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FOR PAINTING BIG
SKIES AND BLUE SEAS,
SUSAN SUGAR FINDS
ENDLESS INSPIRATION
IN HER KEY WEST

ARTIST'S PARADISE

Some mornings, Susan takes her supplies to the beach early enough to watch the dawn unfold.

WRITER & STYLIST **BROOKS WHITNEY PHILLIPS** PHOTOGRAPHER **DEBORAH WHITLAW LLEWELLYN**

Visitors have to look hard to find Susan Sugar's house, which makes discovering it all the more enticing. Her place is tucked away on a narrow lane that lost its signage years ago. Beyond the gate of a weathered wooden fence, two historic cottages sit side by side, sharing a wild, rambling garden. "The first time I walked through this gate, I felt like I'd entered a secret world I never wanted to leave," Susan says. "The little brick path was dappled with sunlight and covered in fallen flower petals. It was magical."

Susan has been summering here since 1980, when she first came to Key West with her late husband, architect Manfred Ibel. Originally, their property consisted of one 300-square-foot "cigar roller's" cottage—a crude wooden house built for workers during Key West's cigar boom in the early 1900s. When the neighboring cottage came up for sale 10 years later, Susan and Manfred snapped it up before it even hit the market.

The two artists worked together to transform the tiny, rustic cottages into a charming tropical retreat they named Turtle House. An 11-foot breezeway now connects the structures, with one cottage serving as the main living space and the other as an airy, one-room studio. The breezeway, with a covered area for dining, is a popular gathering place on warm afternoons.

The original cottage, which houses the kitchen and master bedroom and bath, grew with the addition of a pine-paneled living room. A sleeping loft, accessible by ladder, nestles under the eaves of the 16-foot cathedral ceiling. Large new sliding glass doors allow air to flow through the house.

"If I were a little girl and dreaming of a house I would want to live in, it would be Turtle House," says Susan. "I feel like I live in an enchanted place. The outside is my living room; the garden is my television."

It is late afternoon, and the island's famous golden sunlight, which has inspired so many artists, casts



Susan's Key West surroundings are an artist's dream: Sunlight soaks into the wooden surfaces, filters through lush landscaping, and spills into open windows and doors. Her studio cottage, with a ladder to two sleeping lofts, has custom wood cabinets for storing art supplies.



ON THE HOUSE

SPACE Main: 420 square feet, one bedroom, one bath, kitchen/living area with sleeping loft. Studio: 360 square feet, one open room with two sleeping lofts and an open-air bath (below)
STYLE two early 1900s "cigar roller's" simple wooden cottages, connected by a breezeway
SETTING small lot on a shady lane in Old Town, Key West's historic district, surrounded by other hundred-year-old cottages



**COASTAL
CONFIDENTIAL**
painting tips for
budding artists

Anyone can learn to paint, says Susan, who teaches a three-day course at The Studios of Key West (tskw.org). Here's her best advice for getting started.

- Experiment—see differences between small and big brushstrokes, lots of water and a little water, thin paper and thick paper. Go at it in the spirit of exploration and surprise.
- Look at books of painters and paintings that inspire you, then paint immediately after.
- When working outside, be conscious of how quickly the light changes. Slow down and take time to really look at what's around you.

From Susan's collection



Gathering Storm



Dawn at Fish Camp



Pier at Dusk

You can buy her work: Birnam Wood Galleries; 631/324-6010 or birnamwoodart.com.

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palm-frond shadows across the cottages' tin roofs. Butterflies hover around fragrant buds on the lemon tree, and hot pink bougainvillea spills over the fence. When the wind blows, hints of cinnamon and almond from the flowering frangipani tree scent the air.

"I'm completely in love with Key West," Susan says. "The whole town is blooming and aromatic, especially in summer." Unlike the tourists who flock to Key West in balmy winter and spring months, Susan prefers summer, when passing storms make the sky more active. "I'm a painter of sea and sky," she explains. "I'm interested in movement and light."

Most days Susan rises before dawn, stops for a café con leche at Sandy's Cafe (the Cuban bodega that has been in her neighborhood longer than she has), and heads to the beach on her bike to paint. If she's lucky, sunrise will present a perfect "Susan Sugar sky"—soft and silvery with layers of clouds. "I'm not interested in the red ball," she says. "I'm interested in how the ball of fire has an effect on everything else."

Back in Susan's spacious studio, canvases in various stages line the lightly pickled walls. The gleaming white floor is painted with a high-gloss marine-grade paint for durability and sunlight reflection. In the pale room, Susan's paintings offer a rare spot of color, and even these are soft and subtle, dreamy, atmospheric works.

"I think my paintings evoke a memory of a place that you've been, or a moment in time when the light was a particular way, or a thick summer day when the horizon was obliterated and all you see is this Neverland of sea and sky," she says, pointing out that she becomes obsessed, painting the same images again and again.

Luckily, her muse is always changing. Using a subtle play of light and shadows, of closely allied colors, she captures the emerging light of dawn, the movement of shifting clouds and sea. "I can't get away from it," she says. "It is completely entrancing." 🌿



Inspired by houses in Thailand, Susan's home has a thatched breezeway and sliding glass doors that disappear into the walls. During hurricane season, wooden barn doors roll into place to protect the structure. Using water from the sea to wet her brushes, Susan does watercolors that become studies for the larger oils she paints later.



Flowering pandora vine twists around an arbor that shelters the small dipping pool, a shady spot that's one of Susan's favorite places to paint.