

# Alma Allen

SELECTED PRESS

# CULTURED

## 3 Places to Seek Out Cutting-Edge Design Projects in the Hamptons This Summer

*These three spaces Out East are showing the best on the international design market from artists including Frances Palmer, Yuka Kashihara, and Colin King.*

MARGARET CARRIGAN

JULY 6, 2023



Alma Allen, *Not Yet Titled*, 2023; a site-specific wall shelf by Joseph Walsh for LongHouse, *Enignum Shelf XXXVI* 2019, at Object & Thing. Photography by Adrian Gaut and courtesy of Object & Thing.

[EXCERPT]

The Hamptons is a destination for inventive art and design pairings. Below, we spotlight three projects you should seek out.

[...]

“A Summer Arrangement,” which runs through Sept. 3, brings together contemporary works and site-specific commissions by artists and designers including Alma Allen, Megumi Shauna Arai, Sonia Gomes, Rashid Johnson, Wyatt Kahn, Jennifer Lee, Sam Moyer, and Frances Palmer, alongside works from Larsen’s collection. Colin King, author of the recently released book *Arranging Things*, designed the installation. Spanning the living room and gallery of the four-floor house, the exhibition will also extend to the guest level of LongHouse, which will be open to visitors for the first time. —M.C.

# Alma Allen

FEBRUARY 2023



Photo: Evan Walsh © Alma Allen; Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo.

Alma Allen's fourth solo exhibition with Blum & Poe is currently showing in Los Angeles. This show coincides with Allen's solo museum presentation at Anahuacalli Museum in Mexico City. Alma Allen is an American-born sculptor known for his orchestration of arresting gestural immediacy and distinctive material engagement, meticulously carved and cast to draw attention back to the work itself.

Alma Allen (b. 1970, Heber City, UT) currently lives and works in Tepoztlán, Mexico. Recent group exhibitions include *Intervención/Intersección*, curated by Su Wu, Rockefeller Center, New York, NY (2022); *At The Luss House*, The Gerald Luss House, Ossining, NY (2021); *At The Noyes House*, The Eliot Noyes House, New Canaan, CT (2020); Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, CT (2018); deSaisset Museum, Santa Clara, CA (2016); and 2014 Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (2014). In *Conversation: Alma Allen & JB Blunk*, a two-person exhibition that began at the Palm Springs Art Museum, Palm Springs, CA in February 2018, traveled to the Nevada Museum of Art, Reno in Spring 2019. A comprehensive monograph on the artist's work was released by Rizzoli Electa in 2020.



Photo: Evan Walsh © Alma Allen; Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo.

# Here's What It Feels Like to Visit Mexico City's Dizzying Art Week, Where No One Is Immune From the FOMO

*We went behind the scenes at Zona Maco and its rich array of orbiting events.*

KIMBERLY KRUGE  
FEBRUARY 14, 2023

[EXTRACT]

[...]

I'll also nod to the events that I, regrettably, had to miss: Gabriel Orozco's guided tour of his public bridge connecting the two sections of Bosque Chapultepec and a brunch launching Alma Allen's resplendent installation at Diego Rivera's Anahuacalli Museum.

[...]

ART SY

# 10 Must-See Gallery Shows during L.A. Art Week 2023

NEYAT YOHANNES  
FEBRUARY 13, 2023



Alma Allen, installation view at Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, 2023. © Alma Allen. Photo by Evan Walsh. Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo.

[EXTRACT]

Art fairs are descending upon Los Angeles this week, and there's more to see than ever before. This year, Frieze expands to the Santa Monica Airport, and Felix Art Fair rings in its fifth iteration with an extra day of laid-back poolside viewing. Meanwhile, L.A. Art Show enters year 28 with a larger global presence, as SPRING/BREAK arrives with the promising theme of "Naked Lunch."

But if all that isn't enough, the city is bustling with unmissable gallery shows too. Because fair fatigue is real, galleries can serve as a quiet space of refuge for those looking to catch their breath without sacrificing time away from art itself.

Below, we share 10 must-see gallery exhibitions that make for the perfect interlude between fair festivities.

[...]

Alma Allen

Alma Allen returns to Blum & Poe with his fourth solo exhibition with the gallery. When the artist lived in Joshua Tree, his sculptures were usually born of carved wood. Since moving to Topoztlán, Mexico, however, the artist has shifted to the mediums of bronze and stone. Debuting at Blum & Poe are Allen's wall-hanging bronze relief sculptures featuring soft black patinas, reflective surfaces, and singular shapes. In the center of the gallery is *Not Yet Titled* (2022)—the name that all the works share—a milky colored marble piece carved with neat pleats that draw the eye to its ridged surface.



Alma Allen. *Not Yet Titled*, 2022. Blum & Poe. Sold.

Outside, a bronze work sits on a pedestal, catching pools of glimmering light between the folds of its curves. The sculpture, from its centrally located perch, begs to be admired from every angle—not unlike Allen's larger body of work.



# \* CDMX SECRETA

## 29 exposiciones de arte en CDMX imperdibles de febrero

*¡Atención amante del arte! Esta es la guía mensual de exposiciones de arte en CDMX más completa y actualizada, que no te puedes perder.*

ELVA PÉREZ

FEBRUARY 8, 2023



Cortesía.

[EXTRACT]

Febrero, el mes más artístico de la CDMX. Las exposiciones de arte en CDMX no van a faltar y seguro que tu agenda estará más llena que nunca para poder disfrutar de todas las que se inauguran en el mes del amor.

[...]

#### 19. 'Nunca Solo' en el Museo Anahuacalli

Nunca Solo, es la exhibición individual del escultor Alma Allen, muestra que más que una retrospectiva de las obras existentes, el artista residente en Tepoztlán, México, ha optado por crear una serie completamente nueva de esculturas de bronce a gran escala creadas especialmente para el museo.

Nunca Solo, curada por Karla Niño de Rivera, dialoga con este monumental testamento sobre la visión de Diego Rivera: el diseño de la estructura arquitectónica piramidal del Museo Anahuacalli, la colección de objetos de arte precolombino que alberga, el paisaje volcánico de la zona y la calidad de la luz.

