

In Conversation: Alma Allen and J.B. Blunk

Like a blind date, this exhibition stages an encounter between two artists who never met but whose work shares a deep affinity. The work of Alma Allen (b. 1970) and J.B. Blunk (1926–2002) blurs the distinctions of craft, design, and sculpture, with both men inspired by nature’s visceral power and beauty to create evocative work from materials found on the land.

Both artists are self-taught and each began making small-scale work from inexpensive materials: Blunk in ceramic and Allen in wood and stone. Working alone in rather remote California locations—Blunk in Inverness and Allen until recently in Joshua Tree—gave them space and freedom to expand the scale and range of their practices to encompass tabletop objects, furniture, and sculpture, as well as the design and construction of their own homes and studios.

[caption: Photographs by Lisa Eisner and Leslie Williamson show how each artist shaped his own world.]

Blunk is best known for furniture and sculpture, some of it monumental in scale, made from redwood and cypress, while Allen has recently expanded his practice to include much larger works in bronze and stone. Much of the work by Allen in the exhibition was made especially for the occasion. By juxtaposing the work of these two artists from different generations, which has never been shown together, common influences and themes emerge and the conversation begins in earnest.

[separate sponsorship vinyl]

In Conversation: Alma Allen and J.B. Blunk is organized by Palm Springs Art Museum and curated by Brooke Hodge, Director of Architecture and Design

Sponsors: Barbara and Tad Danz with generous support from the Palm Springs Art Museum Architecture and Design Council (ADC), Harold B. Matzner, Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo, L.J. Cella, Ace Hotel & Swim Club, and Clinton Hill/Allen Tran Foundation. Additional funding provided by Aileen & Bryan Cooke, Geoffrey De Sousa & José Manuel Alorda, David Knaus, Roswitha Kima Smale, and Trina Turk & Jonathan Skow

J.B. Blunk

J.B. (James Blain) Blunk lived and worked in the Northern California coastal community of Inverness, near Point Reyes, and was active from the 1960s until the end of his life in 2002. Far from the center of the art world, he was deeply committed to artmaking, rooted to the land, and ruled by his spirit.

Born in Ottawa, Kansas, Blunk moved to California to attend the University of California, Los Angeles, where he studied ceramics and was awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1949. He was subsequently drafted into the army to serve in the Korean War. While in the service, he traveled to Tokyo and there met the sculptor Isamu Noguchi, who became his advocate, arranging internships with renowned Japanese potters. Blunk eventually spent two years in Japan, absorbing not only the culture but also the concept of *wabi sabi*, or the beauty of imperfection.

Blunk returned to California in 1954 and Noguchi introduced him to the Surrealist painter Gordon Onslow Ford, who hired him for a construction project in Inverness. This was the first time Blunk worked with wood and he loved it. Ford gave Blunk some land nearby and in 1958 he began building his own house. The house, and practically everything in it, is built from found pieces of cypress and redwood. Considered his masterwork, it was an ongoing creative project that he never regarded as finished, evolving over time as his life and practice did. The house is still in the family and his daughter oversees his estate from there. Some of the furniture and sculpture on view in this gallery was borrowed from the house.

[please use one of the portraits of Blunk with this panel and let me know which one and I will give you the caption]

Alma Allen [please include photo of him with robot on this panel; caption is at bottom of text]

Alma Allen is a private person, but also a risk-taker, and these traits define his work. Born into a large Mormon family in Heber City, Utah, Allen gravitated to the outdoors as a child, exploring caves and abandoned mines. Inspired by Native American petroglyphs he saw, he carved his own sculptures with a pocketknife, leaving them in caves for people to find. At age sixteen, he left home for Salt Lake City where he worked odd jobs and continued to carve small objects.

Allen is self-taught and works intuitively, letting the natural properties of his materials suggest the form of a work. The process of sculpting leads to discoveries—his materials might crack or break and change shape, providing an opportunity for the work to evolve. Because he works in a reductive way, risk is an inherent aspect of his practice.

Never settling in one place permanently, Allen's desire for change has transformed his work in unexpected ways. In 2006, he moved from Los Angeles to Joshua Tree in San Bernardino County, California, where he built a home and studio, enabling him to create larger scale sculptures. Unfortunately, Allen also developed severe carpal tunnel syndrome in both hands, which prevented him from using hand tools for long periods. Ever resourceful, he purchased a giant robotic arm and taught himself to use it.

Last year, Allen took another risk: he sold his Joshua Tree home and moved to Mexico City. Many of the large works seen here were made especially for this exhibition, in stone and bronze foundries in Mexico. However, Allen continues to use his talented hands to make the small objects that are at the heart of his practice.

[caption]

Alma Allen at his studio in Joshua Tree with the robotic arm he uses to sculpt and carve dense materials like stone and wood, photo by Lisa Eisner.