

CALIFORNIA GIRLS

More often than not, where we are raised shapes who we become.

This is especially true for curator and design consultant, Mariah Nielson, who grew up in the idyllic surrounds of Inverness, California, in a remote cabin designed and built by her artist father, J.B. Blunk. Floating above the earth, with vast views of the forested Northern California landscape, the home is a space that invites endless creative exploration. Boosted by this environment from the time of her childhood, Mariah moved to London to study architecture, later returning to California to work as a curator for the San Francisco Museum of Craft and Design. Now splitting her time between her family home in Inverness and her home in London, Mariah works as the director of her father's estate and is also the co-founder of Permanent Collection, a curatorial project that commissions timeless clothing, objects, and accessories—some pulled straight from the design canon. Wanting to learn more about Mariah and the artistic haven she calls home part-time, we visited her home to see where her story began, starting with the bed turned couch where she was born.

1. From 2007 to 2011, Mariah directed the J.B. Blunk Residency for artists in collaboration with the nearby Lucid Art Foundation.

SOFIA NEBIOLO: How do you see the house as a functional space, but also as a historic landmark of your father and your life there?

MARIAH NIELSON: My father always described the house as his masterpiece. For him, it was a total work of art, and he built it by hand using all salvaged materials. From the beginning, the home contained his own personal collection of art, as well as new works that he brought into the space. These works included paintings, sculptures, furniture, and ceramics. I am sure my mother shared with you his ceramics collection, which we still use ourselves around the house. It was important when I was renovating the home and preparing it for an artist residency,¹ and essentially preparing it for its next phase, that the place not be too precious because my father always encouraged people to sit on his furniture and to be active in the space and engage with the material around them. For example, when the home was an artist residency, we left the original Blunk ceramics in situ, and the artists were able to eat off the plates and drink out of the cups. Interestingly, no piece was ever broken or stolen, and I like that if you share a space, with a certain amount of trust, that it is palpable and

people can sense that and live carefully and thoughtfully within the environment. For me, it is important that it continues to be a lived-in space—never too precious—and that it will always change and develop over time. I hope my mom pointed out the new sofa directly in front of the fireplace, which was built by my husband, Max Frommled, a London based designer, a couple of years ago. The fact that there are new editions coming into the home is also an important part of the story and my father's legacy. He always thought of the place as a work in progress, and that idea has given me a sense of liberty and possibility. Not only that, I have to do the work sensitively and respectfully, but I don't feel that the place is a living museum in the sense that nothing can be changed or moved.

SN: Are there aspects of preservation that you are forced to consider?

MN: I think of that word or interpret that word to mean keeping the house alive, sustaining the place, and sustaining my father's legacy, but with that means making changes to the home. It's in the simple details, like having to seal the exterior redwood panels that my father never did. That for me was an

opportunity to preserve the house, but with this act of preservation came change. I think that it is also important to remember that it is not possible to keep the place exactly as it was.

SN: It feels like the space breathes creativity, but also that it needs it to live.

MN: Yes, that is how I am carrying on my father's legacy, by allowing his home to still be alive because then he is alive. Whenever I visit the home and someone hasn't been there for several weeks, it does feel very still and static and that is not what I want.

SN: When exploring the second level of the house, your mother showed me your workspace and explained that the photos on the wall are preparations for some of your father's upcoming exhibitions that you are working on. Can you explain how you work through curating your father's exhibitions? Are his works all cataloged?

MN: We have a digital catalog that we are building using a program called Artbase, and we are currently in the process of trying to photograph every piece of art that my father ever made. I think this is going to be a lifelong challenge. We recently

photographed everything that we have on-site. We were able to achieve that by working with Daniel Dent, a local photographer, and Jess Thorton Murphy, the manager of the archive and the collection. Everything we had on-site is all now in the database. Now, we are doing some investigating.

SN: Have you had any occasions in which finding his work has been strange?

MN: I loved when Jess posted an ad in our local paper, *The Point Reyes Light*, and asked the community to contact us if anyone had an original work by J.B. Blunk, and it was lovely how many people got in touch. Jess and I were able to visit people's homes and see the pieces in situ, and whenever we have visited someone, they have told us similar stories about the day that they bought the piece from my father, or when my father came to install it, or the ceramic show that they purchased the piece from. We were able to jot down all these wonderful stories and add them to the archive because those stories and the ability to tell a narrative is really important. Also, Instagram is such a useful tool because people will contact me and I will be able to get in touch with old family friends, or sometimes the

children of old family friends that have inherited works, so it has become a useful platform for us, in terms of sharing images and getting in touch.