# Conoce los mejores eventos durante la semana del arte 2023 en la CDMX

*Ya llegó febrero y con él, la semana más esperada del año: la art week.*

DIANA GARRIDO  
FEBRUARY 1, 2023



'Nunca solo' de Alma Allen. Diego Flores.

[EXTRACT]

Si como nosotros eres un apasionado del arte, seguro esperas con ansias los días más importantes en la CDMX: la semana del arte. Febrero es el mes en el que celebramos esta disciplina y por ello, la art week se posiciona como uno de los eventos más icónicos del año para todos aquellos fieles seguidores de las propuestas artísticas más estupendas del mundo.

Este febrero 2023, la semana del arte comprende del 9 al 12 de febrero y habrá múltiples actividades alrededor del arte, así como eventos que se llevarán a cabo antes y después, es decir, a lo largo de todo el mes. Por ello, te invitamos a seguir la guía de eventos en torno a la semana del arte y a tener un mes fabuloso, ¿nos acompañas?

[...]

Nunca Solo

Alma Allen, escultor estadounidense, presenta esta exposición que es la primera en solitario. Él reside en Tepoztlán y ha creado una serie de esculturas de bronce a gran escala para el museo, por lo que resulta en una experiencia única.

## The A To Z Of Mexico City Art Week 2023

NATALIE STOCLET

JANUARY 30, 2023



Museo ANAHUACALLI. MUSEO ANAHUACALLI.

[EXTRACT]

The hotels are full, the restaurants are booked, the thrift shops are cleared and that can only mean one thing—Mexico City Art Week is upon us. Love it or hate to love it, I hope you've been resting, because with this year's line-up, you'll be busier than ever before. The streets are already humming with bona fide collectors, the art glitterati, and socialites making their stop on an annual world-tour. There will be design to devour, art to admire, and it wouldn't be an art fair if it wasn't a little about the partying, too. From a to z, here's where you'll want to be at Mexico City Art Week 2023.

[...]

Museo ANAHUACALLI

Get your cameras ready—Museo Anahuacalli is presenting *Nunca Solo*, a selection of entirely new pieces by the Tepoztlán-based American sculptor Alma Allen. The series of large-scale bronze sculptures will adorn the museum and grounds for the artist's first solo exhibition in Mexico City. Curated by Karla Niño de Rivera, the works complement Diego Rivera's vision for the museum's pyramid-like architectural structure and the area's volcanic landscape.

# CULTURED

## Seven Artists Who Took Their Careers to the Next Level

These artists made the most of the reopening world to launch their careers to new, well-deserved heights.

CECILIA POU  
JANUARY 3, 2022



Alma Allen, *Not Yet Titled*, 2021.

[EXCERPT]

2021 was a year of new thinking, transition, and innovative connections. These artists, whose work spans mediums and styles, have seized the momentum to catapult their careers to the next level. Whether by investigating a new craft or deepening existing practices, these creatives have captured the attention of viewers worldwide, exploring topics central to the reality of existing in the 21st-century including increasing digitalization, economic struggle, exploring gender identity and addressing racial discrimination. These first steps forward are sure to be the first of many.

# The Outsider

An innovator at one with nature, late artist J.B. Blunk gets his due with two new shows

ELIZABETH KHURI CHANDLER  
MAY 2018

# CULTURE



COURTESY OF THE OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA

The Blunk House. J.B. BLUNK's redwood cabin overlooking Tomales Bay and Inverness Ridge in Northern California.

**The Outsider**  
AN INNOVATOR AT ONE WITH NATURE, LATE ARTIST  
J.B. BLUNK GETS HIS DUE WITH TWO NEW SHOWS >

# CULTURE



> Independent thinker **J.B. Blunk** lived quietly in a remote corner of Northern California near Point Reyes, but his powerful sculpture and objects spoke volumes, emerging out of natural materials: Giant redwood trees became expansive communal seating areas, cypress trees formed curved stools, and metals were rounded into jewelry. His works often featured rough cuts from his tools—a relic of the human touch.

The Oakland Museum of California does a deep dive into the artist's entire world this spring with "J.B. Blunk: Nature, Art & Everyday Life," (through Sept. 9) a holistic show featuring 80 objects including jewelry, crockery, furniture and sculptures, complemented by interviews with friends and family, photographs and other ephemera. It also highlights the fact that the pieces continue to be lived with today—from Blunk's redwood sculpture in San Francisco vegetarian mainstay Greens Restaurant or the incredible *The Planet* sculpture, around which the Oakland art museum was built in 1969. The work is often interactive, the forms



fiercely independent. "There's something incredibly inspiring about someone living life and making art on their own terms outside of what the popular influences were at the time," says Carin Adams, curator of art at the museum.

Brooke Hodge, director of architecture and design at the Palm Springs Art



Clockwise from top left: An array of handmade objects furnish the interior of Blunk's home. *Whistle* by Blunk, redwood, circa 1991. **ALMA ALLEN's** not-yet-titled onyx sculpture, 2017, at the **PALM SPRINGS ART MUSEUM ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN CENTER**. Three sculptures in bronze by Allen. Sculptor Allen working a piece of stone. Blunk carving with a chainsaw.

Museum, was similarly inspired by that free spirit. She thought that the commonalities between Blunk and Mexico City-based artist **Alma Allen** (formerly of Joshua Tree) were too numerous to ignore. Allen crafts bold, luminescent forms, currently using tools such as a robotic arm to carve huge slabs of marble and burls of wood into soft, almost permeable-looking objects. Like Blunk, Allen gravitates to remote locations, hand-building his homes and curating the environments, and creating art with a specific "California sensibility," she explains. "In Conversation: Alma Allen and J.B. Blunk" (through July 9) is designed to draw in audiences through that aesthetic: "Their relationship to the environment. The use of natural materials. The way of working from the land in a self-sufficient way," she says. "There's such a sense of possibility." • E.K.C.

BLUNK INTERIOR: COURTESY OF THE OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA; BLUNK SCULPTURE (TOP RIGHT) AND BLUNK AT WORK (BOTTOM LEFT) (2); COURTESY OF THE J.B. BLUNK COLLECTION. OUTDOOR ALLEN SCULPTURE AND INSTALLATION VIEW IN GALLERY (2); PHOTOGRAPHED BY LANCE GERBER, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND BLUM & POE, NEW YORK/LOS ANGELES/TOKYO. ALLEN AT WORK: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND BLUM & POE, NEW YORK/LOS ANGELES/TOKYO.



