

**SAME
BLUE
AS
THE
Sky**

Presented by: Studio AHEAD

Co-Curated by: Mariah Nielson
Studio AHEAD

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Same Blue as the Sky is a month-long exhibition conceived by Studio AHEAD in celebration of receiving the New American Voices award from Architectural Digest, given annually to the top emerging interior design firms in the US. To give thanks to the artists who inspire the studio, founders Homan Rajai and Elena Dendiberia asked Mariah Nielson, Director of the JB Blunk Estate, to co-curate a show that describes Northern California's unique cultural heritage.

Northern California's position away from the historic centers of the art world has allowed its artists the freedom to dream and live on their own terms. The coastline is a reminder of life always on the edge; it is a periphery and a frontier. "It has been justifiable," explains Henry Hopkins in his introduction to *50 West Coast Artists*, "to restate the perennial cliché that the footloose, the adventuresome, and the dreamers loom large in the formation of California's compatible but strikingly individualistic society."

Same Blue as the Sky brings together the work of eleven contemporary and historical artists from Northern California working across sculpture, photography, and painting. Continuing a tradition in which aesthetics, innovation, and place are seen as inextricable, their practices are informed by the landscape of the region: a juxtaposition of natural and urban, new and old, utopian and traditional. The artists in this exhibition are pioneers; their work, whether abstract or representational, demonstrates the creativity, resourcefulness, and individualistic expression specific to this place.

EVAN SHIVELY

GORDON ONSLOW FORD

HEATH CERAMICS

IDO YOSHIMOTO

JB BLUNK

JESSE SCHLESINGER

LESLIE WILLIAMSON

MADELEINE FITZPATRICK

NATHAN LYNCH

TYLER CROSS AND KYLE LYPKA

What's your primary source of inspiration?

Looking and appreciating what hasn't been "made."

How does the landscape you live and labor in impact the way you work?

It's not labor, it's life.

How and what does wood reveal about the place it came from?

One can glean from the wood some insight into the life that the plant has lived. Obviously, empathy varies.

When you first meet a piece of wood are you immediately aware of its potential, its future form?

No. We all need to crack the nut open.



An excerpt from "Interview with Gordon Onslow Ford," by Fariba Bogzaran, September 26, 1994, Inverness, California. *Images of the Lucid Mind: Phenomenology of Lucid Dreaming and Modern Painting*, UMI. 1996.

Fariba Bogzaran:

When you are in your studio, what is your experience of being in that Space? [referring to his concept of "Great Spaces of the Mind"]

Gordon Onslow Ford:

Painting is something that happens through paying attention. If you pay attention to the nature of the world as it appears in lines, forms and colors, you as a separate entity no longer exist. You don't do it by thinking about it. It is something that happens. There is no virtue in this, you know. Some people can do it, like some people can play the piano. A painter is a kind of person who can enter the worlds that he is painting, feel the reality of it, know what it is—and you enter the world by creating it and contemplating what you have created.