SN: As a curator by profession, is there an emotional aspect of curating your father's work that is different from looking at the work of others?

MN: Yes, but with my father's work it is effortless. I feel like I am spending time with him, when I am working with his material. It is really satisfying and enjoyable—not that curating other exhibitions isn't! I think there is an intimacy that I have with his work. The closeness I had with him and the material makes it enjoyable in a really different way.

SN: What challenges do you face when curating your father's work?

MN: Perhaps it is when the curator has a different idea than me of how it should be presented or sequenced. There have been times when I don't necessarily agree with what the curator is envisioning, but I have to respect their ideas and their concepts. That can be tricky, but it is my responsibility to share as much information about my father, the work, and the way

he worked with the curator, so they can find the best way to tell the story and share the material. Coming to the home is crucial for anyone that is organizing a show or curating an exhibition of my father's work. I have worked with curators in the past who haven't been to the house and it just becomes too abstract and forced. Coming to his space makes the difference because when you are in the home and standing on the property, you understand the holistic quality of his work. All of the material he made is so intricately connected to the place and its environment that it is difficult to separate the two.

SN: What are the upcoming shows you are working on?

MN: We are working on three. The first one is a joint exhibition with the artist Alma Allen at the Palm Springs Art Museum; the second is a group show organized by the College of Marin Fine Arts Gallery; and the third is a solo exhibition that will be on view at the Oakland Museum. This last one is a survey show that will include the most diverse range of material that has ever been presented in an exhibition. I am really excited about that. There will be jewelry, ceramics, painting, and sculpture.

For the first time audiences will really understand the breadth of my father's practice and how he worked across so many different mediums. Many people assume that he was only a woodworker, and they don't understand that his practice started in Japan in the 1950's, first with ceramics and then later included all of these different medias.

SN: Your brand, Permanent Collection, also pertains to archives.

MN: Absolutely. All of our products have to do with pulling from old collections and in some cases artist and designer archives. This seems to be a running theme in my life right now.

SN: Where did the inspiration for your brand begin?

MN: My business partner, Fanny Singer, and I met in London in 2012. I was in my last year of graduate school at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and she was in the last year of her Ph.D. at Cambridge. She was studying art history and I was studying design history. We both had been working throughout our education and even before as freelance writers and curators. When we met, we shared this frustration about the life

of a freelancer, which is difficult because there is not a lot of money, but it is a lot of work. We also shared a love for vintage clothing. The day that we met we were both wearing vintage navy blue coats and these two coats sparked a connection that started the project. We had this idea of remaking my coat, a coat that I had bought at a secondhand shop about ten years prior. It was the kind of coat that when I wore it out, I was constantly stopped on the street and asked, "Where did you get that coat?" Fanny and I had this idea of remaking my coat and selling just a few pieces, and then the more people we told, the more interest we got—not just for the coat, but for this idea of remaking design classics. I had done a very similar project in 2010, with the Blunk cups, working with Atelier Dion, a ceramics studio in Oakland. We cast eight of my father's original ceramics and made them using white porcelain. The new product was something very different from the original, and we never called them Blunk originals or even copies. They were new cups based on the original pieces. This way of producing led to all the pieces in Permanent Collection. For some reason, we got caught up in clothes for the first year of the business. This year we are...



Mariah's organization for her father's upcoming exhibitions. Inside the J.B. Blunk residence, Inverness, California.

... moving away from that because neither of us are fashion designers. The fact that neither of us are designers is an important part of the project. We call it a curatorial project and what we are doing is picking pieces that have a timeless quality and reissuing those works. In terms of the clothing, we never wanted to be fashion designers or thought of the brand as a fashion brand.

SN: I like the idea of a perfect object that transcends the confines of time. I think the “slow fashion” movement has also created an opening for your project, wouldn’t you say?

MN: Yes, that is definitely true. The *zeitgeist* right now about slow fashion, sustainability, and the handmade is all pertinent to the project. These are the values that our parents instilled in us growing up. Alice Waters, Fanny’s mom, and both my parents shared a set of values about how things should be consumed and made. As a result, it was easy to think about this project being supported by a clear set of values and ethics. This is demonstrated by how we do small runs and work closely with the craftsmen and factories that make our products. We do a lot of research beforehand to source materials.

After which, we test the products before putting them into production.

