



Bud Caywood has designed thousands of pieces of furniture over the course of a successful career spanning five decades.

The Art of Life: Bud Caywood

Wisely, the fine folks here at the paper only allow me just so much space to fill each week. And today, I could easily fill my allotment with nothing but a lengthy list of this Bethlehem artist's accolades, awards, and achievements. Bud Caywood is an artistic triple threat. He is a highly respected furniture designer, a renowned painter and sculptor, and a published poet of the first water—a creative soul for whom nature, art, and profound spirituality are inextricably bound.

We meet for our interview in Bud's sleek, spacious studio. I am immediately overtaken by the view afforded by a bank of floor to ceiling windows that comprise the entire exterior wall and overlook a cloistered cove on Lake Hickory. "I put all these windows in," Bud offers in response to my obvious studio envy. "Currently, the sun comes up right over there. I can usually tell what kind of day it's going to be at first light." We find a spot to sit and talk amongst the drafting tables, art supplies, and books.

"I grew up in New Jersey," Bud responds to my predictable first question as to how he first came to Alexander County. "Where I grew up I was literally 30 minutes from New York City, from Greenwich Village. My junior and senior year, I spent a lot of my time there. Culturally, it was the right place to be. When I look back, it was the right thing to do. I've always been a creative person. It's just what I do. From a very early age I started painting, sketching and doing stuff like that. I was actually se-

lected for a special class in high school called 'Design and Materials.' They had it for junior and senior years. They wanted to partner the art department with the technical curriculum that we had which was mechanical drawing and shop and things like that. Our high school was pretty progressive in that, knowing that not everybody was going to go to college and get a four-year degree, but knowing that with the technical training, there were jobs out there for them. I got selected by my art teacher to be in that class. My senior year, he pulled me aside and said 'You have a real knack for understanding how to create things. I would highly recommend that you consider a career in product design.' It wasn't specifically furniture, although I did design a piece of furniture in high school that took a first prize in the North Jersey Arts and Science Fair, along with some of my art. I actually won three awards my senior year. But he said 'Let me take a look and see what I can find.' Back then in 1969, there were very, very few schools that taught product or furniture design. There were three schools around there, but there was no way I could afford to go to any of them. But he found a school in Asheboro, North Carolina. There was a technical institute that taught furniture design technology and offered an associate degree in it. So I came to North Carolina to go school here. So I graduated from high school, came to North Carolina and I have been here ever since."

Bud continues. "I knew I needed to be in an area that

People & Culture
by Layne Hendrickson



A work rendered in tile mortar, steel wire, and paint by Bud Caywood. 'Paleon Image Ichthyo'

was heavily into furniture, so I moved to Hickory. My first job in my profession was with Lewittes Furniture Industry, believe it or not, in Alexander County. I went to work there as a draftsman. I worked there about two and half years I guess and then left there and went to Hickory Chair Company as a draftsman as well. I worked there for 10 years. By the time I left there, I was the director of the product development department over the design. That was in 1983 and I've been freelancing as a designer ever since. There were a few stops in between where some of the people I was working with asked me to come and work with them. So I worked for La-Z-Boy for a few years, all the while I was still freelancing. I worked for Alexvale Furniture in Taylorsville and continued to freelance on the side as well. I still design with wooden pencils. I don't do anything in CAD except for some of my big drawings. But most of the time I'm using my pencils sketching away. That's what I like to do best. I need a sharp point and I only use number two and three leads. And then I'll add some color to it with the markers. There's no set style for me. I can design basically any style. Whatever the needs of the manufacturer are. I have thousands and thousands of sketches that I've done. I can't even begin to tell you how many."

What excites you now; what do you want to do from here? I ask. "I want to continue to design for as long as I can. I'm 65 years old, I'm at retirement age. But I realized that I can keep designing. That excites me be-

cause I always pay attention to trends, styles, colors. Just to see what's going on in magazines. That's really where I get my inspiration. You know, design is nothing more than adaptation. And that adaptation has to fit what is actually occurring currently. But you've got to pay attention to trends. You get snippets of things that are going on out there before it becomes a trend and you've got to learn to recognize those things. I buy European magazines because Europe tends to be a year to two years ahead of us in a lot of things. I don't worry about failure on things, because failure always allows you to think outside a box. If you're afraid to fail, you're going to do the same things. Even with design, I'll sketch things sometimes that I look at and I know it can't be built, but at least it gives me an opportunity to move in that direction to understand how it can be built. Because some manufacturers just don't have the capability of creating some of the things that I design, so I have to know their capabilities and design according to them. If not, I'm wasting my time and theirs. So I have a good understanding of product design from a functional standpoint and from a manufacturing standpoint having worked in several very high end factories."

