

By Sue Ellen Christian

A weekend getaway along Michigan's west coast from the stateline to the resort town of Saugatuck is lovely in and of itself. But sprinkled along this lakeshore swath are magical hideaways in which you can find, though not always easily, artist-owned galleries and studios. Artists are covered in sawdust, paint and clay and their work is infused with the world just out the studio door – the woods, farms, meadows and dunes. It all makes for a soulful excursion.

In this quick tour focusing on artist-in-residence studios and galleries, you get to see the meadows that serve as inspiration for former Goose Island sculptor Fritz Olsen's striking marble sculpture "bouquets" – massive pieces that nonetheless swivel at stem and flower head in his Sawyer gallery/studio. At Blue Star Pottery in South Haven, Mark Williams plucks maple leaves just yards from his potter's wheel and covers them in a slip glaze that results in a delicate, trademark design.

You see the whimsy, too, like Linda Hoffhines and Floyd Gompf's sculpture garden in Union Pier featuring a 4-foot long striped egg and cement-covered Bertioia chairs and yes, cement shrubbery. And you see the hope; painter Dawn Stafford opening in July with her first solo venture, The Peachbelt Studio and Gallery, in a meticulously-renovated 1867 school house on M-89 across from a Fennville farm field. (Try out the school bell.)

Experiencing the interplay of artist and environment is "a much-more well-rounded learning experience," says Olsen, whose spacious gallery is in a former azalea nursery built in 1939. "You get to see where a piece was created and not go to some retail outlet or some slick gallery,"

Travelers can easily find good local eateries (Lakeside's Casual Chef Cafe for homemade soups, Café Gulistan in Harbert, the Harbert Swedish Bakery for breakfast and lunch, Crane Orchards on M-89 in Fennville, Pumpernickel's Eatery in downtown Saugatuck, the outstanding Everyday People Café in downtown Douglas, to name just a few) and B & Bs and motels are also plentiful, so it's easy to explore at your own pace. Galleries are open Friday through Sunday but hours vary. Some fine art is sure to be missed in this telling, so explore at your own pace and following your own aesthetic.

Traveling from Chicago, exit I-94 at Highway 12, just inside Michigan, and go west to Red Arrow Highway and head north. Then start looking for signs, or lack of them. As sculptor Marcia Perry put it, "People get here by hook and by crook – enough so I can survive, not so many that I have to move."

For example, a small placard just north of the Wild Orchid Design shop on Red Arrow Highway that says, simply, "The Egg" is the only clue to find Gompf and Hoffhines' black-and-white tarpaper-covered home. The mammoth egg is a take-off on the souvenirs that travelers buy to remember a place. "People come and say, 'I'm here to see the egg,'" says Hoffhines.

Hoffhines' earthenware ceramics are daring and giddy with color, and her inviting space tempts you to take a seat and try to make a pot yourself. Gompf's furniture of recycled wood is on display in their home, but sold at Lovell & Whyte(((CQ))) in nearby Lakeside.

While on Red Arrow in Union Pier, check out the pencil-and-ink work of Sara(((CQ))) Scherberg at her Acorn Gallery. Then head north on Red Arrow just a few miles to the Lakeside Gallery in Lakeside brings you to a wondrous space, a garage-like clutter of adventurous ceramic pieces made when the gallery also had an international artist exchange. The gallery was begun in 1968 by John Wilson of Chicago International Art Exposition fame.

Two miles up the road, just west off Red Arrow on West Holloway Drive in Sawyer, is the pastoral setting for Olsen's sculptures. During gallery hours, stroll past 46 pieces exhibited along a garden walk that starts at the "Dan Ryan gate," which is made of discarded rebar from the highway's reconstruction.

Hop back on I-94 if you want to make good time, and in St. Joe, visit the Box Factory for the Arts – indeed, it's in a cool, funky old factory that made specialty boxes – and often catch several of the 20 studio artists on site working as well. There are three galleries showcasing regional work.

Across the St. Joseph River in Benton Harbor, it's a quick stop to see Synapse Gallery, a fairly new venture featuring photographic work in an 1860-era building. Owner and photographer Chris DiCicco has his studio there and brings youthful energy and vision to the exhibits. Then, a bit off the coastal path, in Coloma, is the studio and gallery of Randall Higdon, who specializes in representational landscapes of exacting detail.

There's not space to cover all nine of the artists in the Blue Coast Artists, whose studios and galleries hopscotch along (or nearby) the Blue Star Highway, which runs parallel to I-196. (See www.bluecoastartists.com for more details.) Yet these studios from South Haven to Saugatuck are all worth a visit for one reason or another; Williams' nature-infused functional pots; the quaint studio setting and vivid landscapes of Suzi Lattner; the menagerie of pets, including strutting peacocks, among the raku and smoke-fired work of Dawn Soltysiak at Khnemu Studio, which is housed in a big red barn; and the handmade glass beads and funky, small-scale wire creations at Jessica Bohn's Blue Roan Studio, where animals also abound, including a crowing rooster.

Blue Coast co-founders Jerry and Kathy Catania own Vesuvius Gallery on Blue Star Highway in Glenn, where Jerry Catania's sophisticated blown glasswork is also shown. Blue Coast Artists features artists' demonstrations the first full weekend in October. "Unique settings are part of the experience, says Kathy Catania, owner and curator of Vesuvius. "You discover this wonderful art in the middle of nowhere,"

Tucked amid the Blue Coast group are Stafford's new Fennville studio and the mystical setting of Foxglove Studios on 64th Street in South Haven. Walk through meandering

gardens that artist Barb Bare uses for her dried flower creations and visit her sheep, whose wools she spins, dyes and weaves for her fabric art.

A few blocks west of Blue Star in downtown Douglas are at least three artist-owned galleries within two blocks: The novel relief acrylics of Scott Luoma, who paints on site, the metal sculpture of Johnny Blue, and fine oil paintings of *plein-air* painter Kenneth Cadwallader.

Finally, the journey ends at a fitting locale, the artsy town of Saugatuck, where the Ox-Bow school, affiliated with the Art Institute of Chicago, began in 1910. Among the many fine art venues here, take in Jim Brandess' studio and gallery on Butler Street in the heart of downtown, where you can see – and smell - the artist working on his latest richly hued oil painting in the front window. Rachael(((CQ))) Hirt of The Tuscan Pot specializes in majolica-style tiles and pots, and you'll find her bent over the intricate designs in her back-of-the-shop studio.

To top off this tour of artists-at-work, end with Marcia Perry's Ark Gallery and Sculpture Studio on Blue Star Highway in Saugatuck. Perry's wood studio is a jaw-dropping sight of towering logs, half-finished chairs, sleek torsos, fantastic animals, and chisels, chisels, chisels. A gallery upstairs provides a calmer setting in which customers arrange to "adopt" (for a price) one of her wood creations.

"I work with these and they become my friends," says Perry, sawdust covering her overalls. "You can't sell your friends."

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