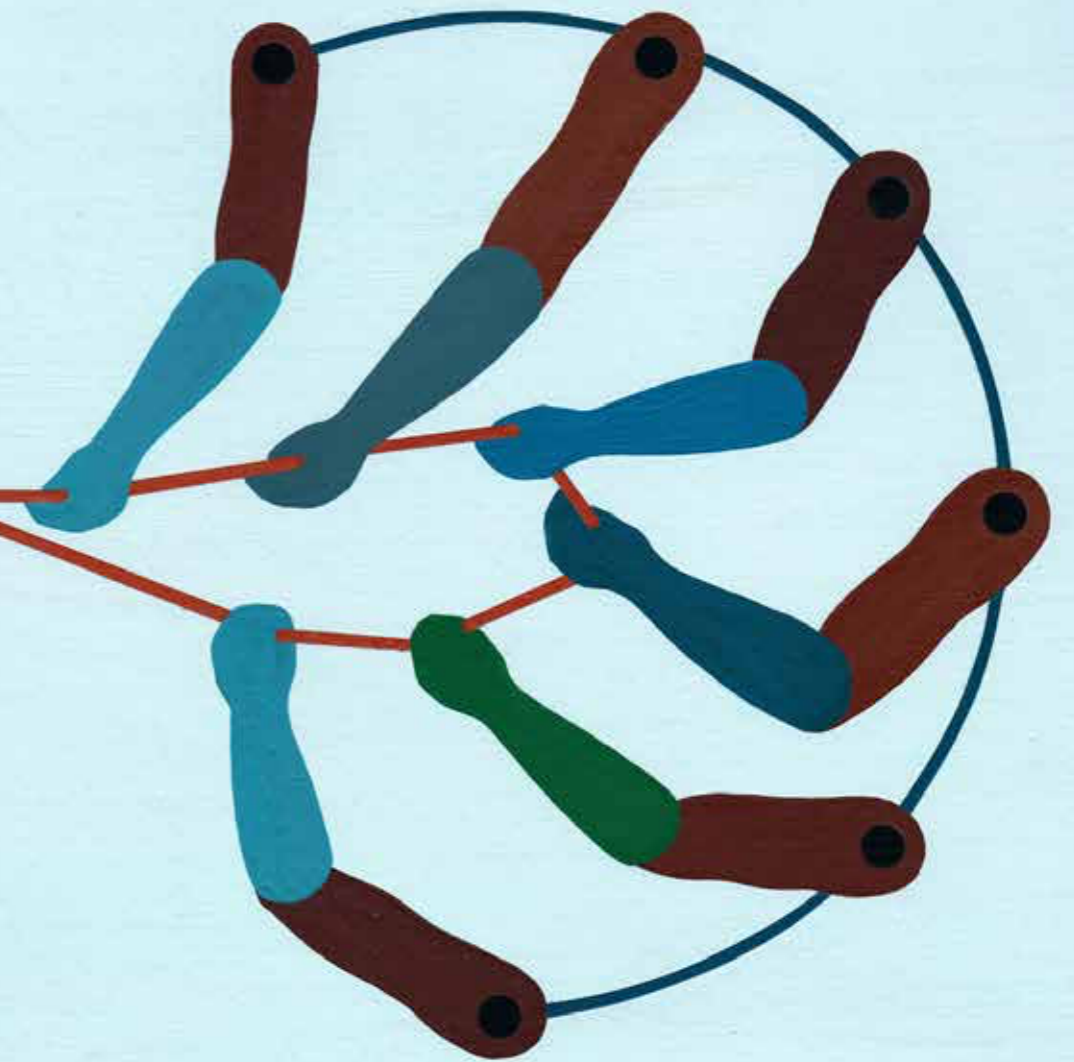


THE

*GROUND
REMEMBERS*



OTOBONG NKANGA

Otobong Nkanga was fifteen when her mother told her about the dream she had had. It dated back to the night of her birth. A child moving freely through fabric and pigment. “I dreamt of you in colours.” That memory was to endure. Later, when Nkanga was hesitating between architecture and art, that recollection settled the question: she chose to make art rather than sit at a drawing board. That was the beginning of a practice that has since extended into many realms.

Born in Kano, Nigeria in 1974 and based in Antwerp, Otobong Nkanga belongs to an influential generation of artists rethinking what art can do outside gallery walls. Her work stays close to the body: soil under her fingernails while she plays in the cool shade of a wooden house; mica catching the light on the path to school — mistaken at first for treasure fallen from elsewhere. These early encounters became, in time, the grammar of an art that links geology to grief.

