

ARCHITECTURE + DESIGN

Inside the Sublime World of Late Sculptor J. B. Blunk

A stunning, handmade idyll where redwood, river stones, ceramic, and creativity reign

By Kathryn Romeyn
Photography by Yoshihiro Makino

July 30, 2018



Imagine living not only in the midst of pristine natural surroundings but actually feeling truly embraced by them, breathing in warm woody aromas as an abundance of curvaceous redwood forms hug you inward. Such is the state of being inside the intimate, hand-built abode of the late prolific American sculptor J. B. Blunk, who began creating it in the late '50s in Inverness, California, after his friend and patron, the surrealist painter Gordon Onslow-Ford, offered him an acre of land.

Though he was Kansas-born and UCLA-educated in ceramics, Blunk's earthbound life traces to Japan, where he spent four years living in the early '50s and where he met renowned artist Isamu Noguchi by chance. Noguchi was responsible for the introduction to Onslow-Ford, who allowed

Blunk to climb trees on his land in search of the perfect plot for his future home, which became the pure expression of his artistic being.

“Once he chose that spot he *became* that place,” says Christine Nielson, his wife until he passed away in 2002. “It wasn’t nature so much as it was just the world that his material existed in,” she says, adding she would not call him a naturalist. Blunk felt a relationship with the wood that grew around this place, on the Northern California coast, and had an undeniable connection with the redwood burls washing up on its beaches that he salvaged. His art curator daughter, Mariah Nielson, sees a certain reverence for organic material in his abstract yet evocative style, which left much of the natural form intact in wood and, in his slightly rugged clay work, purposely left rocks jutting through the fired surface. He strove “to find the shape or the spirit that was in the piece of wood, and bring it to life or reveal it,” says his daughter, adding that the material guided him, not outward influences, though some might find subtle parallels to Brancusi and Noguchi.



Photos and ephemera include (clockwise) a black-and-white photo of Blunk and wife Christine Nielson in 1978; a note from artist, assistant, and close friend Rick Yoshimoto; a picture of Blunk with painter and neighbor John Anderson; and one of the artist with his daughter, Mariah Nielson, Yoshimoto, and Yoshimoto's son, Ido, in 1986.



Christine describes Blunk as simply “a man with his place.” He loved being in the woods around his home: hiking, salvaging wood burls; working, finding materials, and allowing them to tell him what they wanted to be.

While it’s hard to imagine anyone not walking through the graceful towering entry arch and feeling their heartbeat quicken at the beauty and balance of textures surrounding and inside the compact home, Mariah, who was born there, admits she took the house for granted. As a teenager she wished to be “quote-unquote normal and have a father that wasn’t an artist. I really pushed up against the house and I rejected the lifestyle my parents had brought me up in.” Not until her early

20s, when she was studying architecture, did Mariah appreciate what they'd created "and the fact that it was a work of art."

In fact, at 16 she left for Tokyo, following in the footsteps of her father, who was influenced heavily by his time apprenticing for two Japanese national treasures, potters Kitaoji Rosanjin and Toyo Kaneshige, and learning about Shinto (the ancient Japanese religion that worships nature). "That friendship really changed his life," says Mariah of Noguchi.

Another life-changing relationship was with Christine, his second wife, whom he met in 1968, when she was a school teacher and his son Bruno (one of two sons he had with his first wife, Nancy Waite Harlow; Bruno is an artist in Inverness, too), was in her math class. Unlike their daughter, Christine felt immediate awe in the house. She was invited for tea with another teacher to borrow Navajo artifacts for a social studies unit on the Native American tribe. "I walked in and I was absolutely charmed," she recalls. "I had such a feeling of being comfortable. I found it so appealing and thought, I want to be in this place. It really was almost as though I fell in love with the house at the same time as I fell in love with the man." Her response was visceral. "There was a fire going in the Franklin stove, and it just felt small and intimate and welcoming, and beautiful." She moved in during the summer of '69 and way later came an appreciation for the artistic qualities of the home.



Blunk's studio, with scrap wall and the iconic curvilinear Entry Arch sculpted from a single piece of old-growth redwood, circa 1972. "He wanted it to be an act people walked through as a way of signifying an entrance," says Christine. The piece is Mariah's favorite. On the left, placed on a cypress stump, is the ultimate find of Blunk's, a globe-like river stone he discovered at Christine's family's house on the Stanislaus River one summer. She recalls, "He literally got out of the car, didn't say anything, walked down to the beach, and walked up moments later with a perfectly round river stone. It was as though he was magnetically drawn to that stone. It was the most uncanny thing, it looked like it had been milled or made into a perfect sphere."

“We were total hippies for a while there—I’m horrified when I look at old photos now,” laughs Christine, who now oversees financial management of the J. B. Blunk Estate and sits on the board of a few green companies. “Everything we bought on every trip to every place was hanging on the walls or pinned somewhere. It was like a junk shop.” Christine added her mark by tacking things to the walls and beams of the 600-square-foot original tiny house, hanging as a room divider Peruvian belts and textiles they bought during a Machu Picchu adventure in the winter of 1969. (That trip was Christine’s first education in textiles, which later, along with ceramic jewelry, taught by her patient husband, became her own form of artistic expression, appropriating the geodesic dome to house her loom.) Now, she halfway laments, “it’s totally spiffed.” Mariah, who works with the estate and permanent collection, keeps it like a museum, says her mom, who relents that while living so tidily is a tad more difficult, it’s far easier to appreciate the architecture.

In more than half a century it’s more than doubled in size to its current 1,400 square feet. Even at its tiniest, Christine says, “I never felt constrained. I was happy with him and I was happy there, and space didn’t feel like an issue, but it was certainly great when we added on the bathroom [with a composting toilet in the mid-’70s], and terrific when we added the bedroom upstairs.”



