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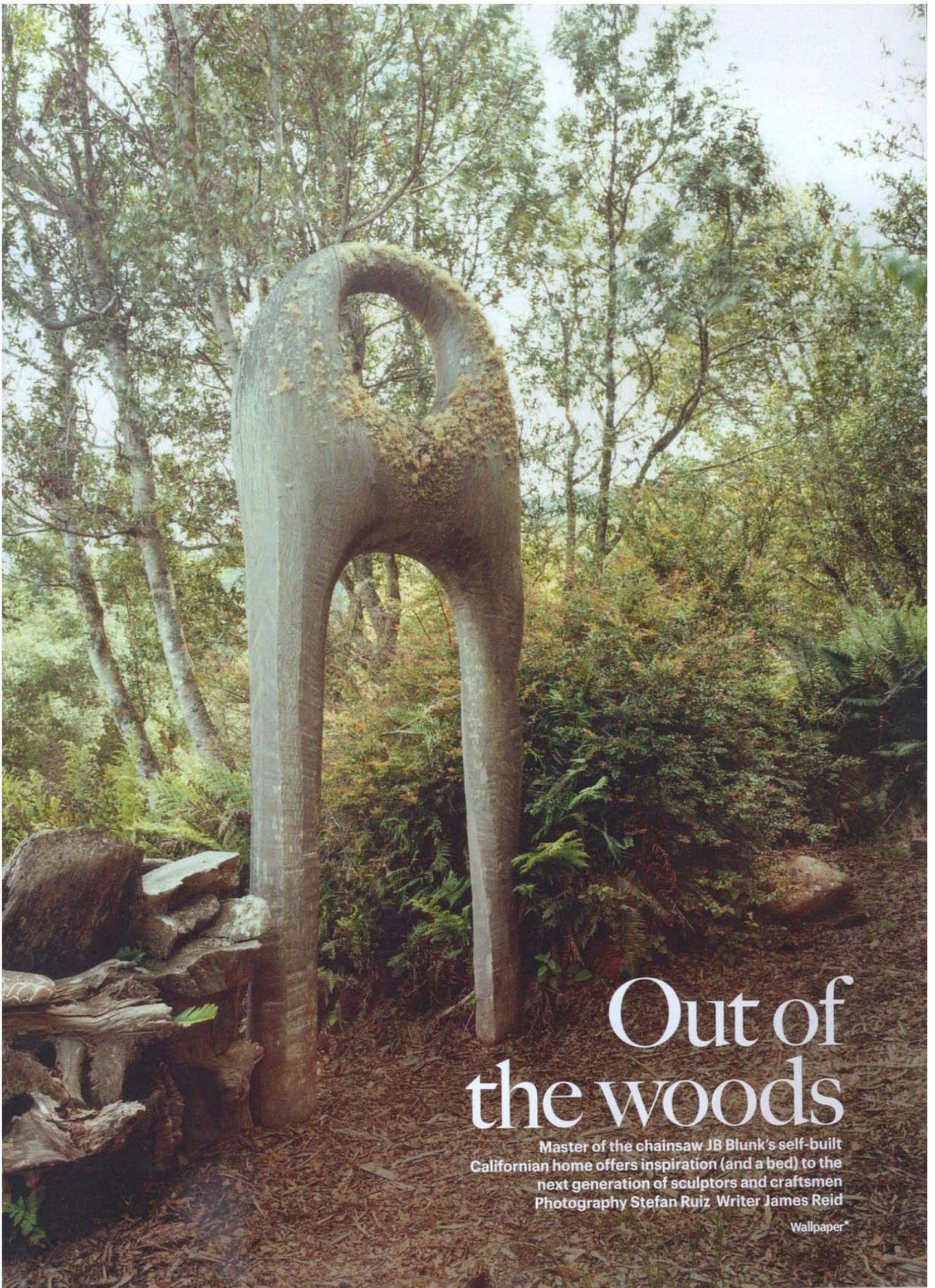
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ARTS AND CRAFT

This page, the living room. In the foreground is Blunk's 1968 *Scrap Chair*, which is currently showing at New York's Museum of Arts and Design as part of its 'Crafting Modernism' exhibition

