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ABBOT KINNEY)

In the main living area of sculptor J.B. Blunk's hand-built Inverness home sits the aptly named "Scrap Chair," made entirely of leftover pieces of wood from his larger endeavors.

IN HIS HAND-BUILT MARIN COUNTY HOME, ARTIST J.B. BLUNK BROKE NEW GROUND IN WOODWORKING. NOW, HIS DAUGHTER IS PRESERVING THE MASTER'S LEGACY
BY CAT DORAN PHOTOGRAPHED BY LISA EISNER

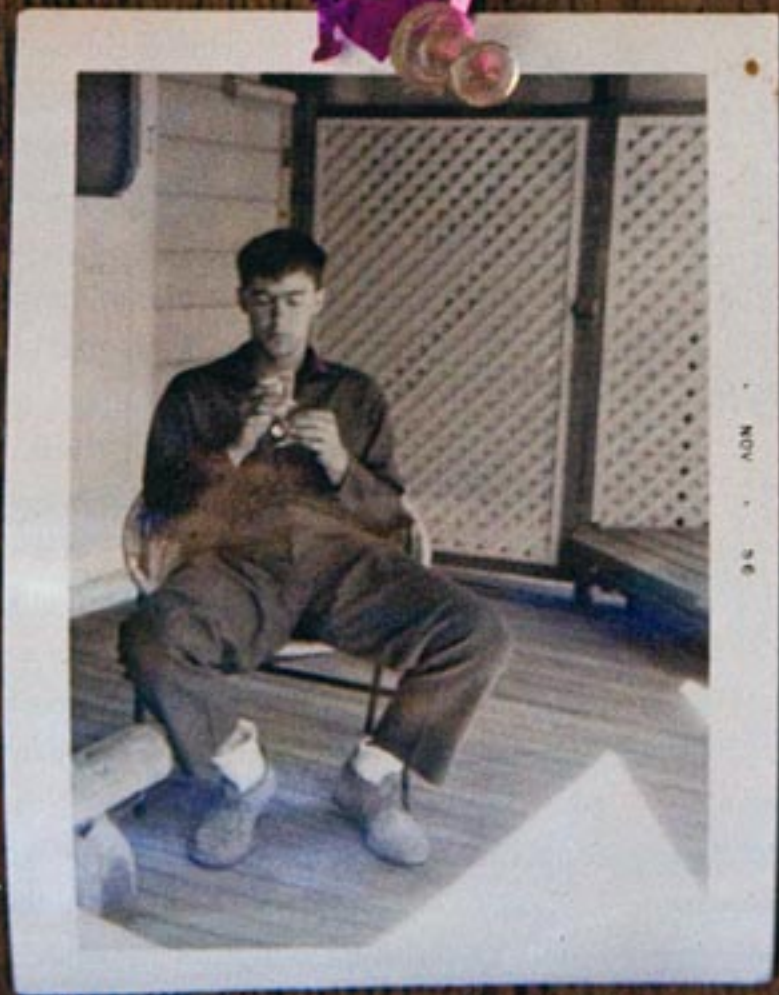
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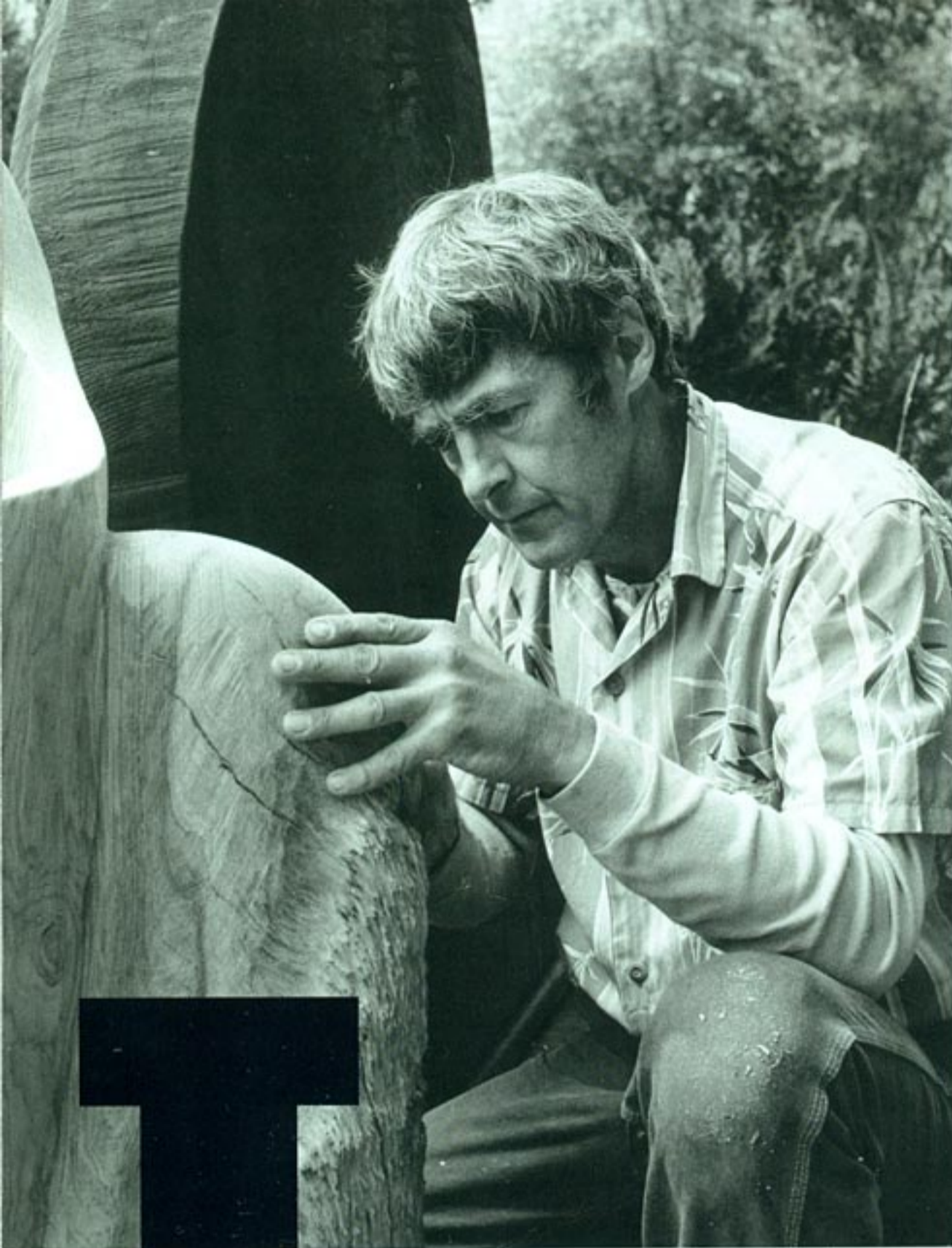


