

J.B. Blunk

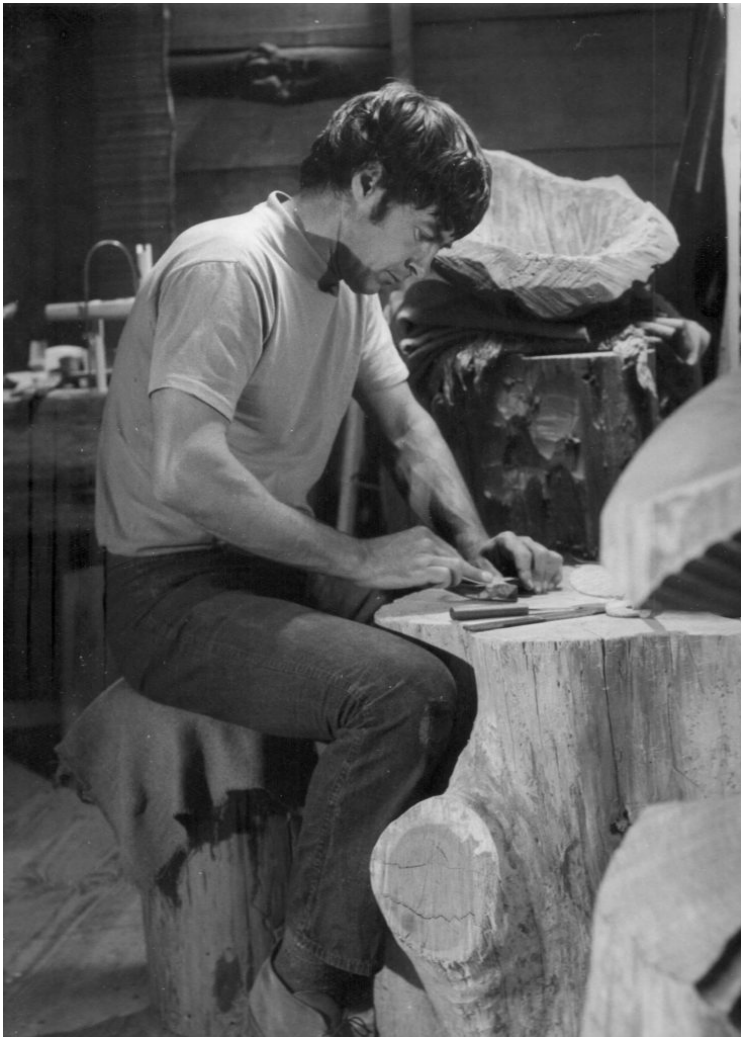
SELECTED PRESS

The First Exhibition of JB Blunk's Jewelry, at Kasmin Gallery in New York, Offers an Intimate Look Into the Late Sculptor's World

His designs were made to be interacted with, sat on, drunk from, lived in, and worn.

MEKA BOYLE

NOVEMBER 23, 2022



JB Blunk in his studio circa 1975. Courtesy of Kasmin Gallery.

The late multidisciplinary artist JB Blunk is best known for his innovative wood sculptures and furniture, two categories he often fused. Now Blunk's jewelry is on display for the first time, at Kasmin Gallery in New York, framed by paintings, ceramics, and sculptures that span his prolific career.

Blunk lived the life of an artist. Many of his designs were made to be interacted with, sat on, drunk from, lived in, and—in the case of his jewelry—worn. Now, at Kasmin, some of the jewelry pieces are for sale, ranging in price from \$1,000 to \$18,000.



Exhibition view. Courtesy of Kasmin Gallery.

JB Blunk began making jewelry in the 1950s and continued late into his practice, although many of the pieces were not designed to be displayed beyond adorning his loved ones. Blunk handcrafted the majority of the earrings, necklaces, bracelets, rings, and accessories on display for his partner and muse, Christine Nielson, as well as for family and friends.

Blunk often made jewelry to test out concepts for his sculptures. "The jewelry, specifically the bracelets and the rings, really are maquettes for larger works," Blunk's daughter Mariah Nielson—Director of the JB Blunk Estate who co-curated the exhibition with Kasmin—told Artnet News. "They were opportunities for JB to explore ideas on a very small scale. It was a quick and easy way of working through an idea or developing a form."

