

THE NASHER

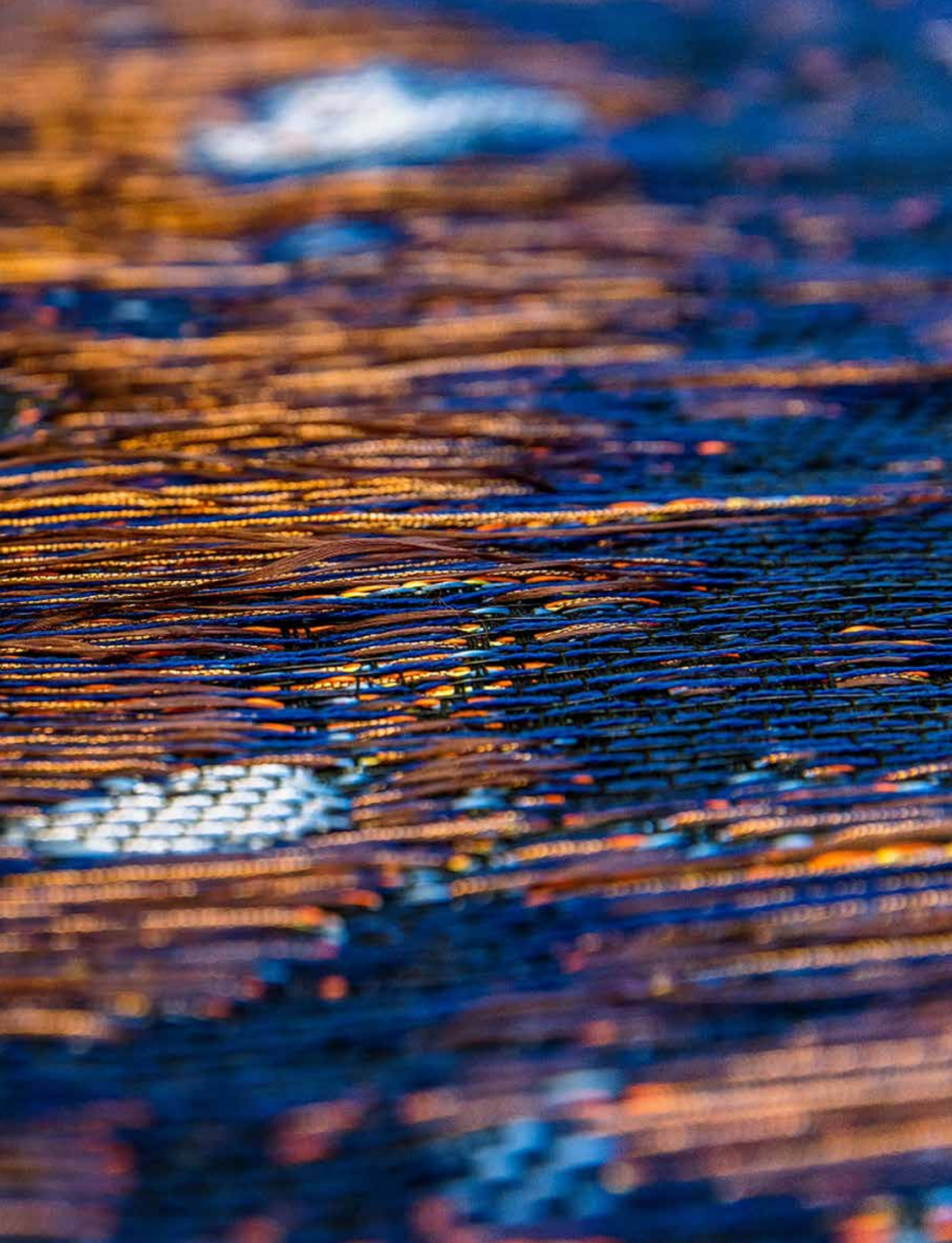
THE LAUREATE ISSUE | SPRING 2025



FATIMAH ASGHAR **SALLY GLASS** ANDREAS KELLER **LIZ LARNER** ABIGAIL LUCIEN
ALYSSA MATTOCKS DARYL CELESTE MEADOR **OTOBONG NKANGA** AMAIZE OJEIKERE
RASHA SALT BOSCO SODI **TERENCE TROUILLOT**



Otobong Nkanga, *Tied to the Other Side* (detail), 2021. Woven textile, 137 3/4 x 236 1/4 inches (350 x 600 cm). Photo by Willeke Machiels, courtesy of the artist



How do we measure the impact of art? This kind of quantitative analysis is something with which museums often struggle. We can provide attendance figures, numbers of schoolchildren toured, or website hits, but these measures never illuminate the crux of the question. The question of impact is really about emotional response—hearts and minds moved rather than feet through the door—and that is more difficult to measure. Yet that is what we ask of our Nasher Prize nominators and jurors: Identify a single living artist with a significant body of work that has had an extraordinary impact on our understanding of sculpture. The international pool of nominators and our distinguished jury, fortunately, include some of the most astute observers of contemporary sculpture—directors, curators, scholars, and artists. They often identify the importance of an artist's work before the rest of us. We, the audience, from the learned to the merely curious, are the fortunate beneficiaries of their foresight.

