

An ailing mind
encircled by its own walls
searches for ways to ease
the pain that grinds
beyond skin, nerves,
muscles and the living

Ailing Mind

Lingering dreams
Shattered and frail
Lay between matter
and spirit's tenuous veil
Nerves constricted
and pressured tight
Infiltrating cells as vessels ignite
Rendering muscles numb
What a poignant burn
Where dreams falter and yearn.

Lingering Dreams

Loaded tears
turned to rock
slowly drips
A silent force
A red caress

Loaded Tears

Cracked wood, withered root
Scattered amongst the living
Craving for southern light
Dreaming of soft life
Within its vessel of pain

Marked wood, battered foot
Forgotten amongst the living
Waiting for recognition day
To be able to recount
What could have been

Forgotten Amongst the Living

Bound by ties
Of toxic fluids
Nerves inflamed
Mood swings high
On untamed tide

Untamed Tide

While we stand
While we wait
While we watch
We can't yet mourn

Until Then

Otobong Nkanga

Craving for Southern Light

13.07.23
07.01.24

The exhibition *Craving for Southern Light* by Otobong Nkanga (Kano, Nigeria, 1974) brings together a significant selection of her work from the last two decades and includes drawings, textiles, poems, sculptures, objects and performances, as well as a special installation for IVAM.

In the first room, several series of drawings and a large tapestry define a poetic and political iconography which have always accompanied the artist, showcasing her strength of evoking fiction through images which elicit memories of bodies, spaces and interconnected movements. Her figures put the action centre stage, evoke memories which speak of work, belonging and property: domestic and family scenes, but also conflicts. Diagrammatic drawings have been arranged in a series and incorporate her colour palette, acting as an origin for new scenes.

The central room is home to a new work realized in situ; the result of trips, research and the relationships that the artist has established in the city and in the museum. An unsettled landscape, dark, an emotional space between darkness and light, made up of precarious, fragile shapes. The clay which has been shaped into abstract forms reminiscent of natural worlds evokes the fragility of ecological, economic and political realities. Opposite this landscape, different sculptures relate to the regeneration and repairing of the various ecosystems: recipients which harbour life or carpets that allow us to reflect on the comfort of the protective natural fibres which simultaneously transmit energy. A series of ropes snaking around the space, passing through large balls or hanging from the ceiling, sending us on intersecting narratives or stories that go places.

In this setting we find a circular economy project with transformative production structures such as *Carved to Flow* (2017), a three-phase project first presented in Athens, during the *documenta 14*, as a laboratory to manufacture soap, then in Kassel where soap was sold and distributed. And the current phase with the proceeds funding an art space in Athens as well as The Carved To Flow Foundation, a non-profit in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, in Nigeria.

In the final room, a series of tapestries, a volcanic-rock floor and the installation *Solid Maneuvers* (2015), which is a poetized translation of an inverted hill, an excavated topography containing minerals and salt. The sculpture references the abandoned excavation, which leaves the landscape, and our relationship with it, wounded.

Otobong Nkanga's work constitutes one of the most complex and solid expressions of the landscape of contemporary art, combining the development of a critical imagination and a powerful form of artistry with history, political dissemination and social care.

In recent years the artist has participated in numerous solo and collective exhibitions, most notably, *Otobong Nkanga*, Kunsthau Bregenz (2021-2022); *Underneath the Shade We Lay Grounded*, Sint-Janshospitaal, Musea Brugge (2022); *Of Cords Curling around Mountains*, Castello di Rivoli (2021-2022); *There's No Such Thing as Solid Ground*, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin (2020); *From Where I Stand*, Tate St. Ives (2019); *To Dig a Hole that Collapses Again*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2018). She has also taken part in the *documenta 14* exhibition and biennale exhibitions in Venice and Sharjah (2019), Sydney (2016), Lyon (2015) Sao Paulo and Berlin (2014), amongst others.

1. *Social Consequences* (2009–2014) is a series which, together with *Filtered Memories* (2009–2010) and *Captured Gestures* (2016), provide insight into Nkanga’s worldview and her rendition of memories. The drawings explore labor, household, home, and concepts such as belonging and ownership. The artworks have a surrealistic air and present both recognizable and violent objects such as weapons and projectiles, but also social gatherings and domestic situations. A distinctive feature of Nkanga’s art is how she puts together diagrammatic motifs, often using part of the image as a palette and including this in the finished work. This occurs in several works in the *Social Consequences* series, where palettes lead to subsequent images. *Filtered Memories* (2009–2010) is a series of works based on selected memories from Nkanga’s childhood and adolescence, which have had a particular impact on her life. The drawings refer to themes such as lost innocence, the notion of home, and her immediate family.