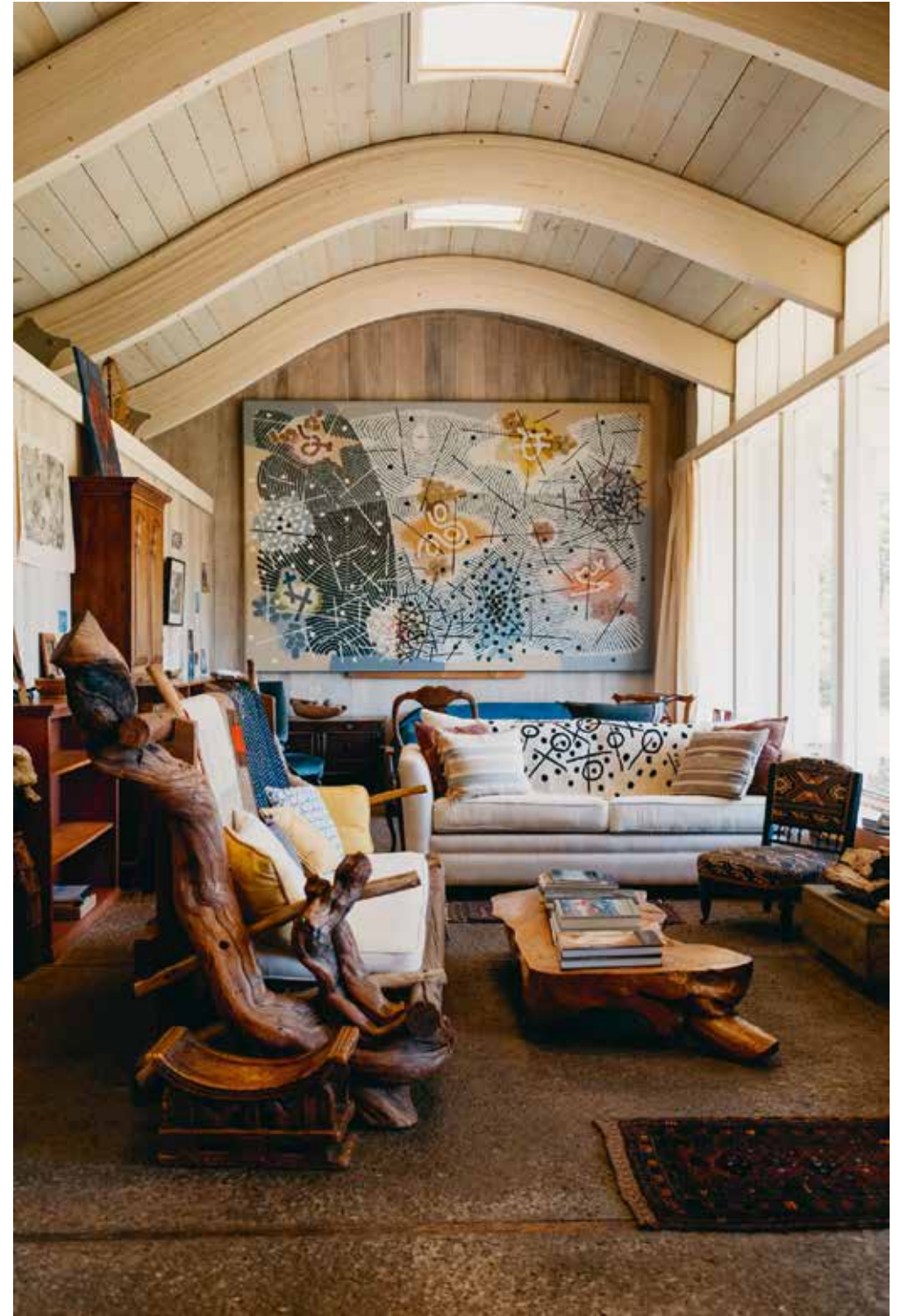
FB: Sounds like the work of a shaman.

GOF: Well, shamanism, of course, is new to me, but I expect painting the inner-world is very close to shamanism, in the sense that we are both inner-travelers—except that the painter does that unconsciously for a growth of consciousness, which will be self-evident to other people, rather than trying to cure a particular ill.

FB: When you say self-evident to people, do you mean that others would recognize it?

GOF: Yes. It will awaken something. Hopefully an inner-world painting will awaken something in someone who is sympathetic—awaken something that they haven't thought of or seen before—it is a revelation.





What's your primary source of inspiration?

Every little thing in life can make an impact on my thinking. Lately the stick bugs that I am raising give me so much joy and I can't help thinking that nature is the best designer.