I ask about his obvious success in interfacing his art with the world of manufacturing. "The bottom line is; you want to be successful at what you do. And you can't resist those changes. I'll give you an example; I'm working on a project right now for one of my design

accounts which is Fairfield Chair. That's a really good company, they're in Lenoir, and American made. The chair that I just recently designed for them structurally is a little bit different than what their manufacturing capabilities are, but in the process of designing that, they wanted me to make a few changes in order for it to go through their plants. And I said 'Okay, where do we need to go with it?' So you sit down and you talk to them, and you realize 'Well, that's really not a major change from an aesthetic standpoint. We can do that and it doesn't compromise the design at all. And so it becomes a 'win-win' for us. They're getting what they want for running it through their plant easily, and I'm getting what I want because I haven't lost the integrity of that particular design. But there are a lot of designers who've got huge egos, and they won't budge at all. I don't go there. I like my relationships that I have with my design accounts. These people end up being personal friends of mine. There's no reason to resist that when the bottom line is they want to sell furniture. I want them to sell furniture. And I want to make money off what they sell. But every single thing we look at that is manmade, every single thing, is a form of art. It doesn't matter what it is. That simple stop sign was designed by an artist. Your shoelace was designed by an artist. We've gotten to the point where we take that so much for granted that it's not even part of our thought process."

Next we discuss Bud's writing. "I'm a poet. Poetry gets a bad rap. I'm really a story teller and most of my writer friends are the same way. Even though the genre is called 'poetry,' we pretty much tell stories—things that we've done or where we've been. They go into a poetic prose category pretty much. I write all the time. I've written 14 chapbooks of poetry and one full length collection. I'm a member of the North Carolina Poetry Society. I've been on that board as well. I'm a long time member of that society. I usually write about nature for the most part. Most of my writing has a connection back to the natural world. Not all of the time, but most of the time. And I have a process that I use called 'word clustering.' Because I like to find words that really mean what you're saying, but don't pinpoint it. It works like this. Say this piece of cardboard here—

so you give three words that describe cardboard, okay: 'paper,' 'thin,' 'coarse.' Now give three words that describe each one of those words. And before you know it. You're out here with a word that is directly associated to that cardboard, but it's outside, it's not obvious. You start playing with that and all of the sudden you come up with some really cool stuff. Sometimes I do the same thing with colors. If it's 'Burgundy,' then 'Sanguis' works."

"I'm a visual artist as well," Bud segues nicely. "I do both 2-D and 3-D art. I work primarily in plaster and acrylic, and encaustic wax. But I've discovered a new art form. There are no references to it whatsoever. It's tile mortar. I started working with the mortar on some small little pieces on cardboard and realized that I can work that mortar for hours and hours and create what I want to create out of it. Once it's set up, it's set up. I work most of the time in abstracts. I can do very detailed stuff, but I tend to not to go there, because that's what I do all day long when I'm drawing furniture. So it's an outlet for me. The abstract part, I really enjoy. I put on some good music and just go to town and work on it. But the mortar is an interesting medium because there's nothing like it. Having worked in plaster since about 1998, so nearly 20 years, and I mix in the acrylic and some other things, and in some cases I'll embed it in wax which gives it a whole new aspect."

"I make all my own frames and all my own canvases. And although I use brushes, I make a lot of my own tools out of different things that I find, pieces of wood or whatever. I use dentist tools a lot. I do the same thing with painting, sometimes you just can't get the detail you need out of a brush so I'll just use feathers, or horse hair, or porcupine quills. All the tool is used for is to get the effect. I like to experiment. I'm not afraid to mess up on something. When you experiment and play around with different things, your mind opens wide. I know that I am so blessed to have creative talent and I thank God for it all the time. I know that I have been blessed with it. It doesn't scare me to try something. Let me have it. I'm going to give it a try. That's just the way I am. And because of that, I've done some things that I've surprised myself with."

Further experience Bud's amazing works at www.budcaywood.com



Black Eyed Susies reimagined in vibrant new colors.