



# OTOBONG NKANGA

Gently Basking in Debris



Nigerian Belgian artist Otobong Nkanga sees history, memory, economics, and geography flowing like a river through the human body. Straddling nature and society, the body can be a metaphor for global fracture or connectedness. It mirrors the earth: Both contain the same elements and minerals. Both bear the scars of exploitation. Both need time and love to be made whole.

*Otobong Nkanga: Gently Basking in Debris* is presented in conjunction with the Tennessee Triennial for Contemporary Art, a statewide array of exhibitions responding to the theme of “Re-Pair” as envisioned by consulting curator María Magdalena Campos-Pons of Vanderbilt University’s Engine for Art, Democracy & Justice. Symbolizing an economic system in which individuals are only valued for the parts of their bodies that produce wealth for others, Nkanga’s fragmented figures resonate with Campos-Pons’s call for art “to re-pair, patch and rebuild our fragile spirits, bodies, cities, political institutions and economic relationships.”<sup>1</sup> In Nkanga’s work, repair is less physical than it is emotional and spiritual. In an interview published in the brochure for her 2020 exhibition at Berlin’s Gropius Bau, curator Stephanie Rosenthal asks the artist about the relationship between care and resistance. “To care,” responds Nkanga, “is a form of resistance. We have to enter into the space of resistance—of singing together and caring for each other’s souls.”<sup>2</sup>

As Nkanga poses the possibility of healing both humanity and the earth, she creates a dialogue between the permanent and the unfixed, connecting the earth to human flesh. Previous exhibition titles such as *There’s No Such Thing as Solid Ground*, *To Dig a Hole that Collapses Again*, and *The Breath from Fertile Grounds* all explore this shifting terrain. In this exhibition, the titles of several small paintings use the verbs *grounding* and *earthing* as metaphors for the return of an authentic self as well as for the body rejoining the soil from which life emerges.

The title of the exhibition, *Gently Basking in Debris*, links human obliviousness and environmental degradation, denoting a condition that, if it continues unchallenged, will undermine any hope of repair. The word *basking* evokes an image of someone, perhaps most of us, relaxing in the sun, blind to the pile of debris—physical, historical, and

sociological—mounting around them. By raising the false comfort of denial, Nkanga suggests that art can stimulate wakefulness, keeping us from basking too comfortably in this broken world.

Biography and geography offer a window into Nkanga’s expansive thinking. Born in Kano, Nigeria, she has studied in Ile-Ife, Nigeria; Paris, France; and Amsterdam, Netherlands; she now lives in Antwerp, Belgium. Inevitably, many of her ideas relate to crossing between places and cultural identities. She says, “My work is interconnected with the places I’ve lived. What happens in one place affects another. This is true for nature, too . . . There is no way of looking at the world in a little bubble. We have to look at all the different bubbles and how they are affecting each other.”<sup>3</sup>

The tapestry *Revelations* (cover) beautifully illustrates this idea. In it, we see a woman surrounded by a cloud of picture-bubbles. Some show scenes of bleak industrial sites from around the world; some contain the rich colors of rocks and minerals. Others depict Nigerian coins, kobo and naira, that have become so devalued that they are now worthless—traces of the once-strong economy Nkanga remembers from childhood. The pattern of bubbles contains images of sites of extraction, exchange, and loss, constituting cultural and personal memories that threaten to overwhelm the woman. Her right hand is depicted as a net holding empty circles—bubbles of the future, open to the construction of new memories, which might break the cycle in which she seems trapped.

Linking the exploitation of labor and violation of the land involved with the extraction of minerals used in cosmetics, the video *In Pursuit of Bling* is a meditation on mica, a reflective material that is used in many beauty products. As a child in Lagos, Nigeria, Nkanga smeared glittering mica dust on her own skin. At the time, she did not know about the mechanisms of production and consumption fueling the cosmetics industry, but she knew about disco bling and Diana Ross sparkle. Only later did she weigh the desire for glitter against the damage done to the earth to fulfill that desire.

In the film’s climactic moment, Nkanga takes the union of body and mineral one step further, placing a rock into her mouth, perhaps to



Fig. 1: Otobong Nkanga. Still from *In Pursuit of Bling*, 2014. Video with sound; 11 min, 59 sec. Courtesy of the artist

swallow it (fig. 1). If she indeed ingested it, the stone would remain undissolved, forging a link between timeless matter and decayable flesh. While there is nourishment that comes from swallowing minerals (Nkanga notes that our vitamins are composed largely of mineral supplements), she also speaks of humanity's relationship to the earth as one of insatiable appetite, absorbing far more than is needed, leading to a pathology of destruction. The thing swallowed may give us energy, but it is only temporary.