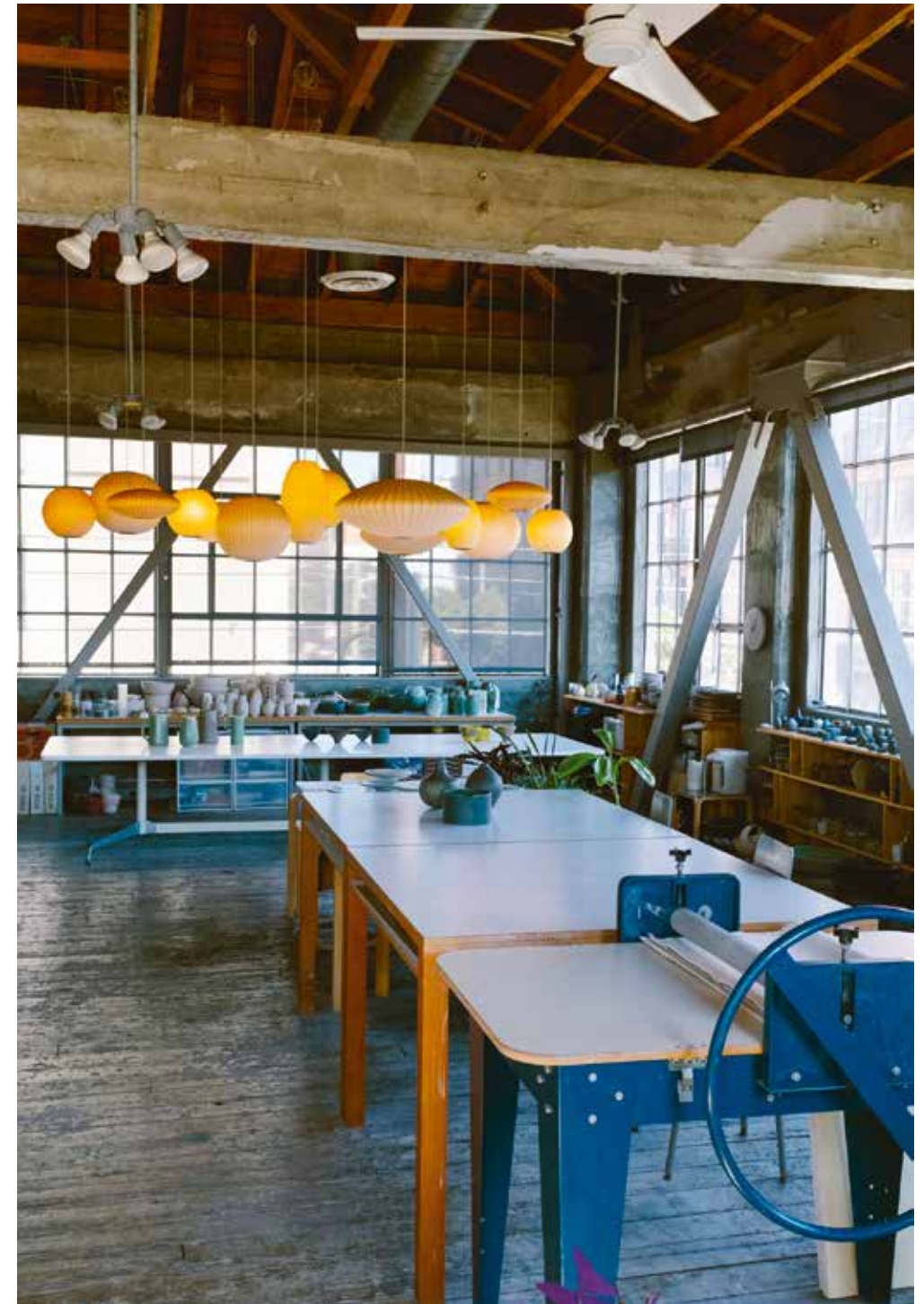
How does the ceramic tradition and history of Heath impact your art practice?

Ceramics has a long history, thousands of years, and it changes very little. And I want to keep it like it always has been; I want to keep it simple and connect with both hand and head. Heath is Edith; Edith is Heath. I find traces of her on clay, glaze, form and surfaces everywhere. My work is not about mimicking her, it's about continuing her thoughts while adding mine, and moving forward, slow and steady.



How is Heath's history and style indicative of Northern California? And how do you expand this tradition as a contemporary designer with roots in Hong Kong?

Hong Kong is a unique place; it blends ancient past and future, east and west cultures. Growing up there, it prepared me to respect history while encouraging me to look for something new. I find this background gave me what I need to be at Heath at this time. It is a moment that fuses legacy and future.