Opposite, *Entry Arch*, redwood, 1972, located at the entrance to the compound





# Out of the woods

Master of the chainsaw JB Blunk's self-built  
California home offers inspiration (and a bed) to the  
next generation of sculptors and craftsmen  
Photography Stefan Ruiz Writer James Reid

Wallpaper\*



**OBJECT LESSON**  
The main workshop, filled with Blunk's original tools and objects, along with materials left by resident artists



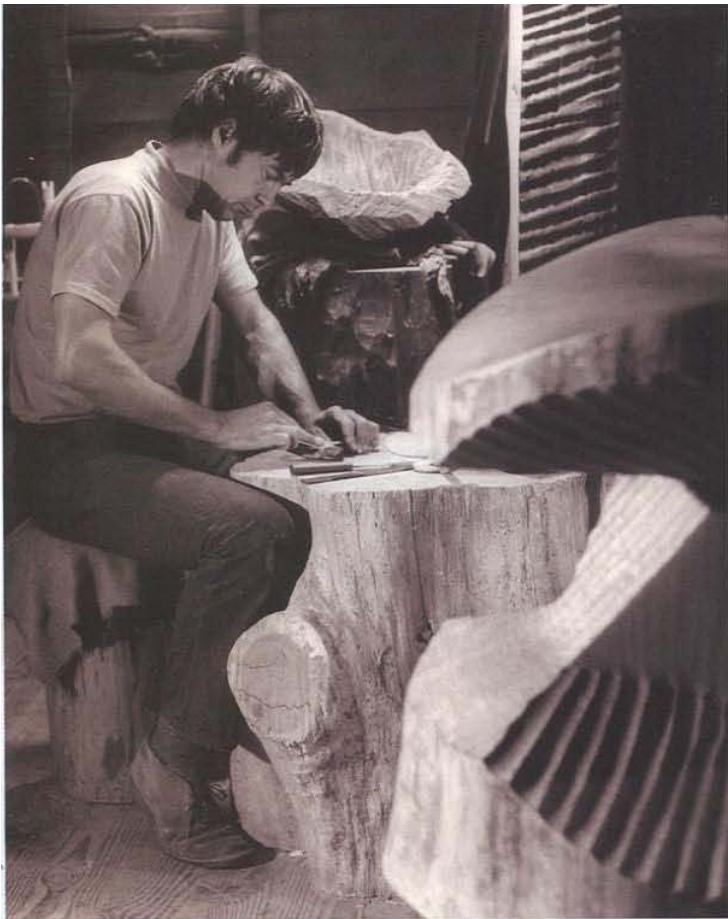
**P**erched high above the small town of Inverness, California, along meandering roads, through thickets of oak and firs and up, up and up again along a steep, unpaved track, lies a small cluster of modest, low-slung wooden buildings whose weathered, silvery exteriors belie their significance. Two huge totemic wooden sculptures, one weathered and cracked and sporting mossy clumps, the other newer and less faded but still showing signs of exposure, guard the way in, and an area scattered with roughly milled wood, stumps and boulders, and piles of sawdust hint at the creative energies that have been unleashed here. Here, on the edge of the Bishop Pine Preserve, is the estate that the protean craftsman and sculptor James Blain Blunk built for himself, a place created from salvaged materials in the 1950s, and home to Blunk – known as JB – and his sinuous, raw, tactile furniture and sculptures for the rest of his life.

Stepping inside the main house, you're struck by the warmth and energy of a unique home born of one man's vision. Everything is wood. The floors are solid wooden planks, aged and smooth. The walls vary from coarse found timbers to silky-smooth off-cuts, carefully placed together to create a textured and tactile surface that invites caress; a sculptural jigsaw puzzle that also keeps the outside out. Pieces of Blunk's furniture, ranging from modest, simple stools to complex, composite chairs and large, commanding redwood sculptures, are dotted around the main space. All around are objects both found and crafted, pieces which demand to be handled and examined, which the invited visitor is encouraged to do. A huge slab of redwood, still on its trestles from the 1950s, acts as the hub of this living/dining/kitchen space. The other thing that strikes you is the humdinger panoramic view, looking out over a wooded hillside and down a rolling valley to the cattle and marshes of Point Reyes Station two miles away. Aside from the epic climb to get to the house, nothing as you approach its low-key entrance through thick woods really prepares you for the eagle's eyrie setting and 270-degree view. Hawks swirl on the thermals just above, and the trees whisper and sway in the breeze; besides that, it's total, serene peace.

