

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

Galleries: 'Utopian Benches' by Francis Cape at Arcadia University Art Gallery

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Arden Bendler Browning's "Lag," part of "Collage Perspectives" at Swarthmore College's List Gallery.

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Asked how he would like to alter the gallery's architecture for "Francis Cape: Utopian Benches," Cape, a British wood carver-turned-sculptor based in Narrowsburg, N.Y., took a look around and had a single request: Uncover those three windows.

"I think I had two reasons," Cape says, "the first being to make the space more closely resemble a meetinghouse, the second being to attempt to break down the distancing of art from life - an inevitably hopeless pursuit, but one which seems particularly relevant to this project. Oh, and of course, why cover up all that beautiful architecture in favor of a white box?"

The natural light has given the space an unfamiliar openness, and the windows are beautifully preserved relics of the 1893 building's arts and crafts interior architecture. But it is Cape's 20 unpainted carved-poplar benches, based on the designs used in American utopian communities and arranged here in tidy rows, that lend the gallery its present meetinghouse character.

In planning his project, Cape studied available examples of benches, made measured drawings of them, and visited a number of U.S. communities - defunct and extant - including those within easy reach of Arcadia, such as Ephrata Cloister. His benches are reconstructions of ones used for various purposes by the Hancock and Mount Lebanon Shaker communities; the Harmony Society; the Society of True Inspiration in Amana, Iowa; the Hutterites; and the Society of Separatists at Zoar, Ohio, among others.

Cape's exclusive use of poplar for his benches has the interesting effect of highlighting the nuances and disparities in their designs while simultaneously uniting them visually. Cape, helpfully, has provided a sheet of Xeroxed photographs identifying each bench and the community from which it sprang; even so, some careful looking is required (sitting on the benches is encouraged, by the way).

Where the installation succeeds most eloquently is in displaying the commonality between furniture and sculpture and the sense of community that can be engendered by something as simple as sharing a bench.

The gallery is hosting gatherings to discuss such topics as utopia, "the local," community, and the value of things during the run of the exhibition; see its website for information.

Arcadia University Art Gallery, 450 S. Easton Rd., Glenside, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays and Wednesdays, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Thursdays, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Fridays, 12 to 4 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays except Nov. 27. Gallery reopens Tuesday. 215-572-2131 or [www.arcadia.edu/gallery](http://www.arcadia.edu/gallery). Through Dec. 18.

## Painterly collages

After decades of being ignored by young artists, collage is back at the cutting edge of contemporary art. What's different this time around, though, is the prevalence of representational imagery in collages and the use of cut and found materials in paintings - the notion of the large painting on paper or canvas as a collage.

The spirits of Kurt Schwitters and Anne Ryan do not hover over the List Gallery's "Collage Perspectives: Works by Elizabeth O'Reilly, Ken Kewley, Chie Fueki, Arden Bender Browning, and Njideka Akunyili," nor do its artists seem to

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have been influenced by Dada, pop art, or Fluxus collagists. Craft traditions and paintings by the likes of Georges Braque, Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Richard Diebenkorn, and Peter Doig seem the more obvious touchstones. Njideka Akunyili's large mixed-media works on paper incorporate painting, ink transfers, and Xeroxed photographs, but her images of domestic settings, full of competing patterns and often prominently featuring a figure or two, call to mind the flat renderings of Kerry James Marshall and Gauguin. Akunyili's Nigerian heritage is prominent in her work though, too, especially in her layers of Xeroxed imagery.

The acrylic and mixed-media portrait of a young blond man with pale blue eyes in Chie Fueki's *Matt* would seem to be directly referencing several of Van Gogh's self-portraits, not just through the intensity of the subject's expression, but with Fueki's thick ridges of paint, which appear to have been squeezed onto the surface through a tiny nozzle. His mixed-media painting *Marsh*, on the other hand - one of the few abstract works in this exhibition - has an illustrative, fairy-tale quality reminiscent of Peter Doig.

Richard Diebenkorn might not be the first artist one thinks of on seeing *Lag*, Arden Bendler Browning's acrylic and gouache painting on Tyvek, not least because the work is extremely horizontal. Nevertheless, Bendler Browning's cityscape abstractions exaggerate perspectives in a manner akin to Diebenkorn's "Cityscape" paintings of the early '60s, and even use a similar palette.

Ken Kewley and Elizabeth O'Reilly are the classicists of this show. Kewley's small collages of figures in interiors and street scenes honor Braque's cubist compositions, while O'Reilly's views of Brooklyn's Gowanus Canal and New York City, assembled from individually cut pieces of hand-painted watercolor paper, suggest American woodcut prints from the 1930s.

List Gallery, Swarthmore College, 500 College Ave., Swarthmore, 12 to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays. 610-328-7811 or [www.swarthmore.edu/Humanities/art/Gallery](http://www.swarthmore.edu/Humanities/art/Gallery). Through Dec. 11.