He traveled extensively throughout his life and collected precious stones and gems as mementos that he later turned into jewelry. A triad of three earth-toned earrings in the exhibition were made from coral and shells that Blunk brought home from the beaches of Mexico, giving them an intimate and organic quality.



Little Mans (1954). Courtesy of Kasmin Gallery.

Much of Blunk's jewelry has a sculptural quality to it that echoes his wider known body of work. In one of his early necklaces, the aptly titled *Little Mans* (1954), a silver and amethyst pendant rests atop an animated clay body. The pendant connects to thin leather strips with what look like tiny outstretched arms.

Blunk found joy and enlightenment in his work. No matter how big or small, he used his hands to sculpt fluid forms out of organic material. He famously worked with large pieces of salvaged redwood that had been washed up along the Northern California coast or discarded by loggers.

Blunk's magnum opus is his handmade wood home in Inverness, Calif., that holds countless ceramics, tables, chairs and sculptures he made during his lifetime. He was a pioneer of the countercultural back-to-the-land movement of the 1960s and 70s, when young disenfranchised Americans relocated to nature to build homes and communal farms away from urban life. He lived and worked from the house for the remainder of his life, drawing inspiration from the natural environment.

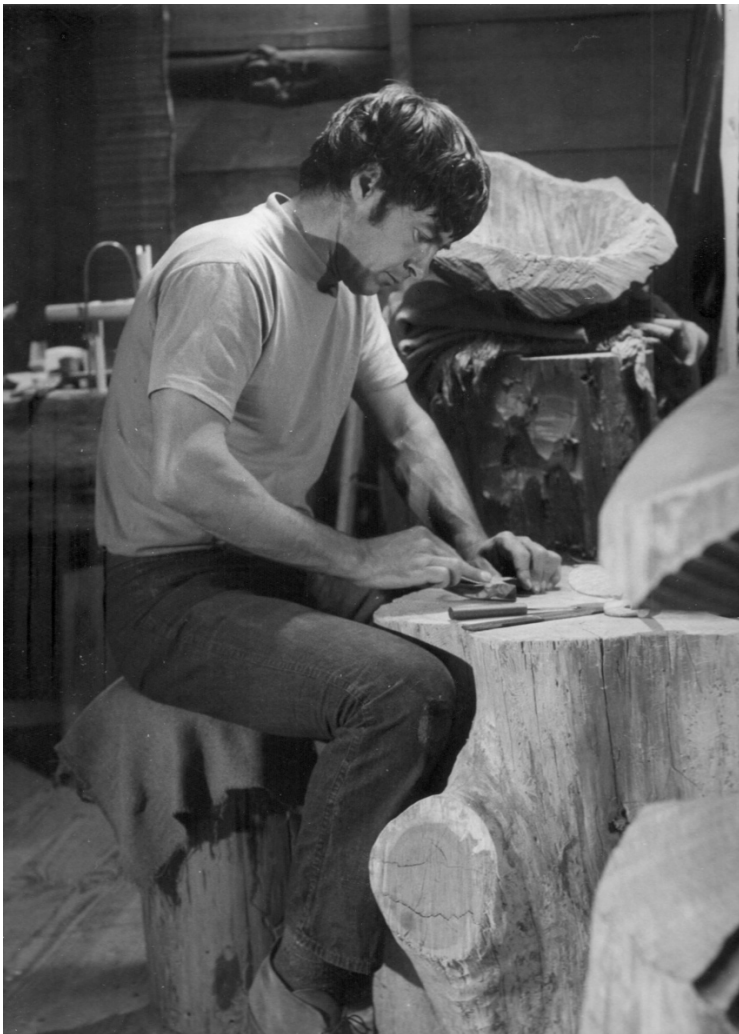
CULTURED

Known for his Organic Wood Sculptures, a Private Practice of JB Blunk is Revealed for the First Time—Jewelry

Never before shown to the public, the late sculptor's jewelry is on exhibition in "Muse," which opens today at Kasmin Gallery in New York.

SOPHIE LEE

NOVEMBER 10, 2022



JB Blunk in his studio circa 1975. Photo courtesy of JB Blunk Collection.

