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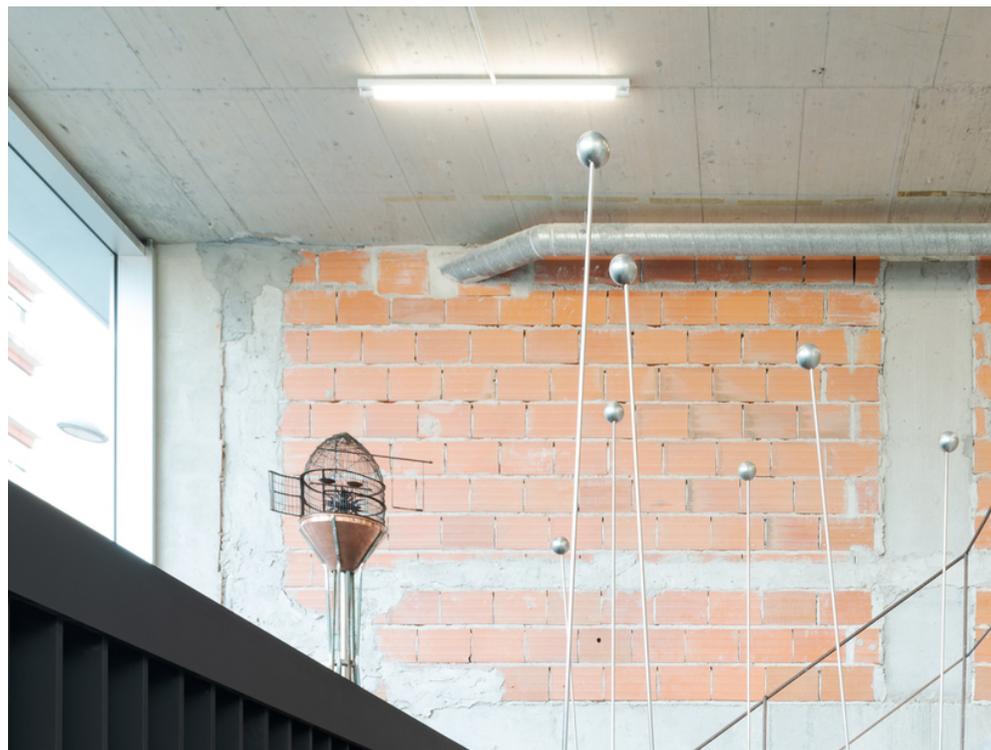
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ART & CULTURE

Preenchendo Vazios by Dozie Kanu at Lumiar Cité

👤 *Maria Inês Augusto*

Teasing, evoking and restricting: this is how Dozie Kanu bridges the chasm in what is his first major exhibition in Portugal. Born and raised in Texas to Nigerian immigrant parents, Kanu, already a household name on the international art stage, lives and works nowadays in a warehouse that he converted into a studio in Santarém. This is where he now defies the boundaries of art, form and materiality.



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I headed to [Lumiar Cité](#) for the exhibition and I confess that I made my way there with excitement and the expectation that I would be witnessing the outcome of a transformative process, the fruit of careful critical thinking. As I entered, I was struck by what seemed to me to be a colossal mdf structure painted black. This visually restricting structure, which demands an action – going round it – changes the layout of the space and brings to mind what is already known about Kanu’s work: his keen interest in building tensions and providing new perspectives.

After skirting the large wall (I should point out that later on I found out that it was not just a wall and that it served another purpose), a guessing game commences. I feel the urge to identify and guess the objects (or parts of them) comprising this seven-part set. I reckon they were once discarded and now take on new forms. “The objects are tired, they are weary of our perpetual rebuilding of them as objects under our desire and affection. They are exhausted by our longing for them. They are tired of us and we of them.”^[1] This exhibition shows how these objects, released from our affection as everyday objects, but not exempt from their identification through our memory, are handled, in a more or less subtle way, and now serve the field of art. A brass lamp base, a cauldron and part of a 50s/60s hairdryer are some of the items that have given up their purpose and are now used to hold up flagpoles with spheres at the edges that render them useless (*seven useless flagpoles playing with gaud*, 2022).

