

SHOU SUGI BAN

A Labor of Love: Using an ancient Japanese wood-burning technique, the owners of retail and gallery space Svper Ordinary created functional shelving that is beautifully original

WORDS: Beth R. Mosenthal, Assoc. AIA + LEED AP BD+C

DO YOU OWN A BLOW TORCH? IF YOU ARE A FAN OF ARTISAN-LEVEL DIY PROJECTS AND TIRED OF BEETLE KILL PINE, SHOU SUGI BAN TIMBER MIGHT BE FOR YOU.

IN the architecture and design world, building materials come and go with the trends. However, sometimes a unique material comes along and has an unimagined lifespan. A particularly unexpected one: charred wood.

While the idea of burning wood to make it more durable may seem counterintuitive, shou sugi ban demonstrates the opposite. Considered a Japanese art believed to date back to the 1700s, shou sugi ban is a process of charring wood in order to preserve it. The charring protects the timber from the elements (sun, wind, water, decay, fire) and can extend its life. For a simple cedar fence that might last five years without repair, the same wood burned at a controlled temperature might last up to 30 years with minimal care.

A popular building material in Japan and various parts of Europe for centuries, shou sugi ban is

making inroads in America within the last year or so. A versatile wood that can be used indoors or out on almost any surface imaginable, the material was recently introduced to Denver via "Svper Ordinary" in RiNo's open air market, The Source.

Designed by the Denver-based architecture firm Tres Birds, charred, black wood is showcased as a shelving concept artfully composed to display the store's merchandise. The richly textured, charred wood creates a layered topography of undulating surfaces while providing a rich contrast to the adjacent stark white gallery walls and carefully chosen artwork, which rotates.

According to Pedro Barrios, curator of Svper Ordinary, the black and white concepts are a staple in the store's branding, merchandise and upcoming exhibitions. The charred shelving was a successful

