

**BRUCE**

QUARRYHILL BOTANICAL GARDEN **JOHNSON**

# BRUCE JOHNSON

Quarryhill Botanical Garden  
2014

PHOTO CREDITS:

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BOOK DESIGN & IMAGES:

**bionic**  
Planning  
Landscape Architecture  
Urban Design

## FOREWORD

This catalog is about the work of Bruce Johnson and the installation of his solo exhibition at Quarryhill Botanical Garden. It is intended to provide a deep look into his ideas, extraordinary craft and prolific body of work spanning 40 years.

Quarryhill Botanical Garden is a 25-acre site located in Glen Ellen, California. It is open in all seasons and welcomes many visitors annually. The plant collection is a vast sampling of rare and unusual species native to Asia that have been acquired through expeditions to the continent over many years. This is the first out-door art exhibition that has been staged on the Quarryhill site.

Upon the invitation to exhibit his work at Quarryhill, Bruce posed a challenging question:

“How do I curate my work in this large botanical garden? This site is not designed for this purpose. Is this a “site for art” or an “art for the site” project?” —Bruce Johnson

To engage this curatorial challenge Bruce approached Bionic, a San Francisco Landscape Architecture firm who is familiar with his work and experienced in collaborating with artists, to curate the show and produce this catalog.

The work in the exhibition is of a landscape scale. The pieces are big, weighing thousands of pounds, and each requires a site specific installation. Quarryhill Botanical Garden is a second nature environment, which is to say, it was previously a gravel quarry prior to becoming a ‘rare species’ botanical garden. It is a purpose built landscape and has a created beauty of its own that has evolved over time. While the pieces had many physical requirements, we felt it was possible to site them without significantly altering the garden. A nuanced strategy was devised to work within the existing spaces, circulation patterns, and vegetation. We then considered how one may perceive this combination in various compositions. Our concept was simple:

Site + Art + Humans = Curatorial Masterplan

The support given by the Quarryhill Board of Directors, Executive Director, and staff has been strong and has made this exhibition a true collaboration. It has been a pleasure to work with our friend Bruce Johnson again, and we are pleased to submit this seminal art show at Quarryhill as the foundation for its bright future within the growing Sonoma County arts community.

Curator, Scott Smith  
principal landscape architect, Bionic

## SITE

With 25 acres to consider, we set out in the field to evaluate the vegetation patterns, circulation, and topography. In the studio, we created a 3D computer model to assess the site's scale, spatial qualities, and site lines. We also considered access for installation purposes and to provide a sense of discovery and mystery for the viewer. Through this analysis, different types of installation possibilities were realized based on spatial qualities of the site and the scale of the pieces available.

