

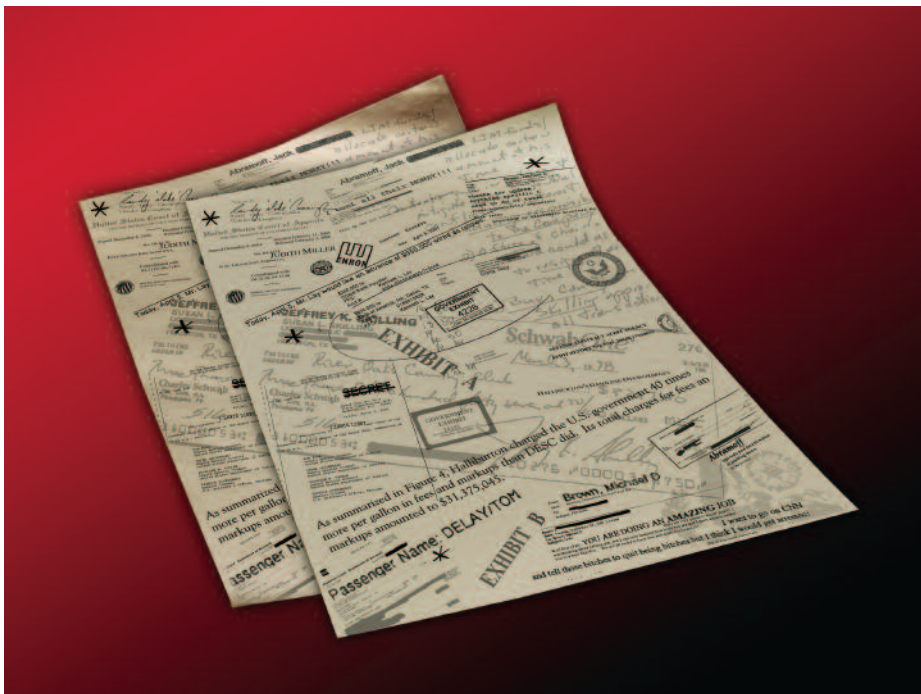
PURE SATIRE

Inexpensive editions by the artist duo Ligorano/Reese poke fun at government corruption

by Sarah Valdez

While dealers and artists have been tromping like gypsies from one art fair to another, courting collectors who have the sort of astronomical hedge fund wealth enabled in no small part by the policies of George W. Bush, Brooklyn-based artists Nora Ligorano and Marshall Reese (Ligorano/Reese) have been exercising their First Amendment rights. Since 1992, the duo has been developing and distributing an irreverent, politically astute line of reasonably priced multiples under the name Pure Products USA, so called after the William Carlos Williams poem "To Elsie." Among their creations is *Line Up*, a foldout book of USPS regulation-size postcards featuring mug shots of seven top government officials, including W., Condi, and Cheney, in which they all hold placards bearing the date and location at which each "betrayed the public's trust" (that's a moderate way of putting it).

