



Bachman, Kara Martinez. Painter's Irish Channel studio masters the art of off-grid living," *Nola.com*
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Nicole Charbonnet holds her dog "Rose" at her art studio/home in the Irish Channel
(Photo by Brett Duke).

When painter Nicole Charbonnet acquired her Irish Channel studio -- which serves both as her workspace and her home -- it had already fallen prey to the insults of time and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In its rescue, she not only saved an old building, but set her sights on living and working completely off the grid.

"It was an old factory, It wasn't a residential building," Charbonnet said of the airy, 7,000-square foot-structure. She and her artwork live upstairs, where her paintings lean up against the walls. Nearby, in an adjacent space, her "personal" 500-square feet -- one bathroom and bedroom -- serve her simple needs. Downstairs, she rents space to other artists.

She only knows the history of the building by learning it from the neighbors. They said it was once a mattress factory. At another point, it was a broom factory. No one need spell it out, though; it's clear, surrounded mostly by residential properties with lawns and friendly stoops, that this address was a little different.



There's no lawn or landscaping outside. Even now, Charbonnet's front door is a roll-down industrial door, and guests need to call ahead, as she doesn't have a doorbell.

Adding living warmth to her frosty-toned, bright workspace are several small dogs. They follow Charbonnet around, and the faint sound of their claws on floorboards create a fun pitter-patter among the artworks.

Charbonnet bought the place several years after it had stood vacant following Katrina. The roof had rotted off. She replaced it and topped it with a full off-grid solar system that supplies all of her electricity needs.

"I was able to save a lot of the wood. It's good pine and cypress," she said, pointing down at the white floorboards of her studio.

Overhead, ceilings estimated at 20 feet are supported by exposed white-painted beams. The light streams in from high windows. Some of the accoutrements of living -- a couch here, a bookshelf or supply shelf there -- rest comfortably among what appears to be hundreds of completed canvases leaning against the walls.

"Being an industrial building, the space is generous," she said. "It's also very simple. It's just wood. The light is amazing.

"The neighbors said, thank God you came in, this building was falling down," she said, about her arrival several years ago. "It's the biggest building on the block, so I'm excited I was able to save it."

Charbonnet's rooftop solar power system was created by Jeff Canton of New Orleans-based Solar Alternatives, who she said provided "wonderful advice and work."

In her previous Warehouse District studio space, Charbonnet had dabbled in solar, but wasn't completely off-grid. She said she sold some electricity back to the power company, but her monthly savings was negligible, so the benefit of remaining "connected" didn't reap the rewards she'd hoped for.



After looking into all the options, she elected to go completely off the grid in 2011. She said she loves knowing that in a storm or other emergency, her studio could be a life-saving asset for the neighborhood.

"It was expensive," she said. "The system I put in was like a \$80,000 system, but I got 80 percent of that back," she said, referring to a 50-percent state tax credit and a 30-percent federal tax credit.

Charbonnet does caution that what she did was much more extensive/expensive than what most home solar systems do. Not only does her system provide all of her electricity, but in this case, the space the system supports is 7,000 square feet.

"My system is not small at all, as it needs to power a huge building and is not just set up for a camp or ancillary power for home during grid power outages," she explained, indicating the cost of such supplemental systems for smaller homes would cost far less than what she put in place.

Charbonnet lamented the fact that in recent years, subsidies and credits for solar systems have been cut; she feels fortunate she was able to create a self-sustaining system while it was more financially feasible.

"It's 100 percent renewable, so it's more green," she said of why she thinks it was worth the investment.

Charbonnet -- who has a predilection for depicting animals and unusually elegant images of pop culture superheroes in her artwork and working with layer upon layer of paint -- exhibits locally at Arthur Roger Gallery and at various venues around the country.

"It's mixed media," Charbonnet said of her work. "I'm a painter, but I use a lot of materials besides paint."

Charbonnet has been selected as the 2016 featured artist for the Cocktails for KID smART fundraiser, happening Oct. 26 at the New Orleans home of Elly and Merritt Lane. The nonprofit, which brings the arts to local children who may not otherwise be exposed to them, offers single event tickets and sponsorship packages that range from \$125 for a single ticket to \$5,000 for 10 tickets, a champagne reception, and other goodies. Those reaching a certain level of sponsorship will receive a giclee limited-edition print of Charbonnet's "Zebra" work, printed on archival paper with archival ink.

"Obviously, growing up in New Orleans, I feel like I've benefited immensely from mentors, teachers and people in the arts," she said of why she supports the work of KID smART. "They go into schools that don't have sufficient funding for the arts."

