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NOV/DEC 2019 | DISPLAY UNTIL 01/06/20

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HOME BUILDER / MIKE LEONARD, LEONARD BUILDERS LLC
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE / JOHN TARKANY, SGA | NARMOURWRIGHT DESIGN

MARSHLAND MASTERPIECE

IN SOUTH CAROLINA, AN ART-FILLED MODERNIST GETAWAY SITS COMFORTABLY AMONG ITS LUSH LOWCOUNTRY LANDSCAPE.

WRITTEN BY JENNIFER BOLES / PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD POWERS

Opposite: "The house itself is mostly glass," explains architect Keith Summerour, who selected equally sleek finishes for the foyer—including book-matched Calacatta Manhattan marble flooring, antique wooden-beam stairs and a glass stair rail. "The idea was to create as light a footprint in this environment as we could while retaining a strong sense of design."

Below: Designer Beth Webb helped tailor the restful colors of this Kiawah Island home to both the art—including a Jason Berger painting in the guest living room—and the marsh landscape outside for homeowners Carey and Doug Benham. A Raleigh sofa and a pair of armchairs, all purchased from Design Within Reach, lend a midcentury feel to the space.



Full of natural beauty and altered little over time, Kiawah Island is a treasure of the South Carolina Lowcountry. Situated about 25 miles from Charleston, the barrier island has changed hands frequently over the centuries—from a reputed pirate and English colonists to a conservation-minded development company. What persists is an astounding natural habitat for white-tailed deer, bobcats, great blue herons and, yes, beachgoers and golfers.

Kiawah Island's sense of community and evident natural wonders proved appealing to Atlantans Carey and Doug Benham, who credit the idyllic setting with their decision to build a vacation home there. "We thought the location was just beautiful, among the ocean and the marsh," explains Carey. "It was such a gorgeous blend of everything."

Envisioning a modernist, multilevel house that would respect Kiawah Island's landscape, the Benhams engaged Atlanta-based architect Keith Summerour, with whom they'd worked in the past, to design it. Having established his reputation as a classicist, Summerour has in recent years expanded into contemporary design; what has not changed is his conviction that architecture must be rooted in the land. "Contemporary architecture is the expression of a strong idea, but I do feel strongly that it needs to be of the locale," says Summerour, whose starting point for the Benhams' home was a hallmark of the coastal South: the live oak tree.

For the uninitiated, live oaks have undisciplined limb structures, their Spanish moss-draped appendages hovering close to the ground and reaching upward toward the sky. To accommodate the live oaks on the Benhams' property,

The Benhams have an extensive collection of ceramics by North Carolina artisans, some of which is displayed in the living room on a tree-slab dining table handcrafted by California maker BlankBlank. An Abstract Expressionist painting by British artist Frank Avray Wilson, created in 1962, hangs behind the table.



Summerour configured the residence as three connecting pods nestled among the trees, laid out to surround one particularly majestic specimen. He managed to negotiate branches by crowning the house with an undulating roofline. The effect is, as Summerour sums up, “as if you took the *Swiss Family Robinson* tree house and moved it to the ground.”

The neighboring marsh inspired the home’s exterior finishes, as well. “When you look at the marsh, it appears as hundreds of horizontal lines—because of the grass and small tributaries that run throughout it,” notes Summerour, who mimicked this effect with board-formed concrete for the first floor, creating the impression of weathered wooden planks. Mixed with local sand and seashells, the material has the benefit of capturing “the general feel and coloring of the marsh.”

To the second story, Summerour applied two layers of wooden shingles to amplify their shadow lines, once again echoing the marsh’s striated appearance. Instrumental in the process was general contractor Mike Leonard, whose attention to detail ensured the home’s finishes would blend seamlessly with its environment. To contrast the wealth of organic surfaces, Summerour placed massive panes of glass that soar up the façade, wrapping corners and running across walls, affording panoramic views of the landscape.

