

# AnOther<sup>Magazine</sup>

The Young Artist Working at the Intersection of Industrial Design and Art



Artwork by Dozie Kanu, Photography by Theo Christelis, Courtesy of Soft Opening

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TEXT: Bryony Stone

How do we deal with anxiety? Well, according to industrial designer-turned-artist Dozie Kanu, there are two options: celebration or death. These polarised responses are the subject of Humane Alternatives, Kanu's first solo show in London currently on display at Soft Opening – a subterranean space at Piccadilly Circus that curator Antonia Marsh has transformed into a tiny 24-hour gallery, accessible to anyone who stumbles down into the tube station.

In the world of industrial design, Texan-born Kanu is having a moment. After studying film at New York's School of Visual Arts, Kanu went on to work with special events company Bureau Betak, contemporary design store Matter Made and interior designer Carol Egan. Last year, a

cement bench dyed purple referencing Houston's custom car culture and rap's favoured intoxicant purple drank transported the young designer into Salon 94 and Macacarone gallery's exhibition Midtown, generating a buzz around Kanu which hasn't died down since.

Using 'celebration' and 'death' or 'execution' as its starting points, Humane Alternatives plays out in two objects, each splintered into three parts. Death is characterised in an electric chair, recalling the history of capital punishment in Kanu's home state. Constructed in serene white marble, the chair is broken up into a seat, back and base served up on three plinths. Celebration is recalled contrastingly quietly in a triptych of mini wooden dancefloors framed with glinting metal. Side-stepping the crowds at Frieze, we asked Kanu to decode his mesmerising six-part exhibition.



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### **On bracing himself for the predominantly white design industry...**

"My first design objects were a set of chairs that were shown in an art exhibition stacked, black on top of white, as a gesture of dominance – a sort of internal pep-talk for myself against white supremacy."

### **On the inspiration behind that electric chair...**

“I had the idea of replicating an electric chair for a while. But thinking about public executions for capital crimes through glass displays led to me feeling that Soft Opening was the appropriate context to exhibit an electric chair. I found several additional layers in the work, while on the surface I was interested in expressing my feelings of becoming more public about my practice and how it affects me and also how everyday people could relate to that. I looked at ‘celebration’ – and ‘execution’ or ‘death’ – as polar opposites on the spectrum of how we deal with anxiety. I also pushed myself to make work that transcended the boundaries of my past work being that this exhibition is on display underground. The works still serves a distinct purpose, but I tried to leave them wide open for interpretation.”



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### **On using material to subvert expectations...**

“I’ve been using marble quite frequently in my work as an aspirational symbol. Greek and Roman sculptors and architects were always using marble – it represented taste and eternal adoration for them and I think marble still carries that same energy. It also kind of feels like I’m going against what’s stereotypically expected of me when I use a material like marble.”

### **On the soothing power of three...**

“I wanted to separate the chair and make assembly instructions for it. It just so happened that it became three pieces. I decided to make the same number of dancefloor panels in the ‘electric slide’ pieces. Three felt like just enough and there’s also something soothing about it.”

### **On finding himself through work...**

“I think this exhibition is a bold acknowledgment of my enormous interest in bringing concepts that reach far outside the realm of design into my work. I’m all about making functional objects but the functional layer of my work is merely just a layer. I don’t care much about what my label is at this point. I’m going to continue making objects that are an authentic representation of who I am and the things that I’ve been thinking about.”



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