

Meet the Young Designer Making Very Interesting Furniture

Adam Wray, June 7, 2017



Dozie Kanu is waiting for his bench to arrive. "I think this piece is gonna mesh really well," he says, surveying the bright, second-floor gallery space it will soon occupy. "I'm just imagining the chrome glistening." The bench is on its way to the Lever House in New York, where it will be installed as part of "Midtown," a generation-bridging group show that places the work of legendary practitioners like Isamu Noguchi and Gaetano Pesce alongside nascent talents like Kanu. Open through this week, the show is a partnership between Salon 94 and Maccarone gallery.

For Kanu, a 24-year-old Houston transplant, "Midtown" is a milestone that called for commemoration. "The bench was created after I took a step back and looked at the reality of what it meant for me to be participating in this exhibition alongside some of the most respected individuals in the art and design worlds," he says. "It's also an expression of how I pushed myself to take steps farther and farther outside the box that I had the potential of

being confined to.” It’s a striking object, a slab of cement joined to gleaming car wheels by industrial piping. It’s also dense with autobiographical detail: The cement is dyed purple in reference to the promethazine cough syrup used to make lean, the narcotic cocktail popularized partly by Houston rappers, and the wheels are the classic elbow wire rims favored by the city’s custom car culture. Commingling hometown symbolism with a sleek modernism, it represents both where Kanu came from — and where he’s going.

Kanu left Houston for New York City in 2012 to attend the School of Visual Arts as a film student. His interest in object design grew out of an affinity for purposeful mise-en-scène. “I was into films that were really well art directed,” he says. “Stylized, Kubrick-esque films where everything in each scene was completely on point. That led to falling in love with gallery spaces. I would take complete days just to gallery hop. It was like church, kind of.” Kanu turned this newfound enthusiasm back toward film and delved into set design. “Soon everyone was asking me to do the sets and art direction for their films, because no other students were focused on that. I became the go-to.”

While studying at SVA, Kanu took a job with the designer Carol Egan, for whom he produced samples, and then worked at Matter Made, a Brooklyn manufacturing studio. From there, he began his own practice. Last year, he designed his first piece of furniture, a chair whose sleek, midcentury curves are set off by a Klein-blue cushion. It caught the eye of his friend Matthew Williams, the designer of the fashion brand Alyx, who photographed it for Nick Knight’s SHOWstudio platform. Kanu considers this a turning point: “Now that I look back, that moment gave me the confidence to take this seriously.” (A chance encounter with the veteran dealer Paul Johnson at Design Miami led Kanu to a meeting with the Salon 94 founder Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, who saw his work as a natural fit for “Midtown.”)

His next two objects — a table made from Portuguese marble mounted on hardware store castors and a chair made from chrome tiles, a birch frame and foam armrests affixed with cargo straps — embody the same mix of high and low materials represented in his new bench. “There’s always that level of relatability juxtaposed with luxury,” he says. “Something that’s really well done, but there’s something punk about it, something to throw it off. You have to add elements that clash.”

This impulse to scramble signifiers puts him in step with some of his other notable peers — besides Williams, Kanu also has rapper Travis Scott and Off-White designer Virgil Abloh in his corner as admirers. Scott, in fact, was one of Kanu’s high school classmates, and the two have remained friends and confidantes ever since. But Kanu is careful to keep the realm of celebrity at arm’s length. “I don’t want to have that lens too focused on me,” he says. “It’s easy to get lost in that world. The visibility is good for getting the message out but right now the focus is having a sturdy foundation.” Now working from a shared studio space in Brooklyn, Kanu is well on his way.

Though his career has only just begun, Kanu envisions his as a generous practice — he is already thinking about inspiring the next generation. “Especially black youngsters in America. So many of them feel there are no alternatives to rap, basketball or, now, trying to be a fashion designer. There are so many lanes to take. I’m just trying to expose that to them.”