The grounds surrounding the house reflect the combined efforts of landscape architect John Tarkany and landscape designer Kelly Megeath of Garden Elegance, who likewise took their cues from the marsh, incorporating indigenous grasses and native plants like dwarf palmetto and yaupon

“The rooms have these long, Palm Springs-esque horizontal spreads,” notes Webb, who gravitated toward low-slung furniture for the living room, including Steven Gambrel’s Jackson Square sofa that anchors a soft rug by Stark Carpet. A custom wooden console by Skylar Morgan Furniture + Design holds additional pottery and a vintage lamp.



Designed to hug the kitchen's glass-wrapped corner, a built-in banquette provides seating around a copper and quartz dining table by Calhoun Design & Metalworks, which also crafted the hanging glass and metal cabinets. Kelly Wearstler's burnished-brass Elliott chairs bring in additional seating. Both the chairs and banquette are covered in Edelman Leather's Dream Cow leather in Gray Suit.

In an effort to preserve the property's natural beauty, Summerour and landscape architect John Tarkany were mindful not to alter the land more than necessary, keeping any grading to a minimum while preserving existing trees. With its organic appearance and sandy coloring, the home's board-formed concrete exterior blends in with the surrounding marshland.



A selection of the Benhams' North Carolina pottery collection is displayed outdoors, including a ceramic vessel by artist Daniel Johnston that holds plantings selected by landscape designer Kelly Megeath. The native ferns in the foreground were chosen for both their ability to thrive in shade and their loose appearance, mimicking that of the nearby marsh grass.



holly, along with a few non-native species; Japanese plum yew, for example, was trimmed into neat hedges to complement the home's clean-lined architecture.

The interiors were just as creatively conceived, but here, both nature and art drove many design decisions. As a visual artist and former board member of Atlanta's High Museum of Art, Carey and her husband had spent years collecting works by important artists such as Sally Michel Avery, Stephen Pace and Ivon Hitchens, even earmarking specific paintings for each room of their Kiawah Island retreat. Recognizing the deftness required to design it, Carey was quick to call up a friend, Atlanta designer Beth Webb, to help realize her vision. "I knew Beth had the experience, style, taste and personality that would allow me to consult her expertise," says Carey. "I had a lot of fun buying pieces on my own, but I always came back to Beth for her opinion."

Webb's background as an art dealer ensured she was up to the challenge of tailoring the Benhams' furnishings to their artworks. "Creatively, I like to be stretched, so

I love it when someone says, 'Let's do something different,'" she enthuses. Carey requested that the palette of each room stem from the art as well as the marsh landscape, so Webb pulled hues directly from paintings, sourcing textiles in corresponding shades. Plush selections of upholstery prove that the designer considered comfort just as much as color. "I think contemporary style is cool and chic," she notes. "But you need to be able to *live* in it." To that end, a curated mix of custom-made and midcentury furnishings keep the effect dynamic.

Ever the editor, Webb shunned any decorative objects that did not hold meaning. "There is little here that does not tell a story," the designer notes. Truth be told, it's a statement that could be applied to every aspect of the house and the surrounding property. And as for the homeowners, their story also has a happy ending. "We wake up surrounded by glass walls, looking out onto this huge, incredible, ever-changing marsh," Carey expresses. "Isn't that wonderful?" **L**

Thanks to its lofty windows, Carey's art studio enjoys ample light and views, while the unadorned concrete floor allows for easy cleanup. A vintage acrylic chair and coffee table, both from Huff Harrington Home & Design in Atlanta, are just two of the midcentury pieces collected by the homeowners over the years.



Left: With a picture window to bring the outdoors in, this powder room is furnished by the same philosophy: Namely, the concrete vanity repeats the home's exterior finish indoors. A pair of burnt silver Lille wall lights by Porta Romana flank the view. The floors feature book-matched Calacatta Manhattan marble from Marmi Natural Stone in Atlanta.

Opposite: A cozy nook situated among the treetops, the home's upstairs lounge invites relaxation thanks to its concrete fireplace and a Verellen chaise, from Bungalow Classic in Atlanta, covered in Sandra Jordan's Prima Alpaca fabric. A Stephen Pace painting hangs above the fireplace, while a vintage Moroccan rug from Tew Galleries in Atlanta lends visual warmth below.