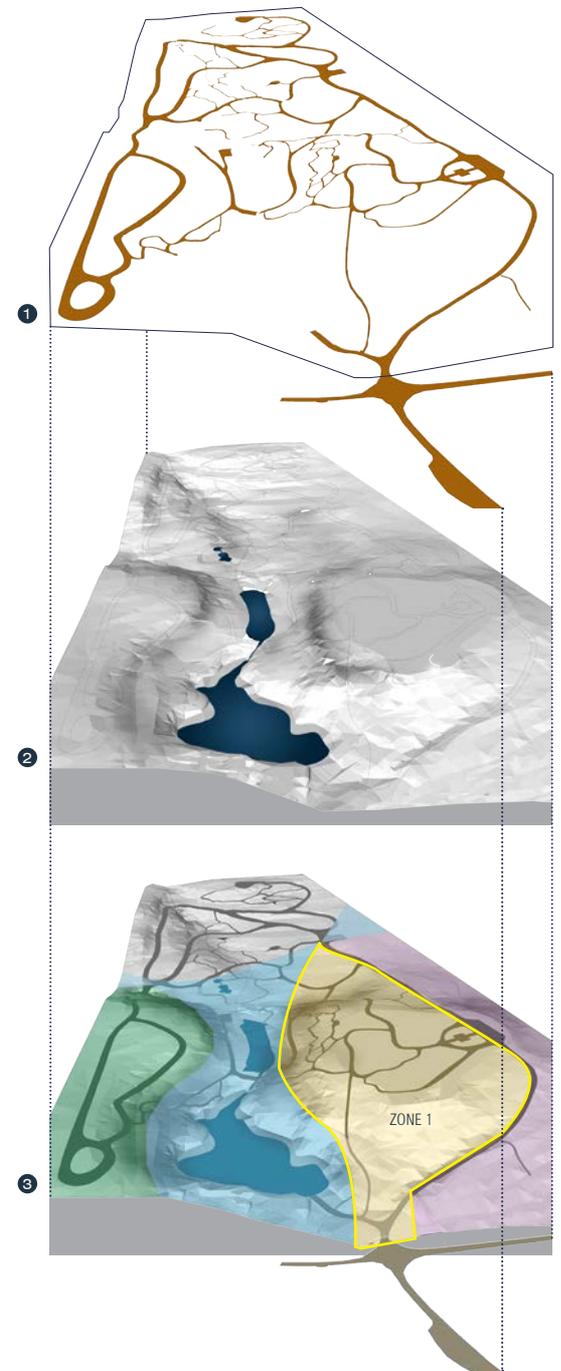
Based upon the 3D modeling analysis, the site was divided into spatial zones. This enabled one specific zone to be used relevant to the quantity and type of sculptures in the show, thus creating the ability to position the sculptures to build presence as an ensemble. For this show, the art is ordered so that all pieces fit into the spatial precinct identified as Zone 1. The garden also acts as a unifying force and softening background for the sculptures.

## ART

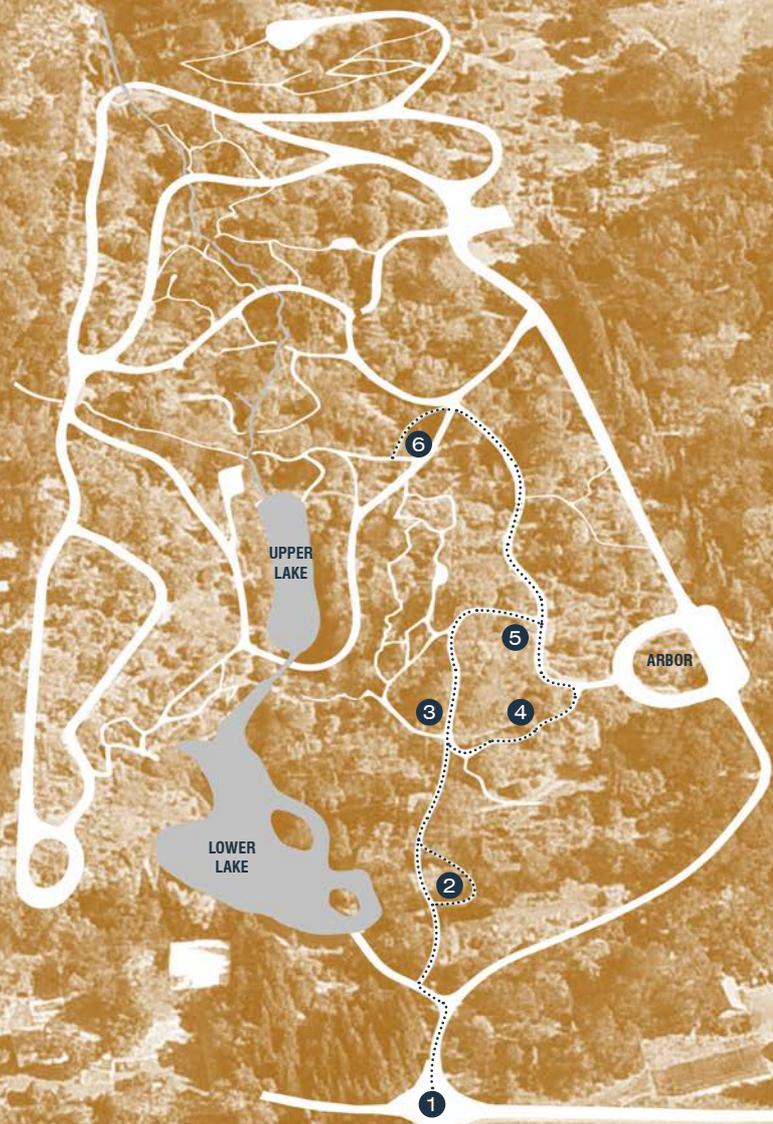
We believe in the connection between the object and the viewer, so we worked to make connections between the geometry of the art and the context. The locations consider the seasons, sun, rain, wind, and how each piece may help us notice these things. As landscape architects, we are searching not just for fit, but also for phenomena and human experience. The power of Bruce's abstractions, as garden art, implies symbolic associations. They are posed to be viewed through a perceptual gaze. This also implies that the pieces and settings are not staged as focal points of a composition or the terminus of an axis. Rather, they act as a device to modulate rhythm, or as one element of an array of elements with special iconography.

