



This is Repurposing

Bret Cavanaugh's scavenging verges on hoarding. But the things he's crafting from that junk are remarkably original. And now, with the debut of his first furniture collection, he's poised to redefine modern design, too.

By Scott Edwards



From Cavanaugh's Trophy Series (clockwise from top left): a silver-leaf armoire, a dining table and a dresser. Opening page: Cavanaugh may not be the tallest guy around, but he carries a big chainsaw.

I'm not clear. Where is your workshop again?

"Do you know the Wine Hut?"

Got it now. Thanks.

There are still some addresses where GPS will betray you. Bret Cavanaugh's workshop is one of them. Then again, mine could have led me right to his front door, and I'm still not sure I would have realized I'd arrived in the right place. It resides among a ramshackle storage facility just north of Frenchtown, New Jersey, where the storage units are old shipping

containers. But even that conveys a degree of orderliness, which would be misleading.

I pull in, then back out, prepared to go where, I'm not sure, when Cavanaugh waves me down from behind an old, mostly-dismantled Toyota pickup that sits in front of his workshop.

Cavanaugh is wearing a T-shirt, shorts that extend below his knees and construction boots that are laced up well above his ankles. All of it is covered with blotches of stain and/or paint.

As are his stubbled face, his arms and his hands.

He's been here, in this space, for the last three years, but he's been working on the property, on and off, since he started getting serious about making furniture, about 10 years ago. The front room is a large, wide-open setup that still manages to feel crammed with loose-end materials. It's also where his tools and machines are, most of it relatively organized by contrast.

Cavanaugh leads me to the back, through a salvaged-wood door of his own creation, to a much smaller room that he's using as a



His original concept was a vanity, but as the design evolved, it became a freestanding mirror and a matching pair of drawers. Opposite page: The chandelier (top left) is part of the Trophy Series. The cutting boards (bottom) were Cavanaugh's gateway into furniture design. And the platter (top right), he made from part of an old bed frame.



showroom for the time being. It's furnished, mostly, with a few large pieces from his Trophy Series, which he crafted specifically for the International Contemporary Furniture Fair at the Javits Center in May. He devoted himself to the collection for the better part of the last two years, and he's just now, in late June, beginning to reclaim his life.

I'm having trouble digesting what I'm seeing, and it's not just the suffocating heat. Everything I was exposed to up until this point indicated this was some sort of salvage yard. But the furniture in this room is right on the leading edge of modern—polished metal, sharp angles, abstract forms.

Cavanaugh is a compulsive scavenger. (And a bit of a hoarder.) Thus, the seven 40-foot shipping containers of his own, all filled to their capacity, clustered around the outside of the building. When he was starting out, it was the cheapest means by which he could source his materials. Along the way, it somehow became his signature.

"A lot of the stuff that I have comes with a story," he says. "That's kind of my thing."

There's an ingenious coat rack made from a bucket of crank arms he found on the side of the road and lithograph frames embellished with driftwood in an Etsy-ish riff. His is not a modern-farmhouse aesthetic. He's not

sanding, painting and reissuing. To call that repurposing against what Cavanaugh's crafting is gross negligence.

That stuff, though, stands among but separate from the Trophy Series, his first collection crafted entirely from scratch. Still, the dining table, armoire, dresser and chandelier are clearly the next phase in the evolution of the same resourceful craftsman. The intricacy of the designs and the unorthodox juxtaposition of materials attest to a thoughtful, intensive process.

"What I try to do is make diamonds, make these pieces that are memorable but that capture something in somebody. Make them feel something," Cavanaugh says. He talks quickly,



his eyes widening and narrowing with his candence. "I think 99 percent of people, even if they know furniture, they don't know the depth of it." Not his, at least.

The Swiss-Army furniture maker

Cavanaugh doesn't obsess over wood. (He's got about a dozen logs behind his shop, and

he plans to install a sawmill soon, but that has more to do with control and cost-efficiency than any kind of reverence.) Nor is wood his only medium. Or even his primary medium.

He grew up in Lambertville, NJ, around an antique car garage, built motorcycles for fun in high school, studied machinery, leatherwork, metal fabrication and welding. He also worked

as a chef. (He built his own food truck.) And all of that experience and knowledge is applied regularly, often within a single piece of furniture. In fact, that's what holds his attention, which is no easy task.

But what drives his designs is an ability he's devoted no time to cultivating.

"I have a photographic memory, and I can