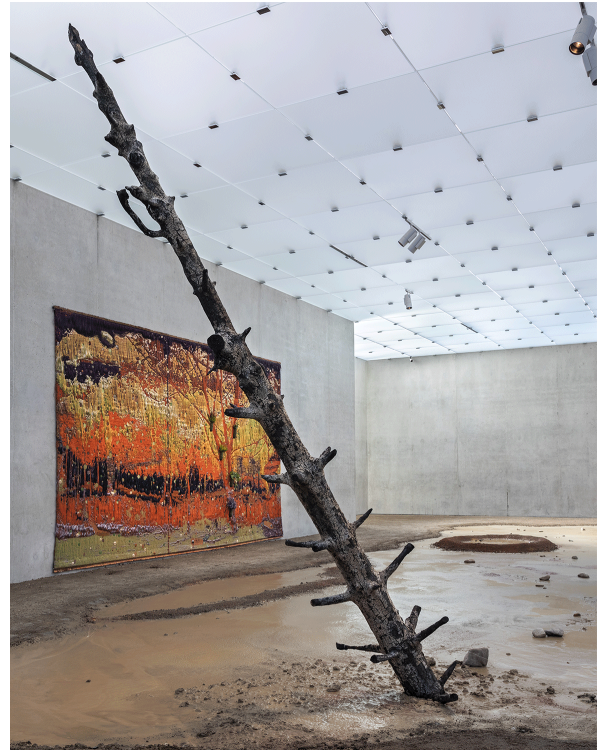


‘Humans are only a small, minute part of the ecosystem,’ says Otobong Nkanga over a Zoom call from her studio, ‘but we as beings have forgotten this.’ It’s an observation that reverberates throughout the Nigerian-born, Antwerp-based artist’s urgent, challenging, and yet ultimately optimistic practice, which ranges from drawings to large-scale installations, from performances to projects in the social realm. To see the world through Nkanga’s eyes is to see not merely a stage on which Homo sapiens play out their all too often solipsistic and (self-) destructive dramas, but rather to see a shared habitat, in which what she terms countless ‘life forms’ (which include fauna and flora as well as soil and rivers, seas and mountains) coexist, connected in a great web of being.

Currently the subject of a solo exhibition, ‘Craving for Southern Light’ at IVAM València, Spain – a show that is, among other things, a meditation on weather, light, and heat – Nkanga is also a totemic presence in the Hayward Gallery, London’s environmentally-focused summer group exhibition ‘Dear Earth: Art and Hope in a Time of Crisis’. The Hayward show is billed as inspired by the artist’s proposition that ‘caring is a form of resistance’. What this means, says Nkanga, is that attentiveness to ‘other types of life that do not have a voice as we do’ is the basis for countering ‘what the economy has to say, what capital has to say, what politicians decide’ about the non-human elements of our ecosystem. At a time of planetary emergency, such care is what’s needed to ensure ‘the possibility of existence’ in the critical years to come.



Left : Otobong Nkanga. Photograph by Wim van Dongen.

Right: Installation View of Otobong Nkanga, *Unearthed – Sunlight*, Kunsthaus Bregenz, Bregenz, Austria, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.



Otobong Nkanga, *Double Plot*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

Featured in 'Dear Earth', Nkanga's vast tapestry *Double Plot* (2018) is based on an image of the solar system, taken by NASA in 2011. Light from distant, long-dead stars bears down on our corner of the cosmos, having journeyed here for many thousands of years, while four superimposed photographic discs depict scenes of contemporary civil unrest. Presiding over all this is an enigmatic headless figure, who we might interpret as a kind of puppet master, pulling on the strings of history. Looking at the work, we get to thinking that while the universe may be glimpsed from an infinite number of standpoints, both spatial and temporal, its every atom is nevertheless a part of the same whole. Nkanga relates *Double Plot* to 'thinking within African philosophy [about] time as a flat plane where everything collapses.' Like the starlight in her tapestry, 'your ancestors are part of your life in the present, and they are also the ones who show you the way into the future.' There are calls to action all around us, if only we have eyes to see and ears to hear.



Otobong Nkanga, *Remains of the Green Hill*, 2015. Photograph by Aurelien Mole. Courtesy of the artist.

In 2015, Nkanga visited a copper mine in Namibia. The site is colloquially known as Green Hill, a name that recalls a time when its mineral-rich slopes glowed with verdant oxidized copper, small pieces of which the local San people would carve out for use in trade. In the early 20th century, German colonists transformed it into a bleak crater through blast mining, and in the artist's video work *Remains of the Green Hill* (2015) we see her standing on the site's jagged edge, her back to the viewer, like the figure in Caspar David Friedrich's painting *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818). And yet, unlike Friedrich's *Wanderer*, Nkanga isn't expressing mastery over this landscape, but rather addressing it in song, acknowledging the resources that have been plundered from this place, and the cost incurred to human and other life. It's something she describes as an act of 'appeasement,' similar to pouring 'a libation on the ground.' 'We all extract, we all take things out' of the earth, she says, 'but appeasement has no place in the agenda of exploitative companies and structures.'