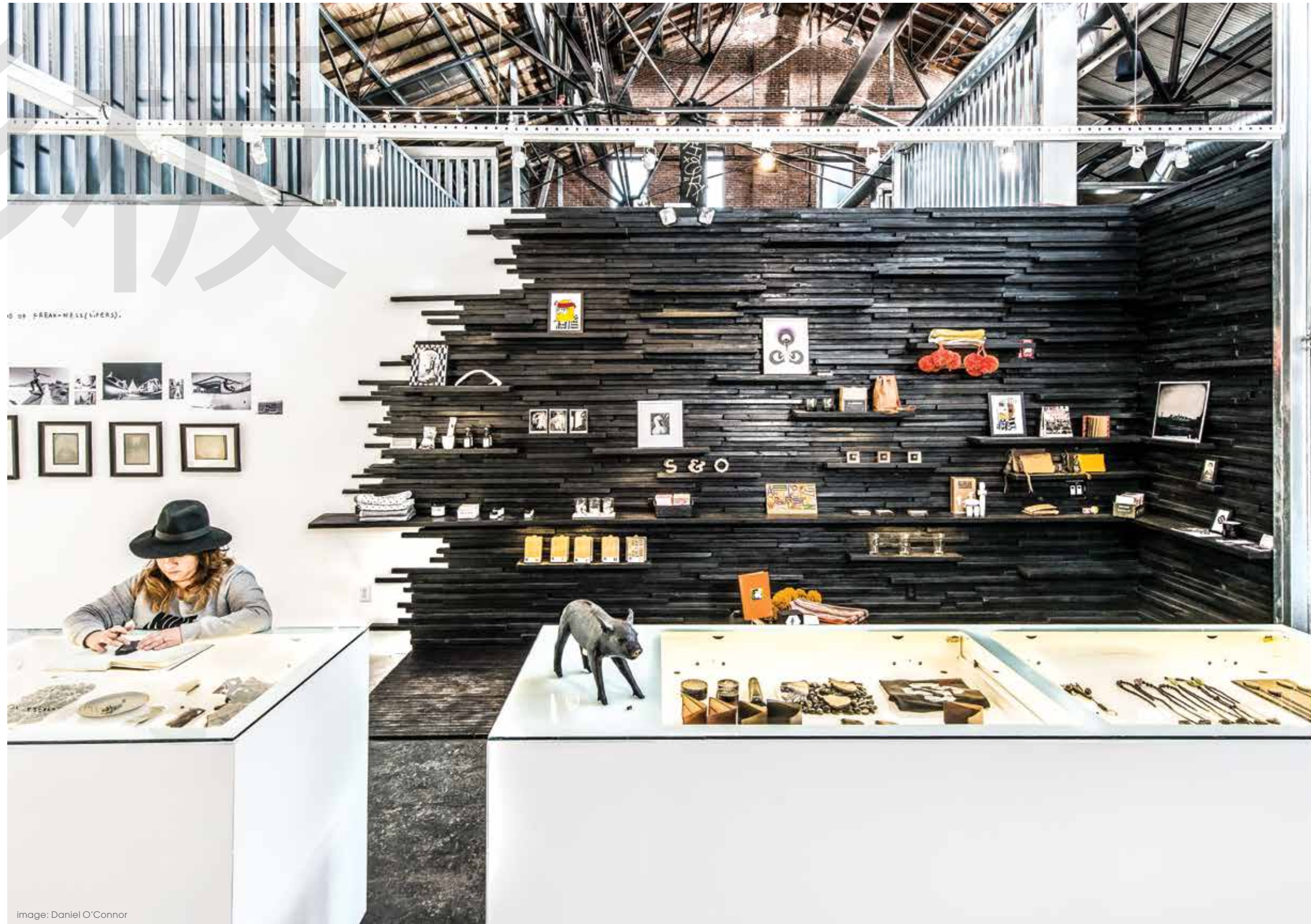


Image: Daniel O'Connor

烧杉板 SHOU SUGI BAN



Image: courtesy of Svper Ordinary

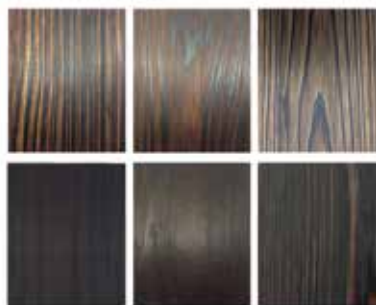


Image: courtesy of Svper Ordinary



Image: Daniel O'Connor

TOP: Barrios (top left) and Cavanagh (top right) of Svper Ordinary spent 2-3 hours a day for almost four consecutive months to create enough material to achieve the stacked, charred shelving concept. The installation, on the other hand, took only 4 days.



The shou-sugi-ban technique can yield a variety of finishes and textures, depending on the duration of burning and the brushing technique used. Samples shown here are from Delta Millworks.

aesthetic and functional design solution that met Svper Ordinary's goals of creating a space that was divided visually, while employing a low-budget material, design and build strategy.

Denver's two newest shou sugi ban experts, Barrios and Bryan Cavanagh of Svper Ordinary, under the direction of Dan Powers from Tres Birds, created what they call the "American version" of this ancient Japanese art. "We used table saws to create stacks

of wood of different widths. We had masks and gloves and used blow torches. How long it takes to burn the wood depends on the thickness—each piece burns within minutes... if not seconds! You have to be careful not to over-burn, otherwise the wood crumbles."

While it's hard to imagine the pristine gallery space covered in black dust and a team of guys with respirators, their hard work paid off. "We get a lot of interest in the shelves from people stopping into



Image: Daniel O'Connor

The stark contrast between the smooth, white gallery walls and dense timber shelves divides the space while reinforcing the store's goal of treating everyday objects as "works of art."

the space," Barrios says. "People that are attentive to detail notice the crackling, organic texture that can't be replicated and are curious how it was created."

So would they recommend DIY fanatics really do this at home?

"As Bryan and I went through the process, it became a labor of love...there is nothing like it in this city and it has become a part of our branding and identity," Barrios says. "It is extremely time and labor intensive. For a residential application, it might be easier to get a similar effect with wood and paint."

This "labor of love" was also a leap of faith. Cavanagh says he "didn't know what the walls or shelving wood look like until we installed them."

Luckily, the collaboration between Tres Birds and Svper

Ordinary has been a huge success. Their dynamic retail & gallery environment experiences consistent foot traffic ranging from art enthusiasts to tourists to the early-morning coffee crowd. "Most art galleries have people visit their space for an opening reception; we have big crowds pretty consistently throughout the week," Barrios says.

Shou sugi ban creates a long-lasting material that denotes texture and richness, as well as a wide range of aesthetics dictated by the degree of burning. It could be the gateway to exploring other ancient means and methods and rethinking commonplace materials.

THE PROCESS

Barrios and Cavanagh dedicated three to four hours each day for four months on location at Tres Birds' Denver studio to saw, burn, wash and eventually install and seal hundreds of pieces of wood to create the shelves.

"The first step was to cut all the wood. It was extremely labor intensive; using reclaimed 2 x 4's and 2 x 12's for the display shelves from Tres Birds' leftover scraps," Barrios says.

"Directly after burning we swept each piece with a wet bristle broom to remove the excess dust," Cavanagh says. "We installed the shelves before sealing the exposed surfaces. While there are many different types of seals depending on the application, we used a special component polycrylic."