

# Jay Nelson + Rachel Kaye Ocean Beach, CA

By [Matt Titone](#) Photography by [Read McKendree](#) August 19, 2018



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**Jay and Rachel are a couple of San Francisco based artists who have made their dream home and studio in the quaint Outer Sunset part of town, right by the beach. It's not often we get to feature the home of a maker of "surf shacks;" Jay designs and builds everything from tree houses to car, truck, van (and even boat) conversions, to products, to full blown houses — like the [one in Kauai](#) we featured a while back. Rachel is a fine artist who focuses primarily on painting and drawing. The two often collaborate, share a**

**studio space at home and have joint exhibitions together from time to time. We recently caught up with Rachel and Jay to get a glimpse inside their amazing home, talk shop and hear how having two young children has affected their creative process.**

**How did you meet and how long have you been together?**

17 years. We met in college in 2001.

**How long have you lived here in the Outer Sunset area and what brought you here in the first place?**

Rachel: We moved to the Outer Sunset in 2005. Since then we spent two of those years in NYC.

Jay: I lived in Berkeley and Oakland first. In college I realized that there were occasionally really good waves at Ocean Beach and at the time rent was relatively cheap out here. But Rachel wanted to move to New York, so we broke up. I was miserable without her, I went to graduate school in New York for painting and convinced her to let me move in. Then we moved back to the Outer Sunset.

**What are your favorite parts about SF and the area in which you live?**

Rachel: The people. When we travel we often fall in love with other places, but when we come home we always realize how good community is here.

Jay: The (Outer) Sunset feels like a small town. Sometimes walking a block to the health food store can take an hour, running into people on the street. So many of our friends have opened stores or restaurants out here. Almost all of our friends work right here and never leave the neighborhood.

Surfing is very intense here, there's a lot of wind and bad days but sometimes it will get good maybe just for an hour, it's nice to be close and have an eye on it.

## **Favorite places to surf locally?**

Jay: I'm a creature of habit, I change at our house and surf out front. I never drive. I like the idea of being an expert of my very short coastline in front of my house. Paying attention to the sandbars as they go away and come back with the seasons.





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## **How did you find your house?**

Rachel: We were living out here in a small cabin behind Dave and Lana. Our friend Phil owned the house we're in now and offered to sell in two us. We had a little money saved and had a giant art sale in our studio and sold every last scrap of art.

## **What are your favorite parts of your home?**

Jay: The back yard. I love working on and reworking it. It's pretty windy here at times but somehow it's really warm back there and protected from the wind.

Living in the outer sunset you become really aware of geographic details and micro climates. We don't get as much sun as you would, say in LA, so having good southern exposure and northern blockage is really important.

Growing up in LA, I never thought about the weather unless it was rainy. I

don't think I really appreciated warm days. I like that hot days are special here.

## **Jay, I was first introduced to your work from the tree house you built at Mollusk. How did you first get into building tree houses and other fun, artistic spaces like converted vehicles and whatnot?**

I grew up building treehouse/forts/cliff dwellings. When my friends and I were young and there were no waves we would spend all her time building forts even through high school. We would sleep in the forts — kind of our homes away from home. Those experiences shaped the way I think and when I build things I try to tap into that joy of building you found as a kid.

When I was in college a childhood friend invited me to build a treehouse on his property on the big island of Hawaii. As soon as I finished school and had a little money I left for Hawaii. I wanted my money to last as long as possible, we found a local dump where you can get salvaged building material for free, I think the only material I bought was the hardware, screws nails and bolts. That was really the start for me of using recycled material. I like the make do style of it, You build with what you're given and the materials make the decisions. When I came back I started having art shows and one art show I re-created my Hawaii treehouse in a gallery. Then John, the owner of Mollusk, asked me to build a treehouse in Mollusk. I worked and lived at Mollusk during that time and also built my first camper.

## **Did you study architecture in school?**

No, I am a painter. I do appreciate some architects but I'm mostly interested in people who have no design background or artists who wanted to build there own homes blurring the line between art and life.





**You have such an amazing and eclectic body of work spanning from more art installation-like pieces to products to actual homes and living spaces. What have been some of your favorite or most memorable projects over the years?**

The Kauai house is pretty special. I really think it's a magical space and at the time it was very ambitious for me because I'd never built an entire house. Of course I had a ton of help.

I'm really proud of the work my wife and I have done in collaboration. We have been playing with architecture and furniture with our paintings and building structures or rooms for art works.

At this point I've built 10+ campers. I think of the campers as one body of work that is slowly evolving, each one building on the next.

**Tell us about some projects you both are currently working on.**

We're doing a collaboration in France this summer where we are going to build a large structure; "experimental furniture" for seeing the ocean. Rachel is going to paint each piece of wood and then I'm going to cut it up and put it all together.

**Rachel, where do you draw inspiration from in your work?**

I like thinking about being in the studio with artists I admire. As a painter, you're part of a very long lineage and that's a beautiful complicated mystery.

**Describe your artistic process.**

I keep a diary of images/objects/shapes that interest me. They are ever-evolving and rotating. I don't really discriminate from these sources. It can be a hand in a painting, to a piece of fruit, a toy, photograph, textiles, the shape of a letter. From these visual resources, I can start a painting or drawing, a sort of launching pad and then work goes from there.

## **Do you guys share a studio together?**

Yes we have always shared a studio. We use to have a really big studio up the street but when we had our first kid we decide we wanted to be closer to home so we could go out and work while she was sleeping so we built a studio in the backyard that we share.







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**You are both artists with two young kids now. How has your living situation changed since having kids? Also how has being a parent affected your work and process?**

Jay: It's the same in a lot of ways, we've bonded deep through the process of raising children. Part of being an artist is making mistakes and doing dumb stuff, I will say that it's harder to make mistakes when your time is limited in the studio. I just feel like I don't have as much time anymore so that's hard.

Rachel: While my time is more limited, I get focused really quickly now when it's time to work. I also have two humans who hold me accountable for my

actions, so I want to be the best version of myself for them, which is being a dedicated artist.



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