

Meeting in Depth JB Blunk and Gordon Onslow Ford

Fariba Bogzaran

*The Great Morning:
Winds of long ago
Blow through the pine-trees.*

Uejima Onitsura¹

For over forty years, JB Blunk (1926–2002) and Gordon Onslow Ford (1912–2003) lived in close proximity on a densely wooded ridge in Inverness, California. In this dynamic landscape, fog rolls over the bishop pine trees from Mount Vision, and settles in the valley cradle of a nature preserve. The only buildings on this specific ridge are the homes and studios of Onslow Ford and Blunk. Over the years, whether they saw each other in person or not, they witnessed similar movements in nature and were touched by the same wind blowing in from the ocean.

What had first connected the two artists was their love for Japanese aesthetics. Besides each independently studying Zen Buddhism, they both cherished the volumes of R.H. Blyth's commentary on haiku poetry published in 1950, which provided them entry into the philosophical ground of the culture; specifically, it promoted quieting the mind, beauty in simplicity, and reverence for nature.² Blunk came across Blyth's books on haiku while in the army in Korea: 'For a few years of my life all I read was those books, over and over and over.'³

Embracing the short verses of Japanese haiku poetry is of great importance in understanding the wisdom of the Japanese philosophical sensibility. The simple yet profound arrangement of words facilitates a shift of perception. In this way, for these two artists, haiku was a major influence in their work and way of life. The Japanese masters of poetry also declared that

1. Uejima Onitsura (1661–1738), in the section 'Haiku of the Edo Period, Japan' in R. H. Blyth, *Haiku, Volume 2: Spring*, (Tokyo: The Hokuseido Press, 1950), p. 4.
2. Conversation with Gordon Onslow Ford and JB Blunk (1993). Fariba Bogzaran Archive. Both artists had the volumes of R.H. Blyth in their libraries and spoke about how much the books had influenced them individually.
3. JB Blunk and Fariba Bogzaran in conversation. Inverness, California, 1993. Fariba Bogzaran Archive.

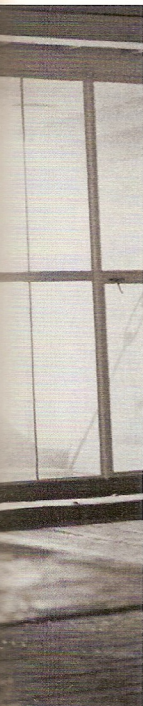
there is no distinction or separation between humans and nature, hence it is an illusion that we are beyond nature looking at it from above. The deep bond between Blunk and Onslow Ford was developed through this philosophical dictum, and both artists embraced it explicitly in their artworks. For both, these philosophical elements translated as: *art as a way of knowing* and *art as a way of life*.

Gordon Onslow Ford's cultural and artistic background was far removed from Japanese art. A British-born landscape painter, he served as an officer in the British Navy before moving to Paris in 1937. It was there he changed the direction of his art, and was invited by André Breton to join the Surrealist group in Paris in 1938. With an inheritance from his patron, Onslow Ford acquired a large collection of art, which he later used to not only help himself, but also his fellow artists. He came to New York by the invitation of the New School for Social Research to deliver a series of four lectures in 1941. He called the series *Surrealist Painting: An Adventure into Human Consciousness*. In the lectures and an accompanying exhibition, he introduced automatism and Surrealism as well as the new direction he and Roberto Matta were promoting on art and exploration of consciousness. When his visa expired, he joined the Surrealists in Mexico and stayed there for the rest of the war. His home in Erongarícuaro became a refuge for many artists. In 1947, Onslow Ford moved to Northern California where he was invited by the San Francisco Museum of Art to have a retrospective exhibition, *Towards a New Subject in Painting* (1948), and later the important group show *Dynaton* (1951). Soon after, he acquired the S.S. Vallejo ferryboat moored in Sausalito, which he used as his studio.⁴

In spring of 1951, Onslow Ford's life took a major turn when he met scholars at the American Academy of Asian Studies in San Francisco, and he devoted himself to studying Eastern philosophy. There