It was a chance meeting in a small Japanese *mingei* (craft shop) in the 1950s that changed everything for Blunk. Stationed in Japan after the Korean War, as an officer Blunk had off-base privileges at the weekends, so would often take a Jeep and ride out and explore the surrounding countryside, keeping a

watchful eye out for any ceramic studios in the villages he visited. As a student at UCLA he'd studied ceramics, becoming particularly interested in Japanese Bizen pottery – unglazed stoneware fired at high temperatures in wood-burning kilns – and he hoped to find good examples in his downtime. On one such expedition Blunk struck up a conversation with a woman in a *mingei*, eventually realising he was talking to the wife of Isamu Noguchi. Noguchi, a dedicated pacifist, initially wanted nothing to do with this American officer, but after realising Blunk was serious, learned and passionate about Japanese ceramics, warmed to him, eventually inviting Blunk back to their home for tea. The meeting led to a lifelong friendship, Noguchi eventually arranging for Blunk to study ceramics with his own teacher, Toyo Kaneshige. Blunk, once discharged from the army, spent three years in Japan working and studying with Noguchi, and the two men corresponded throughout the rest of their lives. As Blunk's daughter Mariah Nielson, now custodian of the estate, says, 'It was almost like an older brother/younger brother relationship.' Noguchi also introduced Blunk to the California-based surrealist painter Gordon Onslow Ford, who was building a home, designed by architect Warren Callister, on land in Inverness. Onslow Ford must have seen some untapped potential because, despite Blunk's almost total lack of experience, he hired him to construct the house's huge curved wooden roof. The gamble paid off. Working by instinct, Blunk created a jig for the design, which involved multiple layers of thin wood laminates and, without too many hitches, gave Onslow Ford the roof he wanted. During the construction the two men became close friends, so much so that Onslow Ford offered Blunk a parcel of land to live and work on as payment. And this is where Blunk set about crafting his own house and studio, up with the hawks and the treetops.

Continuing to trust his instinct, Blunk set about building the house with no plans and no drawings, basing the build entirely on what materials he found or salvaged. (Admittedly his then-wife's father, an engineer, did work out the key load-bearing calculations for the project, but that was about it.) Driftwood, telegraph poles, and old windows from a schoolhouse were all incorporated into the build. Clearly, Blunk was a natural talent, because the house still stands almost exactly as he built it, and the combinations of woods and materials have aged and burnished so that the building itself is integrated into the >>





**RED STATE**

Opposite, clockwise from top left, Blunk at work in 1965; part of Blunk's eclectic library, with a metal goat sculpture bought in Mexico in the 1960s; the entrance hall featuring, on the left, *Dark Presence*, redwood stained with black shoe polish, and, on the right, *Self Piercing Form*, redwood; a mask by former artist in residence Oliver Halsman Rosenberg

This page, Mariah Nielson in the workshop in front of her father's original band saw

## Word got round about the chainsaw-wielding craftsman up on the hill



surrounding landscape. The layout and the proportions of the rooms are mostly conventional, yet the house feels like a functional piece of sculpture.

Once the house was completed in the early 1960s, Blunk had the time and the space to push woodworking to the limits of scale. Often studying raw pieces of wood for days before working them, Blunk would make no preparatory sketches or models, instead following the grain and burl of each slab as he felt right, working with chainsaws and large chisels to create striking, mythic-feeling pieces that have a real immediacy to them. The workshop, which still houses Blunk's original band saw, is full of many of the pieces of unworked timber he hauled up the hill with a truck. Knots, burls and slabs of maple and walnut line the walls, just as Blunk left them when he died in 2002. 'It's there as a precedent, a source of reference, sort of a living museum,' says his daughter. When Blunk worked on really large commissions, he had to rent out local cow pastures from farmers because he couldn't get the wood up the steep hill. 'They were ideal because they

are wide swathes of land, so he could make a project as big as he wanted and make a real mess and cows were the only ones disturbed. And they don't complain too much,' says Nielson.