To thank the land for the gifts it yields up (and apologize for those we wrest from it) is for Nkanga a way of balancing our relationship with the planet we call home. Perhaps her most visually striking project to date, Nkanga's 2021 solo exhibition at Kunsthaus Bregenz in Austria was themed around the four vertical oceanic layers, which range from the deep abyss to the near-surface sunlight zone. Its central feature was a 44-meter-tall mistletoe-choked tree, which appeared to rise from a stagnant pool on the ground floor, and push up through the first and second floor spaces before its leafless tip emerged into the upper gallery. Here, drifts of arid soil suggested a barren, uninhabitable landscape, and a tapestry entitled *Unearthed – Sunlight* (2021) combined woven images of a heat-scorched forest with tendrils of living ivy, a plant long associated with cemeteries. Nkanga says the show developed from contemplating what the bottom of the sea contains, including the drowned 'bodies of millions of people taken from the African continent and moved towards the Americas.' Over the centuries they have 'been transformed into minerals' and are now prone to being extracted from the seabed and put to (likely environmentally destructive) use.



Installation view of Otobong Nkanga, *The Workstation, Carved to Flow*, Athens, Greece, 2017. Photograph by Wim van Dongen. Courtesy of the artist.

In many ways an apocalyptic vision, the Bregenz exhibition was also concerned with how 'life [...] comes out of death.' Once the show closed, many of its components were redeployed: the tree was chopped up for firewood, and the soil used to build a house for the daughter of Nkanga's collaborator on the project, the architect Martin Rauch. 'I don't like the word "sustainable", I never did,' the artist says. 'The whole system has to change.' Nevertheless, this approach points to a still-uncommon way of conceptualizing exhibition making (and unmaking), in which a show is a temporary way station for materials and energies, rather than their expiration point.

The ongoing project *Carved to Flow* (2017-) began life as part of documenta 14, an exhibition sited in both Athens and Kassel, Germany. Nkanga set up a laboratory in the Greek capital, developing prototypes of ten handmade cold process soaps from raw vegetable fats, herbs, and essential oils, set in hexagonal molds. From this emerged a marbled black soap she named *O8 Blackstone*, and in Kassel she created a series of tower- or well-like sculptures from some 15,000 bars, which were slowly sold to help fund two distinct, yet related initiatives. One is a nonprofit art space in Athens, Akwa Ibom, which takes its name from Nkanga's father's home village, and which she established with the curator Maya Tounta to stage key exhibitions of previously below-the-radar artists such as Thanasis Totsikas. The second is a foundation in the form of an organic farm outside the original Akwa Ibom in Nigeria, managed day-to-day by Nkanga's brother, Peter Nkanga, an investigative journalist. Using biodiversity-sensitive planting practices, it grows everything from African fluted pumpkins to plantains, pineapples to passion fruit trees.



Left: Otobong Nkanga, *O8 Black Stone*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist. Right: *Carved to Flow* Foundation land in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Courtesy of the artist.



Installation view of Otobong Nkanga, *The Carrier* (Ji Yun Lee), *Carved to Flow*, Kassel, Germany, 2017. Photograph by Lena Heubusch. Courtesy of the artist.

Nkanga is firm that the foundation is for the people of Akwa Ibom, ‘not something established with the international art world in mind’. Anybody who turns up at the farm can draw free clean water from its pumps, and charge their mobile phone from its solar-powered generators for a nominal fee. Local women sell the farm’s produce at market, villagers are employed as laborers, and young people learn how food might be produced without the environmentally devastating, recklessly short-term techniques of industrial agriculture. The artist tells me that she wants the foundation to ‘open up another way of looking at food, at the landscape.’ While it is a practical project, rooted in a community’s immediate, everyday needs, it’s also ‘a way of imagining what is possible,’ and that at this perilous moment in our planetary story ‘not all is lost’.



Carved to Flow Foundation land in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Courtesy of the artist.



Installation view of Jason Dodge, *They lifted me into the sun again and packed my empty skull with cinnamon*, Akwa Ibom, Nigeria, Athens, Greece, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.

Otobong Nkanga is represented by [In Situ – fabienne leclerc](#), Paris; [Lisson Gallery](#), London, Los Angeles, New York, Shanghai; and Lumen Travo Gallery, Amsterdam.

Tom Morton is a writer and curator based in Rochester, UK. He is a regular contributor to *frieze* and *ArtReview*, and in 2022 curated the group exhibition ‘The Kingfisher’s Wing’ at GRIMM, New York.

This is the first in a series of articles featuring artists whose practices consider ecology and inspire optimism.

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Caption for full-bleed images: 1. Installation view of Otobong Nkanga, *Dear Earth: Art and Hope in a Time of Crisis*, London, England, 2023. Photograph by Mark Blower. Courtesy of the Hayward Gallery. 2. Installation View of Otobong Nkanga, *Unearthed – Sunlight*, Kunsthhaus Bregenz, Bregenz, Austria, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.