BI
TINK



The hand-carved bathroom sink. Stone sculpture, bench and painting all by J.B. Blunk. OPPOSITE Family photos neatly pinned on the kitchen wall.





inspired by the place it was created but actually part of it.

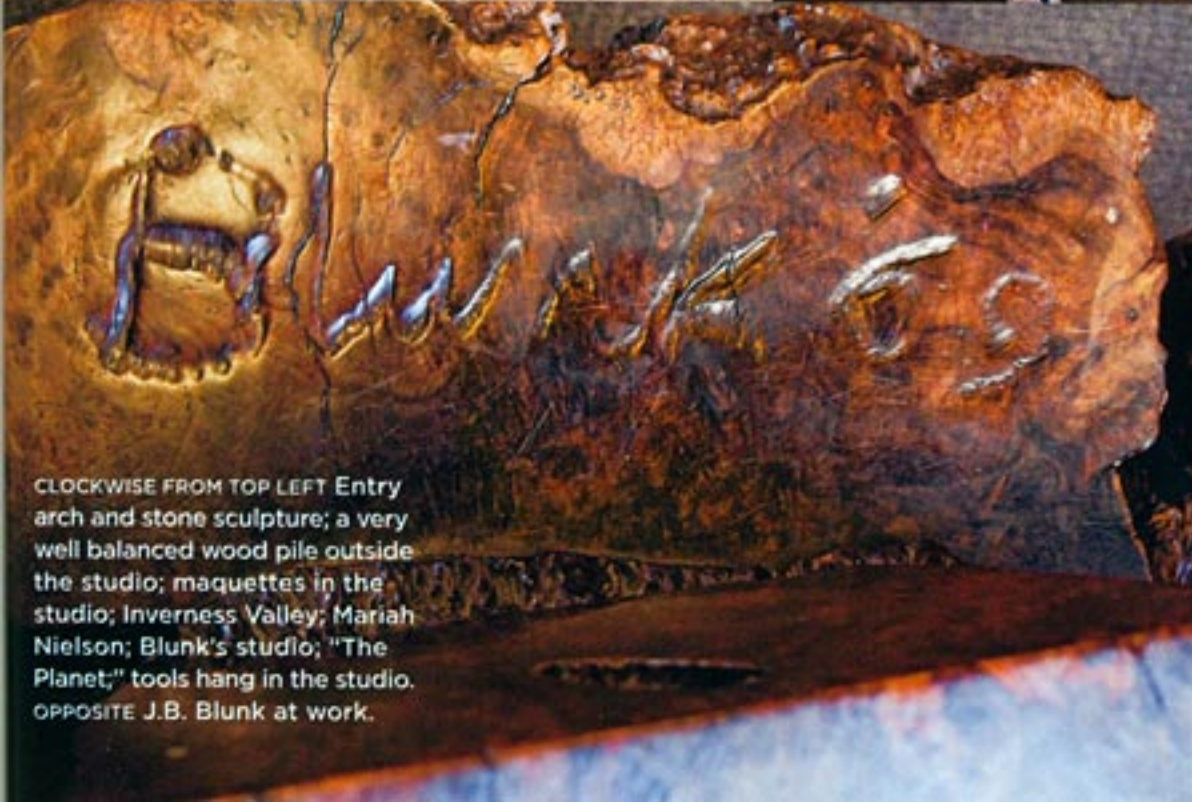
After graduating from UCLA, where he studied ceramics with Laura Andreson, Blunk was drafted into the Korean War. While on leave in Tokyo, he happened to meet sculptor Isamu Noguchi while shopping in a folk art store. He was able to gain a discharge into Japan and, through an introduction from Noguchi, met the renowned Japanese potters Rosanjin Kitaoji and Toyo Kaneshige, both of whom he apprenticed under until he returned to the United States in 1954. Back on American soil, Blunk settled in Inverness, 40 miles north of San Francisco, where another introduction from Noguchi would prove life changing. The Surrealist painter Gordon Onslow Ford owned a large swath of property and was looking for someone to build the massive wooden roof for the house he was constructing. Blunk undertook the task; in doing so, started to see wood as a medium for his own sculpture. Ford gave Blunk the use of a

Just past a long, steep, winding, and, in some places, dirt road sits the most perfect house. It's a rustic structure hanging tough out over the edge of the Inverness Ridge in western Marin County. The house was built completely by hand in the late 1950s—more specifically, by the hand of sculptor J.B. Blunk. To describe the densely wooded coastal Inverness Ridge as heavenly or

idyllic does it no justice at all. To find inspiration here, you merely need to open your eyes. Which is why it makes so much sense Blunk would live out his life here as a base to create the most enormous wood sculptures you've most likely never seen. Blunk was a rare artist; one whose work genuinely feels not only

piece of land up the road from his own property to build a house and studio. And in this spot, the artist continued to work with clay, metal, stone and wood.

Blunk's first major commission was a room of furniture for landscape architect Lawrence Halprin. From there, he found work mostly by word of mouth and referrals. His first public work was a seating sculpture at U.C. Santa Cruz. And in 1969, Blunk made what is probably his best known work: "The Planet," for the Oakland Museum. This seating sculpture fashioned from a single two-ton redwood burl is 13 feet in diameter. Other enormous seating sculptures followed, including the three-ton seating group at Greens Restaurant in San Francisco's Marina district and "Magic Boat" at the California Orientation Center for the Blind, where the tactile nature of different sections of the sculpture took on magnified



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Entry arch and stone sculpture; a very well balanced wood pile outside the studio; maquettes in the studio; Inverness Valley; Mariah Nielson; Blunk's studio; "The Planet;" tools hang in the studio. OPPOSITE J.B. Blunk at work.