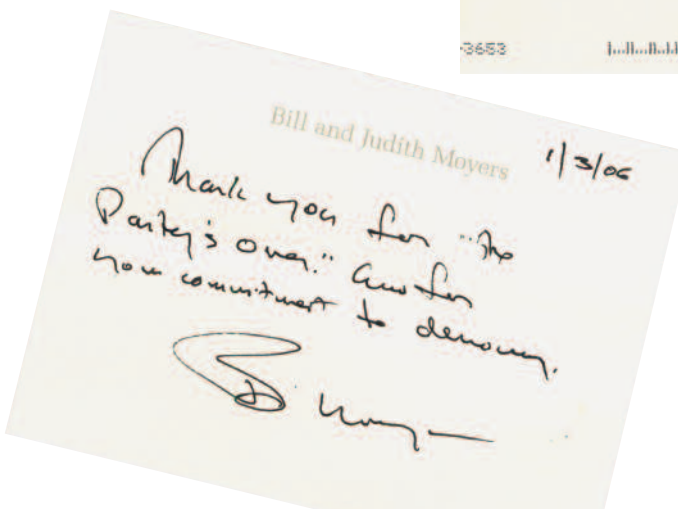
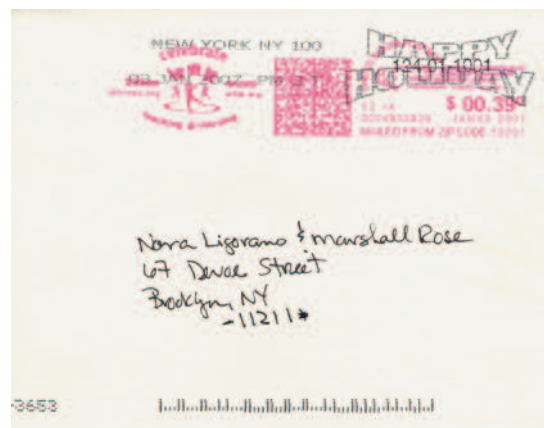
Pure Products is dedicated to a mission that's rare in the art world these days: satirizing the blatant corruption of powerful public figures and institutions in America. "I think [Pure Products is] about memory and creating a collective emotional response to historical events," says Ligorano. "[We] take events that are historical but perhaps not positive, like the Welfare Reform Act, and commemorate them in the form of editions—each functioning kind of like a miniature monument." The editions are made using both hands-on craftsmanship and mass-production techniques and are sold through the Internet (www.pureproductsusa.com) and in gift shops, with the help of an effective marketing campaign aimed at the press. As Reese is quick to point out, the venture derives its intended meaning from its interaction with the public. "Pure Products is a little like culture jamming," he says, "and it's interesting to see how the media distorts

