



TAKING THE LONG WAY HOME

BY: **Tori Phelps** PHOTOGRAPHY: **Courtesy of Margaret Biggs**

Former model Margaret Biggs knows a thing or two about gorgeous pictures, though, these days, she's more interested in painting them than posing for them. A Pensacola native who left for New York City as a teenager, she spent three decades away from the place she loves most. When she finally returned home, she found a new career, a new perspective, and an old calling.

Biggs has always felt that Pensacola is a bone-deep part of who she is. Perhaps that's because her ties to the area go back to the sixteenth century, when an ancestor on her mother's side was deeded land by a Spanish king. Her parents helped to cement her bond to the Gulf Coast by making Mother Nature a part of the family. Dinner was something from the land, and weekends were spent exploring past where the road ended on Santa Rosa Island. Unfortunately, today's kids cannot do the same. "That area is now much more developed," she mourns.

Along with their reverence for nature, her parents also passed along an art gene that took root in Biggs at an early age. Relatives' paintings dotted the walls of the family home, and it seemed that her own would soon join them. However, a year into her art studies at LSU, the modeling world came calling.

At a friend's suggestion, Biggs dropped some snapshots of herself into the mail for local photographer Michael Belk, who was working on major campaigns for national and international brands. He liked what he saw and began using Biggs as, she says, "the girl on the arm of the handsome man" in menswear catalogs. Those photos ended up in the hands of agency owner and model-maker extraordinaire

Eileen Ford, who phoned Biggs's mother and requested that her daughter relocate to New York. Biggs immediately started packing—not because she was dying to work the catwalk, but because she wanted to travel. “I had very little interest in modeling, but I knew it would be my ticket to travel to Europe,” she explains. “And I had a burning desire to see Europe.”



This photo of Margaret Biggs contemplating the beach just before a poetry reading at Sundog Books in Seaside, Florida, is a beautiful tribute to Biggs's art by photographer Romona Robbins.

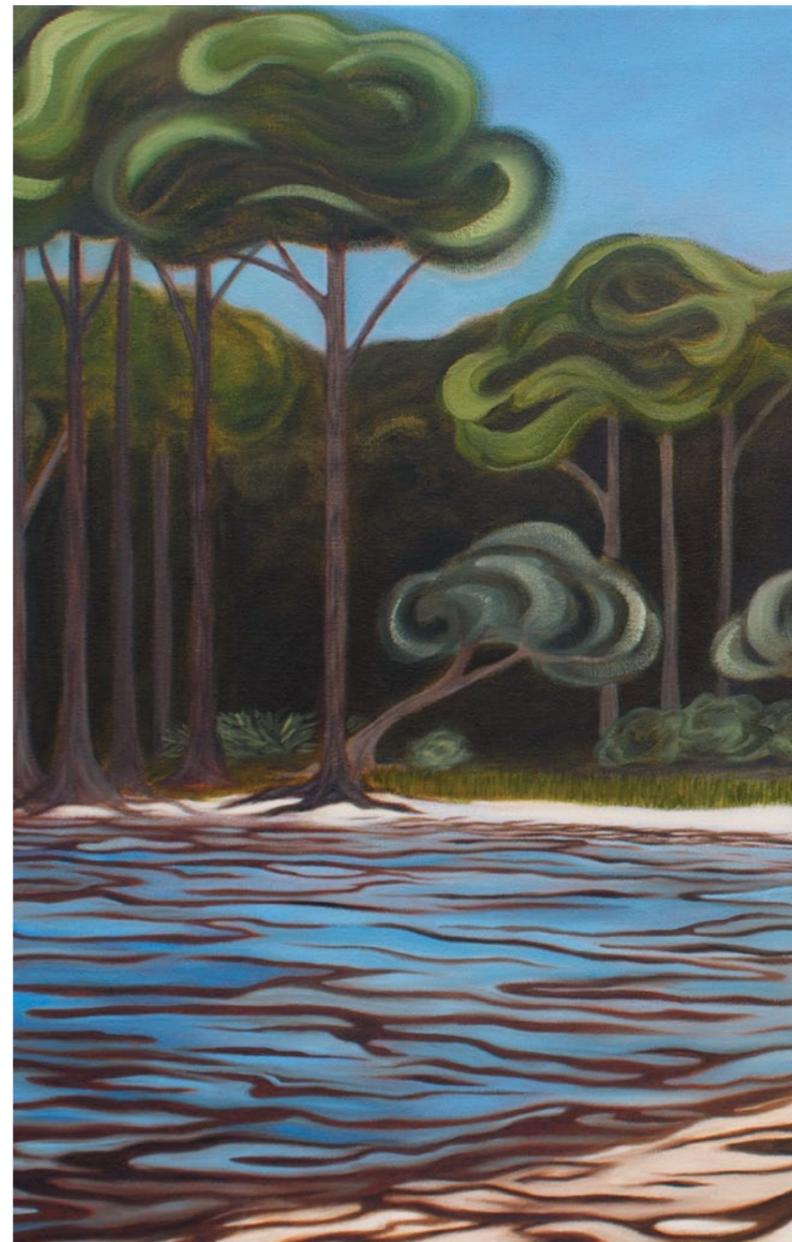
THE REASON HER PAINTINGS **CAUGHT ON LIKE WILDFIRE**, BIGGS BELIEVES, IS BECAUSE EVERY PIECE, WHETHER IT DEPICTS A FLOWER OR FORT PICKENS, STRIVES TO CAPTURE THE ESSENCE—THE VERY SOUL—OF ITS SUBJECT.

