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Otobong Nkanga Excavates Material Histories

Her work – currently on view in solo exhibitions at Gropius Bau, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter and Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art – pulls tragedy from landscape

S BY [SKYE ARUNDHATI THOMAS](#) IN **FEATURES** | 30 OCT 20



In the spring of 2015, Otobong Nkanga visited a copper mine near the town of Tsumeb in Namibia. She stood in front of it and made a song. She sang to the land and, with her song, she apologised. She apologised to its earlier names, which were lost with the arrival of foreign invaders. She apologised to the languages no longer spoken in its vicinity, and to the lives erased from history. Nkanga was born in Nigeria and is of Ibibio descent. In Ibibio culture, before you begin an event or a significant task, you call upon the ancestors and offer libations; you ask them to be witness and guide. This disputes Western understandings of linear time, or the telling of history in which things end or die.

Tsumeb was home to the San peoples, who would carve out small pieces of copper ore from the surface of the bedrock and use them for trade. In the early 20th century, German colonialists started blast-mining, using dynamite to set underground fires. Nkanga had been told the mine was colloquially referred to as Green Hill, because it was so mineral rich that it glowed the vivid emerald tones of oxidized copper. Instead, Nkanga found a bleak terrain. The green-hued metals had long been blown out and the rugged landscape carried the evidence of extraction and dispossession. It was a ruin that could no longer represent its name. Nkanga apologised to Green Hill because her understandings of body and landscape are ancient: the two are inextricably, supernaturally linked. Time and history are continuous. 'The past is not yet over,' writer Saidiya Hartman put it in *Lose Your Mother* (2006), 'I am the vestige of the dead.'



Otobong Nkanga, *In Pursuit of Bling*, 2014, video stills. Courtesy: the artist and Mendes Wood DM, Brussels/São Paulo

Nkanga brings the past closer. In order to do so, she turns to the land. In the sculptural installation *Solid Maneuvers* (2015) – made after her visit to Green Hill – pressed metals, Forex and tar are held up by thin metal poles. They hover above ground like layers of frozen jelly, mimicking the smooth, scalloped topography of cut-out land. They are comprised of sheets of mineral metals like copper, brass, steel and aluminium as well as petroleum-derived acrylic and tar. In a short video made on the occasion of her 2020 solo show at Berlin's Gropius Bau, Nkanga describes *Solid Maneuvers* as the 'translation of a mountain'. Over the surface of the work, she gathers the traces of landscape: white and pink salts, glittering vermiculite, heavy sands (thick with the residue of crushed copper), talc, clay, and blue and green make-up spill over the structure. One etymology of the name Tsumeb holds that it comes from a San word meaning 'to dig a hole that collapses again' – an endless cycle, a still-alive land, despite its exhumation.

In an eponymous, site-specific performance, Nkanga steps into the centre of the installation and rubs the different powders between her fingers, then onto her face and arms. She acts out certain, precise movements, dispersing the soft, colourful particles around her body. In engaging with the material in this way, she shows us how the body – through its labour, and by entering and transforming landscape – has continuously reinvented its relationship to matter. She stages her own unique ritual inside the work – the 'mountain' – in a nod to how traditional or cultural ceremonies across the world are dynamic and hybrid. Her gestures recall the Marxist adage (from *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848): 'All that is solid melts into air.'

In Nkanga's practice, material is the carrier of history that extends into the everyday. Each substance she works with is rich with narratives of trade, loss, migration and conflict. Material is archive, memory and also monument; it imparts not only colonial histories but those of family and of place. It is spiritual and has the power to speak. The cultivation and trade of just three items – sugar, coffee and tobacco – transformed three entire continents and forcibly displaced millions of people, tying them into slavery or bonded labour for generations. The labouring body cannot be separated from material, and material cannot be separated from land.