The art world celebrates JB Blunk for his organic sculptural works in clay and wood, many of which can be found in the permanent collections of institutions like the Smithsonian and SFMoma. But the upcoming exhibition at New York's Kasmin gallery marks the first presentation of the late artist's jewelry work. "Muse"— which also features a selection of Blunk's ceramics, paintings, and wood sculptures—charts the artist's travels across South America and East Asia through the gems, bones, seedpods, and beads that he collected along the way and transformed into wearable mementos for loved ones.

Why has it taken so long for Blunk's jewelry to reach viewers? The artist's daughter, Mariah Nielson, explains: "He made pieces for my mom and me, for very close women friends, and very occasionally on commission." One such request was made by fellow artist Gordon Onslow Ford, a surrealist painter who asked Blunk to craft a gold bracelet and necklace for his wife Jacqueline Johnson.



JB Blunk, *Little Mans*, 1954. Images courtesy of Kasmin.

"The variety, and whimsy is so typical of his practice and so beautifully represented in these never-before-seen diminutive works of art," Blunk's partner, Christine Nielson, says of the items in "Muse," which opens ahead of New York Jewelry Week. "These pieces offer a glimpse into an area of his oeuvre that was not previously available."

Though Blunk's earrings, pendants, and bracelets are smaller in scale than his sculptural work, the pieces reflect the same earthy warmth and contrast between function and abstraction. But unlike his sculptures, which were made with the gallery in mind, Blunk's jewelry work feels intensely personal. The earliest piece on display, *Little Mans* (1954), is a necklace the artist crafted from clay and silver with a leather chain. It appears like a figure with outstretched arms, an amethyst stone embedded in its face. A pair of earrings, decorated with coral and seashells from the beaches of Mexico, radiate a nostalgic summery heat.



JB Blunk, Earrings, 1977.

"I remember JB hiding presents for my mom in the branches of the Christmas tree," Mariah recalls. "My mom would discover small boxes covered in handmade wrapping paper in the branches. Inside would be a pair of earrings, a bracelet or a necklace." Now, at Kasmin, devotees of the artist's work can experience the same sense of discovery.

"Muse" is on view through December 23, 2022 at Kasmin's 514 West 28 Street location in New York.

FINANCIAL TIMES

Chip off the block – lessons from my father, JB Blunk

As a new book shines a light on the work of the late American sculptor, his designer daughter recalls how his aesthetic shaped her own

MARIAH NIELSON

SEPTEMBER 10, 2020



Artist JB Blunk in a fig tree in Japan, c 1952 © JB Blunk Collection.

I can still remember the smell of my father's studio. A mix of freshly cut wood, sawdust and varnish. It was a warm, dusty, pungent scent that emanated from his sculptures and, at the end of the day, his work clothes. The smell would waft out of the open doors of his studio and envelop me like a strong hug when I stepped inside.

My father is the late sculptor JB Blunk, best known for his large-scale redwood installations such as *The Planet* (1969) at the Oakland Museum of California. But before he started working with wood in the early 1960s, ceramics were his focus. When he was drafted into the Korean War in 1949, he saw it as an opportunity to visit Japan and meet the revered studio

potter Shoji Hamada. There, a chance encounter with the artist Isamu Noguchi led to apprenticeships with the distinguished potters Kitaoji Rosanjin and Kaneshige Toyo – experiences that deeply influenced his work and way of life.



Mariah Nielson with her mother Christine and JB Blunk in Inverness, California © JB Blunk Collection.

It was seen most visibly in the construction of our home in the small Marin County town of Inverness, California. The house and two studio spaces were built by hand from salvaged materials by my father and his first wife, Nancy Waite Harlow, in the late 1950s. Here, amid the large redwood burls, chunks of cypress and other scraps of wood, JB would carve and sand his sculptures, paint, and work on his ceramics and jewelry designs.

For me, as a child, my home was a magical playscape filled with art and creative people. The house is surrounded by dense woods and a verdant garden where I created a vast network of dirt roads for my Matchbox cars. I was a wild child. I hated having my hair brushed and wearing shoes. I painted and drew ceaselessly. My mother, textile artist Christine Nielson, taught me to weave; my father taught me how to work with clay, and together we would make pots, cups and plates.

If I wanted to spend time with my father while he worked – which was every day – I needed my own project. I started a restaurant called Chatz Cazure that served sawdust-based dishes. My father would always order the special of the day, which I dished up on plates and bowls made from redwood scraps. I would also make furniture for my doll's house. Occasionally he would join me, carving wonderful miniature coffee tables or chairs.