This April, the Nasher Sculpture Center celebrates its eighth Nasher Prize Laureate, Otobong Nkanga, whose work has deeply affected audiences and has caused our jury to think anew about the form and role of sculpture. Incorporating numerous materials including wood, stone, glass, ceramic, soap, rope, and tapestry, as well as more ephemeral elements such as sound, scent, performance, poetry, and conversation, Nkanga's work highlights the essential function of sculpture: making meaning out of matter. In doing so, her work deepens our understanding of matter itself and the network of connections it engenders—terrestrial, celestial, and human.

Like a stone cast in still water, the current issue of *The Nasher* provides insights into the depths of Nkanga's work as well as the expanding circles of its impact, which will be felt more keenly in person throughout the celebration of the Laureate from April 3 – 5; the run of her exhibition at the Nasher through August; and, through the publication of a monograph on her work, for years to come.

Warmly,

Jed Morse


Interim Director and Chief Curator

Otobong Nkanga, 2024. Photo by Laylah Amatullah Barrayn









Otobong Nkanga sings to plants. She listens for a reply. She dissects a tear, identifying its minerality, its cause, and its existence beyond the corner of an eye. She reads. She learns how things are made and what they are made of, collaborating with artisans of all kinds. Moving across the globe, she speaks to people, old and young, receiving ancient wisdom and new perspectives. She tastes the air, smells the earth. For her, this is research.

Research often dons an air of academic tedium. But consider it more expansively, please, for when driven by curiosity, the goal is not intrinsically tied to the answer but to the search. At its best, it's done with openness, patience, and voracity. This ethos can be found throughout Nkanga's practice, but in this issue of *The Nasher* you will find how this approach to learning is fundamental to creating works of art.

The pages ahead are devoted to and inspired by Nkanga, our 2025 Nasher Prize Laureate. In the first half, essays, images, and interviews directly address her work, while the latter half presents other artists who share an indirect link to aspects of it. These links are not singular but each story demonstrates that the vast array of material used in art-making is not limited to the physical composition of the work, but also the infinite ways those materials enter our lives. The history of barbed wire is sewn into quilts, interrogating land privatization and its often violent legacy; cacao butter is cast into sculptures, representing systems of labor and products of restoration; a daughter mines the smell of her mother's belongings to capture memory; a ceramicist listens to her clay, allowing for personalities to come forth; bricks of fired earth are stacked and disassembled, demonstrating the fragility of a wall at the hands of community.

We tend to see artists primarily as makers, but in reading this magazine you will find that artists are often connoisseurs of knowledge—that much of art's appeal lies in the vast range of inspiration the world offers and humanity's capacity to harness it. By harness I do not mean to conquer, but to coax, artist or otherwise, searching with openness, patience, and voracity.

Curiously yours,

Adrienne Lichliter-Hines

Editor in Chief

alichliter@nashersculpturecenter.org

Mica flakes and powder. Photo by Adrienne Lichliter-Hines

THE NASHER / SPRING 2025

Interim Director and Chief Curator

Jed Morse

Editorial Director

Jill Magnuson

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Adrienne Lichliter-Hines

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ON THE COVER:

Otobong Nkanga, *Anamnesis*, 2018. Installation view of *Otobong Nkanga: To Dig a Hole That Collapses Again*, 2018, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

Photo by Nathan Keay, courtesy of the artist

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Nasher Sculpture Center

2001 Flora Street
Dallas, Texas 75201

For inquiries, please email

publicrelations@nashersculpturecenter.org

Visit us at nashersculpturecenter.org

and follow us on social media



Fatimah Asghar

Fatimah Asghar, author of *If They Come for Us and When We Were Sisters*, is a poet, filmmaker, educator, and performer. They are the writer and co-creator of *Brown Girls*, an Emmy-nominated web series that highlights friendships between women of color. Along with Safia Elhillo, they edited *Halal If You Hear Me*, an anthology that celebrates Muslim writers who are also women, queer, gender-nonconforming, and/or trans. They are also a writer and co producer on *Ms. Marvel* on Disney +, and wrote Episode 5, "Time and Again."



Sally Glass

Sally Glass is a writer and editor based in Los Angeles. She founded *Semigloss Magazine* in 2012. She makes ceramics and is in love with a clown.

Andreas Keller

Author of *Philosophy of Olfactory Perception*, Andreas Keller is an academic with PhDs in neuroscience and philosophy. Since 2021, he is the owner and operator of Olfactory Art Keller, an art gallery in New York's Chinatown that encourages artists working in all mediums to experiment with scents as objects of aesthetic experience by providing a dedicated exhibition space for olfactory art.



Alyssa Mattocks

Alyssa Mattocks is a writer, curator, and producer of artist projects and exhibitions based in New York. She currently works at EUROPA in New York and is an associate producer on the documentary *SUN RA: Door of the Cosmos*. Previously, she was the Director of Deli Gallery, organizing exhibitions in New York and Mexico City. Before that, she worked at David Zwirner and 52 Walker. She later assisted Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich on *The Ballad of Suzanne Césaire*.





Daryl Celeste Meador

Daryl Celeste Meador is a scholar and textile artist from Dallas, Texas. She holds a PhD in Cinema Studies from New York University. Her writing has been published in the journal *Feminist Media Histories*, *Social Text Online*, and the edited volume *Bicycle Justice and Urban Transformation: Biking for all?*. Her artwork has been shown in the El Paso Museum of Art, the Museo de Arte de Ciudad Juárez, and at the Ludlow 38 in New York City.