Otobong Nkanga, *In Pursuit of Bling – Desire*, 2014, photograph, Lambda print, 60 x 40 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Mendes Wood DM, Brussels/São Paulo

Nkanga follows the trade routes of spices, minerals and oils to map out their racialized, capitalist inheritance. Her practice – which encompasses drawing, painting, photography, collage, performance and creating immersive, atmospheric installations – is thus a sensitive study of land, body and material. In *Anamnesis* (2018), first shown at the Deichtorhallen Hamburg, Nkanga hollowed out parts of a wall to fill it up with a mixture of tea, cumin, cinnamon, cardamom, clove, coriander, pepper, cacao, vanilla, peat and coffee. Its many, heady scents permeated the air. *Anamnesis* was a parable of migration, the spices, minerals and plants softening into each other, just like their individual histories.

For documenta 14, which took place between Athens and Kassel, Nkanga initiated the project *Carved to Flow* (2017–ongoing). In the Greek capital, she set up a laboratory consisting of workshops, talks and cold-process soap-making, which can be traced back to the Ancient Egyptians, who used vegetable oil and animal fat to produce soap-like bars for bathing and perfume. Nkanga, with soap maker Evi Lachana, handmade ten different soap prototypes in hexagonal moulds. Of these, one was a marbled black soap they named *O8 Blackstone*, composed only of raw ingredients: olive, laurel, sage and coconut oils; shea, babassu and cocoa butters; charcoal and camwood; indigo; seeds and perfumed essential oils. The oils and butters were sourced from Greece, North and West Africa and the Middle East: lands that have historically provided the world with their resources.

In Kassel, Nkanga made sculptures from 15,000 pieces of *O8 Blackstone* – towering, hollow wells around which visitors could walk. She slowly sold each soap, the profits from which are being used to fund an arts space in Athens and a foundation in Nigeria. With this project, Nkanga is testing out a circular economy: putting money back into people and land through an alternative funding model, which rejects neoliberal financial systems that are otherwise exploitative.



Otobong Nkanga, *Carved to Flow*, 2017–ongoing, and *Anamnesis*, 2018, installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. Courtesy: the artist and Mendes Wood DM, Brussels/São Paulo; photograph: Nathan Keay

Nkanga strives to create systems of care and repair. In order to do this, she recognizes that all modern procedures need to be reinvented. In nations like Nigeria, where the welfare state struggles to provide adequately for its citizens, community-based structures of care – the family, friendships, NGOs – take over. The more Nkanga investigates systems of production, the more cognisant she grows of the need to decentralize wealth and power. In 2020 – which writer Octavia E. Butler described, in an undated notecard, with remarkable foresight, as ‘the first year of the burn decade’ – this feels especially prescient as abolitionist conversations enter the mainstream.

O8 Blackstone thus speaks to power. ‘The Costs of War Project’, a 2020 Brown University report, details how, in the 19 years since the inception and undertaking of the US-led ‘global war on terror’, more than 800,000 people have died and at least 37 million have been displaced from eight countries. It was not a war on terror; it was a war about resources. With *O8 Blackstone*, Nkanga deconstructs the many sediments of petroleum and grease, turning them into a soap that, in itself, will eventually dissolve – the historic and political charge of each ingredient clarifying back into the ground from which it came.

'There's no such thing as solid ground', declares the last line of one of Nkanga's poems of the same name, written in 2020, which forms the title of her show at the Gropius Bau. Growing up in Yaba, Lagos, in the 1980s, Nkanga would walk to school in the early mornings as the light hit the muscovite mica deposits mixed into the asphalt of the streets. As the crystalline mineral glinted in the sun, its shimmer made her think of pop music, and Diana Ross. Mica, or 'Muscovy glass' – with its flashy, brilliant colours formed by potassium crystal groupings – was used to decorate homes in 18th-century Russia. In performances, Nkanga rubs mica powder onto her body, wanting to embody the glitter, that mode of shine. She holds up her hands and lets the fine particles flicker in the light, magicking shapes into thin air.