Using these “finds” – a well-known feature of the artist’s practice – indicates, among other factors, a willingness to put forward a new perspective; one that is achieved precisely by relocating commonly used materials to exhibition settings, turning them into a kind of contemporary artefact. Kanu’s act of choosing and collecting



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expresses a willingness and interest in items that were previously embedded in the world and will bring with them a layer of meaning which the artist is compelled to articulate over the course of the creative process. Each of these elements is no longer dictated by its original role and is given new connections. They evade the original identity that gives them a purpose, a fate. Art historian and curator Kellie Jones views the transformation of discarded objects so that they can be reinvented with new meaning in the artistic realm as a form of alchemy, where mundane objects are turned into artworks that re-signify their original function^[2]. Kanu's transformation reflects his awareness of issues and notions relating to meaning, emphasises the creative and expressive potential in reusing and reinventing materials, and challenges the limits of functionality, materiality, utility and, of course, form.

On the upper floor I notice that the mdf wall is actually also the stage for three other pieces, one of which is immediately recognisable as a cage (*literal stance decrepit, regress with love*, 2024). I remember Fyodor Dostoevsky describing them, in the poem idealised by the character Ivan Karamazov, as places where certainties dwell^[3]. As the exhibition text itself states, Kanu's intention with this show is to address the "blind spots in Western institutions dedicated to art history discourses". Kanu perhaps wants us to break free from these certainties related to exhibition sites and their criteria and reveal other perspectives. The certainty we can have with this cage, however, is that it is turned upside down, that it adopts the opposite role and that, in some way, it imposes the wish for freedom. Whilst, on the one hand, the open door and the swing and feeder on the outside are inviting, on the other hand, the sharp, austere object inside (whose primary role is to scare birds away) is repelling. This object is an obvious and



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unsettling provocation that plays an important role in Kanu's recent pieces and can be identified in other works, particularly in the shape of *Anti-Climb Raptor Spike Reflections* (2023), a work in cut and engraved glass, in the cradle entitled *Bhad (Their Newborn's Crib)* (2019) and in the piece *Hemorrhaged and Made Deaf* (2020).

As with the open cage, the sofa also looks appealing at first glance. Facing large windows and with its back to those who enter, it is immediately and inevitably perceived as a utilitarian object. However, as we approach this sofa-sculpture, we realise that, instead of upholstered seats and nails, we have slabs of chipboard, bicycle chains, armrests and a jagged metal structure that suppresses the first instinct - to sit down.

I believe that *Preenchendo Vazios* poses several questions. The evocation of memory, by recognising the objects; what they really are or what they could be; what form and function are and, finally - and perhaps because I come from a background of examining and assessing art objects - the question of changing value. A meat grinder projecting light, hooks on the floor incapable of fulfilling their purpose (hanging) and bicycle parts all have a value in the everyday context, but they acquire another purpose, another worth, in the realm of art, being the same thing - but not quite the same thing.

I reached the end of the exhibition feeling that it is appropriate to stress that the artist's early career in production design for film and theatre clearly influenced his metaphysical approach to objects. I believe I have experienced his fondness for a kind of deliberate mise-en-scène, something that also distinguishes his work and his exhibitions.

Preenchendo Vazios can be seen at Lumiar Cité until April 14, 2024.



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[1] Bill Brown. (2001). Things. In *Things - Source: Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 1, p. 15.

[2] Reference made by Makayla Bailey in the text on the exhibition *Function*, at the Studio Museum Harlem.

[3] “We are like this. We dream of flying, but we fear heights / To fly you have to love the void / Because the flight only happens if there is emptiness / The void is the space of freedom, the absence of certainties / Men want to fly, but they fear emptiness / They cannot live without certainty / That’s why they exchange flying for cages / Cages are the place where certainties live.” in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

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MARIA INÊS AUGUSTO

Maria Inês Augusto, 33, has a degree in Art History. She worked at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MNAC) as a trainee in the Educational Services department and for 9 years at the Palácio do Correio Velho as an appraiser and cataloguer of works of art and collecting. She took part in the Postgraduate Programme in Art Markets at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities of Universidade Nova de Lisboa as a guest lecturer and is currently working on a project to curate exhibitions of emerging artists. She has been producing different types of texts, from catalogues and exhibition texts to room sheets. She also collaborated with BoCA - Biennial of Contemporary Arts 2023.
