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Salvage operation

John Preus's Proustian art is a recycling of things past

By: Elly Fishman



John Preus is the son of Lutheran missionaries and the first Preus male in six generations who isn't a pastor. If that makes him the family maverick, he still hasn't lost his reverence for the past. In the age of suburban developments that he says "look like they fell out of a spaceship and into a field," Preus prefers old materials with evidence of prior lives. "I like seeing how nature and human hands affect material over time," he says. "I often think about the life span of materials and their morphology."

Preus is among a growing number of Chicago artists who harvest their supplies from dilapidated houses and junkyards, finding their art in other people's trash. He's both a fine artist and—through his company, Dilettante Studios—a cabinetmaker who builds bookshelves from maple flooring, doors from industrial glass windows, tables from salvaged doors, and jungle gyms from discarded writing desks. "I have a hard time making something for no reason," he says. "I live back and forth between a pragmatic solution and an aesthetic one."

A soft-spoken, mild-mannered 40-year-old who listens to Grizzly Bear and James Blake while he works his power tools, Preus received his MFA from the University of Chicago in 2005. He started digging into Chicago's underbelly as a founding member of a small artists' collective called Material Exchange. During their five years together, the group explored how environment can determine value. Their projects included creating modular cubes from trash, a fireplace mantel from donated books, and a pop-up cafe from used furniture.

When the group shut down in 2010, Preus focused on his own art. This summer he opened an installation, *The World as Text*, at Columbia College. The piece consisted of an

eccentric reading room: drawers jutting from walls, chairs built into bed frames, and desks lofted on stilts. Really, it was more of a reading playground. But, like all of Preus's work, it also was saturated with history. There was a melancholy in the chipped wood and disfigured drawers. "I aspire to make places that feel exciting and vibrant," Preus says, "And I think the spaces I'm attracted to have this longing for perfection that's been sidetracked and adapted." Next month, he'll reconstitute and revise *The World as Text* for the opening of the Southside Hub of Production—a yearlong series of happenings, art shows, conversations, and dinners at the First Unitarian Church's Fenn House in Hyde Park. He plans to recycle the desks from the Columbia show into a jungle gym and bar.

Preus gets plaudits for his green practice, but he sees the dark side in what he does. "People always think this is a positive, effusive movement. But there's an apocalyptic sense to the work. Junkyards have a sense of doom in them. And when all those kit-style houses begin to fall apart and there's excess material everywhere, we're going to have a real problem." Of course, the bits of waste that end up in his hands just might reappear in a gallery—or as kitchen cabinets.