

Preszler notes that canoe-building is an art that is rapidly becoming lost. “Very few people make canoes anymore—I’d estimate fewer than a dozen people worldwide. It’s sad, and I hope people reconnect with some of that history through my work. There are aspects of nature that can only be experienced from the perspective of a canoe.”

For him, the work became a way to process the series of losses that he had experienced. “When my father passed away, I inherited his humble woodworking tools from the family ranch. I was living on the ocean in New York at the time and was an avid outdoorsman. So I set out to honor his legacy. He never built a boat or even saw the sea since he was a cowboy in South Dakota, but growing up he taught me about craftsmanship and hard work, so I had the baseline within me and just had to make it happen.”

While continuing to work as the CEO of a sustainable winery near his home, Preszler got to work teaching himself the lost arts of American boatbuilding online and through books. Through his woodworking, he soon discovered a feeling of freedom and a passion for self-reliance that he’d forgotten since moving off the family farm.

“The process of building canoes is fascinating because there are so many elements that merge into the same practice,” he says. “You have to be adept at using power tools as well as hand tools, fiberglass and varnish, finish work and precision, but also a fair amount of improvisation and creativity.”

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At the end of a year of work, he showed that canoe to a very impressed neighbor, who had a suggestion: “Why don’t you just make one of these a year and sell it for \$100,000?” Just like that, Preszler had his business model.

“I’ve sold my canoes to art collectors, boat enthusiasts, and other artists. I can’t reveal their identities,” he says. “The business has grown into an important part of my livelihood. I currently have a waiting list into the 2020s.”

The canoes are entirely handmade—including woven leather and hemp seats, and custom bronze cutwaters and compasses—primarily using notched strips of local aromatic red cedar that are glued together around formwork and then fiberglassed. But each boat is unique. “I use a variety of different



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woods,” says Preszler. “Basswood, walnut, zebra-wood, Macassar ebony, ash, aspen, Mexican ziricote, mahogany, maple, and cherry. I source them from all over the world. There are no right angles, so unlike furniture making, for example, often I don’t have the benefit of measurements and fine machine variances. It’s important to me that my canoes look and feel handmade, because they are, and I don’t have any employees either. I insist on doing everything myself because that’s part of what my clients pay for.”

“The cliché really is true,” he says. “If you’re passionate about what you do then you’ll never work a day in your life.” For a lucky few, they also get to share in this passion too, while the rest of us can take inspiration from the transformative power of reconnecting with the natural world. ○



Working alone in his workshop, Preszler makes his canoes using hundreds of handcut strips of wood.

Preszler’s canoes have been described as a functional work of art. Of course they are seaworthy, but they are also intended to pass down through the generations.