Amaize Ojeikere

Ojeikere lives and works in Lagos, Nigeria. His photographic career has spanned over two decades, beginning under the tutelage of his father, J. D 'Okhai Ojeikere, who gifted him his first camera (A Canon D70, 35mm SLR camera) as a graduation present. He is responsible for the photographic archive left by his father and continues to play a major role in the management of FOTO OJEIKERE, a photography company set up in 1975 devoted to providing high quality photo services. He has exhibited his work internationally.



Rasha Salti

Rasha Salti is a researcher, writer, and curator of art and film. She lives and works in Beirut and Marseille.

Terence Trouillot

Terence Trouillot is a writer and editor based in New York City. He is Senior Editor of *frieze* and a contributing editor at *BOMB*.



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Otobong Nkanga, *Carved to Flow: 08 Black Stone soap*. Cold-process handmade natural soap, butters and oils from across the Mediterranean Middle East, and North and West Africa, fused together with water, lye, and charcoal, 2 1/3 x 2 1/3 x 1 1/2 inches (6 x 6 x 4 cm). Photo by Wim van Dongen, courtesy of the artist



A close-up photograph of a hand holding a cigar. The hand is positioned on the left side of the frame, with the fingers gripping the cigar. The cigar is dark and has a textured surface. The background is dark, making the white text stand out. The text is arranged in four lines, with the first two lines reading 'OTO BONG' and the last two lines reading 'NKKA'. The font is a large, white, serif typeface.

OTO
BONG
NKKA

A Long Thread

Jed Morse and Otobong Nkanga explore how materials, time, and place shape her life and practice.

November 2024

JED MORSE: You have experienced lots of places over your life: You were born in Kano, Nigeria, and lived in Lagos, in Paris, then studied in Amsterdam, and you've lived in Antwerp, Belgium, for quite a while now. You exhibit all over the world and your work takes cues from the places where you're making or showing it. Has your experience growing up and working in so many parts of the world had an impact on how you think about place?

OTOBONG NKANGA: There have been different shifts and different ways of thinking about places. During my childhood, we moved around Nigeria and each area had its own specific way of being and existing. Later, studying in Ife, Nigeria, I met people who made me realize that the world you are in is connected to another world, that there is a bigger world, and that there are things that link us. These connections might not be from today, but from a few centuries ago. Those things influence the architecture we build and the food we eat. By being in specific places, you understand the craftsmanship there and you then want to know more, and that enters into the work. Understanding what a place gives, and how people work with the things that come from that place, makes you understand the deep connection to land, to material, to transmitted knowledge, and the ways those connections transform and shape the place, or culture, or agriculture.

JM: I think that kind of deep consideration shows up in the way that you deal with materials. There is such a broad range of materials that you incorporate into your work. Works such as *Anamnesis* (2015-ongoing), *Contained Measures of a Kolanut* (2012), *Taste of a Stone* (2010-ongoing), and *Carved to Flow* (2017-ongoing) explore a wide range of materials and their potential meanings, whether it is historical, sociological, economic, cultural, or spiritual. I'm curious about how you choose and work with certain materials, because part of it seems to be based on a very personal encounter, but there is also this

aspect of deep research. Is it one or the other? Is it a combination of learning and intuition?

ON: I think there's a combination of many things. It's intuition. There are some things I've encountered in my childhood that I encounter again later on. There are people who have stories that are linked to these materials. There are also stories that are linked to how certain things were used at different times. Those residues that you get from your parents or grandparents, or people that have knowledge, are quite ancestral. So, there are many ways of entering into a material. At the same time, the material talks to you. It has a way of telling you, "This is my limit." I think, sometimes, just by experimenting with the material, you get to understand it from another perspective, which is not a human-centric perspective, but from what the material itself is saying—the kinds of erosions it's had, the kinds of limits in relation to heat, or in relation to its melting point, or in relation to its texture and how it shifts.

I may have my own relationship with a material from growing up, and then when I encounter it in another space and see that people are using it in a different way, it changes my understanding of what that material is. *Contained Measures of Tangible Memories* (2009/2011) is a very good example of how one material can differ in different places. In there, you have indigo, you have black soap, you have mica—all materials that have been starting points for different projects I have done. As a kid, I would play with mica on my skin, seeing how it would shine, and later on I found out that mica is actually used in makeup, and that it's used as a resistance to heat. The material is used in so many things. But, it was just my plaything, as a kid.

Opposite: Installation view of *Otobong Nkanga: Cadence*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2024-2025. Photo by Emile Askey, courtesy of the artist and the Museum of Modern Art

Previous spread: Otobong Nkanga, *In Pursuit of Bling*, 2014. Still from single-channel HD video, color, sound, 11:59 minutes. Image courtesy of the artist





“...the material talks to you. It has a way of telling you, ‘This is my limit.’ I think, sometimes, just by experimenting with the material, you get to understand it from another perspective, which is not a human-centric perspective, but from what the material itself is saying...” —Otobong Nkanga

I’m very much invested in that idea of starting with a little material that might mean nothing and then realizing that it has a long thread; it’s connected to industries, it’s connected to histories, ancestral knowledge, it’s connected to the past in relation to your own background. There are many informal and formal ways of working with that material and understanding its capacities, its limits, its potential, and then exploring that with the work.