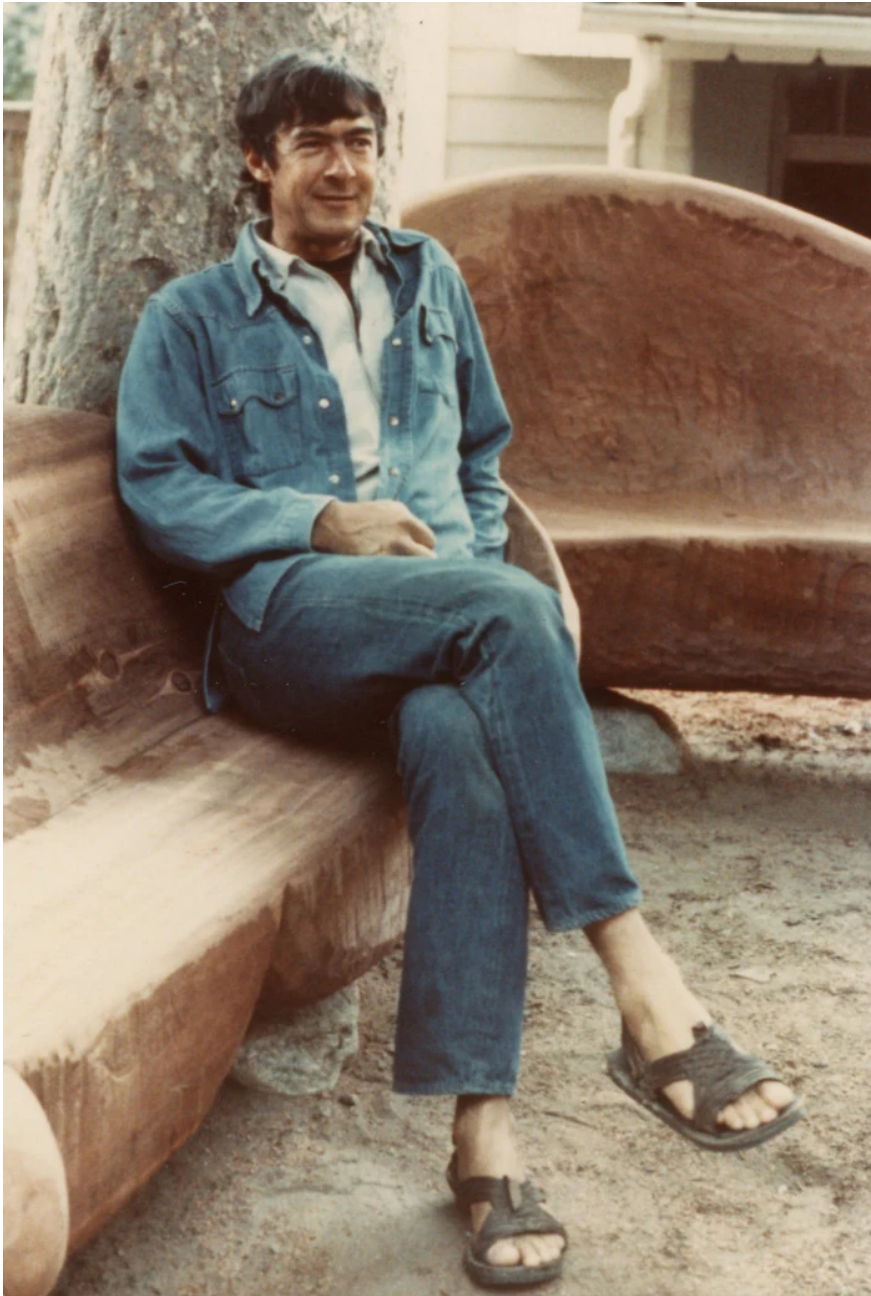
JB was extremely productive and protective of his time. A classic Blunk adage was “my time is precious”, but this didn’t mean he was a recluse. He loved to socialise, and my parents hosted weekly dinner parties with musicians such as Ry Cooder and Taj Mahal, and artists Lee Mullican and Luchita Hurtado. Once a month our neighbour, the surrealist painter Gordon Onslow Ford, would join us for dinner. My mother always made a soufflé with bundles of roasted potatoes and rosemary in parchment paper. Gordon would arrive and extend his right hand to me. I’d gently pry his fingers open to reveal a beautiful, polished stone.