Gordon Onslow Ford painting in his studio on the S.S. Vallejo, 1956



he first encountered Alan Watts and began studying Zen Buddhism with him. Through Watts, Onslow Ford was introduced to visiting Japanese calligraphy master Sabro Hasegawa, an encounter which changed his life. He witnessed Hasegawa making calligraphy at his studio, and in that moment, he realized that he wanted to learn the art of Japanese and Chinese calligraphy. Several artists from the Academy gathered to search for a calligraphy teacher, eventually finding Hodo Tobase Roshi. For the first time, Onslow Ford submitted himself to study with a teacher (Tobase) for five years. Among the other students were artists Ruth Asawa, Adaline Kent, and Lucienne Bloch.⁵

Contemporaneously, in 1952, Blunk, after having served for two years in the Korean War, chose to go to Japan to pursue his interest in pottery. Blunk had a chance encounter with sculptor Isamu Noguchi who introduced him to Japan's great artist and master ceramicist, Rosanjin Kitaoji.⁶ Blunk became an apprentice to Rosanjin for four months, learning ceramics, and Japanese aesthetics. This was followed by another apprenticeship with master Toyo Kaneshige, in Bizen. It was a crucial turning point in Blunk's life and beginning of his art practice.

The lives of Blunk and Onslow Ford first intersected when Blunk moved to Northern California in 1955, and their mutual friend Isamu Noguchi introduced the two.⁷ Blunk visited Onslow Ford and his wife, writer Jacqueline Johnson, at their home in Mill Valley, north of San Francisco. Blunk later recalled his impression with great enthusiasm: 'The first time I went to visit him [Onslow Ford] in his home in Mill Valley there was a big event. The first thing I saw was this tall, slender Paalen [Wolfgang Paalen's painting *The Messenger*, 1941] just as he opened the door. I had never seen anything like that... Then he [Onslow Ford] gave me all these books and journals and catalogues of Surrealist art. I had just seen a few things once in a trip to New York wandering around

4. For a more in-depth history see: *Gordon Onslow Ford: A Man on a Green Island*. (Inverness: Lucid Art Foundation, 2019).
5. Michael Wenger and Kaz Tanahashi, 'Creation in the Instant: An Interview with Painter Gordon Onslow Ford', May 13, 1991, in *Wind Bell: Teachings from the San Francisco Zen Center*, p. 36–43.
6. Glenn Adamson, *Focus: JB Blunk*, (Bolinas: Bolinas Museum, 2000).
7. Isamu Noguchi, 'On the Sculptor JB Blunk', in *JB Blunk Sculptures, 1952–1977*, (Los Angeles: Craft and Folk Art Museum, 1978).

by myself. He just buried me in these books because he knew that I would find them of interest; he wanted to share them because that is where he was coming from. These books were a gigantic revelation to me.’⁸

Additionally, when he met Blunk, Onslow Ford had his studio onboard the S.S. Vallejo, which he shared with the Greek painter, Jean Varda. In the mid-1950s, the boat became a cultural hive and a meeting ground for artists, poets, and writers. Through Onslow Ford, Blunk met many remarkable artists and thinkers in this milieu, among them were Roberto Matta, Lee Mullican, Wolfgang Paalen, Varda, Harry Partch, Luchita Hurtado, Ruth Asawa, Richard Bowman, Alan Watts, and many others. Blunk was immediately integrated into Onslow Ford’s circle of friends and associates.⁹

It was their shared, deep engagement with Japanese aesthetics and arts that allowed their friendship to quickly and substantively take hold. As artists, both Onslow Ford and Blunk were keen observers of their surroundings, a practice they honed during their study of the Japanese aesthetic sensibility. Influenced by a combination of the ancient Shinto and Zen Buddhism religions, this aesthetic stressed a deep inquiry into the experience of emptiness, attention to detail, and cultivation of elegance. Art was no longer an object but a presence in relational space. The positioning of forms, be they artworks, flower arrangements, or a stone on a shelf, can create a correspondence between the outer and the inner, and be an inspiration. Blunk had made this practice a way of life, living inside of a moving installation: ‘I absorbed something from looking at a lot of Japanese gardens. And it was all just about moving objects around in space. I started to see things in contemporary life in relationship to each other in this way. I am constantly re-arranging my world. I consider this as a big part of what I do—because sometimes something [profound] happens as a result of simply re-arranging things.’¹⁰