## HUMAN PERCEPTION

We have intentionally integrated the sculptures into the site without forcing a classical line or setup for the viewer, which would require a "classical gaze" to evaluate the site compositions and sculpture. Merleau Ponty, in "The World of Perception", refers to a perceptual mode or gaze as an alternative to measure the connections that art makes between humans and nature. This approach, without a formal framework, enables each viewer to apprehend his or her experience with the art based on sensation over intellect. Our inquiry here is to explore if it is possible to create the possibility for site specific phenomena. Or to exhibit a sweet spot of human experience. This is an eternal quest that is confronted when art is a symbolic object within open-ended compositions.

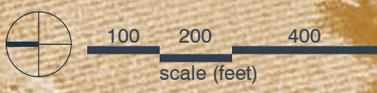


QUARRYHILL  
BOTANICAL GARDEN  
1. Circulation  
2. 3D Topography  
3. Site & Topographic Zones



INSTALLATION LOCATION

- 1 OFFERING
- 2 UPRISING
- 3 OLAZ DE PAZ
- 4 RATIO
- 5 FIVE ELEMENTS
- 6 VOID



PARKING  
OFFICE  
GIFT SHOP



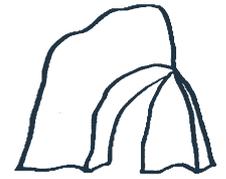
## TYPOLOGIES

This body of work is based on certain principles of an alternate reality that we would justifiably call abstract art. Each piece expresses space and form with distinct connections to the site and the viewer.

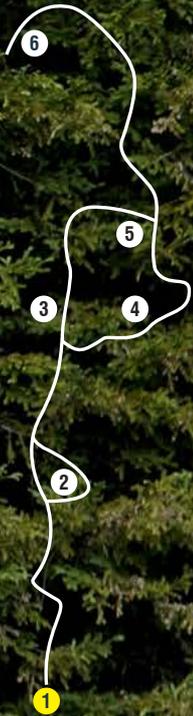
To fundamentally understand these abstractions and their connections, we have taken the liberty to place the sculptor's general body of work into typologies or types of abstractions. This enables us to organize and discuss the work in terms that help fulfill the curatorial concept and position our thoughts in a collective way. This show contains one piece in each of the six typologies: portal, marker, heaven, earth, human, and void.

Gesture, scale, and form are the essential determinants to a typology. The heaven, earth, and human types are primary with derivatives being portal, marker, and void. Heaven typologies include tall, space controlling gestures. Whereas Earth typologies are low landscape elements that use their connection with the earth to make the art or the landscape, or both, more visible. The human typology "or Fudo" - a Japanese Buddhism term - describes an immovable or stable element like the guardians of ancient temples. Human forms are well balanced and often contain internal gestures and patterns.

The pairing of a typology with a site location was made using the concept above with a focus on sight lines, sequence, and scale of the sculpture. The portal typology is used as the first sculpture seen from the parking lot because of its scale and form that embody the beginning, or gateway to the show. Moving into the garden, the heaven typology is used on the upslope to emit a strong visual that guides the viewer as to which path to take next. The slope topology also emphasizes its upward gesture. These and other strategies were used throughout the show to place each piece according to their optimal fit.