What's your primary source of inspiration?

First and foremost, I'm inspired by the material itself. It is what it is and that must be understood and respected. As I spend time with the material, the conversation develops, and I am able to visualize a collaboration with it. I have countless sources of inspiration around me that I seek out and that consistently change.

One recurring theme is humans' interaction with nature. We have a strong urge to organize the chaos- to create boundaries and straight edges. It simplifies the material and gives it a different presentation, more digestible to the human eye and mind. I'm not trying to tame the natural design, but to create a more layered piece. Something that is so structurally human with geometrical designs, but within that is something wildly natural. The brutal shapes and designs are simple and subtle in effort to give the eye a landing place that is familiar so that it can then better take in the natural beauty.

How does the landscape you live and work in impact your art practice?

My practice naturally grew out of this landscape. As a child, my first memories include observing and exploring the surrounding nature and also witnessing my father, Rick Yoshimoto and JB Blunk creating from these resources. Later as an arborist, I learned to read the environment and understand its impact on life

and growth of all that exists. It's an interconnected web that takes time to learn and is incredibly specific to this place. My practice evolved from caring for living trees to working with wood. This continuum could have only occurred from the dedication to this place, over my many years here.

How do you approach, and begin to work on, a large piece of raw material?

As I mentioned, I approach it as a conversation. First, there is an introduction and I do my best to understand the qualities of the material. These are literally the story of its life and of the landscape in which it grew. It takes time to take in the details and imagine what is underneath, to read the subtleties of the material. It can be a long process. From there what I end up designing is my best effort to compliment and highlight these nuances.

Do you know what the material will be when you first encounter it or does the artwork reveal itself over time?

I sometimes have a preconceived idea that I want to explore and the right material must be searched for. Those ideas must have the flexibility to change as the work unfolds and the qualities of the wood reveal themselves. Many times, the material exists as a beautiful and interesting piece and I connect with it for that reason only. What sculpting or forms come next from these pieces are secondary.





An excerpt from "An Interview with JB Blunk," by Rita Lawrence, held during the opening of the exhibition *JB Blunk Sculptures, 1952-1977* at The Craft and Folk Art Museum, Los Angeles, 1978.

RL: When you worked with Rosanjin Kitaoji and Kaneshige Toyo you lived with the families, shared a Japanese potter's existence. Did some of that influence more than your work?

JBB: Of course. It's still with me. The way I think and relate to the place around me and the environment, ecology, had its inception then and was important in forming an idea of a way of life. But I had no plan. The building of the house, and all that came after, was the result of other experiences after I returned. I moved to Inverness to build a kiln and to make ceramics. I was afforded the opportunity of a place to live and work and, with all of my being, I was hoping to do that. At that time I was even so naïve as to think I would live and work in Japan!

RL: Rousseau says: 'Men live not in order to live but to make others believe that they have lived.'



JBB: Right! Because they miss it. There comes a point where you just have to do it. I have never had this problem of philosophizing and then putting it into action. I have usually had it happen, even with my own work. I've learned about it, learned a lot about myself, from consciously going back and seeing what I've done. But that didn't happen in my life for a long time because I was just doing. And then one day – FLASH – I started being conscious of what I had done, and once that starts, life changes. Now I am curious. I am wondering what is going to happen. For some time I thought I knew exactly where I was going and what I had to do and I was really focused. I was very unconscious of even what I was making. Things, ideas, were just pouring out. I am not in that state anymore. It's a very different way of living, and it's sure not as easy. I am both feeling better about what I have done and what I am doing and at the same time open to what else might happen – and it may not even be sculpture. I am more open. Open to the life process – to being, not just doing. I am trying to be open to a new way of being in the world.



What's your primary source of inspiration?

The moon. Observation. Tilo, and Yoko. Bright colors. The sound of rain. Chance. The way that plants tell you what they need. Attention. Music; lately Promises, Shore, and the Köln Concert. My friends. Silence. Mount Tamalpais. Hands. Contemplation. The sky. Inquisitiveness.

