A woman in a tan coat and blue jeans is walking away from the camera on a dirt path covered in fallen autumn leaves. She is carrying a basket in her left hand. A small dog is walking ahead of her. The path is surrounded by trees with vibrant autumn foliage in shades of orange, yellow, and red. The scene is captured from a low angle, looking down the path.

THE ART OF LIFE

A former aerospace engineer traded her calculator for a camera and started a blog dedicated to documenting slices of nature. The great outdoors, and her site's signature minimalism, inspired her interiors, too.



ALL IN A DAY'S WORK

Mary Jo Hoffman's blog, *Still*, is known for detailed photographs of things picked up during daily walks, like this assemblage called *Color Study in Bronze*. "The materials slowly built up on my desk," Mary Jo says. "I noticed they were in the same palette, and a composition was born." There are tulip poplar buds, driftwood gnawed by beavers, beetle-eaten linden leaves, and cross sections of an ash tree.



TWO FRAMED PHOTOS, PART OF MARY JO'S WEST ELM COLLECTION, HANG IN THE KITCHEN.



It's almost too easy, Mary Jo Hoffman says of autumn. "It's like being a kid in a candy store." Crisp leaves crunch underfoot as she shops the forest floor for treasures. Tall pines, fiery red maples, and orange oaks form a tunnel around the trail outside her front door. "The hard part is that after a few weeks of photographing oaks, maples, and yellow birch leaves, I get tired of the rainbow-saturated images and want to mix it up."



So goes this aerospace engineer-turned-artist's daily quest to find, photograph, and post a piece of nature to her popular site, Still. Today, instead of picking a flawless leaf, she'll challenge herself to find the less obvious: perhaps a beetle shell to put under the camera, which, in a way, is like her microscope. "I am most excited when I can take a mundane subject, like a rotting leaf, and make a striking and memorable photo from it," she says.

Following a 15-year career at Honeywell, Mary Jo became a stay-at-home mom who tapped her creative juices while the

Mary Jo, *top left*, recently set up a studio in her walk-out basement. "I'm pretty tidy," she says. "But if I'm in the middle of a project, the house can look like a tornado passed over the forest floor." Built-in shelves, *above*, display sentimental pieces like a demijohn glass bottle picked up in France and books husband Steve, *top right* with daughter Eva, had as a student in Paris.

**[BREAKING DOWN]
SCANDINAVIAN
STYLE**

For Mary Jo, Nordic-inspired design comes down to three things: "There's lots of white to reflect the northern light. It's uncluttered, and it's furnished with natural elements." Here's where to start:

**LET THE
SUN SHINE**

Uncovered windows let in light that's reflected and amplified by white walls. (Which white? Mary Jo used tinted Sherwin-Williams paint in a matte finish for walls, satin for moldings, high gloss for floors.) "The style is not so much about modern furniture design as a reverence for light."

**WARM WITH
TEXTURE**

Natural surfaces and organic fibers edge out cold for a casual and comfortable mood. Think stone, light woods (pine, maple, and whitewashed or cerused timber), and weathered concrete with wool, cotton, linen textiles, and furs.

**SIMPLIFY
SILHOUETTES**

Starting with the bare windows, focus on ways to streamline furnishings and simplify collections. For her accent pieces, it's no surprise that Mary Jo goes natural and hyperlocal, and she makes frequent changes. "I like seasonal nature to take center stage," she says.

**PILLOWS IN A
MUTED PALETTE
AND A MIX OF
TEXTURES MIMIC
THE NATURAL
WOODS
AND TEXTILES.**



Mary Jo took the coyote photo above the fireplace and enlarged it on cotton rag paper. The stump side tables are cut from old telephone poles. Branches from the woods provide color. "I stopped buying flowers in the grocery store probably about five years ago," she says.

kids were in school by making art she kept private in bound journals. In 2012, when her children were older, she decided to go public with her daily documentation of specimens she finds mostly on the five meandering wooded trails surrounding her home north of St. Paul. She quickly gained a loyal following, including brands like Target and West Elm, and has since produced home collections for both companies.

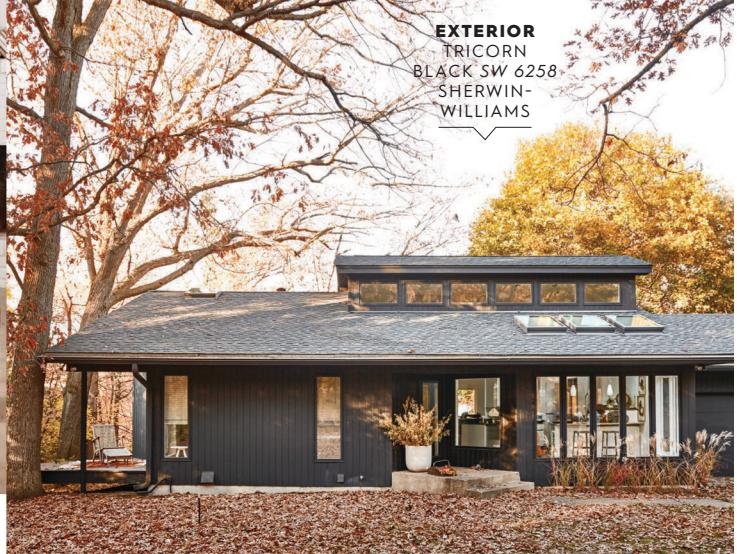
Mary Jo laughs about launching her blog in the dead of winter, which in Minnesota means many of her would-be subjects were covered in snow. But she now credits the frozen landscape's constraint for helping her become a better observer. The distinctiveness of the seasons in the Upper Midwest provides an ever-changing color palette and near-constant discoveries. In the spring she looks forward to watching purple alliums burst their skins. Summer rainstorms make a dramatic entrance over the lake behind her house, with winds that sometimes shake loose birds' nests. She reveals each season with vivid images composed on bright white, or sometimes black, backgrounds. She arranges her subjects—found seedpods, tufts of fur, a butterfly wing, dried berry



“A SPARE INTERIOR, WITH LOTS OF LIGHT SURFACES, ALLOWS THE NATURAL LIGHT TO BE MAXIMIZED AND REFLECTED, WHICH IS SO IMPORTANT LIVING AT 45 DEGREES LATITUDE.”

MARY JO HOFFMAN





bunches—simply and graphically.

The minimal aesthetic of her blog spills over to the 1970s ranch she shares with her husband, Steve, and their two kids, Eva and Joe. All-white surfaces, down to the painted plywood subfloors, form a museumlike setting

for organic textures and modern furnishings. “In the past six years I’ve evolved our home to reflect the Scandinavian minimalism I’m drawn to. At first I said to the kids and my husband, ‘Just let me try this. If we don’t like it, we can change it.’” Her family approved. “I think the lack of clutter was calming, and the house became this oasis.”

Decks off the front and terraced along the back of the house extend the living space to the outdoors, which is where you’ll find the family most of the time. “I recently came across the term *citizen naturalist*,” Mary Jo says. “I think our whole family would fit that description. We’re curious about our environment and like to know the names of things, so we spend a lot of time thumbing through field guides and looking up names and images on Google.” —KELLY RYAN KEGANS ■

In the summer and early fall a screen porch becomes a guest bedroom, *this photo*. Walls were painted the same matte black as the exterior. Steve built the couple's bed, *opposite*, out of a dock and the trunk of a fallen white oak in their backyard.

“ I MAY WANT A MORE FEATHERED NEST AS I GET OLDER, BUT FOR NOW THE SIMPLICITY AND CALM OF AN UNCLUTTERED ENVIRONMENT SUITS ME.

”
MARY JO



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