencing architecture and fashion (contemporary and vernacular). This attempt to build a bridge to the past, and salvage valuable aspects of it for the purpose of revitalizing it for the present is not unique in fashion or architecture; however, rarely is it analyzed through the functions of a small fashion business. Though I ceased involvement with my store, I am still very engaged with fashion design and the design industry through the seasonal collections I produce and offer exclusively through my website, [www.jmorganpuett.com](http://www.jmorganpuett.com).

It is my wish to continue the archeology of the everyday lives of the people who made history but didn't make the history books, and to explore and make visible their contributions to the social fabric. I continue to focus more rigorously on the cultural contributions of those people derided as *folk*, *outside*, and the untrained by creating conceptual textiles that tell these stories; also, through my clothes, site- and project-oriented installations, and most particularly my long term project for the preservation and adaptive reuse of vernacular outbuildings, I continue to interject these voices into the public discourse, not through a method which turns ideas and things into artifacts, but rather in a way which elucidates the relevance of past innovation in a contemporary culture.