

Blair Sligar says he's a craftsman, not an artist. But his customers would say he's both.



AGAINST THE GRAIN

At Hog Eat Hog, reclaimed wood is cut, scraped, smoothed and shaped into warm, wonderful (and sometimes weird) pieces of custom furniture.

— BY KAREN LEBLANC —
PHOTOGRAPHS BY RAFAEL TONGOL

Winter Park-based custom-furniture maker Blair Sligar has an oddball sense of humor that helps define the brand of his quirky company, which is named, apropos of nothing, Hog Eat Hog.

Sligar recently posted a selfie on Instagram in which he modeled a bikini assembled from scrap wood. All I could think of was “ouch.” But for the 32-year-old art-school dropout, it was a tongue-in-cheek social statement about the virtues of reuse.

“In my mind, what I do is a cause,” Sligar says. But he insists that he’s a craftsman, not an artist. Art, Sligar says, has a voice and a point of view. Tables and cabinets don’t, regardless of how beautiful they may be.

On a recent visit to the Hog Eat Hog headquarters, located at 678 Cherry Street, I got a tour of Sligar’s busy workshop, where he and three other craftsmen turn castoff materials into attention-getting furniture for clients who share his aesthetic and, more often than not, his worldview.

“To me, it’s about creating a value system,” he says. “I want to do what’s good for me, good for my employees, good for my clients and good for the world in terms of how

we use resources.”

But if Sligar is a crusader, he’s not a strident one. He’s polite, self-effacing and prone to using such adjectives as “cool” and “weirded out.” Between his laid-back demeanor and his creative vocation, he seems more like an earnest 1960s hippie than a successful millennial entrepreneur.

“I just like word play,” says Sligar when asked how his company was named. “And I love animals. I wanted the name to have nothing to do with woodworking — but I also wanted a name that would stick in peoples’ heads.”

Hog Eat Hog is certainly a memorable moniker. But Sligar says he can’t take credit for it. “It was my ex-wife’s idea,” he admits with a chuckle.

It’s easy to mistake the Hog Eat Hog “factory” for one of the unassuming mid-century modern residences surrounding it. But inside, power saws buzz and the air smells of sweat and sawdust.

Vintage hand tools hang from the walls, giving the space a distinct, museum-like vibe. But these old-school implements aren’t for show; they’re for hammering, scraping, cutting, gouging and shaping reclaimed wood into one-of-a-kind pieces of furniture for both residential and commercial use.

And it’s busy. Sligar, who founded Hog Eat Hog five years ago, says his company could grow even more. But then he’d have to become less hands-on and morph into more of a businessman than an artisan.

Not that he’d rule out someday licensing his designs to a major manufacturer. For now, however, he’s happy to look for more efficiencies in his small-scale operation and take on carefully selected clients who appreciate what he does, and why he does it.

“I was allowed to hold a knife early on,” says Sligar, whose dad had a well-equipped garage woodworking shop. “My parents gave me a lot of leeway with making things, and I did a lot of wood carvings, architectural drawings and clay sculptures.”

Sligar, a Winter Park native who was homeschooled, says his dad was “cool” about letting him tinker with tools. He was also inspired by visits to the Carpentry Shop at Maitland’s Waterhouse Residence Museum, which was built — and built to last, obviously — in the 1880s.

Wood was, and remains, Sligar’s muse and his material of choice. He enrolled in the University of Central Florida’s School of Visual Arts and Design intending to study sculpture, but lasted just two years. A professor, he says, encouraged him to forget about school and begin plying his trade.

Right away, Sligar landed work. A neighbor



“Woodworking gives me a space to think,” says Sligar. “It’s dirty, hot, uncomfortable work. But it gives me a space to work things out.” The art-school dropout loves the unique beauty of aged wood — the warm colors, the intriguing grain patterns, the nicks and notches.



Hog Eat Hog's work is evenly divided between residential and commercial clients. One of the company's most intriguing projects was for the Imperial Bar, where Sligar's team pulled out all the stops.

who was designing and building his own home recruited him to craft the furniture and decorate the interior rooms. At the neighbor's request, he used reclaimed wood for most everything.

