

Dozie Kanu: Preenchendo Vazios



— by Maria Kruglyak

Dozie Kanu's *Preenchendo Vazios*—*Filling Voids* in English—is refreshing in its contemporaneity and emotional subtlety. Exhibited at Espaço Lumiar Cité in northern Lisbon, it is a social statement of new materialism infused with an acute understanding of its context both locally and beyond. With sculptural works informed as much by art as by installation and interior design, the pieces are stacked to the brim with multi-directional references neatly compiled into a minimalism of the artist's earlier practice. Above all, *Preenchendo Vazios* speaks a visual language that feels very *now*—a leap beyond postmodern sculpture in the expanded field.[1]

As much of Kanu's work, the pieces on show at *Preenchendo Vazios* elude easy decoding. Found objects, chosen by intuition rather than theoretical impulse,[2] only offer hints and cursory references, while the immaculate, careful craftsmanship and the equally precise curation give rise to various directions of interpretation. Instead, it is the visual vocabulary as a whole that suggests how to see Kanu's current practice: as the beginning of a new sculptural language of materialism. Perhaps that is why it is so tempting to write about his work in obscured and over-theorised terms; it is an exercise in the tension between comfort and discomfort at the root of the exhibited pieces as well as a multi-layered simplicity that speaks to the post-postmodernism of his practice.

Let us therefore take a step back, and walk through the exhibition one step at a time. Upon entering Espaço Lumiar Cité, we find ourselves closed off from the gallery through *RESPAWN* (2024), an installation that divides the otherwise rather small gallery space into three distinct areas. It is this black MDF-board structure that slows down our step before climbing the staircase at the left of the installation, introducing a sense of gravitas and clearing our minds of the cityscape outside. Walking up the stairs to the main exhibition space, we encounter the three sculptures placed on top of *RESPAWN*: *literal stance decrepit, regress with love* (2024), a found birdcage with its door swung open and holding an anti-climb raptor spike in place of a bird; *lumiar, purpose oriented opp-tix* (2024), a lamp made out of a found meat grinder head and a rocking bike base; and *when the context of the current moment falls away (wahala tray)* (2024), a container-like piece made up of a found aluminium bowl, Portuguese marble, and steel.

This inversion of signs is also a feature of *seven useless flagpoles playing with gaud* (2022), placed behind *RESPAWN* on the ground floor and visible from above on the staircase and an accessible close-up via an almost hidden passage through *RESPAWN* on the right. From above, their main statement is their "uselessness," with the flagpoles not bearing any flags, the balls at their ends signifying their nakedness—an anti-nationalist echo of Kanu's utopia of self-governance.[3] When seen from below, however, we notice the curious objects that hold the bottom of the flagpoles: a pyramid-shaped holder in plastic and metal, a black urn, a rusty mechanical part, a cauldron-shaped filled urn, an old lamp foot in what looks like gold-coloured bronze, and a two-piece metallic sculpture. Small objects from unknown everyday lives, designed by someone, somewhere—their purpose lying elsewhere. In this way, the main part of the *seven useless flagpoles* is not at the top, where the flags would have been, but in their foundation, i.e., the object-instead-of-soil that hold the flagpoles.

These four pieces placed in direct connection with *RESPAWN* also give an indication of the kind of materialism that Kanu works with—not so much a reanimation or reinvigoration of functionalism, as his work is often referred to, but rather the new materialism of alternative cultural theories from the 1990s and 2000s theorised by scholars such as Rosi Braidotti.[4] This *new materialism* is self-referential and self-reflexive in the same way as Internet culture's meme creation, inherently anti-materialist, and rooted in an understanding of the modified object as the artistic expression of the people.

Seen through this lens of new materialism, the two pieces on the main, upper level of the gallery become slightly more interpretable. The central piece, *Untitled* (2024) is a sofa-shaped sculpture of steel cylinders, MDF boards, and screws. Placed in the middle of the room facing the social housing apartment blocks opposite Espaço Lumiar Cité.[5] *Untitled* at once invites us to sit down to watch the social life opposite (perhaps a reference to the *Neighbours* mural by Mariana Duarte Santos in Bairro 2.º de Maio) and pushes away from this kind of perverse interaction with the surroundings, highlighted by the promised discomfort of the design with its too-high armrests in cold, industrial steel and the MDF boards where cushions would normally be. Behind *Untitled*, a 2D mirrored version of the anti-climb raptor spike of *literal stance decrepit*[6] hangs as if it were a customary house portrait of our times.[7] This piece, *Anti-Climb Raptor Spike Reflections* (2023), is at once beautiful and uncanny: a mirror of the barriers and hindrances omnipresent in our contemporary society that reflects on the expectation and respect society itself seems to give these boundaries.

Together, the pieces of *Preenchendo Vazios* make up a kind of interior of a conceptual home, with the flagpoles in the courtyard, the sofa and the mirror in the main room, and the *lumiar* lamp and the sculptures on top of *RESPAWN* continuing the living room decor. Speaking to the artist, it becomes clear that the creation of spaces that make people feel at home while asking discomfiting questions lie at the heart of his thought process.[8] It is then no surprise that the show has this uncanny, conceptual tension of discomfort with the reality outside and homeliness.

It is a pleasure to see an exhibition that is at once so contemporary—in a global, local, and multicultural (and therefore multi-referential) sense—and so grounded. While the works that make up *Preenchendo Vazios* may be elusive intellectually, with veiled possible readings and unverifiable interpretations, emotionally they convey a palpable tension of comfort and discomfort—a feeling that stayed with me for weeks after seeing the show. More than anything, the exhibition shows that Dozie Kanu has only begun to develop a visual language of new materialism; and I for one can't wait to see what he has in store for us in the years to come.

Dozie Kanu (<https://www.doziekanu.com/>)

Lumiar Cité (<https://www.maumaus.org/>)

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Dozie Kanu, *Preenchendo Vazios*. Exhibition views at Lumiar Cité, Lisbon, 2024. Photos: Daniel Malhão. Courtesy Maumaus/Lumiar Cité.

[1] Referring to Rosalind Krauss' concept of sculpture in the expanded field as the new form of postmodernist sculpture. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (Spring, 1979): 30–44.

[2] Dozie Kanu stresses that his artistic process and material visual language are first and foremost intuitive. Conversation with Dozie Kanu, 16 February 2024.

[3] In an interview by Jereh Das, Dozie Kanu says: "I think the future is really going to be more about self-governance, and more people taking ownership of themselves and their destiny, as corny as that sounds. ... I think the elusiveness in my work and my own personal categorisation comes from a place of self-governance, and a disobedience rooted in having the authority to place myself wherever or nowhere." Jereh Das, "Nigerian-American artist Dozie Kanu on disrupting the norm," *Wallpaper** (4 March 2021).

[4] See Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (eds.), *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* (Open Humanities Press, 2012), in the series Graham Harman and Bruno Latour (eds.), *New Metaphysics* (Open Humanities Press).

[5] Conversation with Dozie Kanu, 16 February 2024.

[6] As explained by the artist. Ibid.

[7] Customary portrait in the sense that it was customary to have a portrait of Vladimir Lenin or Joseph Stalin on the wall in the USSR, Mao Zedong in China, and Kim Il Sung in North Korea (the latter was mandatory in the 1970s).

[8] Conversation with Dozie Kanu, 16 February 2024.