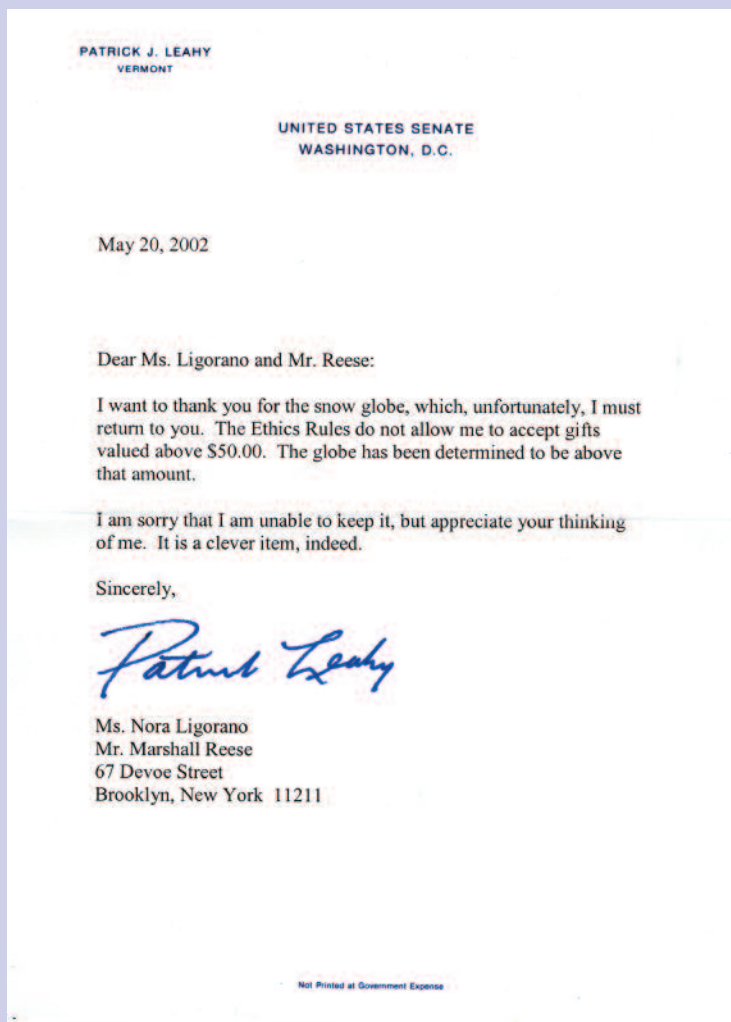


Above: Ligorano/Reese, *The Party's Over*, silver gift wrap, offset edition of 850, 2007
Below: Letter from Bill Moyers, 2006. All images courtesy Ligorano/Reese

and changes and reacts to our ideas."

Pure Products' inaugural edition, *Bible Belt* (1992), is an evangelical New Testament Bible attached to a fat leather strap with a flashy, gold-plated buckle that reads JESUS. The five-hundred-dollar piece, thirty-five of which were issued, not only received the copious media attention one might expect of such an incendiary cincture but was featured in the 1995 Random





Far Left: Letter from Senator Patrick Leahy, 2002

Left: Ligorano/Reese, *John Ashcroft Snow Globe* (6 in. glass globe, hand molded cast resin bust, wooden base with music box that plays “White Christmas”), edition of 25, 2005

House publication *At Home with Books*, and has found its way into the most elite storehouses of American culture, among them the special collections of the Getty Research Institute and the New York Public Library. Similarly, *Line Up* not only turned up on the covers of *The Nation* and *Adbusters*, but was also recently admitted into the Whitney Museum’s print collection.

Among Pure Products’ most popular wares is the *Contract with America Underwear*: laughably high-waisted white cotton briefs with the 1994 Republican notions of government reform emblazoned on the rear and a grinning, ruddy-cheeked, white-haired, suit-wearing man on the crotch. These undergarments were featured on television broadcasts, including C-SPAN, the *Tonight Show with Jay Leno*,

and the *Late Show with David Letterman*. “As a friend of mine at the time rather crudely pointed out to me,” recalls Reese, “You’re saying that Gingrich’s a dick.” It goes back to something that I think about a lot that the Italian actor and playwright Dario Fo says: ‘Laughter is a revolutionary act.’”

Many Pure Products have generated their own fair share of ephemera, producing letters from public figures like President Bill Clinton, Senator Patrick Leahy, Senator Paul Wellstone, Ed Asner, Jim Hightower, and Bill Moyers. Hate mail has arrived from detractors in Florida and Tennessee. Also on the Pure Products site—listed under the category “whatever”—is a letter from Michele W. Blincoe, a secretary for Supreme Court Justice David H. Souter, addressed to “Dear Sirs or Madams,” acknowledging

receipt of a tea towel that Pure Products produced on the occasion of the Supreme Court’s unfortunate decision to uphold the dubious selection of our current president. (The dissenting opinion of Justice John Paul Stevens is silkscreened, by a local studio in Williamsburg, beneath the portraits of the five justices whose decisions wound up shaping history.) One wishes that the towel could fulfill its promise to “wipe out any mistake in a snap.”

Perhaps the most attractive of Pure Products’ offerings to date is the recently released, similarly wishful seven-dollar *The Party’s Over* gift wrap: gold and silver paper embossed with such scandalous facsimiles as Jack Abramoff’s American Express expense reports and emails; indictments of reporter Judith Miller and Chief of Staff Scooter Libby; checks from Enron casualties Jeffrey Skilling and Kenneth Lay; and email correspondence from the wickedly inept former head of FEMA, Michael “Brownie” Brown. Finishing one another’s sentences as only two people who have been collaborating for two decades can, Ligorano and Reese explain that the wrapping paper is “about the gift gone sour.”

“We like to play with the idea of something alluring and lurid at the same time.”

“It was funny to make a wrapping paper people would use on gifts that was so . . .”

“Sordid and tainted.”