During that project, Sligar learned to fully appreciate the unique beauty of aged wood — the warm colors, the intriguing grain patterns, the nicks and notches.

"As long as wood isn't petrified, you can work with it," he says. "It doesn't matter how old it is. It's like a living, breathing thing. And every piece is different."

Certain that he had found his calling, Sligar opened Hog Eat Hog shortly after the home was complete. "Woodworking gives me a space to think," he adds. "It's dirty, hot, uncomfortable

work. But it gives me a space to work things out."

I first saw Sligar's work when reporting on the 2013 New Southern Home, a showhome built in conjunction with the Southeast Building Conference, held in Orlando. His asymmetrical, organically shaped tables caught my attention because of their on-trend appeal.

Sligar, however, doesn't do trends. He does what he likes. And if you like it, too, all the better.

He's an aficionado of Googie architecture, a futurist style that emerged in the late 1940s and was used frequently in the design of motels, coffee shops and gas stations through the mid-1960s.

Frank Lloyd Wright ranks among his major influences, although he prefers the legendary architect's structures to his furnishings. He's also drawn to the simplicity of Danish and Shaker looks.

At the opposite extreme, Sligar appreciates rococo "because it's all weird and ornate." His mid-century modern designs reflect some of rococo's playfulness, but none of its frivolity.

"I have kind of a modern, masculine aes-

thetic," says Sligar. "It's not rustic, but the label fits because I work with wood and I like organic shapes and natural materials."

On the day I visited Hog Eat Hog, Sligar and his team were working on a "Brain Bar" for IZEA, a Winter Park-based social media marketing company that urges its employees to "keep IZEA weird."

Small interlocking triangles made of plywood will frame colored translucent windows, symbolizing the nooks and crannies of the brain, Sligar explains. Reclaimed wood and painted and weathered signs will serve as a backdrop for the installation, which will anchor a hospitality space.

Hog Eat Hog has completed projects for Cask & Larder, a popular Winter Park restaurant, and Imperial Bar locations in Winter Park and Sanford. The company also creates pieces for architects and custom builders as well as a growing cadre of private clients.

"I think part of our appeal is that we do strange things," Sligar says. "For better or worse, we're about exploring this aesthetic that I have.

I'll continue doing it the rest of my life, whether it's wood or something else."

Sligar, however, is perfectly capable of dialing back the strange when he needs to. He recently designed and built a fun but functional custom kitchen with white lacquered panels and a monolithic laurel-oak slab bartop. The room, which features wood salvaged from a demolished barn, became a hit with home-design enthusiasts on Houzz and Pinterest.

A coffee table or a dining-room table designed and built by Hog Eat Hog takes about 25 hours to complete, not including a trip to pick out materials. Sligar says tables range between \$2,000 and \$12,000, depending upon an infinite number of variables.

Most Hog Eat Hog pieces are custom made for specific clients, but there are a handful of ready-to-buy offerings at the shop. Sligar plans to launch a retail line of custom furniture that will be sold through the company's website. Just about the only thing Hog Eat Hog doesn't make is chairs — at least, not yet.

"I like the idea of making something that has



Vintage hand tools hang from the walls, giving Hog Eat Hog's space a museum-like vibe. But these old-school implements aren't just for show. Sligar and his team know how to use them.

meaning, that people appreciate," says Sligar. "If you're going to create something, it shouldn't be disposable. You should do it well."

That philosophy is working for Sligar and Hog Eat Hog. And the off-kilter branding isn't hurting, either. After posing in his wooden bikini, Sligar landed a new client — an architect who appreciated his gutsy, irreverent humor and originality.

Clearly, Sligar can be outrageous — but his work is no joke. In fact, he can get downright poetic when rhapsodizing about his material of choice:

"Wood shows evidence of how the tree that you're working from grew. As you shape it, you reveal this layered history — this never ceases to fascinate me." 🌿

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