How does the landscape you live and work in impact your art practice? I'm thinking of the stark and stunning contrasts between the natural and manmade in your work and wondering if the duality of your lifestyle and this recurring material palette/style are related.

One's environment is everything. The dramatic presence of the natural world (Mt Tamalpais, the Pacific, the Redwoods, etc) and the dialogue with the city (San Francisco Bay Area, urban development). Time, chance, and the labor of the manmade (craft), attentiveness to details and the overlooked. All are interrelated, and coexist, and are reflected in my work. Thank you for noticing.

You've spent time living and working in Japan. What, if any, are the creative connections between Japan and the West Coast?

It is a lineage that is very important and influential to me, the effect of Japan on the West Coast in the last century or more. Craft, obviously, and Zen, and carpentry, and design, and the natural environment, and a certain way of being. I am immensely grateful for the extended time I've been able to live in that beautiful country across the Pacific.

How has spending time in that country impacted your work/creative process?

In more ways than I can begin to describe. It is, fundamentally, a home to me: the clearest sense of place, things as they should be. Such beauty. Such care. Everything as it is. Inspiring in the most profound way.



What's your primary source of inspiration?

I have some touchstones that spark ideas and curiosity - design, architecture, the natural world, history - but invariably all those things lead back to a person who created or did something interesting or courageous or completely original and things just take off from there...

How does the landscape you live and work in impact your art practice?

It has a profound impact on everything I do. My art practice is inextricably tied with leaving my own life and stepping into other people's. I try to see the spaces I photograph through the eyes of their inhabitants and observe the rhythm of their lives through their homes. When I am not traveling and creating that work, it is key for me to have a space of my own filled with my own life's objects to root back into. The quiet of living near the water's edge, being able to walk through the pines and digest what I have experienced, seen and felt has become a key part of creating my work.



You've spent years documenting the homes and studios of Northern California artists and designers. What, if anything, is distinct about the spaces Northern Californian artists make for themselves?

There is a definite communion with nature across the board here I think. We are so blessed with the natural beauty of California and invariably that fact and elements of the natural world are present in every home and artists space I photograph here. I know it is true in my own home as well.



What's your primary source of inspiration?

The spectacle of the beauty and tragedy of the natural world crashing into the same that's within us.

How does the landscape you live and work in impact your art practice?

