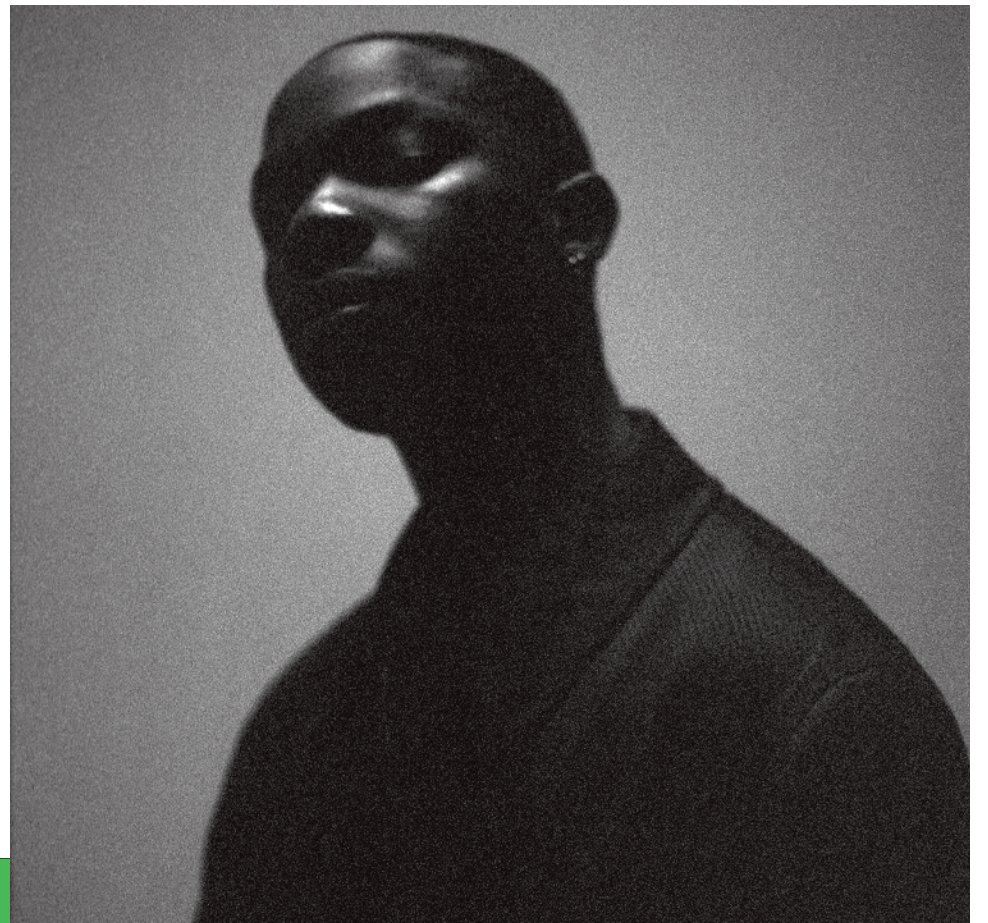


An Interview with

by M. Lawrence Dillon



Dozie Kanu has been making waves in the design community since he displayed a bench as part of an exhibition called “Midtown” at Lever House in New York City. The bench is arresting in its aggression and simplicity. The top is a solid slab of purple-dyed concrete fitted with industrial-grade Schedule 40 pipe atop two chrome-plated Swangas Cadillac rims. As a designed object, the bench provokes a re-evaluation of how we define and display success while still functioning as a bench. It is a powerful expression of this young artist’s voice. In mid-February I sat down with Dozie at the Rothko Chapel to discuss upbringing, hip hop, rebellion, and art. An edited and abridged account of the interview follows.

Where did you grow up?

I grew up on the southwest side of Houston, and around 3rd or 4th grade we moved to Missouri City. So the demographic of my schooling sort of changed. It went from being predominantly black and hispanic to going to a white elementary school—primarily white students.

Looking back that had a pretty impactful effect on me. When you’re coming home to a different culture it’s sort of difficult to find where you fit at school.

What kind of kids did you hang around?

People who were extremely ambitious, who saw—you know—life outside of Houston. Who saw, real possibilities and capabilities of what they were able to accomplish.

One of my best friends, I used to go to his house after school and he’d produce music, and he’d always say crazy emphatic statements like, “I’m gonna meet Kanye West one day. We’re gonna be best friends! I’m gonna be in the studio with Jay Z!”