SN: Does the idea of permanence and archiving also pertain to the production of the clothing and objects?

MN: Firstly, we try to find people that are interested in the idea behind Permanent Collection and working with us. A lot of artisans and craftsmen have very clear expectations for themselves of what they will and will not do. For example, when we were looking for a jewelry maker to make jewelry based on my father’s designs, we initially came up against the challenge of jewelry makers wanting to imprint their own style, taste, design, or aesthetic onto the piece. What we needed was someone that was an excellent craftsman to make the earrings and honor my father’s original designs. When we found Clare Clum, a talented jewelry designer in her own right and an excellent craftsperson based in Helena, Montana, it was the perfect balance of Clare understanding and appreciating my father’s work, but also Clare being excited to work with us. We found her after six to eight months of searching. It definitely takes a while.

SN: I noticed that your sandals are made in Paris by Atelier Attal. For two of the women that started this magazine, Atelier Attal is a special place.

MN: What a beautiful connection! They do make great sandals! I lived in Paris when I was nineteen. My godmother and godfather live there and they live around the corner from Atelier Attal. Yvonne, my godmother, got me my first pair of sandals from Pierre Attal, the original owner. Later, when I lived in Paris in the mid-nineties, Pierre was still alive and well. Now, Thierry, his son, is running the shop. When I moved to London six years ago, I went to Paris to visit my godparents and wondered if the sandal shop was still there. Sure enough it was and the same classic styles were being made, but this time by Thierry, so I ordered one or two pairs of sandals from him. A year later, when I met Fanny and we started talking about collaborating and possibly making sandals, I thought Thierry would be interested and sure enough he was. It has been such a sweet collaboration.

SN: I am glad to know that there is an Atelier Attal fan club forever growing! I was also checking on your website and came

across the journal page that I hadn’t noticed at first.

MN: Oh yes, *Works on Paper*.

SN: I really love the inclusion of editorial content as such a beautiful addition to your philosophy behind the objects. Was this part of the project from the beginning?

MN: *Works on Paper* was an important part of the project from the first collection. Fanny and I have been doing research and writing for years, as part of our academic backgrounds, and we wanted to honor that. For us, *Works on Paper* is an opportunity to reach out to our art network and invite them to write about a specific theme. The theme for our first collection was collections, collecting, and connoisseurship; and the theme of our second collection was permanence. Our third volume is coming out soon and it is about originals and replicas. The themes are always generated by or responding to the collection itself and the values behind the project in general.

SN: I noticed that you have printed the volumes as well.

MN: We originally thought about having the content just

PERMANENT COLLECTION

Photographed by KAYTEN SCHMIDT

online, but it is probably my obsession with archiving and Fanny's appreciation of actual tactile objects that led to the decision to print *Works on Paper*. This way it could be a tangible object, part of our collection, and a part of someone's personal collection as well.

SN: Have you ever thought about opening a space for Permanent Collection?

MN: Not really. Fanny and I joke that when we are sixty or seventy-years-old we will open a brick-and-mortar space. The biggest question would be where to open a space as I live in London and Fanny is based in California. I think it would also change the nature of the project because our mobility and the peripatetic nature of the production and the events that we have is such an integral part of the project right now. We will have to see.

SN: Rei Kawakubo, creator of COMME des GARÇONS has stated that she doesn't keep any archives, that she is always propelling towards new innovations, and that her archives are just a piece of the past. How do you relate to this idea? What is the meaning of archives for you?

MN: I appreciate that sentiment and that approach especially as a designer and a creative person. I know that a lot of artists like to destroy their archives or evidence of their life as they continue to produce because they feel weighed down by work from the past. That said, I studied design history and I couldn't have done that if it hadn't been for the existence of historical archives. I know the importance firsthand from hosting people at my father's house and being able to provide a historian, a research student, a designer, or an artist with material, whether it's in the form of letters or photos or ephemera from my father or from other places. I probably spent half of the two years I was studying for my masters in dusty libraries and archives, and I love those kinds of spaces. From all of that material comes new ideas, and I think it is really important to understand where we come from. Also, without archives or collections, we wouldn't have Permanent Collection and I wouldn't have a business.

Interview and Photograph
by SOFIA NEBILO









*Pages 37, 38 Exmoor Throw.
Page 39 Wool Double Crepe Coat Navy
& Blunk Bangle Silver.
Pages 40-41 Works On Paper Volume II.
Page 42 Wool Double Crepe Coat Navy.
Page 43 Pia Sandals in brown.*