

ARTFORUM

Francis Cape

MURRAY GUY
453 West 17th Street
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View of “Utopian Benches,” 2013.

What if the things we hold and use were manifest condensations of the ways in which we live? Such is the logic of Francis Cape’s recent exhibition “Utopian Benches.” In the gallery are seventeen poplar benches, assembled in a setup that recalls a simple schoolhouse or a church absent of its congregation. Upon closer inspection, each bench reveals itself to be unique; some feature only the bare minimum components of four supports and a seat, while others—given the comparative austerity of their counterparts—have a subtly suggestive curve or the superfluous lathing of the legs.

Trained as a woodcarver, Cape has researched societies defined by their communal living situations, self-sufficient ethics, and few material belongings, creating meticulous reproductions of the benches that have functioned as material supports for their daily activities. Each is handcrafted in wood sourced near his studio. Also, available for purchase in the gallery is a book that includes the artist’s beautifully rendered and meticulous drawings of each bench (its joints, seams, and curves) as well as anthropological details on the community that conceived it.

Represented in these seats are societies from 1732 to the present, such as well-known groups like the Shakers as well as less familiar ones like the Society of the Separatists of Zoar in Ohio. One conclusion to be drawn from this showing might be that it is impossible to deduce the ontological nature of a society from its material remnants, a temptation anthropologists and art historians have fallen for time and again. Nevertheless, the origins of these choice pieces will be at odds with the surroundings they will likely join postexhibition—a material culture rife with obsolescing matter, made on the cheap, oceans away.

— Sarah Lookofsky