

Down East
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She Took to the Woods
by Elizabeth Peavey

For artist Marguerite Robichaux, building a house in the North Woods does not mean camping out or doing without.

In the stiff white light of a Maine winter, the home of landscape artist Marguerite Robichaux stands like an alien thing. Located at the end of an innocuous dirt road--tunnel-like for the firs that line the way--the house surprises. Here, deep in the heart of the North Woods, one might expect a loggy or piney lodge, but not this foreign, post-industrial, corrugated aluminum-sided structure. Not here.

But it *is* here, and it is here by the owner's design, in every sense of the word. Robichaux spent roughly twelve months collaborating on plans with Portland architect Sam Van Dam to create a space in which she could both live and paint. The plans completed, she then put her brushes and canvases aside and settled on-site, working with her contractor and crews from the groundbreaking in May of 1994 to completion of her home in May of 1995. "This house," she says, "is the painting I made for that year."

Marguerite Robichaux is well-known in the Maine art scene and beyond for her landscape paintings. Usually produced in series, they depict simple subjects, Monhegan Island for example, with complex points of view and tension beneath often serene facades. She uses what she describes as a watercolorist's technique with oils. The paint is laid very thin on the surface so that much of the white spaces in her paintings are not paint but the canvas showing through. Many of these works feature dribble lines--as though the paint has run. "Some people look at these marks and ask if I intend to fix the flaw," Robichaux notes ironically. "But what I am trying to show is that what they are looking at is not a tree, but a painting of a tree."

This is clearly a woman who knows her mind. The fact is evident not only in her painting, but also in the very artful life she has created for herself. Robichaux, 46, is a pleasant-looking woman with an easy manner, quick wit, and soft Southern accent. She is an avid outdoorswoman with a taste for sport and adventure, is no stranger to the back of a washing machine or inside of a toaster ("Armed with my *Reader's Digest* fix-it book," she adds), knows her way around a kitchen and is equally adept at taming

the wilderness around her house. "Except I won't use a chainsaw," she says firmly. "I am an artist, and artists do not use chainsaws."

A Louisiana native, Marguerite Robichaux first came to the state of Maine while in college in the early seventies to work at a Boothbay Harbor inn. She returned the summers of 1976 and 1977, during which she met and fell in love with the singer Jud Strunk, who was killed in an airplane crash in 1981. After a few years of commuting back and forth from Louisiana to Maine, she made her final move north in 1982. She purchased the twenty-four-acre lot on which her house is cited in 1986 and rented living spaces until it was economically feasible to build the house she knew she wanted. The house she knew she wanted was not about throwing around unlimited money; it was about uniting style and economy--both in materials and space.

Sam Van Dam remarks it is rare for an architect to encounter a client such as Robichaux, who brought so much to the design table. "What made the collaboration fun for me," he says, "is that Marguerite had a wider than usual vision of what materials were available and how they could be put together. While she knew what she wanted, she also had a broad sense of possibilities and was willing to explore options with me. There has to be chemistry between a designer and owner for a collaboration to be successful. And from the onset, I knew this was going to be a fun dance."

The "dance" began with the decision they would not expend a great deal of money or effort making a complicated structure; a simple, gabled shape would do. And, indeed, one would not cite the exterior of the house for its aesthetic refinement. Robichaux quips that one of her neighbors had stumbled upon the house by accident and had told his wife that someone had constructed an airplane hangar in the woods.

Approaching the house's east side from the road, one is met largely by a view of roof, which swoops to a few feet from the ground, creating a carport and lending a sort of Veronica Lake look to the facade. The grounds are scruffy, still a bit scarred from the construction and site development. A south-side deck waits to be finished. The overall outside effect is that of a work in progress.

So one is not entirely prepared for what lies on the other side of the massive cypress double studios that lead into the artist's studio. The ceiling soars to thirty-two feet. Light falls from huge second-story windows and through the diffused translucent skylights overhead. Studies and paintings in progress line the massive white wall that runs the length of her studio. There is the usual clutter of an artist's workspace--paints, brushes, books--but a sense of order reigns.

“I did not move in until the interior was absolutely finished,” she says as she walks up the small staircase from her studio to her living quarters. In the heart of the house--amid the amalgam of angles, light, space, air, windows, and crannies--it is difficult to take it all in at once. What one first notices are the views in every direction that would make Emerson drool; thick woods from that window, hills from that one, a stand of birches against an impossibly blue sky from that one, a glimpse of river from that one. There is openness, but there are also intimate spaces: the corner dining room, the living room area with its huge windows and Mission-style furniture; the two squat upholstered armchairs squared before the fireplace.

And then, details begin to emerge: the I beam painted an olive green that runs across one stretch of ceiling; the fireplace with tiles the luminescence of spilled gasoline and two massive, highly polished stovepipes that soar aloft; more skylights overhead; the poured concrete floors dappled with powdered pigment Robichaux herself added, lending them an almost marbled look. Yet, like any good painting, the first glance of this space tells you nothing of what it's about. That requires deeper observation.

