



Making an Artistic Life in Northern Michigan

by [Philip A Hartigan](#) on July 9, 2012



Either Guleserian and Altoonjian, one of the founders of the Persian Bazaar (click to enlarge) (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

TRAVERSE CITY, Michigan — In the early part of the twentieth century, two emigrants from Armenia named Guleserian and Altoonjian arrived in Petoskey, in northern Michigan, and decided to go into business importing and selling “rugs and other novelty goods” in this remote but prosperous town. Their Persian Bazaar was located on Lake Street, and the fine red brick building with its big storefront and leaded glass doors today displays a commemorative plaque showing either Mr. Guleserian or Mr. Altoonjian (not named on the plaque) posing for the camera in about 1907, showing off some wares.

At the same time, a young man named Ernest Hemingway was spending his summers at a family home nearby — an association that is more commonly made with Petoskey nowadays. We can imagine Hemingway or one of his relatives visiting the G & A building, as the Persian Bazaar was known — but even without tangible evidence for such an encounter, it’s not fanciful to connect the writer-to-be and the salesmen as part of an emerging artistic life in northern Michigan, which developed alongside the massive logging and auto industries and became firmly established with the founding of the famous Interlochen summer music camp in the 1920s (followed by the arts academy in 1962).

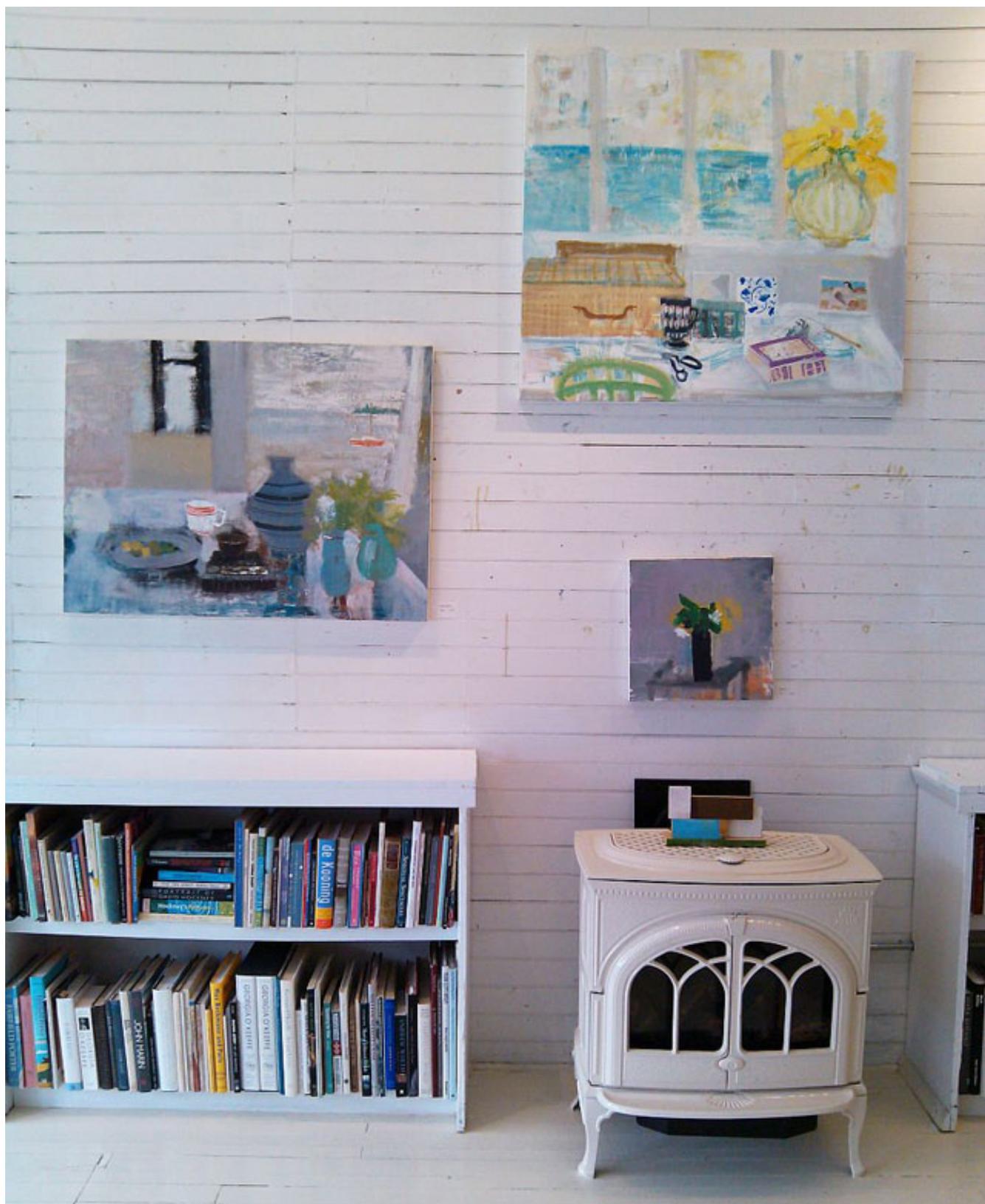


Painters Melanie Parke and Richard Kooyman (click to enlarge)

During a recent two-week stay near Traverse City, I discovered that northern Michigan is still a magnet for artists who want to make a creative life for themselves outside the big cities. All the way up the western side of the state are small beachside towns along Lake Michigan — South Haven, Saugatuck, Empire, Glen Arbor — that are home to dozens of ceramicists, painters, printmakers and jewellery makers. But perhaps my most interesting find was in Kaleva, about an hour's drive south of Traverse City. There, painters **Melanie Parke** and **Richard Kooyman** live and work for half of each year, in a couple of buildings that Parke purchased more than ten years ago.

“The main structure was built in 1902 as a community house, then it became a store,” says Parke. “It was in such bad shape when I saw it that I was able to get it for a really low price. Since then, and with Richard’s help, we’ve converted this building and the barn next door into two sizable studios.”

former store to make her sensitive, Bonnard-like paintings of still lifes and interiors. A short walk across a walled garden leads you to a red barn where Kooyman works on his informally precise landscapes and cityscapes. I asked him how they manage to survive out there, and he assured me they got along fine. "We have a winter apartment in Chicago, but we're very aware that most big collectors in Chicago go to New York City to buy their art. So we do pretty well by selling in other galleries, like in the Chicago suburbs, vacation and resort towns, and so on."



Melanie Parke's studio

The quality of their art is evident: you can see their training even if you didn't know that Parke was a graduate of the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, and Kooyman a graduate of the art program at Ohio State. What I took away from my visit was, of course, a huge amount of studio envy, but also a great deal of pleasure in seeing good painting done with thought and feeling, and satisfaction that such work can sustain these artists outside the conventional gallery system.

Don't just take my word for it. If you're in the area any time during the summer, visit their studios. Just be sure to email ahead of time — info [at] melanieparke [dot] com.

Ernest Hemingway Interlochen Center for the Arts
Melanie Parke
Richard Kooyman