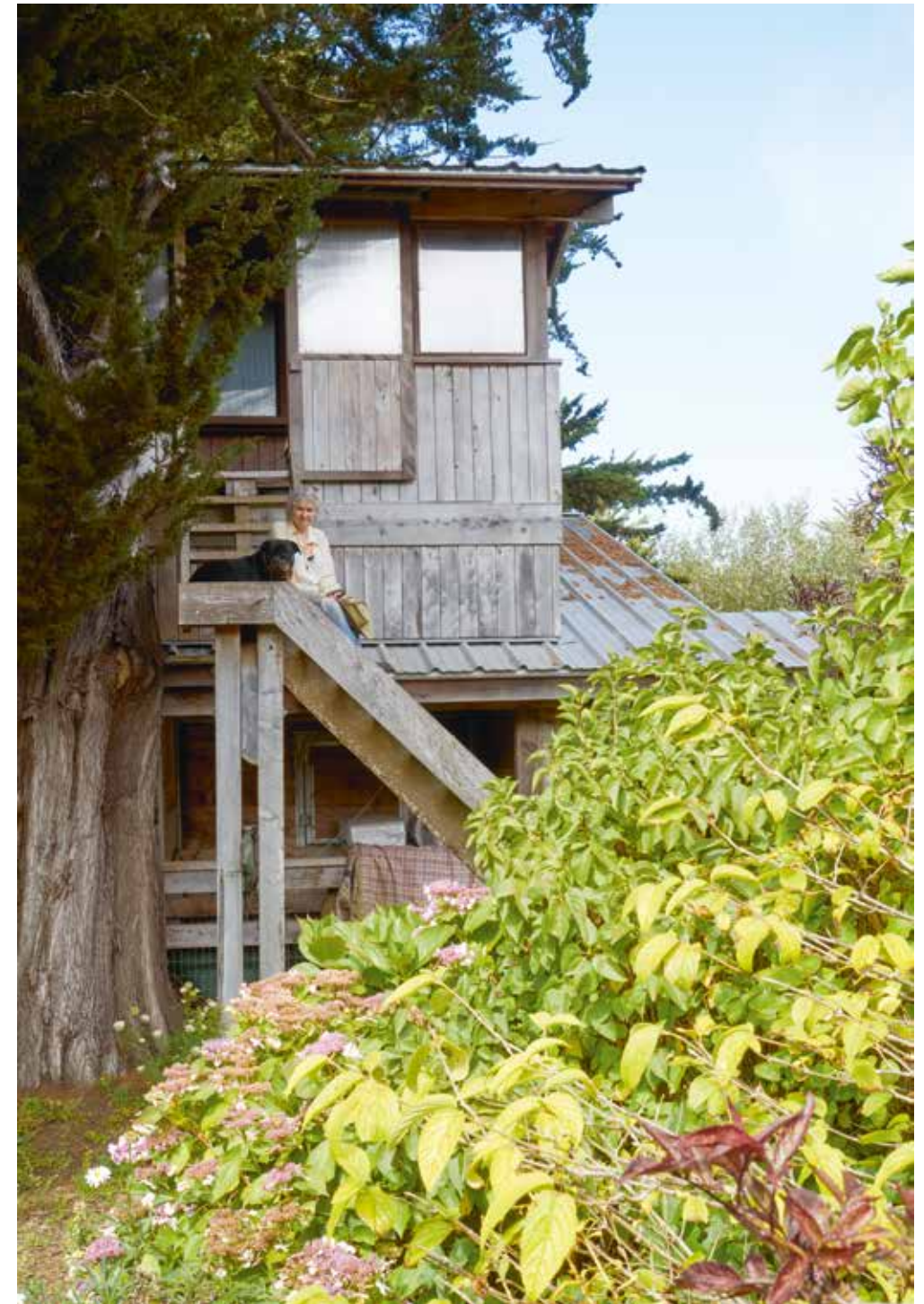
Interior or exterior landscape? What can't affect you if you look both outward and within?

What are you revealing in your paintings?

What can't be said in words. That's the point of painting.

You recently told me, "Once you make a mark, there's an entry". Can you tell me more about this mark?

Beginning, whether a screen or page or canvas, is forbidding. You're on the outside. But when that one special mark of intention and insight vests, you're in. Then the painting isn't a stranger, it's a friend.



What's your primary source of inspiration?

My primary sources of inspiration are political theater, storytelling, vulnerability, awkwardness and desire ... and folly.