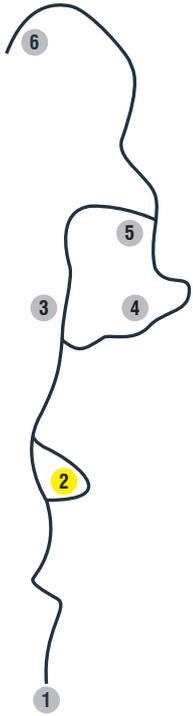
Portal  
Marker  
Heaven  
Earth  
Human  
Void



## OFFERING ▸

Echoing the megalithic form of a dolmen, this sculpture marks a place and contains a space. It evokes nature's hands holding a great copper boulder.

Dimensions: 14' x 11' x 11'

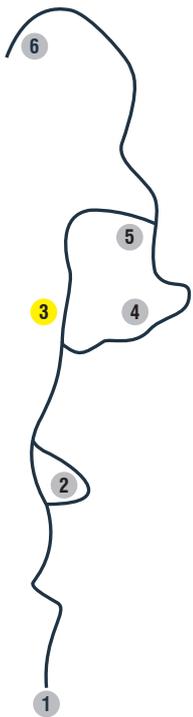


## UPRISING

This piece rises as a vertical gesture of ascension connecting Earth and Sky. Uprising overcomes gravity and levitates a great copper boulder. Form, mass, and energy converge.

Dimensions: 14' x 9' x 6'





## OLAZ DE PAZ

This piece has the scale and presence of a large Henry Moore bronze and the organic exuberance of a Georgia O'Keefe abstract floral painting. The title translates to "waves of peace". Its essence expresses the abstract energy of water, which originates from the organic form of a massive piece of salvage redwood.

Dimensions: 8' x 12' x 5'

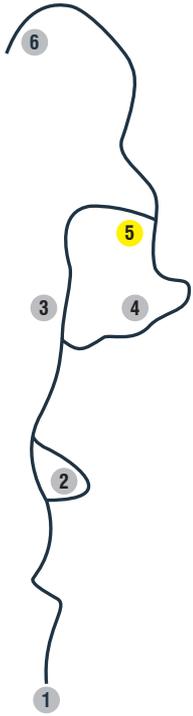




## RATIO ▸

Bruce began by working with two large elemental blocks divided by a diagonal lineal gesture. All shaping was done with a chainsaw and the wood was then simply burned, brushed and oiled. These three elements can be placed at different elevations to compliment a sloping site and the elements can be spaced to accommodate a particular space. The plan view of Ratio appears like the mathematical expression of a ratio, hence the title.

Dimensions: 2' x 4' x 15'



## FIVE ELEMENTS

Architectonic and geologic at the same time, Five Elements evokes a megalithic stack of stones, a cairn, or a large trail marker. In the west we speak of four elements: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. In Japan there are five elements with the fifth element being Wood.

Dimensions: 15' x 9' x 6'