JB Blunk at work on his redwood installation *The Planet*, 1968 © JB Blunk Collection.

Noguchi, a lifelong friend of my father's, also came to our house several times. I remember his beautiful hands – hardened and sculpted by years of making. Describing what JB had created in Inverness, Noguchi said in 1978: "I like to think that the courage and independence JB has shown is typically Californian, or at least Western, with a continent between to be free from the categories that are called art. Here, the links seem to be more to the open sky and spaces, and the far reaches of time from where come the burlled stumps of those great trees."

Whenever I return to Inverness and walk down our driveway, it feels like I'm exhaling. I feel grounded. I was born within these walls and the space is embedded with memories. The objects too are part of ongoing histories – things JB acquired from his travels in South America, Japan and Indonesia; paintings and sculptures made by friends; and, of course, his own creations – all arranged and rearranged over the decades.



The artist at Tassajara, California, c1970 © JB Blunk Collection.

There are certain objects that best embody the humour and considerate craft of my father's work. A ceramic soy sauce pitcher he made in 1970, for instance. The oddly shaped vessel, handmade from local clay, pours just the right amount of soy sauce. The top and bottom are lightly glazed but the round belly of the vessel is left rough to provide a little traction while pouring. It's playful and durable, and has been in constant use for more than 30 years. So have the light pulls in our home. Whittled from extremely light balsa wood, in erotic forms that are quintessential Blunk, they are both artworks and utilitarian objects. There's also a sink carved from a single piece of cypress – a voluptuous yet functional form that was first roughly cut with a chainsaw then finished with a chisel and sandpaper, with deep, long grooves that resemble the surface of a raked Japanese garden.

My father's jewellery has also stood the test of time. Each Christmas he would give my mother a new piece, announced by a poem he had written on brightly painted pieces of paper, folded into unusual shapes and tucked into the tree. One particular bracelet – a circular brass band fitted with two beads, one carved from a deer antler, the other from ivory – she has worn every day for the past 40 years. This design, rethought as the Sun Moon Bracelet, exemplifies the ethos of the Permanent Collection, the brand I founded with Fanny Singer in 2016. Our goal is to create unique and timeless objects, garments and accessories, inspired by the environments we grew up in – the kitchen of Fanny's mother, Alice Waters, and the workshop of my father.

My father's personal style was all about layers and flair. He would wear Levi's with a long-sleeved shirt in bright purple, pink or striped cotton, then a work coat and bandana, the latter secured with a hand-carved horn or wood bolo. He made his own belt buckles out of silver and abalone. My mother, meanwhile, favoured natural fibres in earthy tones, offset with my father's elaborate jewellery. In the '80s she wore her hair in cornrows, then, of course, got a perm. All their clothes were considerately made, often cut from fabric sourced on their travels to South America and Japan. My father's well-worn work coat has a special place in my memory, and has also been recast as part of the Permanent Collection in dark-indigo Japanese denim. All these influences are reflected in my own personal style: a combination of old and new, with just a little flair – and always a piece of Blunk jewellery.

In this way I carry my upbringing with me. It was a unique experience. There was certainly a time when I craved a conventional environment. As a teenager I wanted nothing more than to live in the suburbs. It wasn't until after my father died in 2002 that I really began to appreciate what he, Nancy and my mother had created and shared with me. Now I aspire to this type of independence. I also strive to continue JB's legacy. I'm the director of his estate and have recently published the first monograph about him. In October, Kasmin Gallery will host the first presentation of my father's pieces in New York. He would have loved this.

ADPRO

Palm Springs Art Museum Spotlights Alma Allen and J.B. Blunk

Though the artists never met, they share a common bond.

MAYER RUS

FEBRUARY 2, 2018



A 2018 Alma Allen bronze sculpture, *Not Yet Titled*, 2018. Photo: Courtesy of Alma Allen.