JM: The kinds of knowledge and stories that one can draw out from a single material, I think, speak to the diversity of media in your practice: There is drawing, sculpture, tapestry, installation, performance, painting. A lot of times, you use the materials in a way that engages the full range of senses: sight, sound, touch, smell, and even taste, on occasion. This points to an intimate engagement with materials, but also with the audience that experiences your works. How do you think of the role of engagement and various ways that audiences experience different media?

ON: I always take the [exhibition] space as a kind of sculptural space. It’s a space that the body, which is already a sculptural form—it’s already solid, it’s moving, it’s looking, it’s smelling—exists in. We are not engaging in space as entities that just look. Instead, every sense allows us to be present within a space, allows us to understand, and also heightens our sense of fright or ease and engagement within a place. Either you run, or you stay, or you feel comfortable. That relationship to the body is something that I’m very much interested in. I’m interested in things that are kind of in movement, so that they allow the body to vibrate, allow the body to feel that it exists within the space.

By creating with different materials that engage with each other, you’re able to heighten what that material is doing. You’re able to heighten, also, the subjects that you want to pull out of the work. You’re able to create stratifications of understanding of the work, which is not just a linear way of looking at it.

Sometimes you must give life to a material. If it’s a tree, the

tree might be able to talk, and that tree then becomes a voice or a channel to be able to say things that are linked to other life-forms. I have to imagine that I’m that tree, in a way; have empathy for it. Maybe the tree is hot and burning. Is it a tree that has a long taproot or is it something that spreads? And if it spreads widely, then what comes of that? I try to understand the kinds of geographical or geological strata underneath it, to be able to understand what the root is reaching out for. And then I can tell a story about it not having enough of this or needing less of that. So, there are many ways of engaging that allow for the storytelling of a tree, and this allows you to then play with different mediums. You have to be able to give that tree the full life that it needs to have, for us to enter into its world.

JM: I’m glad you brought up the sense that objects have a story to tell, and what a burned tree might have to say, because the environment is something that comes up in your work quite a lot,



Above: Otobong Nkanga, *Anamnesis*, 2015. Plywood, gauze, coffee, tea, spices, cacao, raw tobacco, peat. 204 3/5 x 451 1/5 inches (520 x 1146 cm). Installation view of *Streamline., Ozeane, Welthandel and Migration. Oceans, Global Trade and Migration* at the Deichtorhallen Hamburg, 2015. Image courtesy of the artist

Opposite: Otobong Nkanga, *Solid Maneuvers*, 2015/2020. Video still from performance by Otobong Nkanga, who sang, told stories, and performed different gestures related to industrial processes, physical labor, and the limits of human productivity. Gropius Bau, Berlin, 2020. Image courtesy of the artist



in particular our connectedness to the environment. I'm thinking of that incredible, 60-foot-tall tapestry in *Cadence* (2024), at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), which includes two embracing figures—a male and a female with the veins in their arms braiding together and going into the earth, which is quite beautiful and romantic. And then you have these other projects, such as *Landversation* (2014/2016/2020), which orchestrates opportunities for visitors to learn about the land that they live on from a variety of perspectives: ecological, geological, agricultural, historical. Your mentioning of that burned tree reminds me of your installation at the Kunsthaus Bregenz (2021–2022), which seemed to address our sometimes-brutal impact on the environment. Was there a moment, or maybe several moments, when our connectedness to the

natural environment took root for you, so to speak?

ON: I think the first time of ever feeling that there was something beyond myself in relation to just engaging with the environment was at the age of three. That's very young, but I still remember it quite intensely, because whenever it got hot I would go underneath the house; we had a stilted house and there it was cool. There was a lot of sand, and I would play with little containers to build and sculpt little things from those containers, and I realized that you can actually make a volume from a cup. I remember that sense of feeling safe and cool underneath, and then when you come out, of course, it's hot. So, I think that's the first thing that I remember of my own relationship to the environment.



Top, from left: Otobong Nkanga, *Stripped Bare VII, V, VI, and I*, 2003–04. 10 C-prints on photographic paper, 15 3/4 x 25 1/2 inches (40 x 65 cm). Images courtesy of the artist
 Above: Otobong Nkanga, *Landversation Beirut*, 2016. Site-specific participatory installation and conversations in the form of an ongoing performance. Photo by Walid Rashid, courtesy of the artist



I think the second one, that really was quite brutal, was at the age of four, when there was a riot with tear gas. I realized that there's something external to your body that can actually render you blind and suffocate you, and that is my first remembrance of fear. Our relationship to the landscape is not only about an environment that gives you life, but also an environment that can take your life, an environment that can maim you, an environment that is also conditioned by human interventions. You get to realize, over time, as you grow older, that the world we live in is also conditioned, and sometimes some things render you powerless.