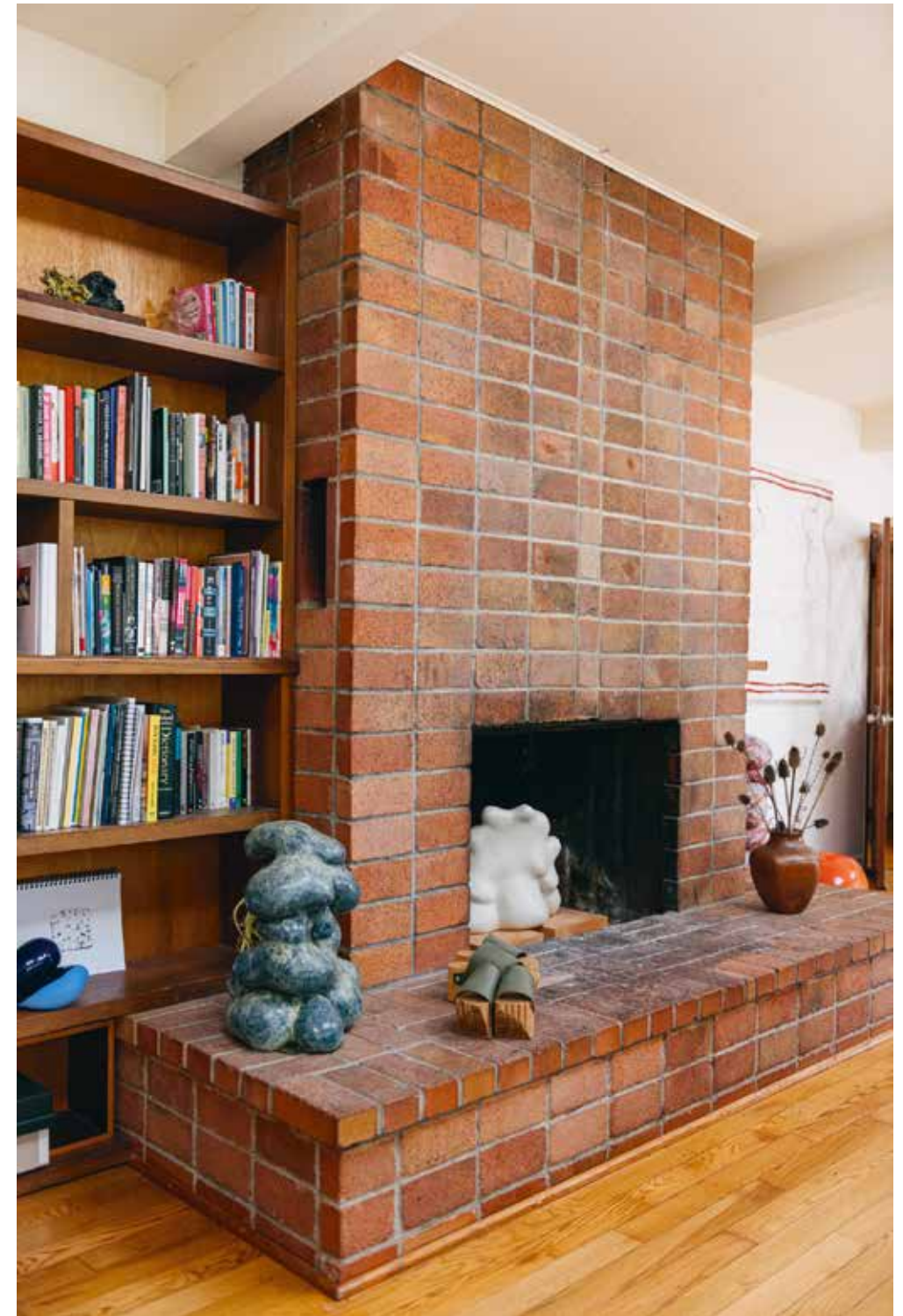
How does the landscape you live and work in impact your art practice?

I've lived in San Geronimo for about ten years in three different houses and I really love the semi-rural quality of this area. None of those houses occupy particularly large lots, but each has a yard and are adjacent to some open space in one way or another. So I have outdoor space to work in, but I also have a long view into the distance which seems important to me. I try to build that into my work – something seductive in the foreground paired with an opportunity or possibility or opening for something else to happen in the distance. The views from here include some empty rolling hills, some oaks/redwoods/pines/bays, some big rocks and open skies. Sometimes I think about the sky in relation to the psychological patterns, because tomorrow the wind will shift.



What are the environmental contradictions of your landscape and do they inform your work/creative process?

One local contradiction is the former San Geronimo golf course that was purchased by Trust for Public Land and is being returned to a more *un-gardened* state. I am intrigued that it was developed and is now being *un-developed*. The engineered concrete fish ladder that was built once for the salmon to get past the small dam was removed and big earth movers were brought in to recreate a more natural and salmon friendly creek topography. I am inspired by our follies... that we use our considerable education and resources and even sometimes good intentions to make improvements... to ourselves, to this land... and then sometimes find we were wrong, or want something else and we change course. I find humor in the confidence *we [white men] have in our own ideas or plans. In a more abstract way, this golf course reclamation echoes some of the considerations and conversations around American monuments.



What's your primary source of inspiration?

These are secret.