Brooke Hodge, the Palm Springs Art Museum's intrepid director of architecture and design, is playing matchmaker. Like a blind date, her new exhibition, "In Conversation: Alma Allen and J.B. Blunk," stages an encounter between two artists who never met but share a deep affinity. The work of Alma Allen (b. 1970) and J.B. Blunk (1926–2002) blurs the line between craft, design, and sculpture. Both men drew inspiration from nature's visceral power and beauty—majestic trees, craggy mountains, rugged boulders—to create profoundly evocative work from materials found on the land.



The kitchen of J.B. Blunk's home in Inverness, California. Photo: Lisa Eisner.

Allen and Blunk were self-taught, and each began making handmade work on a small scale using ceramic, stone, and wood. Working alone in remote locations—Blunk in Inverness, California, and Allen until recently in Joshua Tree, California—gave them the space and freedom to expand the scale and range of their practices to encompass not only tabletop objects furniture, and sculpture but also their own hand-built houses.

In addition to small early pieces, large-scale works, and process models, the exhibition will feature photographs of the homes and studios of both Allen and Blunk by Lisa Eisner and Leslie Williamson, creating a parallel conversation between the work of two contemporary photographers. The exhibition runs from February 3 to June 4 at the Palm Springs Art Museum's Architecture and Design Center, Edward Harris Pavilion.

A Little House in the Big Woods

The late craftsman J.B. Blunk built his Marin County cabin by hand: a holistic expression of an artistic life.

AMANDA FORTINI

NOVEMBER 17, 2016



A totemic sculpture by Blunk in the corner of the master bedroom. Credit...Lisa Eisner.

In the sleepy Marin County town of Inverness, on a remote wooded ridge that overlooks the wide blue sweep of the Tomales Bay, sits a modest, low-slung redwood cabin that the late multidisciplinary artist-craftsman J.B. Blunk built entirely by hand.

The Blunk House, which resembles a cottage from a midcentury-modern fairy tale, is no less than one artist's architectural treatise on how to live. The integrity of his vision — a total embrace of the handmade — is evident upon first entering the yard. There's a rock collection, its contents gathered by Blunk; a ceramic studio (with three kilns) where Blunk once worked; and a woodcutting studio that still contains pieces of redwood he gathered. Two towering arches loom over it all. The first was carved by Blunk from a single piece of redwood circa 1974. The second was cast in bronze and installed by Blunk's son, Bruno, in 2002, the year Blunk passed away, as a tribute to his father.

For Blunk, art and life seamlessly coexisted. Beyond the heavy, ponderous redwood door, the sort one might find in a medieval castle, is a simple open-plan home with a sleeping loft, all of it illuminated by sunlight pouring through picture-frame windows. "My father built everything in here," Mariah Nielson, Blunk's 37-year-old daughter, says. We sit at the kitchen table Blunk carved from a massive slab of redwood and drink tea out of ceramic cups that Blunk fired in his kiln. His pedestals, columns, stools, chairs and sculptures, with their clean lines, allusions to the human body and affinity for hollow spaces, are all around us, the California cousins of Brancusi and Henry Moore.



J.B. Blunk's first wife, Nancy Waite, with their son, Bruno, circa 1958.

Although J.B. (“James Blaine”) Blunk moved fluidly among mediums — making ceramics and jewelry, painting and, late in his career, working with stone and cast bronze — he is known, primarily in the West Coast art world (and increasingly beyond it), for his chainsaw-carved wood furniture and abstract sculptures. He sometimes used cypress, but his preferred material was redwood, the soft, claret-colored wood of those majestic sentries indigenous to the area. He salvaged huge chunks of it that washed up on beaches or remained from building and clearing projects, often using massive burls that loggers left behind.

Blunk was born in 1926 in Ottawa, Kan., but he is a California artist in the truest sense of the term, his craft bound up not only with that state’s landscape, but also with its characteristic ideologies. His enterprising, self-reliant, independent spirit ties him to the settlers Joan Didion has called “the adventurous, the restless and the daring,” as well as to California’s counterculture and back-to-the-land movements. It takes a certain audacity to move to rural-nowhere and erect a house from found materials, to grow your own food and carve, kiln or create whatever else you need. And the house itself, in its porous approach to its natural surroundings, exhibits a typically Californian philosophy of design.