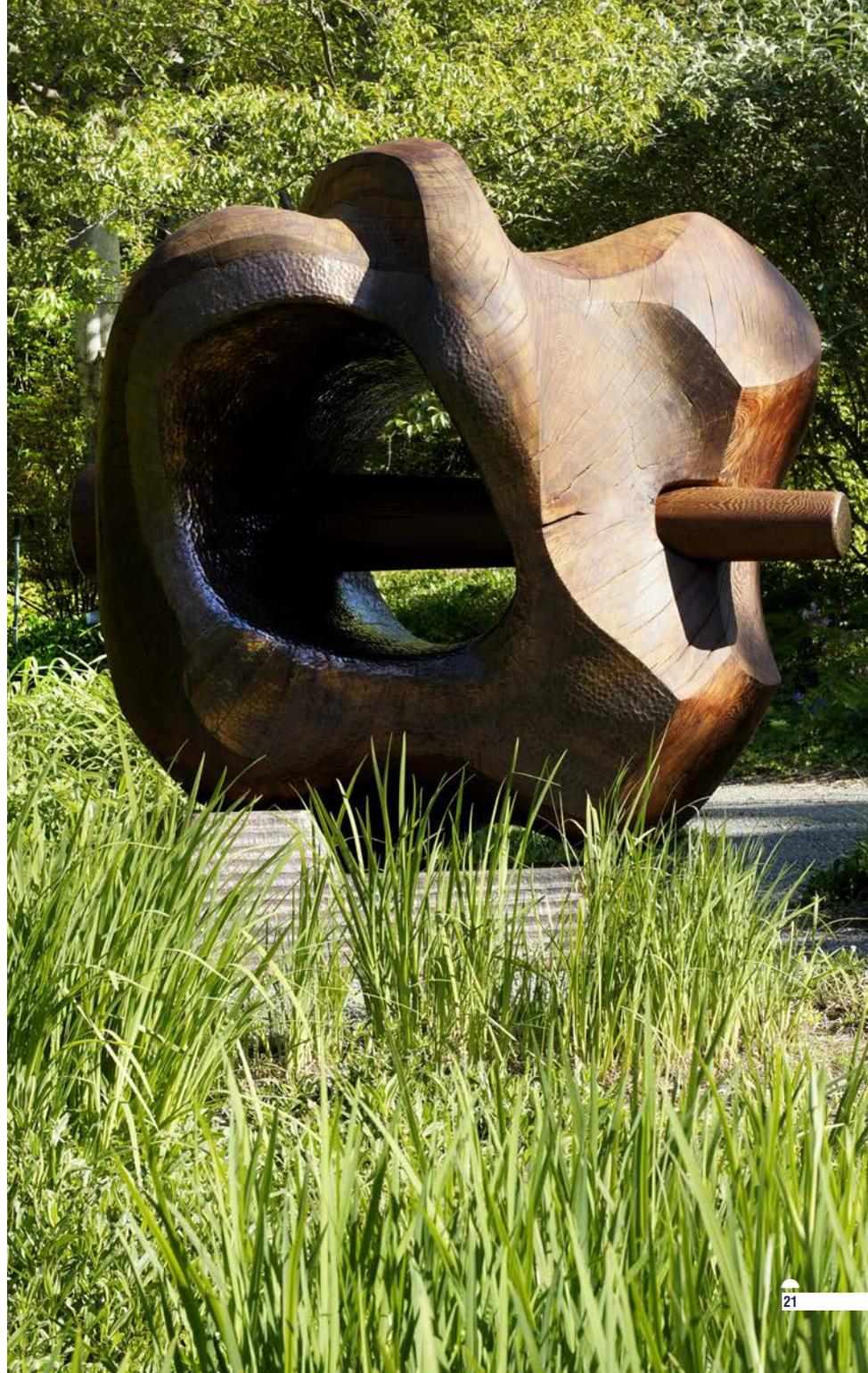




## VOID ◀

This piece took 30 years to gestate. (See p. 29 to see Void in 1983.) It began as a solid convex form but in 2013, it evolved into a vortex of empty space, now simply described as Void.

Dimensions: 8' x 8' x 7'



## SCULPTOR ◀

### THE ART OF BRUCE JOHNSON

Bruce's investigations into the relationship between sculpture and its setting led to the general understanding of his topologic interactions with the site conditions and scale. The connections between sculpture and their natural settings are necessary for Bruce to heighten the relationship between art and nature. This is an eternal exercise of making visible the relationship between the sculpture and the landscape so that one can leverage the other to heighten the viewer's awareness.

### IDEAS & SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

Bruce is concerned with an organic organization of the elements. The richness comes from the tension between the purpose - to reveal the energy within - and the creation - the final form. The work does not ask if this is something about something else, the sculpture is only about itself. What you see is what you get. There is something spiritual about this kind of craft. I ask myself: "what does the sculpture mean?" I don't believe the pieces try to mean anything, which is the beauty of this work.