"J.B. Blunk: Nature, Art & Everyday Life." Oakland Museum of California, 1000 Oak St., Oakland, 510-318-8400; [museumca.org](http://museumca.org). "In Conversation: Alma Allen and J.B. Blunk." Palm Springs Art Museum Architecture and Design Center, 300 S. Palm Canyon, Palm Springs, 760-423-5260; [psmuseum.org](http://psmuseum.org).

C 80 MAY 2018





# Wallpaper\*

## A 'blind date' between two Californian artists reveals surprising shared sensibilities

CHARLOTTE JANSEN  
FEBRUARY 4, 2018



Sculptures by Alma Allen outside of his former Joshua Tree studio. Photography: Lisa Eisner. Courtesy of Palm Springs Art Museum

'I like to think of "Allen/Blunk" as a blind date,' says curator Brooke Hodge of the new two-artist exhibition at Palm Springs Art Museum Architecture and Design Center she has organised, exploring the fleshly and fantastic works of Alma Allen and JB Blunk. The exhibition is the first in an ongoing series at the museum, bringing two artists from different generations into an imagined conversation through their work.

The two Californian artists never actually met, (Allen continues to work, recently relocating from Joshua Tree to Mexico City; Blunk passed away in 2002) yet the resonances between their practices are uncanny: corporeal curves, cheeky, prodding phallus shapes, curls of bronze, marble, ceramic and wood that make their materials look soft, malleable and sensual.



JB Blunk at work. Courtesy of Palm Springs Art Museum

This natural affinity between the two artists is perhaps in part down to the fact that both preferred to work far from the madding crowds, with studios in remote locations, inspired by the natural colours and materials of their surroundings. For Blunk, it was the redwoods of Northern California, where he built a house in a nature reserve. Allen, meanwhile, worked out of a scintillating dome in the desert.

Not only did both artists dabble in furniture design, sculpture and homewares, but they both designed their own working and living spaces too, their environments in symbiosis with their practices. Documentation of this is included in the exhibition – alongside pieces borrowed from Blunk’s house in Inverness – considered his key work. In particular, portraits of both artists’ carefully-arranged, earthy-hued kitchens hint at more personal, connections between their lives and art.



Alma Allen in his former Joshua Tree studio. Photography: Lisa Eisner. Courtesy of Palm Springs Art Museum

A shared interest is revealed not only through their aesthetic sense and tastes – but also in their purposeful playfulness. Blunk’s bulbous ‘Penis Stools’ pair perfectly with Allen’s bronze series, *Not Yet Titled*, carved visual puns alluding to everyday objects, domestic items—and genitals. It seems neither one took themselves too seriously.

They were both unafraid of experimenting with scale: outside the Architecture and Design Center at the museum are two more recent imposing stone sculptures by Allen. Equally, Blunk was as happy making jewellery as he was going monumental – in 1969 he created a work, ‘The Planet’, made entirely of one ring of redwood, 13ft in diameter. Quite a feat considering both artists are self-taught.



*Not Yet Titled*, 2014, by Alma Allen. The exhibition features new work in bronze and stone made by Allen especially for the occasion as well as a number of his early pieces in wood, marble, and stone. Courtesy of Palm Springs Art Museum

# ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

## Palm Springs Art Museum Spotlights Alma Allen and J.B. Blunk

Though the artists never met, they share a common bond

MAYER RUS  
FEBRUARY 2, 2018



Sculptures by Alma Allen in front of one his studios in Joshua Tree, California. Photo: Lisa Eisner

Brooke Hodge, the Palm Springs Art Museum’s intrepid director of architecture and design, is playing matchmaker. Like a blind date, her new exhibition, “In Conversation: Alma Allen and J.B. Blunk,” stages an encounter between two artists who never met but share a deep affinity. The work of Alma Allen (b. 1970) and J.B. Blunk (1926–2002) blurs the line between craft, design, and sculpture. Both men drew inspiration from nature’s visceral power and beauty—majestic trees, craggy mountains, rugged boulders—to create profoundly evocative work from materials found on the land.

Allen and Blunk were self-taught, and each began making handmade work on a small scale using ceramic, stone, and wood. Working alone in remote locations—Blunk in Inverness, California, and Allen until recently in Joshua Tree, California—gave them the space and freedom to expand the scale and range of their practices to encompass not only tabletop objects furniture, and sculpture but also their own hand-built houses.

In addition to small early pieces, large-scale works, and process models, the exhibition will feature photographs of the homes and studios of both Allen and Blunk by Lisa Eisner and Leslie Williamson, creating a parallel conversation between the work of two contemporary photographers. The exhibition runs from February 3 to June 4 at the Palm Springs Art Museum’s Architecture and Design Center, Edward Harris Pavilion.

## Alma Allen at Shane Campbell

LAUREN DELAND  
JANUARY 27, 2017



Alma Allen: *Not Yet Titled*, 2016, bronze and claro walnut; at Shane Campbell.

Alma Allen's semiabstract sculptures provoke an irresistible urge to identify familiar formal corollaries. The self-taught, Joshua Tree-based artist encouraged this impulse by giving the name *Not Yet Titled* to all the new works in his exhibition at Shane Campbell's South Loop location. As a gallery employee told me, Allen reasoned that this would allow viewers to select their own titles for the works. And so they did, as I learned by eavesdropping on conversations of visitors and staff: here, perhaps, is *Hershey's Kisses* (a pair of intertwined bronzes), and there is *Stomach* (a pink organ-like form made of Persian travertine).

Most sculptures sat alone or in small groups on the floor of the cavernous gallery space. With a few exceptions, they were shorter than waist-height. Certain pieces were paired as if in dialogue. A bronze orb bedecked with two flat disks seemed to stare goggle-eyed at a fat sea creature-type figure hewn from black Italian marble. Smoky silver and bronze veins ripple through the latter, amplifying the form's bulges. Such lumpy opulence appears throughout Allen's work, with irregular forms consistently rendered in richly beautiful materials. A craggy hunk of deep brown claro walnut, which seems to gaze into the distance through sockets whorled into it, is burnished to a high sheen. A piece suggesting a human head with a comical yet inscrutable face and exaggerated bumps on top—as if the head belonged to a cartoon character that had been whacked with a hammer—is rendered in bronze.