Parallel narratives form the central theme of Nkanga’s monumental tapestry *Double Plot* (2018). The tapestry incorporates different perspectives and talks about acts that have affected land and the lives of people. The background depicts the structure of the solar system and star formations. From a bird’s-eye view, a network of lines is reminiscent of land measurements and borders, of structural divisions that create tensions. The frontal perspective shows a man without a head and hands, next to a tree holding a chord to the network of discs on the next layer. This plane zooms into photographic images of explosions and riots – moments of manifestation of power and moments where people are manipulated and controlled by power structures – such as the uprising at Tahrir Square, which is documented here and aligns with the star constellation in the background from that very day. As such, the man invites you to look up, down and forward in order to discover the double narratives and connections. The textile work also opens up a temporality, like the light of the stars shot into the universe long before their twinkling reaches our eyes, or the politically oppressive situations playing out in parallel globally. Situations and appearances that happened at a certain time and are rendered visible at another. The depicted elements of bodies, land, and plants are literally woven together and connected and remind us that political decisions have human, geological and social repercussions.

2. In the central space of the gallery a new site-specific work is displayed on the walls. The artwork includes ceramic sculptures, drawings, poems and other elements that create a landscape, which is the result of his research in Valencia. Reframing people and objects as entities that come into being in relation to other entities, Nkanga deftly weaves insights from geology, botany, poetry and non-Western knowledge systems. Her works’ allusions to the reparative potentials of connectivity urgently gesture towards the possibility of more liveable futures.

The installations *Carved to Flow* (2017- work in progress) and *Constellation to Appease* (2019) are also displayed in this room.

Nkanga originally created *Carved to Flow* for documenta 14, an international exposition that took place in Athens, Greece, and Kassel, Germany, in 2017. For this project, Nkanga held a soapmaking workshop in Athens, where prototypes were created using water, charcoal, lye, and seven butters and oils from the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and North and West Africa. Nkanga explains the symbolism: “One of the things that connects all these spaces is oil. We could think of the oil underneath the sea or soil, or trees and plants . . . what connects, not what divides, and to think about how people are escaping from places that are nourishing the world with their resources.” Once produced, 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 bars of soap 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 nonprofit in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, in Nigeria.

- 3.

Constellation to Appease was made in response to Cornwall’s landscape and activated in a performance at Tate St Ives. Nkanga took the piece onto the beach and interacted with the ocean and elements. She included foraged plants and beach-combed items to show traces of the geological and social history of Cornwall. The work continues to change as the materials react and decay. The steel hexagonal shapes echo the form of crystalline structures of minerals and salts and the rubber-coated industrial rope reflects the significance of rope in Cornish industrial shipping. Nkanga has generated an iteration of this performance in the Mediterranean Sea for the exhibition in Valencia.

In the last room Otobong Nkanga’s presentation centres around the installation *Solid Maneuvers* (2015), a manifestation of her encounters with an area devastated by mining in Namibia known as ‘Green Hill’, which, since 1875, has seen its mineral-rich soil hollowed out, leaving a scar in the landscape. *Solid Maneuvers*, a poeticized translation of Green Hill’s inverted, excavated topography – containing vermiculite, salt, make up, heavy mineral sands and shredded copper – serves as a poignant reminder of the ecological implications of capitalist accumulation. The gravel and the mica of the installation form a slag-like landscape. The sculptural elements resemble islands or archipelago landscapes and are made up of different materials which have been layered to create the varying formations. The title *Solid Maneuvers* refers to the fact that it is the body that maneuvers, transforms, and manipulates the raw materials we extract from nature. Natural landscapes are constantly being transformed or exploited according to what they can provide us with. Integrating performance into the work, Nkanga considers how the machinery used for mining these landscapes are informed by the physical gestures of the human body. Two hanging works, *Steel to Rust – Meltdown* (2016) and *The Rift* (2023) allude to social, economic and industrial corrosion and its physical and emotional repercussions for the human body and the environment.