### INFLUENCES

Bruce's early influences include: Japanese aesthetics, indigenous architecture, forms of nature, primitive art, early modernists, and seminal contemporary sculptors such as Henry Moore and David Smith. David Nash wrote the primer on wood as far as Bruce is concerned. Mark di Suvero, whose studio is nearby, personifies vitality and his sculptures are powerful and courageous. But it is di Suvero's generosity to fellow sculptors that engenders Bruce's deepest admiration.

Isamu Noguchi has had the greatest aesthetic influence on Bruce's work. Bruce met Noguchi in his studio on the island of Shikoku, Japan in 1983 and again in NYC a year later, but it was not these meetings that mattered. Rather it is the exquisite beauty of Noguchi's sculpture and the depth and breadth of his approach coupled with his great devotion to his calling that inspires Bruce and fills Bruce with gratitude.



## MATERIALS

"If the vitality is there, the form will follow." —David Smith

The quote above is appropriately etched in the apron of Bruce's studio. He begins the process of engaging with the materials using intuition, unconcerned with ideas. Form and energy are omnipresent themes. "When my body is tired and I become fully engaged with the material, that is the moment when ideas emerge. Making sculpture is a process of joy and exuberance of solitude and uncertainty, and back to joy and exuberance. Waiting for the engagement is the essential part. What I make is not me, it just comes through me." —Bruce Johnson

In 1964, the Eel River in northern California had 100-year flood with flows greater than the Mississippi River. These forces deposited forty feet of gravel in some areas and sent mountains of redwood stumps, roots, and burls to rest along California's north coast beaches. The South jetty of Humboldt Bay in June of 1964 was Bruce's introduction to the wonders of salvage old growth redwood.

Bruce continues to acquire tons of salvage materials in Humboldt and Delnorte Counties including a tributary to the Eel where a landowner, for twenty years, has rescued stranded roots from low water gravel bars. Within the form of roots and swirl of grain you can see and touch the patterns of nature and feel the fractal expression of growth and energy. One cannot resist the desire to explore and feel this vitality. These materials can be as old as 1000 years.







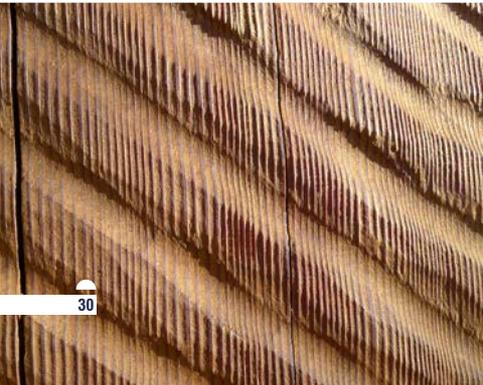
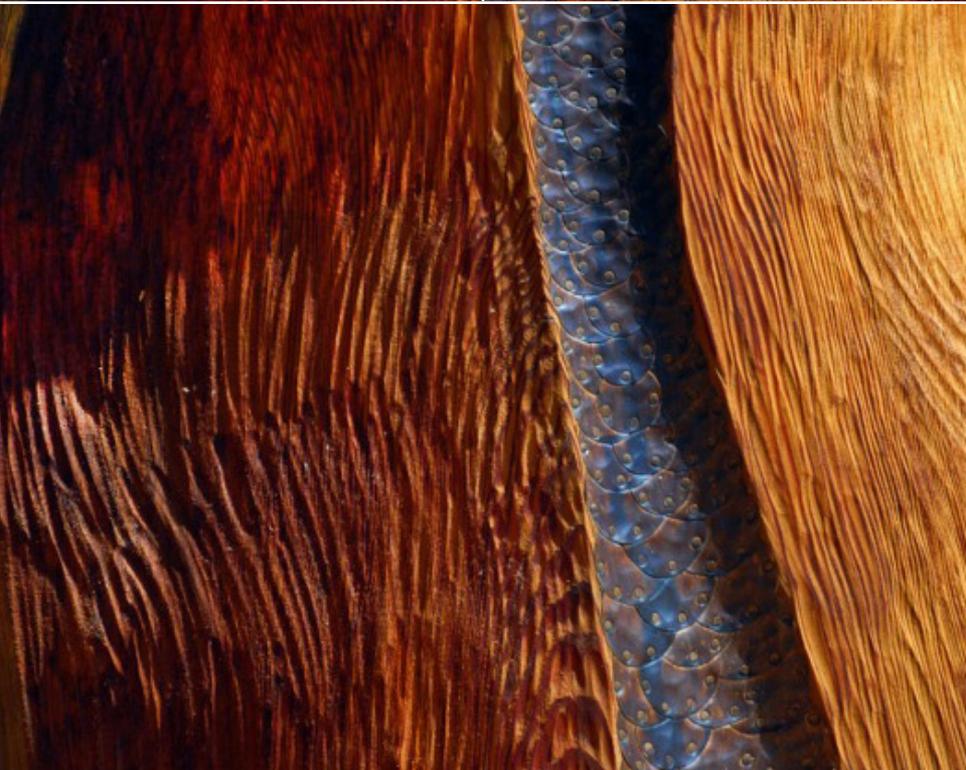
## CRAFT ▾

