



BY Meg Cox

## *Gwen Marston*

### HER OWN FINE SELF

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To reach Gwen Marston's rustic home on Michigan's Beaver Island, you either need to take a two-hour ferry ride or a 15-minute flight in the sort of propeller plane often dubbed a puddle jumper. But in this case, the "puddle" you're jumping over is Lake Michigan. Only 600 people live year-round on this thickly wooded, pear-shaped island, 55 square miles dotted with seven small lakes.

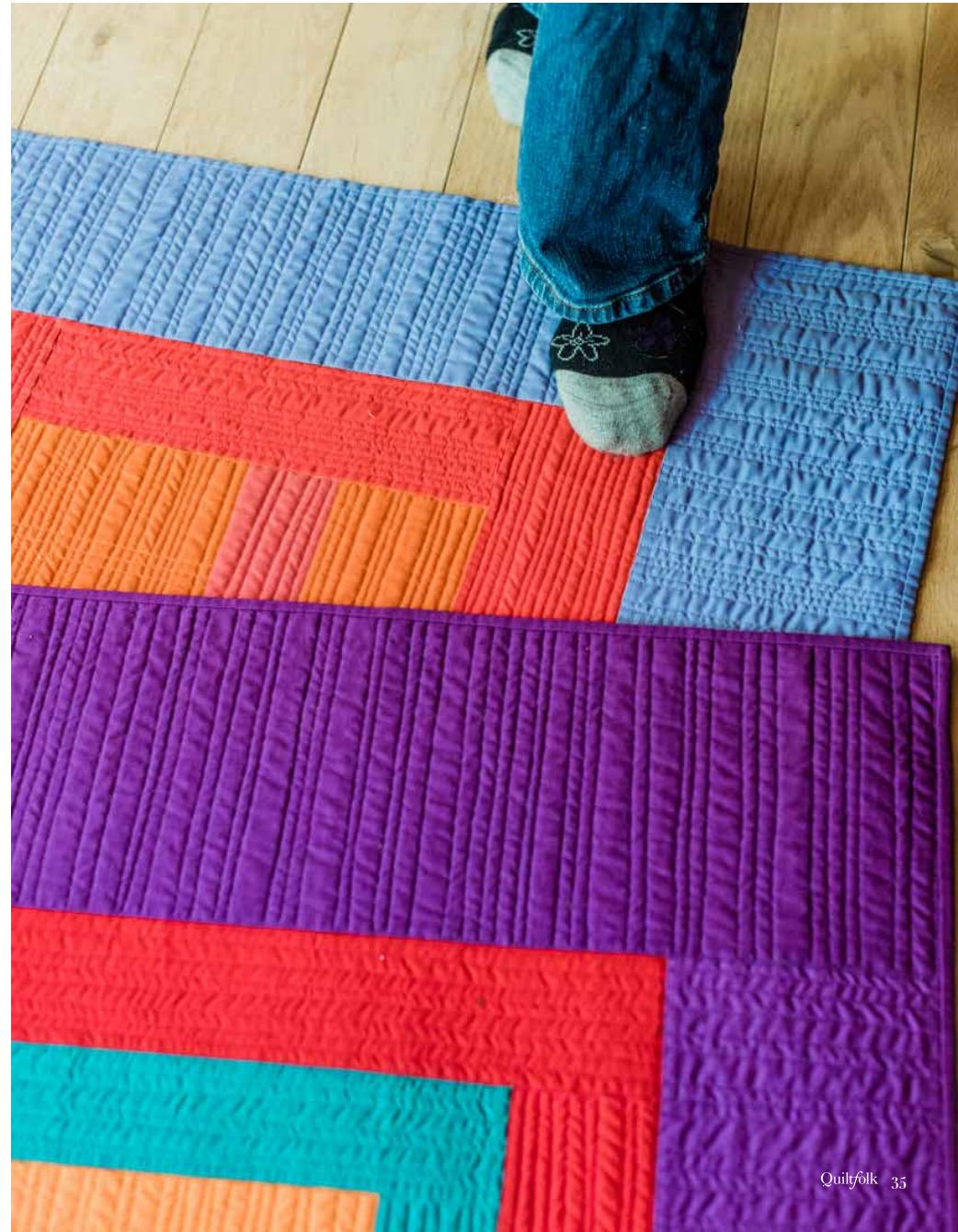
The house echoes Marston's characteristic style of quilting: simple, clean lines that cohere into a powerful image of spare beauty. That aesthetic and her improvisational techniques for achieving it made her one of the most sought-after and influential quilt teachers in the country. But last year, at 80, Marston retired from all that.

When we met her, Marston's warm presence felt outsize, bigger than her small, slender frame. She was dressed in jeans and a black long-sleeved T-shirt, having come to the small airfield to meet the *Quiltfolk* team in her weathered red pickup truck. Her trademark bob with even bangs is now gray streaked with white. A mischievous smile lifted her prominent cheekbones.

Gwen Marston at home on Beaver Island.



















Even Marston's iron of choice isn't contemporary: Instead of the fancy, lightweight irons marketed to quilters now, she prefers a 40-year-old model that would break a toe if dropped but presses beautifully and doesn't turn off automatically.