“Now that J. B.’s not here, probably, it’s easier for people to extol and exclaim and go on and on about [the house],” says Christine, since “it’s not in the presence of the maker.” The unique living space includes this handmade ladder leading upstairs to the bedrooms that were added on decades ago: the master and what was Mariah’s loft. Below it is an assemblage piece Blunk made with a river stone—something he was passionate about collecting—paired with a stool from Africa.

The layout was, and still is, simple. The main rosy redwood-clad space comprised the kitchen, living and dining rooms, and also Mariah’s parents’ bedroom until 1985 when they added a master upstairs. There was a tiny little loft, which was her older brother’s room, and later they added her room, connected by a ladder. The bathroom is off the back of the house, with an outdoor shower, a composting privy, and a beautiful sink Blunk carved out of one piece of cypress.

It’s easier to talk about the items Blunk didn’t make than the ones he did. A few chairs came from the Stanford library, one of which he turned into a rocking chair for his wife to use after Mariah was born. Cookware was commercial, and a collection of wooden plates was sourced on their many Central American travels. “Truly every piece has a provenance story behind it—it’s incredibly personal,” says Christine. Other non-Blunk-made items include several hand-carved wooden masks gifted from a friend, an Indonesian stool he bought there in the ‘80s, ceramics by his lifelong assistant Rick Yoshimoto (who continued making in the workshop after his death, followed by his son Ido, Mariah’s contemporary), and paintings he traded his artist friends for his work.

The house didn’t evolve according to any planning, but instead spurts of work or sales gave it a pulse. Blunk was the

opposite of fussy. “He took the house for granted and I cannot remember a single time when he said, 'And here’s the house I built,’” says Christine of the ultimate work he didn’t consider part of his oeuvre. Really, life was breathed into the compound by his creative impulse, which was, as she describes, “pretty much nonstop and omnipresent.” Adds Mariah, “he was constantly creating. There was very little separation between art and life. He started early and ended late, and he always took a tea break, which I loved.”



Views of the Point Reyes Lighthouse and Pacific Ocean.



The master bedroom’s evocative balsa wood light pull—against warm redwood siding—was made by Blunk, while the jigsawlike headboard was crafted by designer and former artist in residence Rainer Spehl using scrap wood.

Blunk might start the day making a wood sculpture with a chainsaw, but “he appreciated that it was a really aggressive tool and hard on the body, so he would only work with it for 20 minutes at a time, take a break and either stretch or work on a painting or on a ceramic series or make a piece of jewelry, then go back to the chainsaw. In one day he might work across three or four different mediums.” Because of this approach, there’s a clear through line in his artwork, a sense of continuous motif and theme regardless of the technique or material. “He had supreme confidence in what he was making,” says Christine, who credits her husband with teaching, encouraging, and helping her to make ceramic jewelry. “He was extremely patient and a phenomenally good teacher.”

Practicality and function came into play, especially when it came to his seating, but selling pieces wasn’t what motivated Blunk. Sometimes there would be a studio full of pieces and no immediate customers, but, says Christine, “he just kept going and never, never was discouraged. We lived simply and very happily, and he just kept working.” The legacy of Blunk’s work ethic would

appreciate the fact artists have continued to create in his spaces, which Mariah and Christine, along with their husbands, now share custody of and each spend a season living in.



Though intimate, the home's kitchen—with large windows looking out to the forest—still provides plenty of space to gather and eat. The table was designed and made by Blunk's first wife, Nancy Waite Harlow, using Bishop pine. Around it sit a collection of salvaged chairs and redwood stools by Blunk.

“What he asked me to do was to keep the house full of life and creativity,” says Mariah of her dad's wish before he passed. “That was really important. I appreciate that request because it actually has allowed me to be quite open and generous with the place in terms of how we share it.” Since her father died when she was just 21, managing his estate and, in a way, studying everything he'd written and made, allowed Mariah to feel closer to him in the last decade. She just finished digitizing his entire archive, and is helping work on a book and organize exhibitions. The Oakland Museum has one on currently, through early September, and London's Kate MacGarry Gallery opens a show in September.

But she has rich firsthand memories, too. On road trips up north to the mills where Blunk sourced his wood, “we'd hang out with these really rough characters that were actually so gentle and really liked my father. We'd stop to buy crystals, eat at diners, stay at these classic motels on the side of the road, and look for river rocks—that was one of his passions, collecting rocks.” As for Christine, she cherishes scents that remind her of an Indian summer morning early in their romance, “waking up, the sun having just come up, and a sense of warmth pervading the house and the smell of Meyer lemons and the taste of the millet cakes he would make me for breakfast.”



Christine and Mariah Nielson outside their family home in Inverness. Christine's favorite place on the property, where she's the most comfortable, is still in the garden, where she's spent incredible amounts of time over the last few decades struggling with critters eating her plants.



Blunk's brick and clay kiln was made by hand by the artist and his friends in the early 1960s. It's seen countless firings since.

The home was never static when its creator was alive, and since his death the women in his life have ensured it stays dynamic. Mariah was director of the J. B. Blunk Residency from 2007 to 2011, during which time artists who they felt Blunk would have resonated with or felt a synergy with—chosen by a selection committee—lived in the space and created for two months at a time. “As a family we’ve never been interested in turning [the house] into a living museum where it feels like an interior frozen in time. That’s not what my father wanted,” says Mariah. “Especially in the woods of Inverness up on the ridge, it’s really important to live in a home, to keep it standing and structurally sound.” To Christine there’s no doubt they’re making him proud by sharing its magic with likeminded souls. “I think he would be thrilled if he could look down from heaven,” she says. “I can’t imagine anything would make him happier.”