"To make art, craft is a given. Just craft is like a beautiful woman with a lobotomy. Just craft is like merging onto the freeway in second gear; you've got to shift to really get anywhere. Shifting manifests energy and this is what gets you traveling at full speed." —Bruce Johnson

The use of industrial tools has a certain integrity and lack of compromise. Cranes, chainsaws, and chisels are the implements of Bruce Johnson's amazing craft. Much of his craft is rooted in his early career as a builder, from hand-made houses to the historic restoration of the Russian Orthodox Chapel at Fort Ross. The eloquent and sculptural Sea Ranch Chapel, where Bruce served as the foreman, seems to be a seminal project in his development. In part, this is due to the challenges he met through merging complicated architectural volumes based on idea diagrams. The Chapel project received an AIA award for Art and Construction Technology.

With his talent for visualizing volumes at an architectural scale, Bruce has created a standard of craft excellence and identifiable signature as a sculptor. His forms, details, and finishes are seductive and sensual, and foil the massive formations. The finishes exude palpable warmth, particularly following a rain, which creates an intimate connection with the viewer. The patterning is fractal-like and there are adaptive transformations between the patterns that generate endless interest in his eloquent vocabulary.

Right: Void - in process over a 30 year span.



## JOURNEY ◐

Bruce is a man and sculptor of action who operates in the Now. He attracts enormous amounts of material energy. Imagine a scenario where you request 200 tons of raw materials to your office, whereby you easily and without delay transform that energy in and through you to become something extraordinary. Bruce does this with ease, and one can feel the positive energy and joy of his work.

This catalog and art exhibit brings us current with Bruce's sculpture. However, there remain unmet challenges ahead for him. One is to explore the universal dimension both in terms of scale and content. This may be achieved through fewer, larger moves and to consolidate the power. Second is to evolve the Earth typology so that the sculpture engages the context. This would manipulate the visible between the sculpture and the landscape. The piece Ratio moves toward this direction.

Right: Marker - viewable at Runnymede Sculpture Farm.