Allen's bronzes begin as miniatures made with modeling clay. These are scanned so that a 3D printer can produce enlarged versions in polylactic acid, which are cast in bronze and polished to create the final objects. When working with wood and marble, Allen and his assistants chisel the materials with a computerized mechanical arm that was previously used in manufacturing cars in Spain. (In an odd and pleasing bit of symmetry, the building housing the gallery formerly served as an ambulance company's garage.)

The sculptures betray no trace of the digitized industrial processes that gave them form. Indeed, Allen is able to coax a biomorphic squishiness from even the most rigid materials. A tall piece in Persian travertine that loomed in the gallery's far right corner like a mushroom cloud offers a compelling example. The surface of the coral-colored stone is ulcerated with dark crevices populated by nubby, crystalline pink papillae. Coral—which confused early modern Europeans who could not decide if it were animal, vegetable, or mineral—provides an apt material parallel for the elegant muddle of Allen's sculptures.

SIGALIT ZETOUNI  
NOVEMBER 2016

## Of Quarries and Orchards



Alma Allen  
*Untitled*, 2014, (left)  
Grey marble with wooden base, 44"x30"x30

*Untitled*, 2014, (above)  
Claro walnut with metal base, 27"x36"x30

Photo credit: Isabel Asha Penzlen  
Courtesy of Shane Campbell Gallery

BY SIGALIT ZETOUNI

Washington D.C. was established along the Potomac River on a hilly landscape of forests, swamps, and plantations.

George Washington envisioned a federal center with space dedicated for government buildings, and a Frenchman named Pierre Charles L'Enfant, who had fought in the Revolutionary War, would subsequently become the city planner. L'Enfant designed a grand capital of wide avenues, public squares, and monumental buildings that centered around a great piazza, or a public walk. Hence our National Mall is a wide promenade of grass and trees, stretching from Capitol Hill to the Potomac River. The Smithsonian museums stand on both sides, accompanied by presidential monuments and war memorials.

In 1791, on behalf of the federal

government, L'Enfant purchased Government Island in Virginia, a site that was home to the quarry that supplied Aquia sandstone for the construction of the White House and the Capitol Building. In the summer of 1793, workers began digging the foundations of the Capitol, and on September 18, 1793, George Washington laid the cornerstone that was crafted of Aquia sandstone from Government Island. The sandstone from the quarry was used for the floors, walls, columns, as well as the exterior of the Capitol.

During the winter of 2004/2005, British artist Andy Goldsworthy (b. 1956) along with his team of assistants and dry-stone wallers, installed a sculpture entitled "Roof" on the ground floor of the West Building in the National Gallery of Art. Several weeks prior to the installation, Goldsworthy spent nine days on Government Island, creating ephemeral works at the Aquia Creek sandstone quarry. The temporary works were recorded in a photographic diary. They were later exhibited in conjunction with a suite of photographs. "Roof" included a series of nine hollow domes topped by

black holes, constructed of stacked slate and held together without the use of cement. Each dome measured approximately 5.5 feet high and 27 feet in diameter. The structure responded to human traditions that have dealt with the passage of life, from Neolithic burial chambers and ancient Roman and Byzantine structures, to modern public buildings.

Goldsworthy's domical forms countered the angular site, while the Buckingham Virginia slate, a highly reflective material, enhanced the light effect in the space and reflected the use of slate roofs in the area.

On Pennsylvania Avenue, Goldsworthy, a *land artist* who usually worked in rural Scotland, had expanded nature into the urban realm. In an interview for NPR, Goldsworthy noted that "The underlying tension of a lot of my art is to try and look through the surface appearance of things... Inevitably, one way of getting beneath the surface is to introduce a hole, a window into what lies below." (quoted from [www.NPR.com](http://www.NPR.com), *NPR Morning Edition*, Susan Stone, March 28, 2005)

Opening this October 29th, in its South Loop location on South Wabash, the Shane Campbell Gallery is going to show work by California-based artist Alma Allen. Born in 1970, in Herber City, Utah, self-taught Allen lives in Joshua Tree, California, and creates sculptural forms through improvisations. In 2014 Allen's work was on view at the Whitney Biennial, and in the past decade art collectors and curators from around the globe have been increasingly intrigued by his unique sculptures. Allen begins his work with an idea of a form and allows the material itself to process organically. He finds his material in nature, including abandoned quarries in the desert and wood from old trees that have been uprooted. He explains: "Some of the shapes are from the stone. Some are worked out in clay. Some I work out on the computer. And sometimes... I've had a piece completely disappear because I just keep working down." (quoted from "Alma Allen's abstract sculptures channel nature's power at Blum & Poe," Carolina A. Miranda, *Los Angeles Times*, January 2015). Shane Campbell Gallery's show will run through December 3, 2016. ▣

## Earthy Delights

ROB HASKELL  
MARCH 2015



**Left:** Artist Alma Allen with a recent stone sculpture outside his home studio in Joshua Tree, California. He is represented by Blum & Poe ([blumandpoe.com](http://blumandpoe.com)), whose Los Angeles gallery is hosting his first solo show, running through February 28.

### EARTHLY DELIGHTS

A master manipulator of stone, wood, and metal, Alma Allen sculpts natural materials into works of bewitching beauty

Even if Alma Allen had a calculating bone in his body—and there's no reason to believe he does—he could hardly have plotted a less conventional ascent to art stardom. Though Allen has made his living as a sculptor for the past 20 years, creating beguiling abstract forms out of hunks of metal, wood, and stone, he is only now having his first solo gallery show, at Blum & Poe in Los Angeles through February 28.

"I've always existed in a private world, not in public exhibitions," reflects the self-taught artist, who is based at a remote home studio in Joshua Tree, California. "It's like I've been a secret." He's been an open one, at least, among art-world bigwigs such as Dominique Lévy, Tobias Meyer, and Lisa Eisner, all of whom have acquired pieces by Allen. Last year he finally stepped into the spotlight when his work appeared in the Whitney Biennial.