Gordon Onslow Ford in his studio on the S.S. Vallejo, 1956



The Ferryboat Vallejo in Sausalito, 1956. Jacqueline Johnson and Gordon Onslow Ford in back, and Roberto Matta and his wife Malitte in front



8. JB Blunk and Fariba Bogzaran in conversation, *ibid.*
9. See chapter on Floating Gallery in S.S. Vallejo in *Artists, Poets, and Visionaries of the S. S. Vallejo: 1949–1969*, (Inverness: Lucid Art Foundation), p. 40–47.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Gordon Onslow Ford, *Creation*, (Basel: Galerie Schreiner, 1978), p. 24.
12. *Wabi-sabi* is a philosophical view in Japanese aesthetics, relating to imperfection. It comes from Buddhist teaching about impermanence.
13. Onslow Ford, *Insights*, (Emeryville: Lapis Press, 1991).

For Onslow Ford, this understanding of the possibilities of new arrangements of seeing was fundamental to his philosophy. He even inaugurated his 1978 book *Creation* with the chapter ‘See Anew’, in which he advocated for a similar transformation in perception: ‘The new image, hopefully will evolve from painting to painting, from painter to painter expressing eventually a new way of SEEING—then once again the heavens, the earth, the plants, the animals, man and his works will appear in relation to each other, as they should be.’¹¹ Even though Onslow Ford and Blunk connected as friends and close neighbors for four decades of their lives, their personalities could not have been more different. Onslow Ford was a contemplative, introverted hermit and Blunk an exuberant extrovert who loved connecting with people. Still, they balanced, admired, and encouraged each other’s work. Both carried the learning from their respective Japanese teachers about elegance, simplicity, and spontaneity, which they employed in their respective disciplines, while opening themselves to mystery and a dash of *wabi-sabi*.¹²

To build their house and studios, Onslow Ford and Johnson began searching for properties in the Marin countryside around 1954. By 1955, they acquired a large parcel of land on the Point Reyes Peninsula, close to San Francisco. For a couple of years, they walked the land, brought friends and students, and engaged Blunk from the beginning to locate a suitable place for their home. Blunk moved to Inverness and played a major role in the creation of Onslow Ford and Johnson’s home.

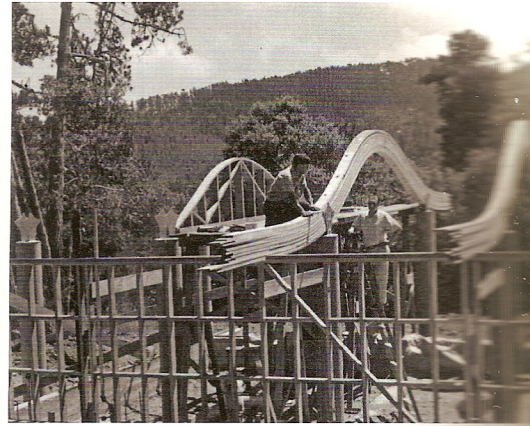
Having been influenced by Eastern philosophy, it was important for Onslow Ford not to build his home perched on top of the mountain, but for it to be integrated in the landscape, leaving the mountain as the focus of attention, as per his saying: ‘For the painter, the importance of a mountain is not so much to climb it as it is to see through it.’¹³ Together, Onslow Ford and Blunk chose a spot for the home part way up from

the valley with a view of the Mount Vision ridge.

Designed by architect Warren Callister, Onslow Ford's house was a combination of ideas built into a simple large room. 'I was thinking it would be more ornate but Gordon kept making it simple,' Callister commented.¹⁴ Its most noteworthy, creative, and unusual feature was its curved roof. The house itself is long and shaped like a ship, as fitting the interests of Onslow Ford and his early experiences at sea, yet this ship is sailing in the woods. The roof is both an emulation of the rolling waves of the ocean and a calligraphic gesture.