Does the landscape you live and work in impact your art practice? I'm thinking about your home, studio, the larger Bay Area context...Does this place and the history of this place have any impact on your style?

We've both been here for over a decade now, this place takes care of us and we feel very fortunate to be here. Having the right kind of studio space and equipment is essential to make the work, and having a place to live close by allows us to keep up a rigorous studio practice. Both of these things were found through friends made over the years. Many people have helped us out here in the Bay and we are very grateful for them. We're not sure if the actual visual landscape of the area has an effect on the work, but being able to go from the city out to nature so easily is certainly impactful.

We've also been able to experience a meaningful connection to the art history of the Bay Area through Tyler's time studying at SFAI, as well as residencies and work opportunities we've participated in that have connected us to the legacies of artists like Peter Voulkus and JB Blunk.

We talked about the craft tradition that's inherent in clay and I'm wondering how you address this as artists? In my opinion, the Bay Area is a place that provides a particular type of creative freedom and I'm wondering if the distinctions between art/craft/design are important to you?

We've found that by neither engaging with, nor running from the craft element of our materials we've been able to work with them in a very direct and reverent way. Instead of being bogged down by any discourse or information surrounding the materials, we've been free to take great pleasure in all its qualities by actively submitting ourselves to them.

We do think there is a distinction between art/craft/design which would mostly be concerned with utility, but we really don't think it makes a difference in terms of value. Good things/objects made with the hand are incredibly important to us.





Evan Shively is a sawyer and artist living in Petaluma, CA. Formerly a chef, he now heads Arborica, a wood supply focusing on naturally harvested, salvaged, wind-felled and otherwise locally sourced lumber.

Gordon Onslow Ford (1912-2003) was a painter and writer born in England. He was a member of the Parisian Surrealist Group in the 1930's and 40's, before settling in West Marin in 1958. Deeply inspired by Japanese philosophies on art, nature, and life, his compositions often depict elements of the cosmos and natural world.

Heath Ceramics was founded by Edith and Brian Heath in 1947 in Sausalito, CA. Edith Heath developed her classic dinnerware and tile sourcing native California clays. She favored materiality and function, influenced by her studies with László Moholy-Nagy at The School of Design, Chicago. Today, Heath Ceramics is led by Studio Director **Tung Chiang** and continues to lead and preserve American design and craft.

Ido Yoshimoto is an Inverness-based artist. The son of Rick Yoshimoto, the long-time assistant of JB Blunk, Yoshimoto is continuing the craft and tradition of his father and Blunk by prioritizing large-scale wooden sculptural forms inspired by the Inverness environment.

JB Blunk (1926-2002) was an artist and sculptor who built his home in Inverness, CA. Informed by the Bizen ceramic traditions in Japan and the Mingei Movement, Blunk prioritized elemental forms in wood, clay, jewelry, furniture, painting, bronze, and stone.

Jesse Schlesinger is a visual multimedia artist based in San Francisco, CA. In his sculptures and installations, Jesse foregrounds a hand-crafted aesthetic utilizing industrial and natural materials and found objects.

Leslie Williamson is a photographic artist whose work is focused on creating portraits of people through their spaces. She sees the rooms we live in as an intimate portrait of ourselves. She is the author of four books including *Handcrafted Modern* and *Still Lives: In the Homes of Artists, Great and Unsung* and collaborates with editorial and design clients in the US and abroad.

Madeleine Fitzpatrick is an Irish-American artist living and working in Petaluma, CA. Her paintings and monoprints teeter on the edge between figuration and abstraction to reapproach the human body from a radical perspective, one that is cosmic and fluid in nature.

Nathan Lynch is a sculptor, performance artist, and Chair of the Ceramics Program at California College of the Arts. Based in San Geronimo, CA, his concerns for political conflict and environmental upheaval are filtered through notions of absurdity, hand fabrication and the dramatic devices of storytelling.

Tyler Cross & Kyle Lypka are artists who share a collaborative sculptural practice based in Oakland, CA. In the process of collectively creating objects within a relationship, they hope to counter the effects of cultural isolation, dematerialization and disembodiment.

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