The entry arch; a detail from Blunk's signature "The Planet" at the Oakland Museum. OPPOSITE The garden.

importance. In addition to their massive scale, these sculptures are unique because they are meant to be touched and sat on. And Blunk was never precious about his work, believing that it should always change and evolve. The massive arched entryway to Blunk's house bears this out. Over time, the wood has been battered by the elements and moss has crept out of it, but the interaction with nature was always part of the artist's plan.

Noguchi said about his good friend, "I like to think that the courage and independence J.B. has shown is typically California, or at least Western, with a continent between to be free from categories that are called art. Here the links seem to me more to the open sky and spaces, and the far reaches of time from where come the burlled stumps of those great trees. J.B. does them honor in carving them as he does, finding true art in the working, allowing their ponderous bulk, waking them from their long sleep to become part of our own life and times, sharing with us the afterglow of a land that was once here."

When I first learned of J.B. Blunk, I felt like a beauty pageant contestant asked which historical figure, living or dead, she would most like to meet. I was so in love with a sculpture of Blunk's, slyly named "Mr. Peanut," that I wanted to immediately break bread with this guy who could chain-saw-sculpt a piece of wood to such smoothness it seemed to be made of enamel or resin. After telling me that Blunk was no longer living, Gerard O'Brien, who was showing "Mr. Peanut" at his Los Angeles gallery, Reform, let me down gently by offering to let me meet Blunk's daughter instead. O'Brien assured me I wouldn't be disappointed.

He couldn't have undersold her more. At the end of that long drive up the hill in Inverness, waiting for us at Blunk's house was Mariah Nielson. A dead ring-er for Ali MacGraw, Nielson is the Director of the J.B. Blunk Residen-

cy, an artist in residence program, which operates out of the house. Upon Blunk's death, under the terms of the lease agreement from Gordon Onslow Ford, an artistic purpose was to be found for the house. The Residency program was established to give artists a place to live and work. "J.B. felt it was important to share his place with others, to offer them an opportunity to meet and connect with the place he was so inspired by," says Nielson.

In operation just over a year, the program has seen two designers, two painters, a woodworker and a sculptor pass through its gates, and for Nielson, the effect the place has had on their work is deeply profound. "They've all expressed a change—maybe not in their work, but in the way they think about their work or the way in which they work, their process. Something about being here changes their eye in a way. And I

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—ISAMU NOGUCHI



A sculpture and painting of Blunk's. OPPOSITE A couch in the home's main room with a stone sculpture in the window.



POINT BLUNK

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 95

know that's what J.B. wanted. It makes me feel like he's still alive when people come here and are moved by the place and his work."

It would be difficult not to be moved by this place—the land, the view, the studio with the enormous pieces of wood still standing by like soldiers waiting to be transformed into heroes. But perhaps the single most magical thing on the entire property is the house itself. Simple and rustic, it suits the land and the land suits it. Every piece of furniture in the house, every sculpture, every

door, every door handle, every floorboard and wall panel, every plate, mug, and bowl, even the bathroom sink, was made by the artist. Walking through the door is like entering a world from a bygone era, but not in a hokey log cabin way. The house has a Japanese sensibility, where everything has a purpose and nothing is superfluous or decorative or in any way useless.

Mariah sees Blunk's approach to building the house as more sculptural than architectural. "We've been renovating it to keep it healthy and we've found so many structural details that are mind blowing. He didn't think in the way a traditional carpenter or a

structural engineer should think. It was more like, 'Oh, I think this makes sense.' And of course, he was working with found materials so every angle is off, every wall is unique."

It's frustrating someone with the immense talent of J.B. Blunk was not accorded fame in proportion to his talents during his lifetime, but who's to say fame is what he was looking for? Maybe the legacy he left and the artist's residency Mariah has created are more fitting with what the man was all about. Who could blame a guy for wanting to stay at the top of this valley, transforming the nature around him? There are a lot of worse ways to live. ●