Growing up in a deeply Mormon Utah family, Allen was forbidden to watch television or read secular books. His imagination, however, was sparked by Ute Indian petroglyphs, which lined the local caves where he would go to whittle sticks. He left home when he was a teenager, eventually landing in New York City. But it wasn't until a severe bicycle accident rendered him unable to work and nearly destitute that he began to sell his stone and wood carvings on the streets. The pieces grabbed the attention of jeweler Ted Muehling—who helped place some of them with collectors—as well as design impresario Murray Moss.

"My artwork is the same now as when I was ten," says Allen, whose mysterious, painstakingly executed sculptures draw comparisons to those of Constantin Brancusi and Isamu Noguchi. He still hikes into the wilderness to find volcanic rocks, gnarled burls, and the like. But whereas he was once limited by what he could lug back to his studio, he now has a crane that can lift giant boulders and—in a concession to his carpal tunnel syndrome—a robot to do the carving. This has permitted him to produce on a monumental scale, though certain materials come with restrictions. "Somebody once asked, 'Will you make me something in a big ruby?' I said, 'Sure, if you buy the ruby.'" —ROB HASKELL



# ARTFORUM

## Alma Allen

ANDREW BERARDINI  
JANUARY 2015



Alma Allen, *Not Yet Titled*, 2014, bronze, 17 1/4 x 18 1/2 x 7".

These sculptures bend, loop, puddle, swirl, and arch in ways that are both exquisitely crafted and weirdly natural. Once I heard an earful of Alma Allen's story, plump with struggle and shitty luck, his artwork beginning as a homeless street hustle, I understood how his gentle and enduring will shaped these works with their sensual skins and gravitational force. For years, starting in 1993, Allen made diminutive and odd shapes carved from wood and stone, only recently adding bronze to his materials and scaling up to the multiple-tonnage range. Easily plunked into a tradition of manufacturing essential or natural forms that includes Romanian modernist Constantin Brâncuși and Japanese artist/designer Isamu Noguchi as well as mid-century gallery cohort, Californian carver J. B. Blunk, Allen's work spaces out into another galaxy of desert psychedelia and Old West alien artifacts, that dusty weirdness that's both ancient and futuristic.

Though the artist has wandered many places, Allen's specific relationship to materials vibes distinctly California, the kind that only survived the hard angles of art movements after the collapse of '60s counterculture by hiding out in a place such as Joshua Tree, where the artist lives and works in a house he designed and made himself. The tree trunk in the gallery garden droops its long head (all works *Not Yet Titled*, 2014) while inside a hunk of black-and-red marble on the walnut table duckbills out from smoothed asteroidal skin, and a giant, funky, bronze pickle with the dangling eye all exude an earthy aura and stoned humor still happily living on in the alien landscape and spiritual planes of the Mojave Desert.

# Los Angeles Times

## Alma Allen's abstract sculptures channel nature's power at Blum & Poe

CAROLINA A. MIRANDA  
JANUARY 16, 2015



Sculptor Alma Allen's pieces, in wood, marble, stone and bronze, are as much about shape and color as they are about visceral feel. The untitled sculpture above is made from the root system of a Claro walnut tree. (Blum & Poe)

A bulbous piece of wood bears a series of nubby nodules that feel just a little bit sci-fi. A gourd-like shape carved out of black and red marble features a curious nose-like appendage that springs out to greet the viewer. And a piece of Yule marble is transformed into a ring so imperfectly supple it looks as if it were formed by hand.

Anyone who says the craft in art has been lost to conceptual over-thinking and industrial fabrication might want to take a stroll through the exhibition of sculptures by Alma Allen that is currently on view at Blum & Poe in Culver City — the artist's first solo show at a major gallery.

The asteroid-ish chunks of Allen's Claro walnut sculptures play with the wood's unusual grain and shape. A vaguely trapezoidal piece carved out of red travertine employs the stone's striped striations in the form. Everywhere, objects rest on pedestals made of raw cedar that has been sanded to the texture of velvet.

If there were ever an exhibition I'd want to grope, this one would be it.

In other words, the photos don't do Allen's work justice, since it's all about the inherent power of the materials: wood, marble, bronze, travertine and the smoky singed hunk of ponderosa pine that now resides in the garden outdoors.

For the low-key Allen, it's part of a long-running interest in working with natural materials.

"There's fissures, cracks and porosity," he says. "Stone is pretty fragile. It's full of cracks and breaks. That you can't go backwards is fascinating. It forces you down a certain path."

Certainly, it's been an interesting path for the artist, who hasn't exactly followed the art school-to-gallery road map that has become so commonplace these days.

Allen grew up in a devout Mormon family outside of Heber City in Utah and it was that upbringing that led to his interest in nature.

"They wouldn't let me watch TV or read outside books," he recalls. "So all there was to do was walk around."

He would go on hunts for petroglyphs and took to carving small sculptures out of wood. But a poor home environment led him to drop out of school and leave home at the age of 16. He landed first in San Francisco, then moved on to places like Portland and New Orleans, where he survived by working in restaurants or construction.

During a stint in Chicago, at the age of 18, he apprenticed for a stone mason and learned how to use the tools of the trade. "I also learned when it was OK to take breaks and how many cigarettes you could smoke during that break," he jokes. "It was a union job."

For much of his adult life — Allen is now 44 and based in Joshua Tree — he has survived by making things, including meticulously crafted wood furnishings of all kinds. In fact, it's the furniture for which he is best known. He has made side tables for the Ace Hotel in Palm Springs and stools for the Oliver Peoples store in Malibu. (The Times reported on his furniture back in 2009.)

But even as he's gotten attention for his home designs, art has always been a constant. When he lived in Chicago, he would make his way to the Art Institute of Chicago once a week. He is a fan of encyclopedic institutions such as the Art Institute, as well as the L.A. County Museum of Art.

"I like the fact that they have art from all of human existence," he says, adding with a chuckle: "It's a continuum of what humans have been making that's not useful."

Likewise, making sculpture has also been key — whether it was the whittled, hand-sized pieces he sold from an ironing board on the street in New York, or the larger-scale pieces that are now on view at Blum & Poe.

“I’ve made the furniture to support myself, he explains. “But with the furniture there is a client and that can be frustrating. The sculpture is different. The sculpture is really freeing.”