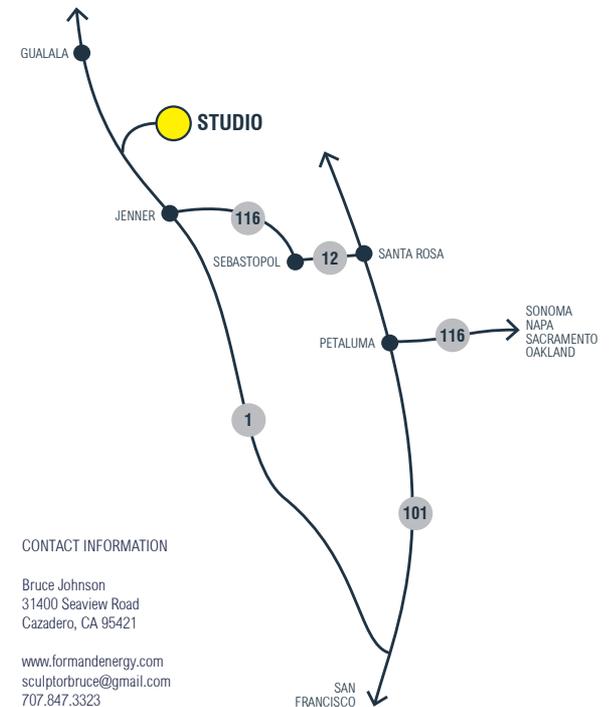




## STUDIO

Bruce Johnson's studio is located in the woods on the northern California coast, where his in-progress pieces are dispersed in the studio and throughout the landscape. A studio visit is the preferred method to comprehend Bruce's process and the scale of his work. Collectors and visitors are welcome by calling ahead.

Above: Bruce Johnson & Studio, 1980



## GALLERY ▸▸

### BIG BANG ◐

Six great logs swirl around the wind-felled 1000 year old redwood body.  
Photo Credit: Michael Sarver  
(right top, not included in show)

Dimensions: 19' x 15' x 15'

### MAYA ◐

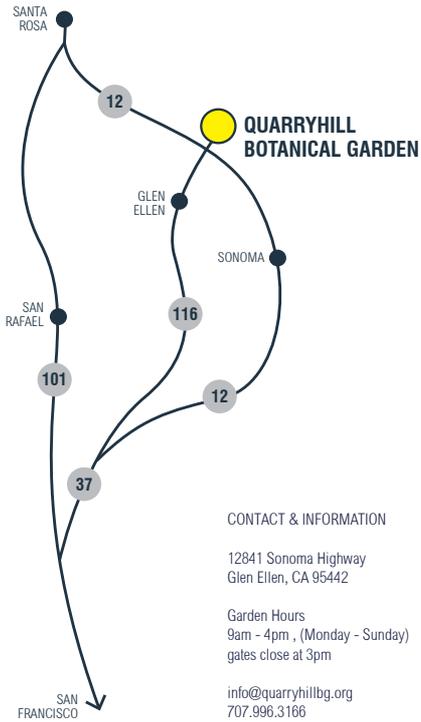
Fire blackened burl stump and red copper shingles inspired by Guatemala's rich Mayan archaeology.  
(right bottom, not included in show)

Dimensions: 10' x 8' x 8'

## SELECTED COLLECTIONS & COMMISSIONS ◐

Djerassi Foundation, Woodside - Torii  
Cedarhurst Sculpture Park, Mt. Vernon, IL - Big Bang  
Rajah Construction, Keelung Taiwan Family - Knight, Boku, Gate of Spirit  
Green Music Center at Sonoma State University, Rhonert Park, Asia  
Barclay Simpson Collection, Umbria, Italy - Wood Henge  
Muriel Galt Garden, Marin County - Vance  
The Asia Art Museum, San Francisco  
Oakland City Center - Solstice  
Runnymede Sculpture Farm, Woodside - Marker, Log Jam  
Edificio Mayola, Algeciras, Spain - Maya  
City of Palo Alto - After the Fire  
Vineyard Creek Inn & Conference Center, Santa Rosa - I Ching  
Plantation Camp, Cazadero - Osprey House Pavilion  
State of Alaska, Anchorage - Wind Prop  
Matanzas Creek Winery, Santa Rosa - Izumi





**CONTACT & INFORMATION**

12841 Sonoma Highway  
Glen Ellen, CA 95442

Garden Hours  
9am - 4pm, (Monday - Sunday)  
gates close at 3pm

info@quarryhillbg.org  
707.996.3166

## ABOUT ▾

Quarryhill is a 25-acre botanical garden within a 62 acre site, containing a rich diversity of Asian flora. All seasons in the garden have their own beauty. The gardens contain flowering Asian trees & shrubs, laced with paths and hidden places to sit and relax, while surrounded by ponds, waterfalls, and vistas of the Sonoma Valley.

Visitors are welcome year round. Self-guided tours are available during our open hours without reservation. Docent-led tours are available by reservation. Group tours for garden clubs and other groups or organizations are also available with advanced reservation.

**bionic**

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