As an artist, I've always been interested in why certain things are the way they are. You wonder why societies and different cultures and places have different kinds of environments: Why is it always hot here? Why is it always cold? What does heat do to the body? What does it do to productivity? What does it do to labor? What does it do to the kinds of relationships people have? These have been questions I've been asking in my work, over time. There hasn't been a moment where I felt like I haven't been engaged with the environment or thought, Oh, now I'm making art that is linked to the environment. Even the early photographic series, like *Stripped Bare* (2004) and *Road Series, Toll Gate to Ibadan* (2001), were questioning the environment: burning fires, wrecked cars, unfinished buildings, overgrowth of greenery, forgotten fallen dreams. Different things in the environment make you wonder, Where does the ruin start and the economy end? And I think this has led to many works that have questioned how things function. When you think about how we have a hand in the way the environment is fashioned and designed, then there is no choice but to try to understand it. It's not about thinking if one is making art that is related to the environment: It's about questioning how we are and how we live in this environment and how it has shaped our world ecologically, economically, and on many other levels. The work really questions the way we are going and the way we are oblivious somehow, or latent, in ways of acting and engaging with other life-forms on the planet.

JM: You've mentioned in other interviews how encountering a defunct strip mine in Namibia had such a powerful impact on you. I can only imagine what it was like coming upon this great chasm in the earth that was made for extracting ore minerals. Was the mine at the point where it was being overtaken by nature again?

ON: Yes, the mine at Tsumeb. Parts of it were being overtaken by nature, by plants, and things like that, and other parts seemed dry and barren, like a sea that could never come back to the point of having anything around it. From what I understand, this mine was actually a huge, big rock, like a big hill, and it had been dug out; it became this deep hole of almost 40 layers underneath the ground. [From the surface] you see just the beginning of that hole and you have to go into the shafts to be able to get even lower. As you look at it, you realize how the landscapes we're living in are not necessarily what we think they are. Sometimes you drive through a landscape and you see the way things are arranged, and it doesn't look natural. The trees are aligned in a certain way. As you grow older, you come to realize that a lot of the things that you're seeing are layers of other histories that have been pushed down. And then new things grow, new things are planted, and sometimes are there for specific reasons. So, the mine was something that reminded me of a human hand that can actually transform things in such an incredible way. Going through Namibia, you get to see the remains, the debris, the ruins of a certain [human] power that was able to cut through hills and hard rock, just to put a train line through. Then you



Otobong Nkanga, *Contained Measures of Tangible Memories*, 2009. Two wooden structures on rollers, ceramic plates, metal, mica, black soap, Cassia fistula, indigo dye, alum, color, sound, video (10 minutes). Dimensions variable. Photo by Aurélien Mole, courtesy of the artist

start wondering, Who did all that work? You feel the heat, the temperatures, the hardness of such a space, and you wonder how people work through this kind of harsh environment to be able to install someone else's ideology within that space; someone else's need within that space.

JM: The sense of connection and the interconnectedness humans have to the earth, to each other, is something that you draw out, consistently. Again, I go back to the tapestry *Cadence* at MoMA, where you have the two figures who are connected physically with the earth underneath their feet, but also they seem to be connected with the great arc of the cosmos above them. And other works connect us with each other through performance, or interaction, or just in the way that you draw out the deeper significance of materials in our lives. There is this sense of the spiritual—something suggesting deep, ineffable links to the great unknown around us. Would you agree that there is a sense of spirituality in your work? And if so, where does that sense of connectedness or spirituality originate, for you?

ON: I'm always a bit wary when we talk about spirituality, because we all understand it in different ways. So maybe it's good if I give my own definition of spirituality, so that it is from my own perspective.

It's not about religion, first of all. It's not going to be about Christianity or Islam or Buddhism or anything like that. It's very much about the way that we connect with the elements that make us stay alive. It's in the way that we realize that these are also entities and they are god as well as we are god—god in a sense, not like God in Heaven—and if we actually consider that a tree is as important as a human being, then we would revere and take care of it in the way that we would take care of a child that is ours. If we think of the water bodies as elements that are as important as things we take as important—our mother, our father, or our kids, or our partners—then how would we relate in this world in relation to all those things? So, for me, that's where the sense of spirituality takes place: in understanding that the power of every element that we live with is also the same entity that lives in us. The amount of water in our body, about 70 percent, is as important as the water in the sea, or water anywhere else. Many of the minerals that are in our bodies are the same thing that we find in stones or in any other material. If that were a way of thinking, and a way of transmission from one generation to the next generation, would we be in this place? And would we be fighting wars of religion? Or would we actually be engaging in a place of respect towards other kinds of entities? And that's, I think, the most important place of focus, which is about the care, the reverence, the respect, and a kind

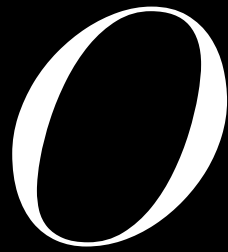
“Our understanding is more of an exploitative system in which everything can be destroyed just to take the sap out of a tree. Everything can be destroyed just to take out a bit of gold. Everything can be completely exploded just to take out a little bit of what we need. But if all our understanding as humans is really connected to where we live and how we live, then we would have a completely different world.”