So, the nineteen-year-old girl who had been out of the Deep South only once decided to leap headfirst into life in New York City, a choice that spoke as much about her naïveté as it did her sense of adventure, she now realizes. Fortunately, her jaw-dropping escapades—fighting a bull in Spain, roaming the streets of East Berlin before the Wall came down, rubbing elbows with Mick Jagger at Studio 54—left her unscathed and with her integrity intact. She did plenty of wild things, Biggs admits, but she believes the almost childlike sense of wonder with which she approached these experiences helped protect her. “(Hurting me) would have been like kicking a puppy,” she says.

After her modeling career drew to a close, a thirtyish Biggs picked up where she left off with her education, settling in at the University of Illinois at Chicago to study art. However, it would be decades before her passion became a full-fledged career. A series of painful events in 2009, including a surprise divorce and a bankruptcy that left her penniless, nudged Biggs to do something she'd put off for too long: go home and do something with her art.

She drove a thousand miles from Chicago to Pensacola with no one but her dog for company, officially becoming a Pensacola resident again for the first time in thirty years. Alone, broke, and living in a shoddy little townhouse, she found herself—thrilled. “Someone said I was forced to move home, but I didn't think of it that way because I was elated to be here,” she says. “I had palmettos in my backyard again!”

Her days were soon filled with old favorites like swimming and picnicking on the beach. And painting. Lots of painting. She began churning out stylized interpretations of the natural wonders she grew up with on the Gulf Coast, and



people took notice. Her work was snapped up for public and private collections, and clients from as far away as California requested commissioned pieces.

The reason her paintings caught on like wildfire, Biggs believes, is because every piece, whether it depicts a flower or Fort Pickens, strives to capture the essence—the very *soul*—of its subject. “If you want an exact replica of what you see, go buy a photo,” she advises. “An artist's mission is to reveal the unseen.”

That includes the *big* unseen: God. A self-described “spiritual” person, Biggs incorporates her belief that we, and everything around us, are manifestations of God, with nature serving as His canvas. In her quest to bring that to life, she relies heavily on her twenty-five-year meditation practice of stilling her mind. “That's when my art flows the easiest; it's when I can hear God,” she explains.

“Peaceful” and “calm” are the words she hears most frequently when people view her paintings, and Biggs insists it's because she paints within a peaceful, calm mind-set. The effect, however, is anything but tepid. She's known for strong



images, a dichotomy she easily explains by asking, “Have you ever noticed that we're strongest when we're most peaceful? There's great strength in inner peace.”

This combination of right place and right mind-set has produced more than sought-after paintings; it has made her a poet. Biggs says that, following her return to Pensacola, poems just started appearing in her head, almost as if she were the conduit rather than the writer. This “effortless” flow of words led to a book of poetry, first produced as a gift for a dear friend's birthday and then as a gift for, well, everyone. Though unintentional, she can see now that the order in which she arranged the work chronicles her journey through darkness and back

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into light. "I give my book to people going through a hard time," she explains, "because it shows my struggle *and* my triumph. More often than not, it's people who've known great loss at some level who really get it."

One of those losses for her, shared by millions across several states, was the BP oil spill. A lifelong environmental champion, she was devastated by the disaster, which occurred within a year of her return to Pensacola. Terrified and anxious—yet unable to shut off the news coverage—she turned fear into action through her efforts of organizing the Pensacola area portion of Hands Across the Sand events in 2010 and 2011, part of an international movement to raise awareness of environmental dangers caused by practices such as offshore drilling.

Hands Across the Sand is just one of the many charities with which she's involved. Biggs is an advocate for Big Brothers Big Sisters; she participates in Art for Heart as a tribute to her parents, both of whom have heart conditions; and she donates to Smile Train, which provides cleft palate surgery for children around the world. "Just \$250 will fix a child's cleft palate; I think that's a really great use of \$250," she comments.

Painter, author, activist: Margaret Biggs has more on her plate than most, but she seems to be adding rather than subtracting. Next up for her is an inspirational book that uses seashells as a narrative device for a woman's life—her tribute to Anne Morrow Lindbergh's iconic *A Gift from the Sea*. She's also considering publishing a collection of her short stories and another book of poetry. But first on the agenda is more visual art: prints on wood, a wallet-friendly way to get art into more people's hands. "I want to make art for everybody, but even at the price range I'm making it, it's fairly inaccessible to some people," she says.

Whether she's making prints on wood or writing about seashells, she hopes what audiences take away from her work is the beauty of slowing down, both physically and mentally, to appreciate the touch of the wind or a wave curling toward shore. Spreading that message, she believes, is her calling. "I was given the gift of art, as I believe everyone is given a gift. And through those gifts, we make the world a better place," she says. "In my own small way, I want to share a little of this magic, this unseen. There's magic everywhere if we slow down long enough to see it." ❏



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