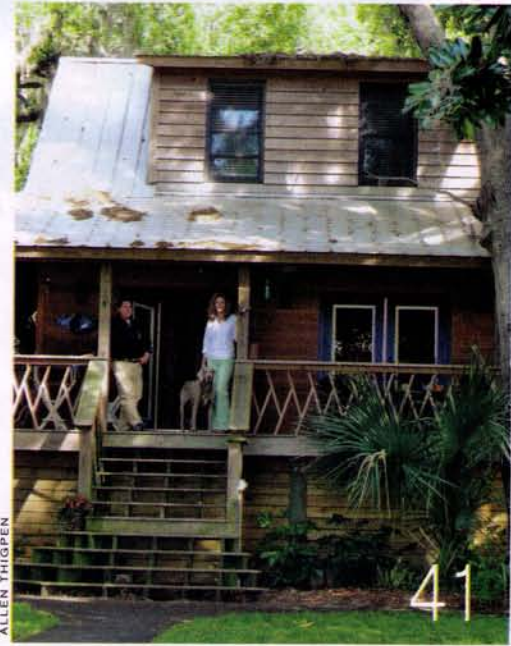


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WATER'S EDGE
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About the cover: A sunset by the water and a fire to ease the chill are just right for the Spadaro family at their home in Jacksonville. Photo by Ed Hall.



contented castaways

HOMESTEADING ON GEORGIA'S HIRD ISLAND. STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALLEN THIGPEN

In a home tucked under a canopy of oak, cedar and magnolia trees Rick and Laurel live the life less traveled. Spreading out before their front porch to the east are a tidal creek, miles of marshland and the ocean. To the west stretches a forest of untouched wilderness.

On a clear morning you can see the lighthouse on Sapelo Island, Georgia, rising above the distant tree line. Aside from a 2,500-foot grass airstrip, the only way to the island is by boat, a winding 10-minute river ride I experienced aboard Rick's white Carolina skiff.

"Rick wanted a big dock with deep water and I wanted a studio looking out over the water, a small house with a

nice porch and a nice yard for the dogs," Laurel says.

Laurel first heard of the property in 2001 while the couple lived in Charleston, South Carolina. Two years later they began construction and made the jump to barrier-island life.

"I loved the island life and he loved boating," Laurel says. "He used to live on a sailboat, and he got his captain's license and always boated since he was a kid."

Rick, a real-estate broker in nearby Darien, Georgia, is originally from Portland, Maine. His past work in chemical engineering brought him south to Charleston, where he met Laurel.

Docks line the approach to Rick and Laurel Johns' home along Hird Island Creek, a 10-minute boat ride east of Georgia's Ridgeville community.



Rick and Laurel's two-story island home, shaded from the sun and overlooking the marsh, was a dream, three years in the making.

"There are a lot of islands here to explore," Rick says. "It's a lot like Maine in some ways."

Their two-story home is one of 30 along the eastern edge of Hird Island. The two-mile long, 1,000-foot-wide island is privately owned and traversed by a narrow, forest-lined road of sand. The favored form of transportation is golf cart.

Down porch steps and across a narrow stone walkway, Laurel and her trio of dogs lead the short stroll to a brightly trimmed, one-room shed at the edge of the yard.

First in the door is Merrick, her 11-year-old gray Weimaraner. Wyatt, the 12-year old Weimaraner-Labrador mix and Sam, a 3-year-old Great Dane, stay behind.

"He's the only one that comes in," Laurel says. "Merrick follows me everywhere I go."

So goes the script each morning at Laurel's aptly-named Grey Dog Studio, the colorful outpost nestled about 30 feet from the water's edge. The windows, front door and sliding doors of the one-room studio were recycled from tobacco magnate R.J. Reynolds' trailer, which Rick and Laurel lived in onsite during the construction of their house.

Reynolds had used the trailer as a hunting-camp getaway when he owned most of nearby Sapelo Island, now the site of state and national nature and wildlife research reserves.

Laurel's studio is aglow with vibrant paintings lining the walls, glass mosaics along each window, rows of fork and knife sets at the center of her work station and dancing stars and sun catchers hanging from the ceiling. At the front counter where much of her work takes place there's a window looking onto the creek, an image of endless green spartina and other marsh grasses unfolding before her.

"I'll work [outside] if the weather's nice," Laurel says. "I've got so much glass now I have to spread it to outside."

Her work is a collection of coastal-themed or whimsical objects – sailboat night lights, sea-turtle mosaics, mermaids, fish, stained-glass shrimp, each brought to life with the light-infused characteristics of glass.

"I love what light can do with the glass that brings out the colors," Laurel says. "I've always loved bright colors in painting and everything I do. Just the way that the light hits the glass and the



Merrick

THE ISLAND ART OF LAUREL JOHNS

From her Hird Island home studio Laurel Johns produces original glass art. The following is a quick guide to her glass-art world:

Stained glass mosaic windows

"It's like a typical mosaic stepping stone but I do it on glass to allow the light to come through," Laurel says. "They hold up better than a stained-glass window that size. We have a couple of them hanging on the porch, so they can take the weather."

Sun catchers

These decorative hanging pieces vary in style and subject matter. "They're whimsical, inspired by a lot of the nature I see around – turtles, palm trees, jellyfish, flounder, crabs," Laurel says. "And other whimsical things like stars and dancing stars."

Night lights and oil lamps

Laurel makes night lights of stained glass and oil lamps from gin bottles.

