

Garnett Puett

b.1959, Hahira, Georgia, lives in Holualoa, Hawai'i
exhibited in *Biennial II*

Queen, 2009

beeswax and steel

I have worked with honeybees all my life. While at Pratt Institute Brooklyn working on my MFA sculpture I designed my first apisculpture. This was my thesis, to fuse apiculture with sculpture. The basis of the projects is to let the viewer watch the form develop over time. This gets the viewer closer to the bees environment and makes the art blend into nature.

Over time I was asked to preserve the finished forms or as I refer to them "collaboration relics" for exhibition and collection. The piece *Queen* is an abstract image of the queen bee and her life forces, the strength of the hive depends on the power of the queen.

GARNETT PUETT

Born 1959 in Hahira, Georgia
Lives in Hōlualoa, Hawai'i

Garnett Puett established his reputation as an artist in New York City in the late 1980s, a heady time in the contemporary art world characterized by a pluralism of ideas, styles and agendas. Among the practices which emerged at the time was the concept of the artists collaborative—a group of artists who joined together, combining ideas and skills, to produce issue-oriented installations, ensemble conceptual works, or non-traditional media events. Puett also found a collaborative process useful in making art, though he worked not with a handful of other artists but thousands of *apis mellifera*—honeybees.

Puett's family has been involved with bees, breeding queens and producing honey, for a long time. After his father died, Puett's mother married one of the largest independent honey producers in the United States, and the family moved to Idaho, leading a peripatetic existence tending company operations in Idaho, Florida, Arizona and Hawai'i. Already proficient in the family business as an adolescent, Puett went to college first at the University of Idaho and then the University of Washington to study management and entomology, especially bee research. Puett seemed destined to become the fourth generation of beekeepers in his family, but midway through the curriculum at the University of Washington he realized he was "burned out on bees," as he describes it, deciding to switch his major to art, something that had long interested him. Puett had grown up in a creative family life—his father wrote stories in his spare time, his mother was a painter, an older sister attended the School of the Art Institute of

Chicago studying painting and film. As a boy Puett had loved building things and for a while had thoughts of becoming an architect or engineer.

At the University, Puett studied sculpture and was influenced by artists who made large temporary installations and public outdoor art that changed over time as people and the elements interacted with or acted on them, the works eventually disappearing or being removed. After graduating in 1982 with a bachelor's degree and moving to New York, Puett decided he also wanted to make impermanent art, especially work in which the process of creating it was more important than an end product. Puett also wanted to create an art form that hadn't been done before, something which would broaden the audience for art by drawing in the layman and not just the small percentage of the public already knowledgeable and involved in contemporary art. He had studied and worked with foundry technology, particularly lost-wax casting in which a sculptural model is made in wax, encased in a mold and then cast, the wax melting and being replaced by molten bronze that hardens into a replica of the wax original. Puett liked the hands-on, tactile qualities of working with wax and the smooth, lustrous look of the pieces in wax. At times he wouldn't cast certain models and would just keep them in their waxen state. Gradually it occurred to him to involve bees in working the wax, and at first the process, the sheer spectacle of the bees swarming over a form before an awed public audience, appealed to him. In time, however, struck by the haunting beauty of the forms which resulted from the bees' activity and realizing the works had a purpose and validity as finished

sculptures, Puett began to keep the honeycombed structures and encase them in glass vitrines to protect and preserve them.

Puett also began to think about how he might use his knowledge of beekeeping, his familiarity with the behavior of honeybees, to work with them to consciously achieve a desired end. Through experimentation Puett arrived at his method of working. He begins his process by fabricating an armature in wood and metal, sometimes also incorporating found objects, then coating it with a paste of hot wax which is worked and carved into a desired form, keeping in mind what he would like the bees to do with it. Often his armatures are human heads and figures, sometimes simply abstract configurations. The finished armature is then placed in a containment box designed to house it and a colony of bees. Puett places a queen in a small cage on the armature in a specifically selected place and often paints the armature with honey or introduces drip-feeders to entice and inspire the bees to concentrate on certain areas. The containment box is then covered, with foraging bees allowed to exit and enter through small openings, and left so that the bees can alter and supplement Puett's form with their lacy networks of honeycomb. Puett periodically checks the bees' progress over several days, gently wiping them away from the armature with his bare hand. When the sculpture has been transformed with the desired organic, flowing shapes, Puett removes the bees and places it in the open so other bees can steal the honey, thereby cleaning the honeycomb chambers. Finally, Puett makes a base and glass cover which become part of the formal aspect of the