Otobong Nkanga, *Diaspora*, 2014, performance documentation, '14 Rooms', Art Basel. Courtesy: the artist and Mendes Wood DM, Brussels/São Paulo; photograph: Mark Niedermann

The installation *In Pursuit of Bling* (2014) unfolds like an epic tale. Two large, woven tapestries – featuring cascading gemstones that encircle headless bodies with torsos taken over by mining-like processes of extraction – are joined by a staggered display of geological samples of mica and copper, inkjet-print photographs, light boxes, texts printed on limestone, crystals and videos looped on small screens. In one of the videos, Nkanga elegantly moves through the streets of Berlin wearing a luminescent malachite crown while presenting shiny objects to passers-by. There is no such thing as solid ground in Nkanga's world because the ground – and all that is found within it – is memory, opulence and ritual.

In Nkanga's practice, land and body may be interchangeable premises, but they are also generative when placed together. 'The body remembers landscapes the mind may have forgotten,' she said to me in conversation. The body is also a mode of thinking. In many of her drawings and paintings, the human figures have no heads: a kind of rejection of racial profiles and Enlightenment rationality. In order for Nkanga to be drawn to a material, or to want to work with it, she has to feel it first. It has to pass through her body in some way. 'My heart has to palpitate, my skin has to have goose pimples; I have to struggle with it, fight with it,' she explains. Alone in her studio, joined by the materials she has collected, she often sings to them as she works.

In *Aging Ruins Dreaming Only to Recall the Hard Chisel from the Past* (2019) – a permanent installation in a previously untended garden of the Sharjah Art Foundation – a low sound tumbles out from between the trees: a recording of a group of children singing an old Emirati ‘rain song’. Several large, crater-like holes have been dug into the ground and filled with salty water. Light boxes, in sunset hues, line the garden walls. When Nkanga entered the space for the first time, she felt a twinge of empathy for a lone palm tree, which, against the greenery of surrounding plants, looked particularly dry and parched. She asked the tree: ‘What happened to you?’ Later, Nkanga travelled to Senegal, the largest salt-producing nation state in West Africa, where she visited the salt lakes and flats, observing how the salt had eaten through the landscape. A subconscious connection was made between the salt before her and the lone palm tree in Sharjah.



Otobong Nkanga, *In Pursuit of Bling*, 2014, video stills. Courtesy: the artist and Mendes Wood DM, Brussels/São Paulo

Aging Ruins is the result of a non-tangible way of thinking and making connections between places. It’s the realization of the things that we don’t always see, the things, as Nkanga says, ‘that hit against our skin, those that shift the molecules of our pores; the things that affect our psyche and our emotions’. Encountering the work, too, is a bodily experience: sound travels down the spine and leaps across the planted desert trees. Apart from the Emirati rain song, there are also pieces performed by Nkanga that ring throughout the space. Her voice spins across time and back to the ancestors. There is something inherently soothing about this work: in a contemporary moment where the future has all-but collapsed, a powerful way to think about the present is to see it as the culmination of all that has come before it.

Nkanga has often said that, across civilizations, we are and have always been ‘addicted to resources’. Empires have decayed or self-cannibalized over trade. She does not indulge in thinking that declares states of emergency; her understanding of time is unbroken. It is not as though the resource wars have just begun or are about to get worse in years to come; they have always been ongoing. When Nkanga looks at a landscape, she sees its scars – its hollowed-out, blasted and missing materials – but also its beauty and immense potential for resistance. She pulls the tragedy from the landscape in order to perform her acts of care and repair. Crisis is not extraordinary but, as Nkanga’s practice makes visible, our response to it must be.

*Otobong Nkanga is an artist. She currently has solo exhibitions at **Gropius Bau**, Berlin, Germany (until 13 December), **Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art**, UK (until 21 February 2021), and **Henie Onstad Kunstsenter**, Høvikodden, Norway (13 November–31 January 2021). She lives in Antwerp, Belgium.*

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*Main image: Otobong Nkanga, **Solid Maneuvers**, 2015, installation view, Portikus, Frankfurt. Courtesy: the artist and Portikus, Frankfurt; photograph: Helena Schlichting*