At the time you’d say, “Uhhhh, alright, how are you gonna do that?”

Day by day, year by year, things progressed and I remember being in New York and him saying, “Hey, come to the studio, I’m here with Kanye.” And being like... Whoa. You really did it. You know?

Were you a good kid?

I was rebellious, but it was a rebellious nature that was grounded in the fact that I would always make sure that I was doing no wrong.

For example, I had a friend that I had met online who lived in New York. They had a really large network in the fashion scene in New York. They were styling people like Diddy.

They invited me to fashion week. I was a sophomore in high school. So, I get this person to write my principal a letter saying that “We are inviting him...” you know, make it sound professional, like I needed to leave.

I told my parents about it and they were like, “Absolutely not! You’re not missing school just to go hang out in New York.” The guy had already booked the flights for me.

The night before my flight I put all of my luggage in the garage before they went to bed so that they wouldn’t hear me bringing down my luggage and stuff. And I called a taxi out of the phone book, and went to the airport while they were sleeping. I turned my phone off.

When I landed in New York I had all these missed messages from my mom and my dad. I’m not answering, I’m not texting them back. They’re really worried, they don’t know where I am.

Finally I decided to text my mom ... ” I’m so sorry mom. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity. I went to New York, I’m gonna be back on this date, my flight lands at this time. Don’t worry about me, I’m safe.” They were furious!

That ended up being a very pivotal moment in my life where I was just ... alright, I gotta get out of Texas. I met a lot of people that I ended up linking up with when I finally

“Bench on 84’s” (2017).
Courtesy Dozie Kanu



moved out there after high school. Yeah. That was just one of the examples of me being rebellious and saying, “No. I’m not following your rules.”

You studied at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. What was that like?

I was probably one of the only ones that had production design as their focus. So I was always busy.

When I was doing production design stuff a lot of the students didn’t have big budgets. So I wasn’t really doing the typical task of the real production designer. It was pretty much having an iPhone and searching junk yards and garage sales and things like that.

That was mainly what I was doing and after a while I was like ... Nah, I can’t keep doing stuff like this. So in a weird way doing production design at that level taught me how to maximize having nothing. How to maximize having zero resources.

Can you describe the work you’re doing right now?

I’m working with readymade objects and configuring them in a way that holds some symbolic value and at the same time still performs the functional aspect that it needs to perform which aesthetically fits with this design language I’m trying to develop.

I think after a few years that will eventually evolve into fabricating from scratch.

What influence does the world of hip hop have on your work, if any?

Even the 84s is a reference to hip hop culture, because in Houston rap the vast majority of Houston rappers have referenced, you know, Swangas in their raps. Chopped and Screwed, DJ Screwed, they always always referenced Swangas, and to me they represent Houston in a weird way. Not Houston the city, but Houston in the rap sense. Codeine. Promethazine. Grills. Slabs. Customizing your car. All of this stuff plays into the stereotypical Houston rapper or Houston rap scene, which I tried to implement into that piece.

Hip hop is important. Rap is like a religion at this point.

What are some of the goals you have?

There is a space within the spectrum of design that straddles the line between art and design. You can make that line hazy to people by the way that you respect the designed object.

In the eighties people were willing to buy Basquiat’s work, wealthy collectors, and hang his pieces on their walls. But that is a different experience than buying a design object from a Black artist.

Now I want to pose the question are they willing to engage with a Black artist who is making design objects? Will that be as easy for them?

Question design, and question art. Sort of carve a space for myself into the history of design art. I can’t wait for things to progress more so that I can really flex my skill in putting together worlds.

What comes next from Young Dozie?

I made the bench last year in May for the big group show that I participated in, and shortly after that I had the idea of turning that into a collection of other pieces with that same concept.

Recently the gallery gave me the funding to do it, and I gotta say, the response has been far better than the bench, just because it feels a little bit more accessible.

Final question, why did you choose the Rothko Chapel to meet today?

I believe in the power of art. In a weird way religion is a sort of a dying concept. More and more people are choosing not to believe in any religion. There are more atheists now than ever. I just think that it’s important to put your faith in something.

I could go on and on about why I think this place is important, but, yeah. It’s one of my favorite places in the city.



“Marble Cube Table” (2016) and “TeePee Home” (2016).
Courtesy Dozie Kanu.