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piece. With his expert knowledge of the bees' genetically-encoded behavior, Puett can orchestrate their amazing skills to his own ends—most of the time. Occasionally, Puett admits, the bees will behave in an unexpected way—swarming out of a containment box as if to say they will have none of his plan, obliterating an armature with giant blobs of comb or digging into his forms, severing a figure's arms or legs, seemingly making a critical statement of their own.

Puett achieved considerable success in New York and elsewhere with his *apisculptures* (bee sculptures), as he calls them. However, in 1993, he put his art career on hold to take the opportunity to purchase his stepfather's beekeeping business on the island of Hawai'i, where he had spent his summers from 1976 to 1982 helping in the operation. While the demands of running a business have made it difficult for him to make art, the recent works in this exhibition mark his return to sculpture with the goal to find a workable balance between beekeeping and creating art in the future.

The sculptures on view in this exhibition demonstrate the remarkable power of what Puett accomplishes with his bees. In *Chief* the artist constructed a bust-like image of a man, consisting of a cast and carved wax head set on an abstract base and surmounted by a triangular spade-like headdress. When the piece was placed inside the hive, the bees made it their home, swarming over its surface and proceeding to supplement Puett's wax work with their own. The bees focused on the most prominent, overhanging features of the head—eyes, ears, nostrils, lips—and burrowed into these areas, altering them with patches of shallow, hexago-

nal comb chambers. The wax coating the headdress has also been covered with a pattern of geometric tracery, and here the bees built up deep, curving ridges of honeycomb. Similarly, under the chin, two parallel lobes of comb extend downward like strange appendages or adornments. Removed from the bees' domain, the embellished form has a striking presence, at once beautiful in its aura of iconic dignity and unsettling in its references to death and decay.

At times Puett chooses not to use bees, preferring to work with wax and other materials alone. *Truth of Impermanence* is such a sculpture, inspired by the artist's viewing of a film on a Tibetan healer who had been renowned for his ability to intuit people's needs and transfer healing energy to them. The film included a ceremony of lighted candles, in which each candle represented a year of the healer's life. Struck by the poetic beauty of the scene, Puett decided to make a metaphoric work with personal significance. Building a box of koa planks, he filled it with melted beeswax, and when it solidified, gridded the surface and drilled holes into it. In each hole Puett placed a candle of rolled beeswax—42 candles representing the number of years his father had attained at his death—and burned them partially down. Standing on a table-like base and covered with a shallow glass box, the work serves as a quiet symbol of the transience of life and the ephemeral quality of being.

Garnett Puett's works, which are at once seductive and disturbing, transcend the unusual circumstance of their technique and reveal the delicate balance between the artist's vision and the bees' instinct. In the sculptures' eerie, melancholy beauty there is something earthy, primal and ancient, interweaving art and the natural order.

GARNETT PUETT

Dimensions are listed in inches, height x width x depth.

Chief, 1995

wax, steel, wood and glass
36 x 20 x 16

Consanguinity, 1995

wax, steel, wood and glass
14 x 20 x 8

The Boatmen, 1995

wax, plaster, wood and glass
60 x 12 x 12

Truth of Impermanence, 1995

wax, plaster, wood and glass
30 x 36 x 30

Viewing Sublimation, 1995

wax, plaster, wood and glass
20 x 10 x 10

Group 8, 1995

wax, steel and wood
18 x 18 x 12

World Window, 1995

wax and steel
50 x 20 x 30