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ART IN REVIEW

Francis Cape: Utopian Benches

Murray Guy
453 West 17th Street, Chelsea
Through Aug. 2



Francis Cape's "Utopian Benches" installation at Murray Guy. In foreground, his copy of a 19th-century Harmony Society feast hall bench.

Francis Cape's latest work is an extraordinary gathering of faith-based furniture — further proof that God actually may be in the details. The 17 benches here are meticulous copies of backless benches built and used in communal, mostly religious societies in North America from the 18th-century to the present.

Mr. Cape tracked down, carefully measured and recorded the benches, emerging from the process with enough knowledge and enthusiasm for a beguiling, informative book: "We Sit Together: Utopian Benches From the Shakers to the Separatists of Zoar," just out from Princeton Architectural Press. But it is the benches, seen together, all made in poplar, that are so illuminating, especially of the idea that "shared seating" for meals, prayer, discussions or socializing encourages both community and equality.

If St. Peter's Basilica in Rome represents one end of the spectrum of faith-based design, these benches must surely be the other. They form a revealing meditation on design as history and expression; a thoroughly informative seminar on joinery, scale, proportion, comfort (best appraised by sitting); and a sidebar covering topics like decoration or lack thereof, the added stability of crossbars and the use of symmetry (a few benches have obvious fronts, most don't).

The feast hall bench from the Ephrata Cloister of ascetic mystics (in Pennsylvania, 1732-96) is the plainest, plainer even than the long Shaker bench here. But the brothers and sisters of Ephrata also produced a refectory bench with curving supports. (According to the book, they slept on L-shaped benches designed to create an uneasy rest so as not to miss the Second Coming.)

Mr. Cape's installations have always argued that design and craft express belief. Here he makes the argument explicit, asking us to see, learn, test-drive for ourselves.

— Roberta Smith