Nkanga is well known for working in tapestry, a medium suited to conveying interconnectedness through its entwined threads. Her tapestries are often epic in scale; *Tied to the Other Side* (fig. 2) is nearly twenty feet across, a tour de force fabricated from the artist's detailed drawings on a large weaving machine at TextielMuseum in Tilburg, Netherlands. The production technique and location become integral to the meaning of the work. Wall-sized tapestries have a long history in European art, reflecting power and status and propagating unambiguous messages of religion, class, and politics.

Different stories are told in *Tied to the Other Side*. Its environment is unclear; is the scene set under the sea, or is it a nocturnal landscape? We see the earth or a seabed littered with people's arms—instruments of labor and agency that have been discarded after outliving their usefulness. At center, a dead figure morphs into a jewel-like growth, a luminous coral or exotic plant—the body returns to the earth. Beams of light are directed toward the left, cut off by the edge of the tapestry, evoking a searchlight or a way-finder aimed toward a future of new possibilities.

Throughout the exhibition, we see Nkanga's soaring imagination modeling new approaches toward repair and reconciliation. This is perhaps most evident in *Carved to Flow*, comprising towers of soap from a 2017 installation and performance at documenta 14, an international exposition held in Athens, Greece, and Kassel, Germany. The exhibition is known for its focus on critically and socially engaged



Fig. 2. Otobong Nkanga. *Tied to the Other Side*, 2021. Woven textile (viscose, multifilament, merino wool, elirex, superwash, monofilament, and acrylic yarns); 137 3/4 x 236 1/4 in. Courtesy of the artist





Fig. 3: Otobong Nkanga. Installation view of *Carved to Flow* (2017) with performers, documenta 14, Kassel, 2017. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo: Wim Van Dongen

art, which often proposes alternatives to dominant economic and political systems (fig. 3).

For this project, Nkanga held a soapmaking workshop in Athens, where prototypes were created using water, coal, lye, and seven butters and oils from the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and North and West Africa. She explains the symbolism, saying “that black soap will be contained with a narrative that is linked with the landscape, that is linked with nourishment, that is linked with geographies, that is linked with thinking of Syria as you think of the desert in the Sahara. It will make you think of colonial enterprises as it will make you think of possibilities and nourishment of food and health and care. It will be embedded with so many stories that you cannot just take a shower with just the soap. It will stain your bathroom with charred residues.”<sup>4</sup> Soap, then, is a means of situating bodily intimacy and cultural memory within a global framework of manufacturing and distribution.

The soap is exhibited in the form of small towers based on actual soap repositories in Aleppo, Syria, and Nablus, a Palestinian city in the West Bank. Individual soap bars have been sold in Kassel and elsewhere, with the proceeds funding an art space in Athens, Greece, as well as the Carved to Flow Foundation, a non-profit in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, in Nigeria. Each one that is sold is wrapped in paper printed with a poem by the artist, such as this one:

Charred, so I had to breathe  
In the absence of oxygen  
Scarred, so I had to leave  
These lands of bare ash residues  
Fleeing, breathing<sup>5</sup>

With *Carved to Flow*, Nkanga envisions a path from historical oppression and conflict toward an economics of empathy. While deeply poetic, the project offers a real-world alternative to entrapment within the structures of extraction, production, distribution, and consumption that have traumatized people and land across time.

Mark Scala  
Chief Curator

## Notes

1. “Theme of Re-Pair,” Tennessee Triennial for Contemporary Art, accessed October 3, 2022, <https://www.dropbox.com/s/jmuioczkrat136/TN%20Triennial%20Theme%202023.pdf?dl=0>.
2. Otobong Nkanga, “That Place of Breathing Together: A Conversation between Stephanie Rosenthal and Otobong Nkanga,” interview by Stephanie Rosenthal, *Otobong Nkanga: There’s No Such Thing as Solid Ground* (Berlin: Gropius Bau, 2020), 47.
3. Otobong Nkanga, interview by Stephanie Bailey, *Ocula Magazine* (June 1, 2018), <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/otobong-nkanga/>.
4. Otobong Nkanga, interview by Bonaventure Ndikung, *Uncertain Where the Next Wind Blows* (Høvikodden: Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 2021), 131.
5. Otobong Nkanga, *Uncertain Where the Next Wind Blows* (Høvikodden: Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 2021), 163.

# Otobong Nkanga: Gently Basking in Debris

Gordon Contemporary Artists Project Gallery

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Cover: Otobong Nkanga. *Revelations*, 2020.  
Woven textile (cotton, viscose, linen, arnica,  
techno, elirex, polyester, and sidero yarns)  
and inkjet prints on 18 laser-cut forex plates;  
94 x 70 3/4 in. Courtesy of the artist.  
Photo: Øystein Thorvaldsen



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