As is fitting of his freewheeling career, Allen’s artwork came to the attention of Blum & Poe quite organically. Partner Tim Blum spied his pieces in the homes of collectors and friends. He also had seen some of the pottery that Allen had made for Heath Ceramics. After seeing the artist’s sculptures at the 2014 Whitney Biennial, Blum followed up with a studio visit.

Gallery director Michael Smoler says the plan had originally been to do a smaller show of pieces in the upstairs gallery.

“But we decided to move the schedule around to accommodate his work,” he explains, occupying the larger downstairs space. “This has allowed him to increase his scale. It’s really remarkable. He’s really moved from artisan to artist.”

The pieces are thoughtful and demure — devoted to the high art of craft. (These harken back to work by figures such as wood sculptor J.B. Blunk, 1926-2002, whose work was shown at Blum & Poe back in 2010.)

The pieces are also very much about material. The marble — called Yule marble — hails from the same quarry in Colorado from which the Lincoln Memorial and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier were made.

The travertine Allen finds in the abandoned quarries that litter the desert between Joshua Tree and Las Vegas. And the wood is salvage from orchards — old trees that have been uprooted and are destined for the wood chipper.

He is particularly fond of Claro walnut, a species that is endemic to Northern California. It’s bulbous root system doesn’t make for good furniture. But its odd shapes and strange patterns offer an interesting material with which to make art.

“The more stress a tree goes through, the more pattern it has,” he explains. “I love that. It’s like stone. It reveals itself.”

Many of Allen’s works begin life as a clay model. “I think better with my hands,” he explains. But he isn’t averse to letting the material dictate the course a work takes.

“It’s fluid,” he says. “Some of the shapes are from the stone. Some are worked out in clay. Some I work out on the computer.”

“And sometimes,” he adds, “I’ve had a piece completely disappear because I just keep working down.”

But that’s not what you’ll find on the gallery floor. Instead, expect to find a series of objects shaped by the artist and the limitless power of nature.

# W

## Alma Allen Has Come a Long Way

ALIX BROWNE  
JANUARY 12, 2015



*Not Yet Titled*, 2014 Yule marble, cedar pedestal. Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe.

Alma Allen started small. The shy and somewhat reclusive self-taught artist sold his early talisman-like sculptures off of an ironing board pitched on the streets of SoHo in the '90s and the cast bronze bowls and table top objects he makes out of his studio in Joshua Tree, CA are widely coveted.

This weekend, however, Allen's profile received a big boost when his first solo gallery show in Los Angeles opened at Blum & Poe. Fittingly, the work—elegant, amorphous pieces made of marble, travertine and Claro walnut—is major, with some of the sculptures weighing in at several tons.

A compulsive chiseler, Allen was crippled in recent years by a severe case of carpal tunnel syndrome and to this day can only work for a couple hours at a time, so the large-scale work was fabricated with the assistance of a giant robot, originally designed for the automotive industry. Nevertheless, in every lump, bump and curve, the artist is decidedly present.

# Frieze

## The Quiet Life

Artists and the freedom of the desert

JONATHAN GRIFFIN  
DECEMBER 17, 2014

A couple of miles into the unprepossessing town of Yucca Valley, in the Mojave Desert near Joshua Tree, California, is a turn-off for the Sky Village Swap Meet. There's a sign, but it's almost impossible to spot from the main road. Open on Saturdays and Sundays, the swap meet has been run for 35 years by Bob Carr, who stepped back from day-to-day operations earlier this year so he can concentrate on making art. Carr is 76. His masterwork is *The Crystal Cave* (2004–ongoing), a freestanding grotto made mainly from expanding foam and crystals. Customers at the swap meet can peer through circular windows in the structure's lumpy brown walls and spy a miniature landscape painted green and brown, through which running water trickles over waterfalls and rock crystals sprout like alien flora.

Carr claims not to know why, exactly, he makes his art – which also includes sculptures of colourful giant spiders perched on webs. It is not known whether he has much interest in, or even knowledge of, the work of one of his most prominent supporters, the artist Andrea Zittel, who lives a few minutes up Highway 62 in Joshua Tree. Between Carr and Zittel – geographically, biographically and intellectually – an untold number of people single-mindedly pursue their own ideas of what being an artist means in the quiet freedom of the desert. Whenever I feel that the art world is too small, too insular or, indeed, any one thing in particular, I remind myself of this southern corner of the Mojave.

When Zittel moved, in 2000, from Brooklyn via Los Angeles to a tumbledown homestead on a parcel of land she named A–Z West, she was not the first artist to settle in the region. Nor, even, was the sculptor Noah Purifoy, who began building his Outdoor Museum in Joshua Tree in 1989 at the age of 72 (he died in 2004). Prior to the 1965 Watts Rebellion in South Los Angeles, Purifoy had made Modernist furniture for wealthy clients. The violence of the Watts riots compelled him to abandon his comfortable lifestyle and, instead, create sculptures from the items he salvaged from the streets – melted neon signs, charred consumer goods – and to mount incendiary, politicized exhibitions with other African American artists. In 1972, frustrated by the lack of progress in rebuilding South LA's blighted communities, he gave up art and returned to his original career as a social worker. It was over a decade before he began making art again, finding many of his materials at the Sky Village Swap Meet.

While Purifoy's contribution to Assemblage art in the United States is unquestioned, his uneven career trajectory left him on the periphery of historical discourse. A retrospective at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, opening June 2015, may fix this. It was his friend, the artist Ed Ruscha, who was instrumental in securing the future of the Noah Purifoy Foundation in the late 1990s. Ruscha has been spending time in the Mojave since the late 1970s, partly as an escape from the exigencies of the art circuit and partly because, like Purifoy, it is where he picks up much of the raw stuff of his art.

Some 30 years ago, Simi Dabah took a welding course and, since then, has been making abstract sculptures from pieces of scrap steel in studios in both LA and Joshua Tree. Before you reach his eight-acre outdoor gallery on Sunfair Road, you will have driven past several of his iconic rusted sculptures, which he has donated to non-profit organizations such as the local library, the community college or the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Institute of Mentalphysics. Others he gives away to charity fundraisers.