—Otobong Nkanga

of engagement. These elements can also have an economy, but it depends on the way that we treat them and the way that we work with them. Our understanding is more of an exploitative system in which everything can be destroyed just to take the sap out of a tree. Everything can be destroyed just to take out a bit of gold. Everything can be completely exploded just to take out a little bit of what we need. But if all our understanding as humans is really connected to where we live and how we live, then we would have a completely different world. ■



Otobong Nkanga, *Unearthed - Sunlight*, 2021.
Scorched tree trunk, landscape of rammed earth
with pools, woven textile, remembrance plants.
Installation view of third floor of *Otobong Nkanga*,
Kunsthau Bregenz, Bregenz, Austria, 2021. Photo
by Markus Tretter, courtesy of the artist



tobong Nkanga's *Wetin You Go Do?* (2015) is an intricate spatial manifestation, composed of 29 concrete spheres, each varying in size, weight, and texture, from the size of a basketball to those approaching the mass of large boulders, some even tipping the scales at more than a ton. These spheres are each an individual entity covered in a powdery white patina that renders them simultaneously muted and confronting. Tied together by thick ropes, they unfurl across the gallery floor, winding and twisting like a tactile map of tension, interconnection, and power.

First unveiled at the Lyon Biennale in 2015 and later shown at Tate Modern in London in 2017, *Wetin You Go Do?* reconfigures the space it inhabits, demanding not just visual engagement but contemplation on the invisible networks—social, economic, ecological—that bind us. The arrangement of the spheres is a study in paradox: the rigor of their form suggests both order and disorder in equal measure. The objects' imposing physicality draws one's gaze, while the ropes that bind them hint at the unseen, often oppressive forces that govern us. They are more than simply objects; they are symbols of interconnectedness, of the dependencies and complexities of modern existence.

The piece's impact is not contained solely within its visual composition. As one moves through the installation, the space itself activates a sonic environment—voices emerge, interwoven and fragmented, in English, French, and Nigerian Pidgin. These voices, displaced in time and space, overlap, collide, and drift in and out unpredictably, forming a dissonant chorus that mirrors the fractured nature of contemporary global discourse. This sonic landscape is purposefully chaotic, creating a dynamic tension between recognition and confusion. The voices speak, but they cannot be fully understood—just as our world, overwhelmed by multiple perspectives and competing narratives, resists singular meaning.

Nkanga has explained that each sphere represents a kind of imaginative character—a person, community, or group—each one entangled in the vast, ongoing dialogue that spans history and geography. The ropes that tether them suggest both the shared burdens and fractures of human experience. The title, *Wetin You Go Do?*—a phrase from Nigerian Pidgin English meaning “What will you do?”—is both a provocation and a challenge, a question that refuses to remain rhetorical. It confronts viewers with their complicity in the systems that perpetuate resource extraction and consumption, demanding reflection on how we relate to the world around us, to each other, and to the forces that shape our lives.

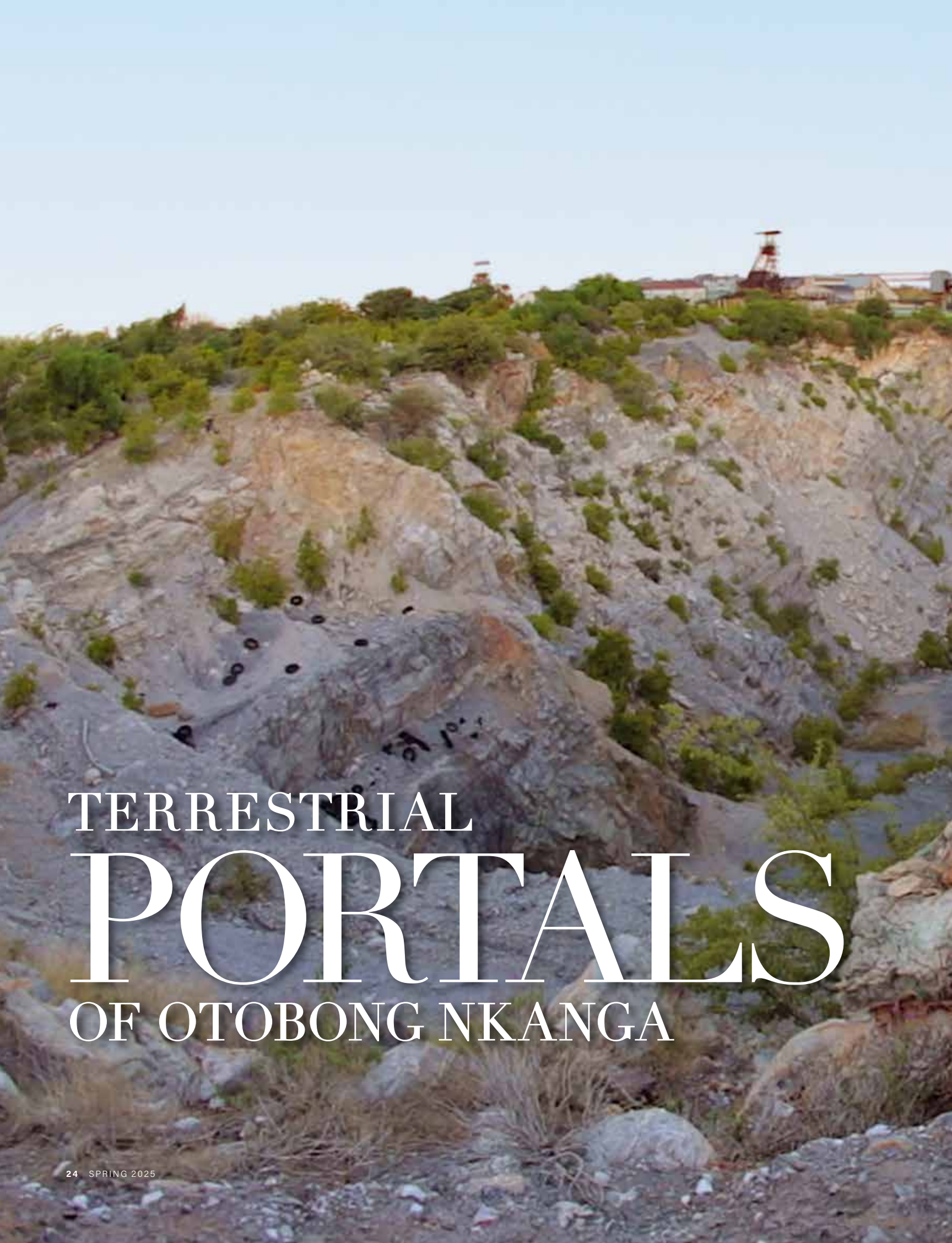
At the core of Nkanga's work is a profound critique of resource exploitation, its violent legacy, and its reverberations across the planet. The cold, solid nature of the spheres, coupled with the strength of the ropes, calls to mind the brutality of industrial extraction—the disruption it causes to landscapes, communities, and ecosystems. The chalky white surfaces of the spheres seem to speak of erasure, a subtle acknowledgment of the environmental and cultural degradation that often accompanies such processes. The ropes are not just physical ties; they are metaphors for the webs of power, labor, and dependency that bind us all to the global economy, for better or worse.