Blunk’s trademark large-scale “seating sculptures,” which blur the line between functional and sculptural and were created for various local institutions (UC Santa Cruz and the Oakland Museum of California among them), are, for the many Bay Area residents who grew up lounging on them, practically part of the landscape themselves. The pieces, culled from gargantuan pieces of redwood, look like magnificent oversized ashtrays you can sit in. Their power derives partly from their innate tension; these are works of artistry and precision carved with a swift, violent instrument.

But anyone familiar with Blunk’s oeuvre will tell you that the house is his masterwork. In 2006, Nielson — who designs a line of luxury basics called Permanent Collection and works as a freelance curator, in addition to managing her father’s estate — moved back to Inverness part-time and has since been refurbishing both the house and her father’s legacy. A show of his ceramics at Blum & Poe in Tokyo opened this month, and plans are currently underway for an exhibition at the Oakland Museum in 2018. “This show is going to look at Blunk holistically,” says OMCA senior curator, René de Guzman, “not just as an artist but as someone who was building a lifestyle.” It is this lifestyle, its ethos and aesthetic — seclusion and simplicity, a reverence for the landscape and an uncompromising fealty to the handmade — that feels so relevant now. But the real pleasure of Blunk’s house is that everywhere, from the chisel grooves on the hand-carved bathroom sink to the chainsaw marks on the oak-wood floors, there is evidence of that element too often missing from our modern, mass-produced lives: the human touch.

Blunk designed and constructed the house with his first wife, Nancy Waite, from 1958 to 1962. He had no formal training in architecture or furniture making or joinery; he’d studied ceramics at UCLA. In 1951, while in the army during the Korean War, he took a trip to Tokyo, where he met Isamu Noguchi in a mingei (folk art) store. This was to be the most fateful encounter of Blunk’s professional life, and not just because Noguchi’s work, with its abstract, organic shapes and use of negative space, is an obvious influence on his own. Noguchi set him up as an apprentice to the acclaimed ceramic artist Kitaoji Rosanjin; later, he worked with the potter Kaneshige Toyo, who was a national treasure in his lifetime. The two years Blunk spent steeped in the Japanese stoneware tradition would teach him to welcome cracks and imperfections and color variations in a piece, an approach he’d eventually bring to wood.

Noguchi was also responsible, however indirectly, for Blunk’s turn to woodworking. In 1954, when Blunk returned to California, he floated among a series of odd jobs for two years before Noguchi introduced him to the Surrealist painter Gordon Onslow Ford, who would become his friend and patron. Ford was about to build a house in Inverness; he hired

Blunk to construct the roof. This was the first time the young artist had worked in wood, and it's surely not a coincidence that in 1958 he began constructing his own house on an acre of land that Ford had given him to live on. His first wood sculpture, a loglike throne carved from a hunk of cypress he found roadside near Petaluma, was created as a gift for Onslow Ford in 1962, and is now in the permanent collection at SFMOMA.



California Craft meets Japanese Minimalism in the cabin that the sculptor J.B. Blunk built in Marin County. Here, a view of the house overlooking the Tomales Bay and Inverness Ridge.

Blunk viewed his house as an ongoing creative project rather than a finished work of art. “J.B. never wanted it to become a precious place,” says Nielson, who has continued to renovate, replacing the carpet in the master bedroom with walnut floors, and adding sliding redwood panels to the kitchen cabinets. “It was really important to him that there was ongoing activity and creative production here,” Nielson tells me. Ido Yoshimoto, the son of Blunk’s longtime assistant, Rick, recently moved into the property’s ceramic studio, where he sculpts wood objects and dyes indigo silk-screen prints. And from 2007 to 2011, Nielson ran a residency for artists in collaboration with the nearby Lucid Art Foundation. Max Lamb, Gemma Holt, Jacob Tillman, Jay Nelson, Rachel Kaye, Rainer Spehl and Harry Thaler have all stayed at the house.

In the 1970 short television documentary, “With These Hands,” which profiled eight different craftspeople, Blunk — coiled like a spring, with dark, brooding eyes — is seen pacing panther-like around a giant redwood burl. He’s tuning into the essence of the wood much the way Michelangelo did with stone. “When working with a large natural form like this, the

primary thing I think you have to accept from the beginning is that you're going to make something from what is there," he says, referring to his method of direct carving. He might have been talking about every aspect of his life.



Blunk with his second wife, Christine Nielson, in 1972.