Inverness in the 1960s was a remote enclave, and the independent-minded Blunk worked undisturbed, far removed from the pop culture exploding through much of California at the time. He was simply driven by the desire to create and live a low-key, sustainable life closely connected to the landscape. Word got round about the chainsaw-wielding craftsman up on the hill creating huge pieces of furniture, and people began to approach Blunk about commissions. He created a dining table and chairs for the influential landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, which was to lead to another lifelong friendship. Another commission, realised in 1969 and one of his favourite pieces, was a seating system, called *The Planet*, made for the entrance to the Oakland Museum. The huge circular bench-cum-sculpture, still in use, was made from a single piece of redwood and can seat ten people. The marks from the

### SLEEPING BEAUTY

This page, a view of the estate nestled in its hilltop setting

Opposite, the bed in the main bedroom made by German artist Rainer Spehl during his stay at the Blunk house

chainsaws are plain to see, and form an integral part of the undulating surfaces of the piece, some of which are left raw with burls, others smoothed to a fine finish. You can't help but run your hand over it, and children love to clamber on it like a climbing frame. This dual functionality and sheer scale are lasting traits that mark much of Blunk's work.

For the next 30 years, until declining health forced him to slow down, he continued to create, alternating between the bigger commissions and smaller (but still full-scale) furniture. You can still feel his presence around the compound today, his tools, books, collected objects and furniture serving as a reminder of the man's raw creative power. His one abiding wish was that, after his death, the house remain filled with that spirit of creativity. Honouring this wish, the compound is now used as an artists' residence, supported by the Lucid Art Foundation, a non-profit organisation part-founded by Gordon Onslow Ford in the late 1990s. Three artists are selected each year, living and working at the house for two to three months, free to explore and create as they





wish. Blunk's vast library is there as a resource, and Nielson spends as much time as she can with them at the house, sharing meals and taking them to meet other makers in the community. Each artist donates one or two pieces of work at the end of their stay and the foundation has an annual exhibition in which they sell the work, the proceeds from which fund the next year's art residencies.

For many years Blunk's work was virtually unknown, except to a select band of collectors who would almost whisper his name conspiratorially to one another. The scarcity of pieces coming up for sale on the secondary market meant he didn't have anything like the profile of contemporaries like George Nakashima or Sam Maloof. But the emerging wave of young designers and makers whose work responds to and respects natural materials has changed that, as has a new generation of collectors drawn to Blunk's primal work, sending prices soaring. (In 2007, the Reform Gallery in Los Angeles sold a table and a sculptural arch for \$250,000 each.) The likes of Martino Gamper and Max Lamb acknowledge the huge influence of

Blunk on their approach, and both have made the pilgrimage to the house.

In fact, Lamb, one of the most thoughtful and grounded of the new generation of designers, really immersed himself in Blunk's way of life while a resident artist in 2009. He read up on Blunk's life and chose to follow the sculptor's ethos of using only the natural resources from the surrounding land to work with; he dug his own clay from the same earth as Blunk, and cured and fired it in the same way; he sourced a large felled tree locally and brought the wood to the residency, and sculpted it there using Blunk's tools.

Says Nielson, 'Access to all these natural resources is a huge part of what this programme offers because of its setting and context. It's wonderful to see how the artists respond to the place when they come here. Some pick up on the grain of wood in the house and that becomes a driving force in the work they make for the months they are here. Others pick up on structural details or colours and textures, but each artist seems to gravitate toward a very specific theme.'



Download Wallpaper's iPad edition for more images of Blunk's house and work. It's free to subscribers – see [Wallpaper.com/iPad](http://Wallpaper.com/iPad) – or available to buy now from the App Store

The working areas of the land around the house and studio are left uncleared after each artist's visits, too, creating a continually expanding sprawl on the estate. People are encouraged to add to the found objects and totems around the compound, and each artist leaves work that remains in the house. A mask by Oliver Halsman Rosenberg hangs on a wall, a sculpture by Gemma Holt rests on a shelf, and Rainer Spehl even crafted a new bed for the main bedroom during his stay. Despite Blunk's pieces now being worth huge sums, the contents of the house and the added work by past resident artists are most definitely not for sale, and form a fascinating, slowly evolving permanent collection. 'If it was in the home, there was a reason my father had brought it into the space, so that's where it's going to stay,' says Nielson. The house and studio are a secluded treasure trove and creative sanctuary on this remote California hilltop, and the diversity of work created at the residency each year makes for a fascinating legacy, of which JB would surely approve. ✪  
[jbblunk.com](http://jbblunk.com); [www.lucidart.org](http://www.lucidart.org)