Before marrying Onslow Ford, Jacqueline Johnson lived in Palo Alto, while she was a graduate student at Stanford University. She hired modernist architect Richard Neutra to design her home there in 1937. From this experience, she brought Neutra's notions of connecting the home to the landscape into the building of their Inverness home, as well as the use of modernist construction techniques. Callister designed the house to be a simple, post and beam structure with classical-style, poured concrete columns. But the curving roof made it complicated because any prefabricated structures would have to be delivered up the winding, one-lane roads of Inverness. Blunk solved the problem by creating the curved roof one plank at a time onsite: 'It was simple once we got a system going,' Blunk said in a later interview.¹⁵

In 1958, the year their house was constructed, Onslow Ford and Johnson invited Blunk and his wife Nancy Waite to themselves choose a spot in the land on which to build their own house and studio. Blunk and Waite gathered enough material and located a site on which they began to build their house. The years living with the Kaneshige family in Bizen and his friendship with John Baxter, whose art was an assemblage of wood, stones, and shells, no doubt inspired Blunk to gather and assemble the handmade sculpture which eventually became his home. Blunk's house, which he took several



JB Blunk working on the roof of Gordon Onslow Ford and Jacqueline Johnson's house, Bishop Pine Preserve, Inverness, California, c. 1958



Interior of Gordon Onslow Ford and Jacqueline Johnson's house, Bishop Pine Preserve, Inverness, California, c. 1959



JB Blunk, Gordon Onslow Ford, John Anderson in Inverness, May 1978

14. Alan Hess, 'Charles Warren Callister's Onslow-Ford Home', in *Fine Homebuilding*, No. 27 (June-July 1985).

15. Ibid.

16. JB Blunk and Fariba Bogzaran in conversation, *ibid.*

17. Onslow Ford, *Creation*, *ibid.*, p.116.

years to complete, became his masterpiece.

The making of Onslow Ford's house, and then his own, shifted Blunk's focus from ceramics to woodworking: 'This place here, the house, the outdoors all around is... like a big sculpture. I sort of slipped in the back door on that, there came a time when I guess one day I thought that I am a sculptor now. But before that I was trying to say something with clay as a medium.'¹⁶ Having witnessed Blunk gather and assemble the material to create his home, Onslow Ford wrote affectionately about him and his house: 'The house that [Blunk] built in the woods was his first masterwork. It was built with wholehearted dedication stone by stone, beam by beam and plank by plank. Now, in this atmosphere charged with potential, this organic carving is an invitation to assume the form of the void enclosed in the archway, and to observe what lies on the other side.'¹⁷ Bearing witness to the creation of each other's homes from the beginning connected the artists even more deeply. Even though they spent much time apart, they always shared important holidays together with their families: 'Gordon and I are very different. Two different worlds [but] he is responsible for introducing me to a lot that I would never have experienced.'

Soon after Blunk built his house, Onslow Ford and Johnson invited painter John Anderson to also build his home and studio on the land. Anderson, who had architectural and building experience, had helped Onslow Ford with the construction of his studios and had become Onslow Ford's studio assistant. Once Anderson built his house, the three artists enjoyed a sense of community.

Onslow Ford and Johnson also acquired Blunk's early sculptures, and at times, commissioned pieces from him. In the biennial pottery sale of Blunk and his artist friend and assistant Rick Yoshimoto, Onslow Ford was among the first to arrive to see what Blunk had created. Onslow Ford's admiration for Blunk's artworks

in wood, stone, or pottery was palpable. Their annual spring ritual was for Blunk to bring long branches of plum blossoms and arrange them *ikebana*¹⁸ style in a ceramic vase Blunk had created. This seasonal arrangement would be the centerpiece in Onslow Ford's home.

In a significant group exhibition in 1978 in Basel, Switzerland—for which he published his book *Creation*—Onslow Ford invited his circle of friends, the 'Creation' artists, which included Blunk, John Anderson, Lee Mullican, Richard Bowman, Jack Wright, and Fritz Rauh, among others. They became an artistic family, visiting each other's homes and studios, participating in exhibitions, and sharing special celebrations together. They encouraged each other to continue their work even if, at times, no one paid attention. In particular, the trio of Onslow Ford, Blunk and Anderson lived inside an intentional artistic community, and became pillars of creation and inspiration in the heart of the Inverness hills.

18. Japanese art of flower arrangement. Within the basic structure of *ikebana* are the three aspects of existence: heaven, earth and man.

JB Blunk's house under construction, c. 1959

Following spreads:

Nancy Waite building their home, c. 1959

The house with a view of the Inverness Ridge and Tomales Bay, c. 1970



