

## J.B. Blunk's 'everyday life' of art and nature at Oakland Museum

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There should be a name for the style typified by the art of J.B. Blunk, whose rustic objects in clay and carved wood seem the essence of 1960s Northern California. The Walker Art Center, for an exhibition shown last year at UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, came up with a great one — “hippie modernism” — but applied the term with a regrettable lack of precision.

Not that Blunk would have understood the phrase when he began to develop his artistic language. As an exhibition at the Oakland Museum of California makes clear, he was an organic original, not a follower of trends. “J.B. Blunk: Nature, Art and Everyday Life” is on view through Sept. 9.

James Blain Blunk (1926-2002) was a bit of a late bloomer, having switched from physics to ceramics at UCLA, then serving in the Korean War and as an apprentice to noted Japanese potters for two years before returning to California in 1954.

In a stroke of luck early on, he met the Japanese American sculptor Isamu Noguchi, whose artistic influence is apparent throughout the exhibition. It was Noguchi who set up the Japan apprenticeships with Kitaoji Rosanjin and Toyo Kaneshige and who later introduced Blunk to the Surrealist painter Gordon Onslow Ford.

The biographical details matter because, as the exhibition's title implies, Blunk's art was not apart from his life and his lifestyle. He considered his home, an intricate puzzle constructed from scraps of lumber and logs found on the beach near Inverness, his most important work.

Onslow Ford seems to have been his main source of patronage, which amounted to hiring him for odd jobs and granting permission to build on the painter's 250-acre tract. The exhibition includes, along with the tableware from which Blunk's family of four ate meals scavenged from the forest, a shirt his first wife sewed from the skin of a deer he killed for food, and a belt of links he cut from leftover soup bones.



J.B. Blunk, "J.B.s Plate" (ca.1980)

Photo: Daniel Dent / © J.B. Blunk Collection

The pottery is made from clay dug on the property, glazed with designs based on natural and traditional Asian forms. At first, the wood that did not go into building his house was cut up and sold as firewood. But sometimes, an exhibition text quotes him as saying, "I would come up on portions of trees that were so beautiful that I couldn't cut them. ... I had them stood up around where I am living. All of a sudden, one day, I did something besides cut up firewood. ... I began to be challenged as to what you could do with a saw because I wanted to create certain forms."

It is possible that Blunk was aware of the totemic wooden sculptures Peter Krasnow made in Southern California in the 1940s from felled trees (including one from the yard of his neighbor, Edward Weston). An equally likely source is the chain-saw-cut tourist art commonly sold, then and now, on rural California roadsides. Whatever the creative impetus, he began to hew free-form furniture and abstract sculpture from the giant stems and burls of local redwood and cedar.

He made the genre his own, even as he borrowed freely from Japanese art its elevated respect for craft and reliance on natural forms. The melancholy of wabi-sabi, the aesthetic that embraces imperfection and impermanence, imbues irregularly formed plates and vessels as well as an 8-foot monument like "Mage," a 1983 evocation of shamanistic power. Rearing on massive polished legs, "Mage" resolutely remains a gnarled tree, as well.

The mystical “Hawk Arch” (1975), a 6-foot crippled hulk topped by a beak-like protrusion, contains within it a radiating human form, described in negative space. Marks tooled into the seat of a simple stool, made around 1965 after a traditional Japanese style, recall designs in a raked stone garden. The garden designs are themselves representations of rippling water.

Though nowhere near as known as that of contemporaries like Claire Falkenstein and Ruth Asawa, his work shares with theirs an illusion of off-hand power, with humble materials and intuitive gesture the magical stuff of their art, and daily existence itself an artistic act. Like them, though he was often dismissed by the art world, his reputation was secured in his lifetime by a few public commissions.

Next year, the Oakland Museum will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the opening of its architecturally significant building, a part of which had to literally be constructed around Blunk’s 2-ton, 13-foot-diameter work “The Planet,” carved from the base of a redwood tree. It serves as both central sculptural element and as lobby seating. Patrons of the San Francisco Zen Center’s venerable Greens at Fort Mason Center have been greeted by, or seated at, the restaurant’s major Blunk work for nearly 40 years.

An important exhibition, well worth a visit, “Nature, Art and Everyday Life” nevertheless disappoints our highest ambitions for it. Without a catalog, or even a brochure, it does little to add to the scant scholarship on Blunk.



J.B. Blunk’s “The Planet” was commissioned in 1968 (completed in 1969) for the Oakland Museum, which was built around the sculpture. The popular work, carved from a single redwood burl, also serves as seating.

Photo: Michael Millman / Oakland Museum of California

And, even more than is true for most artists, this is a body of work that was barely separate from the body of the man. Noguchi called it an oeuvre “free from categories that are called art.” Some excellent video footage and large photo murals help, but the

traditional curatorial layout drains the museum galleries of an energy we must replace in our imagination.

Crowded into a small vitrine as a kind of visual footnote at one end of the exhibition are four long objects of similar scale. They are shown, we are told, the way Blunk laid them out on his kitchen counter. The first is an oblong stone sculpture made by the artist, the second a bone, the third an elongated Mexican pestle and, fourth, a long found stone.

From here, an entire exhibition might be built.

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