Alma Allen, who shares something of Dabah's ingenuous sensitivity to form and materials, relocated to Joshua Tree nine years ago. Since being included in the 2014 Whitney Biennial, he has received wider exposure than ever before in his career. This January, he will have a solo exhibition at Blum & Poe, Los Angeles. But the self-taught Allen was doing fine before he was ushered into the limelight, making furniture and sculptures for clients inside and outside the art world.

What exactly does that phrase – 'the art world' – signify for these very different artists? Something monolithic, inward-facing and impenetrable, perhaps. If so, I think that's a misconception, but one we all sometimes share. For me, it is a source of optimism – not that people are thriving without the sanction of the urban, academic art world, as if the choice were one or the other, inside or outside, but rather that these different conversations, and different communities, are finding more and more points at which to intersect.

When asked what he found productive about working in Joshua Tree, Purifoy answered: 'I look up less often in anticipation', undisturbed by the 'comings and goings' of a city studio. 'Here in the desert, the rabbits, the birds, the scorpions, the lizards all run quiet.' Before we rush to drag everything into the mainstream, we should bear in mind: every conversation requires silence as well as noise.

# Diamond in the Rough

From hawking his wares on the sidewalks of SoHo to showing them at the Whitney Biennial, the sculptor Alma Allen has taken the road less traveled to art world stardom.

MATT TYRNAUER

APRIL 11, 2014



Alma Allen never names his artworks, like these large pieces made of wood and Yule marble, set against the vast desert landscape in which he resides. Credit: Photograph by Lisa Eisner. Produced by Michael Reynolds.

Alma Allen sees his life as having been defined by a series of risks. His sprawling desert compound in Joshua Tree, Calif., where the 43-year-old self-taught artist creates sculptures fashioned of marble, wood and bronze, is evidence that those risks have started to yield great rewards. Allen's studio and house, which he designed and built himself, have, over the past few years, become a pilgrimage destination for loyal collectors, who include art world sophisticates like the hotelier Peter Morton, the philanthropist Beth Rudin DeWoody and the artist Jack Pierson. His cultish followers often show up in person, buying pieces out of Allen's living room, because, until recently, he was not even represented by a gallery, and had, with few exceptions, never even formally exhibited his work.

"My sculpture has always existed in private," Allen says, "because it didn't really fit into any category. My carving was very small, from stone fragments or salvaged wood. It was very rough and primitive. I was self-taught. It wasn't really outsider art because that is really the art of the insane. I sort of defied categories, and now I am a little nervous about ceasing to be a 'private' artist, because I have never even been criticized or reviewed."



The quiet, covert phase of Allen's career came to a boisterous end last month when three of his larger pieces — sensuous biomorphic forms, one made of white Colorado Yule marble, one of black marble and one carved from a half-ton walnut-wood burl — went on display at the Whitney Biennial. Michelle Grabner, the Biennial co-curator who selected Allen for the show, views his work as “an offspring of Brancusi and early-20th-century abstraction,” which she feels embodies Allen's imagination while underscoring physical properties of the materials he carves. Allen says that he is simply an inveterate — even compulsive — chipper and chiseler, who prefers his unconscious creations to his conscious ones. “I have a habit of doing meditative handwork, just sitting and filing away at stone for hours,” he tells me, while sitting in his Schindleresque living room, fiddling with a block of green modeling clay, first forming a leaf, then a tiny bowl, then a little tree. “Most of my work is not abstract, but I don't title my work because I don't want people to think of me when they see it. I kind of prefer to be hidden. I don't know why. It's probably because I'm shy and uncomfortable around people. I don't have regular art impulses that are explainable in 'art terms,' and I am basically making the same work as I made as a child. I don't know if I would be making the shapes I'm making now if I hadn't seen Brancusi, but I think it's basically the same.”



Allen's touch can be found almost everywhere in his home, especially in the kitchen, which features cabinets, a table and miniature sculptures, all made by him. Credit: Photograph by Lisa Eisner. Produced by Michael Reynolds.

According to Roman Alonso, a partner in the L.A. design studio Commune, which has commissioned sculpture and furniture from Allen for clients such as Katy Perry and the Ace hotels, “Alma, up until now, has been content to work off the radar as well as off the grid. His rise in the art world has been anything but plotted out. He's a true self-creation, an intuitive player, living by his wits and, at times, by the skin of his teeth.”

The first and easily the most daring risk of Allen's life was when he ran away from his large Mormon family in Heber City, Utah. A towheaded skateboarding rebel — one of 11 children — Allen was, at times, sent away to live with an aunt, and became increasingly antisocial. “At 14 or 15 I used to go into the hills a lot, where there were Indian caves with carvings and abandoned mines. I used to fantasize these people” — the Indians and the miners — “were still out there, still around. You still find Indian petroglyphs in that area, and that was the first inspiration for what I do. I loved finding these objects, and I used to use a pocketknife to carve little sculptures in the caves, thinking that the people who made the petroglyphs would find them. I still do that. I make things and leave them places.”

When he turned 16, Allen fled to Salt Lake City and bussed tables and worked construction. “At the time I didn’t think of myself as a runaway. I just left,” he says. “I was a normal person, but when you are surrounded by people who believe such a crazy thing there’s no place for you in their lives.”



Clockwise from top left: the artist outside his secluded Joshua Tree home; Allen’s small, scattered creations made of wood, bronze and marble; the artist’s unassuming home in the desert; his business partner, Nancy Pearce, and their 4-year-old daughter, Frieda, in the bedroom. Credit: Photographs by Lisa Eisner. Produced by Michael Reynolds.

In 1986, Allen met Nancy Pearce, who spotted him in a group of skateboarders. “Alma had a broken leg. He was a very cute guy with long blond hair,” Pearce says. “And, because of the leg he was moving slowly, so I could catch up and talk with him.” Allen and Pearce, who have a 4-year-old daughter, became a couple, and though that aspect of their relationship recently came to an end, they continue to be business partners.

“The way Alma went about his work was sort of like the mentality of a skater-punk artist,” Pearce says. “There has always been a cult following of people who were attracted to these little fetishlike carvings he did,” she adds. “Hewing things out of wood and stone is absolutely an extension of Alma. He was doing it without giving much thought to it ever since I met him.”