The inclusion of sound within the installation elevates the experience, making it not just one of passive observation but active participation. The unpredictable flow of voices—each contributing to the cacophony—immerses viewers in a space that is never quite still, never quite settled. As viewers move, layers of sound and fragments of speech force them to engage not just with the installation's physicality but with the questions it raises about agency, responsibility, and complicity. The central provocation of *Wetin You Go Do?* becomes more pressing with every step taken in the space—an invitation to reflect on what, indeed, each of us might do in the face of such entanglements, such inescapable systems of power. ■

Wetin You Go Do?

BY TERENCE TROUILLOT

Otobong Nkanga, *Wetin You Go Do?*, 2015.
Concrete, dye, rope, speakers, sound, 10 min.
(loop), overall dimensions variable. Installation
view at *La vie moderne*, 13th Biennale de Lyon at
La Sucrière, Musée d'art Contemporain de Lyon,
2015. Photo by Blaise Adilon, courtesy of the artist



TERRESTRIAL
PORTALS
OF OTOBONG NKANGA



Video still from performance of
Otobong Nkanga's *Remains
of the Green Hill*, 2015. HD,
16:9, stereo sound, 5:47 minutes.
Image courtesy of the artist

One of the reasons that the multidisciplinary work of Otobong Nkanga can be so beguiling is its experiential calling—its ability to provoke emotions, the senses, and the intellect, all at once. It can be a thoroughly physical and spiritual experience. In an interview by Louisa Elderton for *The White Review*, Nkanga explains her understanding of the experience of art: “I read most works through an emotional space. Looking, hearing, or tasting something in your mouth and feeling the sweetness or the bitterness, or the shift of sweetness into bitterness; this is quite a crucial part of our everyday life.”

The intricate, threaded, chromatic composition of her tapestries suggests a musical partition; to enter her installations or discover her sculptures is to travel, smell, feel, touch; to attend her performances is to witness the rhythm of body movements, to engage a different sense of time and actively participate.

Nkanga’s range of thematic interests is proliferating and unpredictable, but an impulse threads her practice, namely, to counter the dominant and pervasive fragmented consciousness of the world. Nkanga invariably reminds us of our whole connectedness: to the land, the air, the elements that make up our bodies, and to the material world in which we dwell. In an interview with Helen Welford on the occasion of her exhibition *From Where I Stand* (Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, 2020) she expounds her views, saying, “The idea that we are separate entities from the land is false. It is very important in my work to constantly emphasize that these two are intricately connected.”

At first glance, this drive may be labeled as part of an ecological consciousness-raising, but inscribing it as simply as that would shortchange the artist’s worldviews. Her art approaches the pluriverse—or different systems of understanding the universe which coexist side by side—and invites the viewer to find one’s place in it. The artist insists that the fragmented nature of our perception of being in the world as separate entities, disconnected from the relentless extraction of oil in the Niger Delta, or unaffected by the corrosive use of pesticides in India, or protected from the sweep of morbid extremist ideologies in Brazil, is total delusion. Nkanga’s practice brings viewers to see themselves in the world differently: as faithfully bound to other human and nonhuman life forms. More importantly, it grounds their being in the world.

The artist does not privilege a single medium: She draws, paints, weaves, sculpts, photographs, films and edits, versifies, and performs. This polyphony of media and the versatility of the raw materials she uses to make art render Nkanga’s practice stubbornly resistant to aesthetic theoretical categorization. Is it observational, conceptual, relational? All at once, and more. Of her commissioned Atrium

installation at the Museum of Modern Art, *Cadence* (2024), which consists of a 60-foot tapestry, handmade ropes, handblown glass, ceramics, poetry, and sound, Nkanga discussed how she considered a teardrop, saying:

“Our teardrops contain minerals. We think of them as transparent, but they are filled with so many emotions. That’s why one of the sculptural works is glass and shifts into a gradient of color. And then I was thinking, What if this teardrop had a voice? What would it say? How would it say it? So there are teardrops that are a mixture of happiness and sadness, anger, melancholy. The sound work explores the fragmentation of a tear and the emotion that goes with it. It’s not necessarily something that is negative, but it is something that looks at the range of what a tear could be and the emotions that come with that. There are also tablets where I

have poems that have been pressed into the clay piece and fired. Some of them talk about tears, some talk about lingering dreams, some talk about different relationships to physical and emotional connections.”