Pet food bowls

"I've got three big dogs, so I want to make a piece of art for them," Laurel says. "Since I do so many shows that are outside and people bring their dogs, I bring out the bowls so people can have something for their pets to drink from out there. They're also for sale."

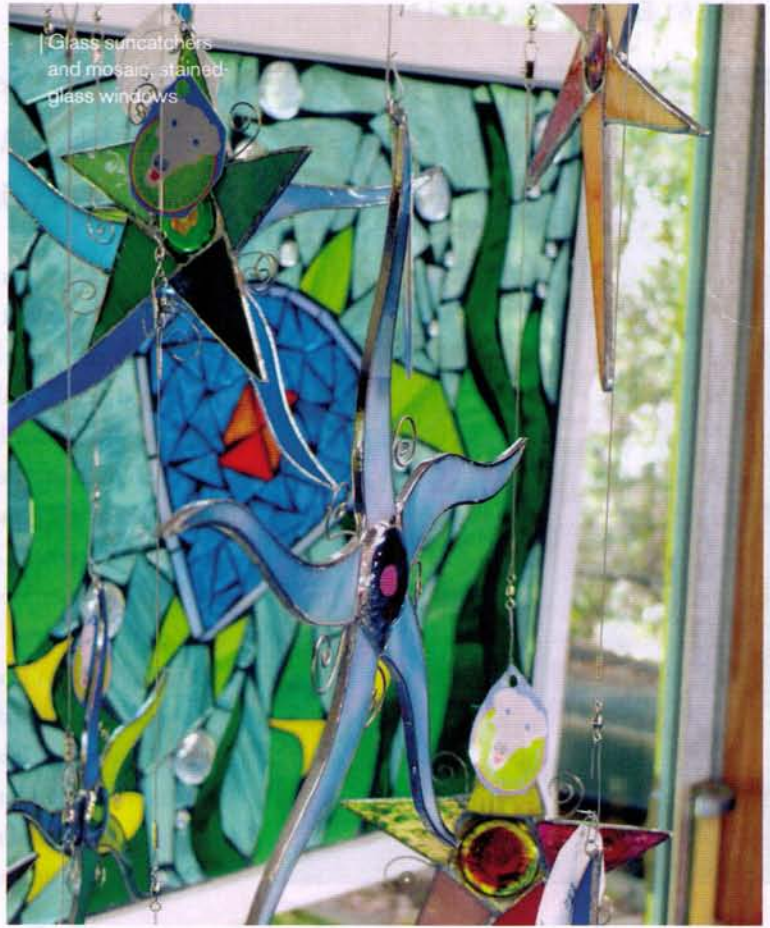
Visit her website

www.greydogstudio.com.

| Painted
lobster floats.



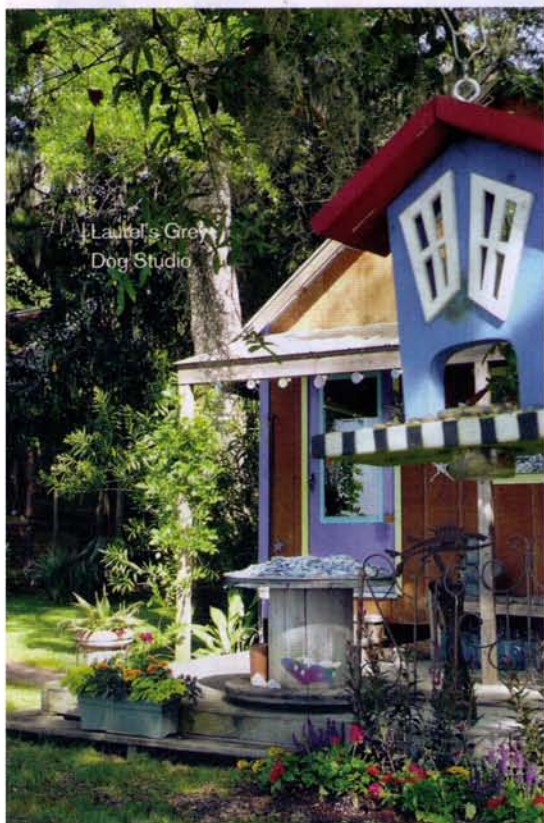
| Glass suncatchers
and mosaic, stained-
glass windows.



| Tumbled island
glass salad sets



| View from the front
porch of Laurel's studio



Hird Island Creek winds its way along the narrow island to the Darien River. At high tide, Laurel and Rick can take the waterway all the way to the old seaport in downtown Darien, Georgia.

three dimensions you can get with the glass and color, that's what I'm drawn to."

What started as a hobby 10 years ago has blossomed into a full-time business. Beginning in 2001, shortly before their move to Hird Island, Laurel began mass producing her glass pieces and presenting at art shows and festivals in coastal Georgia, North Carolina and her summer home in Tenants Harbor, Maine.

"I went to UGA [the University of Georgia] for painting and I just started doing glass as a hobby," says Laurel, who worked after college as a veterinary surgery technician in Atlanta, Georgia, and Charleston, South Carolina. "When we moved here I decided to do this

full time ... and it kind of snowballed."

Laurel is no stranger to barrier-island life. As a small girl, she spent several years on Cumberland Island, Georgia, where her father was a National Park Service ranger. When Laurel and her brother were old enough for school, the family moved to mainland St. Marys. Laurel remembers watching her mother work at home in ceramics – with clay from the riverbank – and driving to the beach in the family's '74 Volkswagen.

"It was great – exploring, going to the beach, all the animals I grew up around."

In many ways Laurel's life mirrors her work, a study in free-form originality steeped in coastal creativity. □



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