

Otobong Nkanga: In Pursuit of Bling and the Fragments of Time by Omar Kholeif



Left: *In Pursuit of Bling – The Discovery*, 2014, woven textile (yarns: viscose, wool, mohair, organic cotton), 190 x 180 cm.

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The Haze (2020) Otobong Nkanga

Late night blues
Taints my heart's hue
Late night fuels...
Breathing each other
As we lay
Searching
Ways to end
Ways to numb
Ways to bend
Ways to float
Ways to strain
Ways to score
Ways to fall
and so, we woke
To another being
Rogue
The riots begin

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Breaking Ground

St. John's Hospital, a Gothic building developed in the 12th century and one of the oldest surviving hospital buildings in Europe, has been taken over. At one point a monastery, a convent, a site for sick pilgrims, today it holds the Flemish painter Hans Memling's Museum, a graveyard, and now, healing stones conceived and erected by the Nigerian-born, Antwerp-based artist, Otobong Nkanga. *Underneath the Shade We Lay Grounded* curated by Michel Dewilde at Musea Brugge is an exhibition of monuments devised in an anti-monumental fashion. Here, the viewer is greeted by grave-stones, erected above 50 tons of white pebbles — synonymous with her 2013 installation and performance *Taste of a Stone*. Amidst this expansive vista, the hallowed halls now brim with new life.

A feat in the history of weaving and the possibilities of making tapestry are presented in the artist's *Unearthed* (2022) series— four tapestries spread across walls. These seemingly living vessels work together to contour and shade an arena that has been devised to evoke multiple routes of lived experience. Of dispersion and of longing, of possession and dispossession: of belonging to multiple places all at once. Nkanga, an artist whose work has featured throughout the years at the 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair, in booths, installations, and in its flagship, Forum, has over the last decade gone on to become a beacon for the African continent and beyond. Pro-

ducing artworks that have reconfigured the conversation around land, ownership, ecology, and belonging, Nkanga's prodigious embodied experience of art has now been situated within the global multiverse.

It was the intervening decade, which leads us to the present that my love affair with Nkanga's artwork began. A generous and nuanced dialogue also emerged, fostering, and nourishing a meaningful friendship. When invited to consider how best to commemorate a decade of 1-54 — a platform that has given new breath to many artists, it felt apt to focus on an individual whose pure presence has transcended the bounds of imagined or perceived borders. Oscillating between the biographical and scientific realms, Otobong Nkanga's practice is akin to a recuperative anthology of voices brought together to sing. So too is the practice of 1-54's Founding Curator of Forum, Koyo Kouoh, whose work as founding director of Raw Material Company, Dakar and as Director and Chief Curator, Zeitz MOCAA, Cape town, have been demonstrative of a new paradigm for the recuperative function of art — one that lustres outwards across the horizon and into the peripheries.

"Nkanga's artwork is an unblemished example of 'unlearning imperialism' — a practice that exists as part of a "contra" proposition as opposed to a diametrically opposite 'post' culture of response and justification on behalf of the so-called and/or perceived 'other.'"

Shine

At St. John's Hospital in Bruges, I see reefs that the artist has situated on the elevated tombstones that linger in her exhibition. These emblems glisten, winking at me from the corners of this capacious site. The glimmering characteristic of 'shine' — found in mica and in the granite form of malachite, is the starting point for the confluence of ideas explored in one of Otobong Nkanga's signature installations, *In Pursuit of Bling* (2014). The genesis for this career-defining work emerged like the prodigious literary and artistic masterworks of our time — from the deep-set root of childhood memory. In an interview, the artist describes her early obsession with the textured surfaces of the ground in her birth city, Kano, and her eventual home in Lagos. For her, the Earth was clearly a bejewelled and breathing entity. In her subsequent departures and returns to Nigeria, the interstitial materials that lived between the red dust and soil, amidst rural ruins and overbuilt city dwellings, became a constant and compulsive fixation before becoming an active pursuit.

Nkanga's fixation with landscape evolved from a moment in her early practice, through acrylic and watercolours, which were sometimes mixed with gouache in the pages of her sketchbooks and on occasion stretched out onto large canvas. Her early drawings in the 1990s were abstract examinations of the ancient African city of Ife, a Yoruba metropolis in Southwest Nigeria. After her father's

sudden death before the artist turned ten years old, her mother, a teacher, as well as a singer and composer, re-located with Otobong to Paris, where she was employed by UNESCO. It was here that a French art teacher took a keen interest in the young artist's penchant for artmaking. Upon their return to Nigeria, civil unrest led to disconcerted rupture and movement in her family's day-to-day life.

