Try a bleached finish

IT TAKES THE COLOR OUT WITHOUT MUTING THE WOOD'S PERSONALITY

BY MICHAEL ROBBINS

With my work I often avoid the warmth of oiled oak, maple, or ash and instead apply a bleaching process that effectively takes the color out of the wood. It may sound like heresy, but done properly, a bleached finish can provide a pleasant contrast and a new context to the wood. The bleaching process allows a wide range of control. Depending on the extent of application, you can achieve results ranging from a subtly muted color to a brilliant white.

I'll show you my method using one of my cabinets. For this example, I am using quartersawn white oak fronts. This wood bleaches out to an almost paper white, while still allowing the silver ray fleck to shine through. These fronts will be paired with a natural oiled white oak carcase, creating a nice contrast between the two palettes.

Prep the surfaces and mix the solution

Before bleaching, prepare the wood by sanding up through the grits to 220. Then wet the wood to raise the grain, and sand it with 220-grit paper. Now mix and apply the bleach. I do this with the work faceup and on stickers, using a two-part bleach product made by Daly's Wood Finishes in Seattle. I order mine directly from Daly's in gallon containers, but you can find pint-size containers on Amazon.

Surface prep

Before you bleach. *After sanding up to 220 grit, wet the wood to raise the grain. Then smooth it with 220-grit paper.*

Photos, except where noted: Anissa Kapsales; top: Michael Robbins

Mix equal parts A (sodium hydroxide) and B (hydrogen peroxide), adding an extra splash of part B (approximately 10% to 15% of the 1:1 mix). This produces a whiter result, with less green and yellow and an even color. When parts A and B are mixed, a chemical reaction begins. The solution is active for about 30 minutes, so mix only what you need for two to three generous coats.

Apply the bleach solution

Apply the bleach, making sure to avoid puddles or drips. Once you have covered all the surfaces, let the bleach sit and do its thing for about 10 to 12 minutes. When the bleach has started to dry, use the remaining mixture to quickly add another coat. Then allow the wood to sit and dry thoroughly.

Once it's dry, assess the color. I apply three coats of bleach to achieve a clean, white look. Each successive coat is applied

SOURCES OF SUPPLY

DALY'S WOOD BLEACHING SOLUTION
Dalyswoodfinishes.com

Amazon.com

OSMO WOOD WAX FINISH
osmona.com

Bleach the wood

Mix equal parts A and B. *Use a disposable brush to generously coat the wood with the bleach solution. When the wood is almost dry, add another coat of bleach solution, and then allow it to dry completely.*

Heat and sand

Make it whiter. *After the second coat, each successive coat is applied after a light sanding with 220-grit paper and dried with a heat gun for a consistent bleaching effect and a whiter result.*

Adjust color and neutralize

Part B only. *After achieving the desired whiteness, if there are any green or pink tints in the wood, Robbins applies a coat or two of just part B and heats it to remove any tinting.*

Neutralize the bleach. *A 2:1 solution of water to vinegar will stop the bleaching process. Apply the vinegar and dry it with a heat gun.*

Add a finish

Apply the topcoat. *Robbins uses Osmo Wood Wax finish in white over the bleached surface. He rags on a coat using a circular motion, waits 10 to 15 minutes, buffs it out with a clean rag, and repeats.*

after a light sanding with 220-grit paper and dried with a high-temperature hair dryer or heat gun. The heat helps to maintain a consistent bleaching effect and also helps to produce a whiter result. After the wood is close to the whiteness I'd like, I look again for any greenish tint. If any is present (it often is, especially with maple), I apply a final coat or two of just part B (the hydrogen peroxide) and then apply heat again. This removes the tint and produces an even, near paper-white effect.

When I am satisfied with the tone, I apply a weakened vinegar mixture to neutralize the wood, usually a 2:1 ratio of water to vinegar. Apply a coat of this, dry it with heat, and then apply a final coat of water and allow it to dry thoroughly. Finally, lightly sand to knock down any grain or rough spots.

Add a topcoat

One of the difficulties of bleaching wood white is keeping it white. Finishing a bleached surface can be tricky; a hand-rubbed oil will quickly amber the wood, making it yellow. A water-based polyurethane keeps it white, but I've never been a fan of the look and feel. In certain commercial applications I've used a water-based polycarbonate on bleached surfaces that works quite well, but it has a bit of a plastic look.

For cabinet fronts like these, where I don't need as much protection as I would on a horizontal surface, I use Osmo Wood Wax White 3111 finish. This product is a satin color finish that works beautifully to keep the bleached wood white while providing an acceptable level of protection. If additional protection is required, such as on a tabletop or desktop, I apply Osmo Polyx-Oil High Solid over the wax. □

Michael Robbins makes custom furniture in Philmont, N.Y.