In 1993, Allen moved to New York City. After a few months he was hit by a bus while biking. His injuries were severe. “I had no insurance. I didn’t have any family, and when I got out of the hospital I couldn’t walk,” he recalls. “I was on crutches for about three months, and down to my last \$20. I had to sell most of my stuff to pay back-rent” — for the time he spent hospitalized. Unable to afford food, he says, “a Dominican deli, where I used to go to buy beans and bread, took pity on me and let me open an account.”



The sitting room acts as a livable gallery, showcasing sculptural pieces by Allen alongside furniture like an Eames rocking chair. Credit: Photograph by Lisa Eisner. Produced by Michael Reynolds.

“It was out of pure desperation,” Allen says, that he lugged an antique ironing board from his apartment to Prince Street in SoHo and arranged about 10 hand-carved objects on top of it. “I was just trying to get \$20 to eat and enough to get back to work,” he recalls. “I had the ironing board as a console table in my apartment in Williamsburg, and I could take it on the subway.” It was, it turned out, a fortuitous spot — a few feet away from the now-defunct Jerry’s restaurant, which was frequented by SoHo art gallerists.

“Some days I sold everything on the ironing board,” Allen says. “I was selling things for \$50, sometimes \$40 or \$20. They were funny little things, very simplistic: a little hat made of quartz, an abstract wooden mouse and depictions of disfigurement and pain, like nails going into organs and things that come out of frustration. Very personal things that I made for me.” At that time, within blocks of Allen’s ironing board were the offices and studios of people like the designer Todd Oldham, the jeweler Ted Muehling and the design maven Murray Moss. They all bought pieces. “People like Ted Muehling set up private shows for me, and after the private shows I ended up in about 30 private collections. It was sort of dumb luck. I didn’t ever pursue the art gallery owners,” Allen says. “I didn’t really understand why they wanted my objects. In fact, I was naïve and showed them my paintings. They were too polite to tell me, ‘We don’t want your terrible paintings. There are 10,000 terrible painters out there.’” Allen emphasizes: “This is why I talk about taking risks: Even if some days I sold everything, at the time it was kind of humiliating. I kind of felt like I was begging. But had I not been willing to take the risk to go on the street with the ironing board, if I had not met these people I had met by standing on that block, my life would not have been the same.”



A curvaceous carving among the sand and stone. Credit: Photograph by Lisa Eisner. Produced by Michael Reynolds.

After almost a decade in New York, Allen moved to Los Angeles, where he was reunited with Pearce, his former girlfriend. They opened a pop-up store called Pearce, selling Allen's pieces. The shop, which operated for four years, was located on the once-bohemian Abbot Kinney Boulevard in Venice, and functioned like a walk-in version of Allen's ironing board: small sculptures arranged on tables and shelves designed and built by Allen. Alonso, along with one of his partners at Commune, Pamela Shamshiri, stumbled upon the store one day. "We were taken with the art and the furniture Alma had built," Alonso says. "He had never considered making furniture to sell before, but we persuaded him to create pieces for our clients."

Allen is somewhat conflicted about his almost accidental furniture-designing career, which, he admits, has often financed his art career. "It's hard to turn down furniture because people pay up front," he says. "There were galleries who were interested in my work in the past but they lost interest because I was making furniture, which was strange to me because there are a lot of artists who did that. Noguchi and Judd made a lot of furniture."

The art collector Mark Fletcher, who has been a strong supporter of Allen's work, encouraged him to continue making furniture. "It is highly sculptural — a scaled-up version of his earlier smaller works, yet with functionality," Fletcher says. "I had hoped to provide Alma the opportunity of synthesizing his two disciplines. I have also encouraged Alma to scale up his work in general."

Increasing the physical size of his work — and therefore the complexity of producing it — has proved a big challenge for Allen. In 2006 he developed a crippling case of carpal tunnel syndrome, which prevented him from using his hand tools for any extended period of time. He underwent surgery on his hands in 2011, but he still cannot carve for more than an hour or two at a time.



Allen enlisted the help of a giant robotic arm to help him sculpt and carve dense materials like marble and wood after developing carpal tunnel syndrome. Credit: Photograph by Lisa Eisner. Produced by Michael Reynolds.

Allen's solution to this problem was typically bold and imprudent: He bought his own robot. And mortgaged his house to pay for it. The massive, orange-painted computer-operated arm, 12 feet in length, resides in its own structure in back of his studio, where it carves marble and contours 500-pound burls of wood. It "used to make cars in Spain," Allen tells me, "we were able to get it cheap, at auction, for \$25,000. If I had bought it new it would've been \$200,000. It was worth it to me in order to keep control of my carving, because when you send things out to fabricators they change things."

"The robot was my secret," says Allen, who was reluctant to reveal its existence. "I was actually quite anxious about it, because whenever I hear the computer is involved in something, I assume that it has an evenness, a regularity. But this isn't that at all. This is really an extension of what I was doing before, only a tool, because I'm using a scanner and an Italian software developed just for making sculpture to tell the robot to follow what I've made in my own hand. It's nothing more than a glorified, one-ton chisel that I operate." "It's kind of incongruous, this machine toiling away and peaceful desert," Pearce says. Wood chips scatter like shrapnel under a powerful drill bit as Allen and his various assistants operate the machine, in this case, carving a sculpture out of a gnarly tree stump. In order to save money, he figured out how to assemble the robot systems himself after only a few weeks of intensive training outside of Pisa.

Allen says the strangest thing to him about his expanding enterprise, built into the landscape partly from rocks he found nearby, is that he is never alone in the complex, which he constructed on zero-interest credit cards and the sweat of his brow. "I'm used to working alone, so now with these people and the robot around here I'm always looking for obscure corners of the compound I can hide in," he says. Among the very few non-Allen-created objects in the airy, open-plan house is that antique ironing board, leaning against a wall. The board, he says, as well as the desert landscape, visible from every room of this house, remind him of his past. "I was a high-school dropout, a runaway," Allen tells me. "I never went to art school. The only school I ever went to was robot training school in Italy for a couple of weeks. I just have no risk aversion. If it's a crazy risk, I'll take it. As a result, I may be the only sculptor in the U.S. with his own robot." He looks down in shyness. "But somehow it seems to have worked out."