At age seventeen, while in a car with her maternal force, the artist was the subject of an accident that spared her own life, but tragically, not her mother's. Aware of the circumstances around Otobong Nkanga's life conditions, her art teacher appealed to the 17-year-old to apply to the *École des Beaux-Arts*. Otobong was reticent, perhaps more eager to take on pragmatic work to support herself and/or her siblings. The offer of reprieve in art eventually took hold. Nonetheless, the resulting five years that followed were not easy ones. Tremors of unease and an aspiration to experiment loomed in Nkanga's mind. Eager to expand her "drawings" into an embodied, performative realm, she would have to branch outside the more traditional academy. After graduating, Nkanga pursued studies in dance and performance followed by a fellowship at the *Rijksakademie* in Amsterdam, where today she is a board member. She has noted, she felt able to explore and give form to her varied interests more deeply.

The circumstances around Nkanga's schooling evoke a model of what the late Nigerian, Okwui Enwezor once dubbed

the 'epistemic violence' of 'Eurocentric modernity'. The conditions of shoe-horning artmaking into sanctioned genealogical archetypes have long been systematic in the field of art. Certainly, artists from the diaspora of Africa, West and South Asia, from Anwar Jalal Shemza to Ibrahim El Salahi, have spoken of the insularity of western seats of higher learning. Specifically, how certain institutions have ignored the cultural and context specificity of 'global modernism' in favour of Eurocentric hegemony. In *Potential History*, Ariella Aisha Azoulay contributes to this debate, inviting the reader to 'unlearn imperialism.' Azoulay's argument documents the violence associated with western epistemology, from the collecting and categorical practices of encyclopaedic museums, libraries, and archives through to institutes of higher learning, which create the lingua franca of how what we once referred to as 'the subaltern subject,' can speak and be seen.

Nkanga's artwork is an unblemished example of 'unlearning imperialism' — a practice that exists as part of a singular, or even "contra" proposition as opposed to existing in a diametrically opposite 'post' culture of response and justification on behalf of the so-called and/or perceived 'other.' Despite her schooling in the tradition of the European art academy, her frames of reference tend to eschew the firmament of the historical rubric of 'land art' and in its place, invoke an assemblage of references from the literature of fellow Nigerian authors, Helon Habila and Teju

Cole to poets including, Chinua Achebe to Ntozake Shange. One can situate Nkanga's thinking as an attempt to develop 'collective affinities' gleaned from informal networks of knowledge and experience, what has been referred to as a form of 'contra-colonial' history. Her commissions and exhibitions have consistently been utilised as opportunities to collaborate with the artist's immediate landscape and its constituents — individuals with precise knowledge sets — specialists in textile dyes or pharmacists of medicine and the herbal garden, as well as economists and lawyers who specialise in enabling grassroots support structures. Amidst this field of forces, artists remain pivotal anchors and interlocutors, as can be evidenced in her collaborative exhibition at *Situ Gallery* in Paris. Nkanga used the opportunity of the exhibition to help fashion, *Togethering*, an effort devised in partnership with artists, Oroma Elewa, Bill Kouélany, Obi Okigbo, and Adéola Olagunju, in 2022.

Instrumental to her approach to the 'land' is Otobong Nkanga's extensive process of primary research, developed through countless hours of reading archaeological documents; months spent in archives and 'in the field' observing ruined histories and the processes of their perceived 'discovery.' *In Pursuit of Bling* (2014) is a prime example of this. It emerged when Nkanga was simultaneously developing research on the 'Green Hill' — the Tsumeb mine in Namibia. This knowledge inspired several instal-

lations, drawings, and performances, including an exhibition entitled, *Crumbling Through Powdery Air* in 2015 at *Portikus* in Frankfurt, where a "valley of ash" to invoke F. Scott Fitzgerald, was conceived out of tessellating sculptural forms. Together, they explored the layers of material that make up the glistening world, ones that humans all too often take for granted.

The initial investigative impulse here began from a need to understand the site known colloquially as 'the gateway to the North.' Much of the art that Nkanga created during the period of 2014 to 2018, including *Steel to Rust—Meltdown* (2016) sought to disentangle what has been deemed a colonial 'origin myth,' which remains seated in the western European imagination. Notable reference is made to the fact that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, German colonisers were believed to have frequently returned to the Green Hill to mine its rich minerals. On arrival, Nkanga found the site barren, a soiled landscape that was scooped of its life, with little shimmer remaining. The textured tapestries she produced such as *Slow Rust – Slow Growth* (2017) are suggestive both of an act of restitution as they are one's of repair. They resemble refractive mirrors when held up to the audience. Equally, one could argue that the work is conceivably a festering, mutating set of forms — representing the weight of scars that can never be erased.



