

Earth, Wind & Fire: Rediscovering the Elemental Art of JB Blunk

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Ahead of his first solo in the UK, why the late California-based sculptor's material sensibility and countercultural ideals deserve reappraisal



Wood. Clay. Stone. Spirit. These are the elements from which JB Blunk created his work – and a more elemental artist of the postwar era would be hard to find. Frank Stella famously said, in 1964, that he wanted to ‘keep the paint as good as it was in the can’. Blunk had more or less the same attitude to trees. Likewise the other materials he harvested from the land around him. But unlike the minimalists, whose works were theory-led, he proceeded through sheer instinct and in deep conversation with nature. His art was the ultimate expression of life lived off the grid.



J.B. Blunk, *Untitled - Plate*, 2016. Courtesy: Kate MacGarry, London, and The Estate of JB Blunk

James Blain Blunk was born in Kansas in 1926, and in some respects he remained a quintessential Midwesterner, plainspoken and hard-working. When I met him in 1998, though, it was like visiting a Jedi Master assigned vigil over the state of California. I'd discovered his work in the catalogue for the 1969 touring exhibition 'Objects: USA', organized by New York dealer Lee Nordness and curator Paul Smith for the Johnson Company: an essential document of the postwar craft movement. Blunk was represented in the show by an abstract seating sculpture, *The Ark* (1969), carved from a single enormous timber. I wondered who could have created this astounding work, and why I had never heard of him before. After a bit of research I realized he was still a name to conjure with in the Bay Area; his masterpiece, *The Planet* (1969), was on permanent view at the Oakland Museum of California. A feat of environmental reclamation, it's carved from a single redwood root structure, all that was left of a majestic tree felled long ago. I went to see it and was amazed anew. And then came another surprise: Blunk was in the White Pages.



JB Blunk's house in Inverness, Marin County, California. Courtesy: Leslie Williamson

When I reached Blunk by phone, he expressed some astonishment. He was not used to receiving calls about his work (certainly not from graduate students like me), though he had continued to produce work unabated, often incorporating carved monolithic stone. He warmly invited me to come and visit him: 'I'm not hiding under a bushel basket.' And so I made my pilgrimage, driving from San

Francisco, to the small town of Inverness, up a rough road and, at last, to the top of a ridge, with breathtaking views of the woodland beyond. And there he was: over 70 years old but still built like a sapling, delighted to tell his story. Blunk had settled on this land following his tour of duty in the Korean War and an ensuing period living in Japan. He'd struck up a friendship with Isamu Noguchi following a chance encounter in a craft shop and then gone on to study with the great mingei potter Kitaōji Rosanjin and the more traditionally-inclined master Kaneshige Toyo. The influence of Japan pervades the house he built between 1957 and 1962; it feels like an ancient temple as much as a mountaintop cabin. He became a dropout here, before it was fashionable: growing his own food, making most of his own tools, even delivering his own daughter without medical assistance (that child, Mariah Nielson, is now the steward of her father's estate, and is writing a book about his life and work).



JB Blunk in his studio, c.1968. Courtesy: JB Blunk Collection

I was lucky to encounter Blunk when I did. Shortly after, he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. By the time I interviewed him for the Smithsonian in 2002, his recall was much diminished. He died later that year. But then a remarkable thing happened. For many years his work – for all its massiveness – had been hard to see clearly, because of its proximity to cliché. Little known outside the Bay Area, even there he was often seen as a throwback. After his death, however, a process of reappraisal began, helped along considerably by two LA galleries, Reform and Blum & Poe. This year the Oakland Museum has staged a full retrospective (which runs until 9 September), while recently the

Palm Springs Art Museum made an inspired pairing between Blunk and the sculptor Alma Allen. In London, Kate MacGarry is opening its autumn programme with a show focusing on his ceramics. It's easy to see why Blunk's star is rising. Authenticity is in short supply these days and he was always the most genuine of artists, grounded in place and in himself. Then too, there has been a general reappraisal of the counterculture which he both anticipated and exemplified. Fifty years on from 1968 – Peak Hippie – that moment's idealism and political commitment seem like something to live up to, not laugh at. In any case, Blunk's work is so damn impressive that it was only a matter of time before it would find a new generation of admirers. *The Planet* and the other large-scale seating forms he made are endlessly inviting, each one a vast compendium of textured marks and sculpted incident. In these and his later totemic works, like *Flying Stone* (1980) and *Mage* (1983), it can be difficult to tell where Blunk's interventions into the raw material begin and end. In this respect he was very like Noguchi; both sought 'not what can be imposed but something closer to its being. Beneath the skin is the brilliance of matter'.



JB Blunk, *Untitled - Plate*, date unknown. Courtesy: Kate MacGarry, London, and The Estate of JB Blunk

Even Blunk's ceramics, which may initially seem slight and offhand, are marvels of invention. One small plate in the MacGarry exhibition is made from five lumps of clay, just squashed together. Shiny glaze brings out the redness of the clay, with the exception of a rectangle askew in the centre. Within is a further hand-trailed curl of glaze, just the beginnings of a spiral. Two stone inclusions burst through the surface. The plate has all the essential characteristics of the Japanese bizen tradition in which Blunk was trained so many years before: flavourful clay, given life by the fire. It has an unpretentious curiosity about it, a love of craft and material. And it has something else, too, something all his work shares. Cliché be damned, I'll just say it: a touch of magic.