

MASTER CRAFT

A slate of shows, and a few devout champions, are shedding new light on one of the 20th century's unsung heroes, artist J.B. Blunk.

BY MAXWELL WILLIAMS
PORTRAIT BY JAMES LAW



Mariah Nielson and Gerard O'Brien, above, collaborated on a show of work by Nielson's father, the late artist J.B. Blunk, whose *Untitled* work on paper is at left.

Mariah Nielson recalls a large chunk of California redwood being delivered to her house in the bayside community of Inverness, California, when she was younger. Her father, artist J.B. Blunk, considered the piece of wood for days—walking around it and studying it in a similar manner to which has been attributed to his longtime friend, sculptor Isamu Noguchi—before slashing into it with a chainsaw. “That’s the way Michelangelo and Brâncuși and a lot of other artists worked,” Nielson says of the meditation Blunk gave to his materials. “My dad would sit and look at it, and whatever was happening during those moments, he was seeing the form that was embedded within that raw material.”

Blunk, who passed away in 2002, has been an unsung hero of 20th century art for some time, known mainly as a sculptor of massive redwood and other wood entities that are meant to be touched, sat on and otherwise interacted with. His uniquely slashed-up woodwork objects were made by spontaneous chainsaw cuts, giving them a jagged look even after they were finished. His interest in texturing the wood, rather than polishing it to a high sheen, may have had its roots in the rough, complex stoneware surfaces typical of the Bizen ware Blunk made early in his career as a potter's apprentice in Japan.

But while the redwood sculptures are important to Blunk's narrative, Nielson is working with Los Angeles gallery the Landing to bring to the foreground Blunk's paintings, with its inaugural exhibition on view through January 16. “Whether it was furniture or large-scale sculpture, there was always a project in the works,” says Nielson. “Painting was just a part of that constant production. He seamlessly moved between a painting, a bowl and a piece of sculpture.”

Nielson points out that the paintings are even made on shards of redwood cast off from Blunk's wood pieces, giving them a sculptural look while highlighting the holistic nature of his work. The images, which are black-and-white, contain elements of Japanese calligraphy, mainly abstracted, but with shades of landscape and figuration. “Being able to introduce people to J.B. through his paintings, or seeing another side of him, I think it's going to

be really interesting,” says Gerard O'Brien, owner of the Landing. O'Brien has sold several pieces of Blunk's furniture through his design gallery, Reform Gallery, and helped organize a show of Blunk's sculptures at Blum & Poe in 2010. “There's 40 years of paintings,” says O'Brien.

“J.B. Blunk: painting, drawing, sculpture” is the first show at the Landing's new space, after operating for years as a gallery-within-a-gallery at Reform where the curation tends to skew to a more design clientele. By contrast, the Landing strives to blur the line between art and design—which is why Blunk, who eschewed labels, was the perfect choice to break ground at the new 3,000-square-foot space.

Though he was included in some important shows in his time, including the landmark “Objects: USA” at the Smithsonian Institution in 1969, the lesser-known mediums of Blunk's legacy are largely under-appreciated. Nielson—who works as a curator in London and oversees her father's work and collection—and O'Brien are on a mission to change that. In fact, they're coaxing out everything Blunk left behind. Next year, in partnership with Blum & Poe, an exhibit in Tokyo will feature the ceramics Blunk produced while studying under master potters in Japan. And in 2018, a major exhibition will culminate in a survey of Blunk's work that Nielson has been organizing for the past five years. “There's this really nice build-up to the retrospective that's going to include all the different mediums,” says Nielson.

But the true essence of Blunk's work was his home, which he built in Inverness in the late 1950s. Inside and out, it shows the earthy world Blunk created—one that didn't distinguish between design object and fine artwork. Nielson and O'Brien are more than happy to hype the fluidity central to Blunk's life. “There's no need to separate the work, which is why I'm so excited about this exhibition,” says Nielson. “The home in Inverness is his masterpiece, and it embodies his values as an artist. When you visit it you are acutely aware of the combination of a painting next to a stool next to a sculpture, in a home built by the same man; you sit down for a cup of tea out of a cup made by hand, and you get the sense that all of his work belongs together, and it's all part of this larger story—and that's who J.B. Blunk was.”