It's hard to believe that someone working in such an antiquated way became the darling of modern quilters. After decades of popularity and several dozen published books, Marston was "discovered" by a new generation.

In 2010, shortly after the Modern Quilt Guild was formed, Marston published an updated version of her 1997 classic book *Liberated Quiltmaking*. Modern quilters felt instantly at home with her aesthetic, which featured solid fabrics and wonky versions of

vintage blocks like Log Cabins.

Canadian fabric and quilt designer Cheryl Arkison, a leading light on the modern scene, called Marston "my personal hero." When a quilt mentor of Arkison's encouraged her to try techniques from the *Liberated Quiltmaking* book, "The heavens parted and the angels started singing," she said. "Suddenly I could see all the possibilities. And I've never stopped improvising."

Marston gave many modern quilters obsessed with precision piecing permission to loosen up and improvise by touting a method that still required precision in other areas. Arkison remembers the stir Marston created as the keynote speaker at QuiltCon in 2016. "Quilters new to improv are

always shocked when I say that we will still use quarter-inch seam allowances, we will still press our work, and squaring is important [so] that your quilt stays together and lays flat. As the QuiltCon headliner, Gwen said pretty much that same thing and [...] the gasp in the ballroom was audible," said Arkison. "She made improv obtainable to those who'd never considered it."

Marston has been an inspiration to countless quilters, as she keeps paying forward the greatest lessons from her own mentor, Mary Schafer. Schafer was an influential quilter who collected antique quilts starting in the 1950s. Well before the Bicentennial, Schafer was responsible for reviving interest in quilts through her careful scholarship

and industriousness in reproducing old quilts. The two women met in the 1970s and Marston helped promote Schafer's work.

While soaking up Schafer's deep knowledge of old quilts, Marston came to a revelation that shocked her. "I could see mounting evidence that many early quiltmakers were not following arbitrary rules nor were they using patterns. They were figuring things out for themselves, which resulted in innovation and originality in their work." When the quilt revival began in the 1970s and quilters started slavishly following patterns and teachers, Marston went another way. "I made an abrupt left turn and figured out how to make quilts that echoed the freedom and spontaneity found in old quilts."



**ABOVE:** Marston's twin habits of being methodical and practical guide her process. **OPPOSITE:** *The Magic Forest*, Marston's latest book, features 31 appliquéd tree quilts, each with a complementary poem, proverb, or haiku.

Being both methodical and practical are constant themes in Marston's work and allure. For 30 years she hosted an annual retreat on Beaver Island and, because many people came annually, she changed the theme every single year. She would pick a theme, say Flower Basket blocks or string quilts, and spend the entire year researching it. By then, she'd have enough material for a book on that block or theme: Thirty-one Gwen Marston books have been published over the years.

Marston's resilient practicality helped her to adapt techniques as she aged. After 50 years of hand-quilting, her hands are "giving me trouble," she said, so she decided to experiment with machine-quilting on her vintage Singer. "You can't lower the feed dogs and I used no special feet," she said. "But I loved the effect. The thread gets pulled a little as you

quilt the straight lines and that ended up creating a herringbone effect. I've spent my whole life avoiding puckers, and now I embrace them."

What will her legacy be in the end? Marston said she doesn't read quilt magazines or keep up with the quilt world online. But what she fervently hopes is that her many books and years of teaching will continue to liberate quilters in more than one way.

If she does have a complaint about how quilting has changed, Marston feels that it's gone too commercial and quilters have become too reliant on patterns. "It's all about celebrity and about patterns. You can't make a simple Four Patch these days without a pattern," she said. "So many teachers just teach their quilt step by step. [...] What I hope is that people will find their own tack, their own way of doing things. Then, their work has a chance to really stand out."







**ABOVE:** Saturated color — a Marston hallmark. **OPPOSITE:** The artist in her studio, happy to keep company with her own fine self.

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*"I've spent my whole life avoiding puckers, and now I embrace them."*

— GWEN MARSTON

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One thing is for sure: Gwen Marston made a career out of doing things her own way and she won't stop now.

Last winter was the first Marston has spent here since retirement, cocooned in her house, toasty warm from her wood-burning stove. She broke up the stretch of isolation with some visits to family, including her London-based songwriter son. But she relished the time alone, digging into the high stack of poetry books on her bedside table and the weighty nonfiction tomes she'd long wanted to read.

"I would get up when it was still dark, press the button on my coffee maker, and sit in this comfortable chair in the living room, watching the light come up," she recalled. "And I thought, you've never had the time to just sit quietly with your own

fine self. That's where you make discoveries!"

Marston doesn't expect to feel lonely, especially during the warmer parts of the year. Her compact, modern guest house will be filled with a succession of friends and family. In truth, Marston doesn't have a set plan or expectations for what she'll do with this next gift of time. She isn't even sure how much of it will include quilting, although she finally got the chance to complete a brightly colored Pinwheel quilt for her grandson.

"I've had ever so many people come up to me with a furrowed brow and say, 'But what will you do?'" Marston said. "I've never been bored for a minute of my life. I just look forward to living life fully. Quilting just developed all on its own, and I like to do life that way."