Sight lines from the living room afford views of almost every area of the house. A half-flight up, a small loft overlooks the studio. There is a fold-out futon and an adjacent full bath. This spot doubles as Robichaux's reading area and guest quarters. Another half-flight up is the master bedroom, perched over the main living space. Spare, tidy furnishings give the room an almost Shaker-style look. Adjoining her bedroom is an elegant master bath with Jacuzzi. There is also a laundry room and a walk-in closet, in which her clothes hang in muted, color-coded rows, as though in some trendy Soho boutique. “I have chosen to keep things spare,” she says by way of explaining she didn't just tidy up the place for company. “There are other parts of my life that are out of control. I like to live in an ordered space.”

To illustrate this point, she strolls into the kitchen, which is dominated by a long island running down the center and is lined with warm bird's-eye maple cabinets. Before one particular drawer she pauses. “This is probably the part of the house my friends make the most fun of,” she says as she opens the large, shallow drawer and reveals one set of silverware laid side by side in neat straight lines--fork, fork, fork, knife, knife, knife, spoon, spoon, spoon. Shoved way in the corner, however, is a plastic knife, suggesting this order is not a mania. It simply pleases her eye.

And that's what is so interesting about the house--that it is orderly without being fussy, spare without being austere, airy without being cold. Here, design and personality have wed. This house belongs to its owner.

More details surface. Amid all these clean lines and white walls, almost every door in the place is a relic. Nicked and chipped and sanded down, these cypress doors were painstakingly hand-picked by Robichaux, who scoured architectural salvage shops in New Orleans, had them refinished and shipped north. But gradually, it's impossible to imagine the house without them; nothing could stand in their stead. This is because, as architect Van Dam puts it, Robichaux has "the eye." The furnishings--largely found objects and bargains she has collected over the years--work with the space, creating a unified whole.

As darkness descends, the atmosphere of the house, indeed the house itself, changes dramatically. Stripped of the North Woods views from its windows, the place suddenly takes on the looks of a Manhattan loft. She has invited a friend from down the road in for a martini, which she deftly concocts. The talk turns to books, music. All of a sudden woods clothes seem inelegant.

Robichaux entertains frequently, and--if one meal at her table is any indication--with a great deal of style. She has a cadre of friends in the area and often hosts dinner parties or cocktail socials. She even has a regulation pool table in her unfinished basement. She has quite clearly put together a wholly civilized life in the wilds of Maine.

The Robichaux philosophy of living the good life is fairly simple; one does not trade civilization's amenities for a woods life. One carts them along and, and perhaps, enjoys them to a greater degree for their august setting. This woman even imports her coffee--thirty-six pounds at a time--from Louisiana. The UPS man, still unable to find her house, leaves it at a local gas station for her.

"This life, this remoteness is not for everyone," she admits while touring the countryside the next morning. When a car passes, she smiles and waves. "And I couldn't do it if I couldn't get away"--which she does. Robichaux has recently returned from an extensive stay in Peru and is preparing for a trip to Ireland. She also makes frequent trips out to the woods to check in with her dealer, Ray Farrell, at the O'Farrell Gallery in Brunswick, and to visit friends in southern Maine. These trips often include a stop at Cherished Possessions in South Portland to see if a new found object might make its way into her home.

Many who choose a woods life want little to do with the outside world. Robichaux says she hasn't gone that far, but that "when I'm here, I'm here. I can usually find company if I need it. My longtime companion, Walter, also has a house in the area, and we

weekend together. And there's the usual onslaught of house guests. But I can happily go for days at a time without seeing another person."

Another car. Another smile and wave. "Many of my urban friends can't understand how I live here. But there's always so much to do, so much to be done. A season passes and I think I've snowshoed only once or fly-fished only once or stomped around in the woods with my shotgun only once. And then, of course, there's my work."

She pulls over on a ridge not far from her house and surveys the sweeping, wintry vista before her. "This is where I want to be," she says, "and I consider myself fortunate that my work allows me to live here."

No, a remote life of this sort might not be for everyone. But it is clear that this is *the* life for Marguerite Robichaux--an artful life, one of her own design.

While the stark lines and corrugated aluminum siding of Robichaux's new house may seem more appropriate to an industrial building than an upcountry lodge, the inside is surprisingly warm and dramatic. The focal point of the living area is the fireplace with its twin stovepipes soaring to the thirty-two foot ceiling.

The artist's oversized oils hang throughout her home, but she carefully keeps her work space separate from her living spaces. And living is what this place was built for--not for a retreat or an escape from civilization. A gregarious person as well as an accomplished cook, Robichaux entertains frequently. Skylights fashioned from translucent Kalwall interrupt the roofline and flood the house with light in every season

Van Dam Architecture and Design
66 West Street
Portland, Maine 04102
207.775.0443
www.vandamdesign.com