After studying at Obafemi Awolowo University, followed by the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, Nkanga continued to spend the summer months in Nigeria. She visited mud houses together with classmates, watching how palm leaves and red clay were turned into thick, breathing walls. She started asking how landscapes hold the weight of what is taken from them. The answer was rarely literal, and that insight came to guide her thinking. Her installations slow the viewer down, directing the gaze toward threads instead of headlines.

Take *In Pursuit of Bling* (2014), built from research into a now-shuttered copper mine in Tsumeb, Namibia. Across twenty-eight tables sit fragments of mica and malachite, photographs printed onto limestone, makeup powder, video footage. The work charts how minerals leave a wounded ground and reappear as eyeshadow or as wiring for distant markets. Bling, the artist suggests, has a long shadow.

This inquiry deepens in *Unearthed* (2021), a cycle of four monumental tapestries first made for Kunsthaus Bregenz. They open in the abyss and rise toward the sunlight, binding what colonial cartographies once kept apart. A vertical orange line crosses each panel, gathering minerals as it ascends. Jellyfish multiply where the water warms. Human limbs settle on the ocean floor, gradually transformed into the same metals our phones now rely on. Bodies once trafficked across the Atlantic become, in this telling, matter being dredged up again for batteries. Loss compounds. Yet plants persist at the edges of the final panel, the kind of growth that returns to gravesites.

Nkanga refuses to leave viewers in mourning. Repair gains physical presence. Carpets shaped like magnified crystals invite people to lie down inside the museum rather than walk past. Wool dyed by hand follows the geometry of pyrrargyrite or quartz. Sculptural pods store aromatic essences. Two ceramic spheres release her voice, the sounds overlapping, into the room — half song, half whisper. The senses are asked to wake up.

This impulse toward repair finds its fullest expression in *Carved to Flow*, a project Nkanga launched in 2017 during documenta 14. Working with a soap maker in Athens, she developed bars containing oils and butters drawn from regions linked by historical trade routes. Each tablet of soap bore a miniature map of exchange. The sale of these funded two ongoing initiatives: an art space called Akwa Ibom in Greece, and a foundation in Nigeria with an organic farm where neighbours can collect water and buy produce at low



cost. “An economy of sustaining and maintaining,” Nkanga calls it. “An economy that helps to regenerate things.”

For her, materials are meaningful because they remember. Tapestry is marked by a double inheritance. She picked up textile skills from her family as a girl. The region of Flanders, where she now lives, developed its own grand weaving



In Pursuit of Bling, 2014
8th Berlin Biennale
© KW Institute of Contemporary Art, Berlin, Germany
Photo © Anders Sune Berg
Courtesy of the artist

Solid Maneuvers, 2015–2016
Photo © MuHKA
Courtesy of the artist

*ON RELATIONSHIPS OF EXCHANGE AND
MUTUAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE
WORKS OF ARTIST OTOBONG NKANGA*



Unearthed, a series of 4 tapestries, 2025
Abyss / Midnight / Twilight / Sunlight
Photo © Pierre Antoine
MAM Paris Musées



tradition, to tell the stories of wealthy households. Nkanga places these lineages side by side and lets them argue. What was hidden in the older pieces, the violence that paid for their silk, is laid bare. Ceramics, brought back into focus in the *Beacon* series (2024), behave similarly. Cracked, blackened columns rise like burnt trees. Around them, dried seeds wait in vessels. Famine and renewal in the same room.

Walking through her current show in Lausanne, the visitor encounters a thirty-year arc that resists easy summary. Early *Filtered Memories* drawings (2009-2010) depict a childhood home in flames, with small hands raised against the fire. Recent carpets feel soft and lush. The continuity is a

method, not a style. Nkanga keeps reflecting on how knowledge moves between generations and continents, travelling from the stone in your pocket to the body that carries it. What she offers is neither nostalgia nor rescue. It is closer to 'attention'. A way of standing on the earth that acknowledges what has been taken and what might still grow. Colours, in the end, that her mother had already seen. /

otobong-nkanga.com

I Dreamt of you in Colours is on view at the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts in Lausanne until 23 August 2026 / mcba.ch

Alterscape Stories: Uprooting the Past, 2006
 (middle panel of a triptyque)
 Courtesy of the artist

What we call material is never neutral — it carries memory, extraction, and meaning.

Beacon - Prominence, 2024 (above)
 Photo courtesy of Lisson Gallery

Keyhole X, 1997 (top right)
 Courtesy of the artist

Carved to Flow, 2017 (right)
 Otobong Nkanga performing at the IVAM Centre Julio González, 2023
 Photo © IVAM Centre Julio González