Mamie Water Babe — Places I have been to but that doesn't change you, 1998, watercolor and gouache on paper, 20x15cm

The Ecology of the Body

Nkanga's interest in Namibia consolidates the artist's phenomenological pursuit of her experience with 'shine.' Coterminous to this, she initiated a concerted study of minerals — decoding their typologies. Of prime interest was the mobility of the 'landscape around shine' and the insular economy that it fostered. In her findings, Nkanga became engrossed by the formal effects of mica and malachite, which were burrowed out of the land and appropriated from the African continent through covert trade routes that formed myopic economic bubbles. The resultant 'glimmer' can be seen in the spires of European buildings, in mobile telephones, as well as in over-the-counter makeup lines, where the skin — the body, becomes an interface to produce light. In *Shine*, art historian Krista Thompson forms an apt correlation using the context of the Caribbean and North American Black body. In her thesis, Thompson reveals that the desire for 'Black' bodies to be seen is drafted by a careful play of light. Investigating a sprawl of social media videos and photographs, filmed from within dance halls to street parties, Thompson reveals a common practice, where Black bodies choose to become 'bleached' — in search of the light of the camera. The performing body, perhaps, more important than the image itself.

Within the framework of *In Pursuit of Bling*, Otobong Nkanga created two video works, *Reflections of the Raw Green Crown* (2014) sees a performance where the artist puts history 'on trial' and into conversation. Donning a zealous 'malachite crown', Nkanga walks the streets of Berlin, taking pause before the iconic architectural motifs accentuated with the seized minerals from the belly of the mines that she has studied. This interaction with the body is supplanted by the

interface of passers-by whose bewilderment may allude to the potential 'threat' of the Black body in motion. This performance becomes an 'insurrection' of a sort, but equally a reflection of the inevitable facts of industrial life.

The videos are presented in different ways. Most commonly, in the installation of *In Pursuit of Bling*, they lay embedded within a flat architecture. The viewer peers over them as if performing an intrusive act. Here, the desire to 'see' — indeed to attain perspective is in and of itself, a negotiation between one's body and the cellular architecture that the artist has generated through her installation. Atop of those videos exist two meticulously constructed tapestries produced at the Tilburg Museum in the Netherlands. On the one side, the spectator is witness to *The Discovery* (2014), a metaphoric blood diamond, jabbed and drained of its essence. On the opposite end of the 360-degree installation is *The Transformation* (2014), a pair of decapitated figures whose contours are formed of networks of earthly extraction.

On the ground, a panoply of materials come to life. Floating mica — a proposition for liberation exists alongside backlit gelatine prints of the Tsumeb mines, as well as limestone Earth engraved with the artist's poignant lyric. "I am just a constituent fragment of your existence until you pass away..." read Nkanga's words. Each integral piece evolves in tandem — mutating, ensnaring the gaze, amounting to the sum of a body, a landscape — one that is still in constant formation, in unceasing flux. Much like life itself, Nkanga's art seeks to unsettle. But hers is an arrangement that sutures through the artist's handling of perceived difference — not as a form of alterity, but rather, as the subject of new ways seeing and feeling our way through the dispersed fragments of time. ■

Notes/1. Talk: Otobong Nkanga with Omar Kholeif, MCA Chicago, Sat March 31st, 2018.
/2. Okwui Enwezor (2008), *The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition* in T. Smith, O. Enwezor and N. Condee (eds.), *Antinomies of Art and Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press),/3. Apha Shemza (2015), 'My grandfather, Anwar Jalal Shemza'. Accessed at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-35-autumn-2015/my-grandfather-anwar-jalal-shemza> (16 October 2015), accessed 5 March 2020./4. Ariella Aisha Azoulay (2019), *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London and New York), 58-63; 286-295./5. Richard J. F. Day (2004) *From hegemony to affinity*, *Cultural Studies*, 18.5. /6. We had first come across the term in an article by George Sadaka in 2011./7. Krista Thompson (2015) "KEEP IT REAL": Street Photography, Public Visibility, and Afro-Modernity." In *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice*, 47-111. Durham: Duke University Press./8. See: Kadiatu Kanneh (1991) 'Place, Time and the Black Body: Myth and Resistance', *Oxford Literary Review* Vol. 13, No.1/3, Neocolonialism, pp.140-163./9. Conversation with the artist, Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, September 2018.

Right: Photo from performance: *Reflection of the Raw Green Crown*, 2014, single channel HD video projection, color, sound, 2:52 min.