Undeniably, there is method: attentive documentary recording; focused scientific, social and historical research; intuitive automatic drawing; unprejudiced curiosity about space, place, and

“The idea that we are separate entities from the land is false. It is very important in my work to constantly emphasize that these two are intricately connected.” —Otobong Nkanga

life-forms; and audacious reinvention of ancestral wisdom. And listening. Before it was reduced to a synonym of *to hear*, the verb *to listen*, by virtue of its etymological origins, *to list-en* (or lust or desire), meant to avail oneself to the desire of the other. In that sense, Nkanga is foremost a listener. When she was creating *Taste of a Stone: Itiat Esa Ufok*, a commission for the Sharjah Biennial 11, in 2013, she interviewed foreign workers living in Sharjah (Pakistanis, Indians and Iranians), asking about their connection to the city, and whether it felt like home. The story of an old man who was homesick but did not have the means to return home became one of her poems included in the installation: “How did I come this way? / Had I a choice that I let go by? / Those fertile fields glittering / bright and far in the night, / needed but a hand to plough. / Alas, broken and adrift, / too old to fly or flee.”

The poem accompanied a courtyard and two-room installation of large rocks and photographs printed on limestone, featuring fragmented memories of her childhood in Nigeria and other places in the world that share architectural sensibilities, all nestled in a bed of gravel, rocks, and epiphytes. Within the courtyard, Nkanga performed alone—a potted plant poised on top of her head—and alongside visitors, engaged as both spectators and participants. Together, the physical and performative elements formed a narrative of exchange between people, places, and her own experiences.

Throughout her life, Nkanga has lived in many places; she speaks



several languages and has intimated herself with many cultures. They inhabit her as much as she inhabits them. She lost her parents when she was young, and was deprived of receiving their family stories, memories, and myths, but she often refers to the legacies of ancestral knowledge as a principal and limitless fount of wisdom that guides her perception of the world, producing meaning and poetics. When she traveled to Namibia and visited abandoned copper mines near the town of Tsumeb, the first thing Nkanga did was sing to the land a song of apology—for all the erasures, ruptures, and extractions the land had endured with the arrival of foreign invaders more than a century earlier. The song—traditional of her ancestral Nigerian Ibibio culture—was performed in her video work *Remains of the Green Hill* (2015) and is meant to precede any action at the site, intended to summon ancestors and present offerings for them to watch over one's intervention.

While it is definitely visual, her practice brings a uniquely maverick twist on the representational vocation of art, making ideas and

Clockwise from left: Otobong Nkanga, *Taste of a Stone: Itiat Esa Ufok* (detail), 2013. Sharjah Biennial 11, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (installation and performance). Photographic images inkjet- printed on Galala limestone. Photo by the artist

Otobong Nkanga, *Taste of a Stone: Itiat Esa Ufok* (detail), 2013. Sharjah Biennial 11, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. Poem inkjet-printed on Galala limestone. Image courtesy of the Sharjah Art Foundation

Otobong Nkanga, *Taste of a Stone: Itiat Esa Ufok*, 2013. Sharjah Biennial 11, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. Site-specific installation and live performance at Bait Khalid bin Ibrahim Al Yousef, Sharjah, UAE. Performance duration: five to nine hours. Photo by Alfredo Rubio, courtesy of the artist



Ototobong Nkanga, *In Pursuit of Bling*, 2014. Installation view of *Ototobong Nkanga: To Dig a Hole That Collapses Again*, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. Image courtesy of the artist

sensations manifest, incarnate, embodied. Essentially, the power of her work lies in making palpable, or recognizable, the transformative impact of the encounter. We, viewers and visitors, are living in bodies that are in constant change from within, but what we encounter imparts change as well, regardless of whether we are aware of it or not. The change can be as ample as a spiritual epiphany, and as discreet as the vibrational shift caused by the wavelength of a color, or sound. The meaning-making of poetry is important to her practice but even more so is hearing the poem as one reads it.

Nkanga uses stone, sand, thread, oil, and myriad other materials, revealing their state of flux in such a way that the encounter becomes sensate and generative. Contact is discovery, connection, transmission, learning. In *Veins Aligned* (2018), a ribbon of Murano glass rests on flat slabs of marble and snakes along the floor in the shape of a vein, suggesting the map of a river cutting through a landscape. Using materials sourced near the exhibition's location in Bolzano, Italy, and fabricated by local experts, Nkanga pushes the materials to reveal their mineral qualities. We see the scaled-up chemical reactions of molecules, usually microscopic and invisible to the naked eye. Acting in a similarly revelatory role, the cube of soap at the heart of *Carved to Flow* (2016) is the incarnation of a fair system of production that the artist has put in place, that one feels compelled to keep because its fabrication carries so many significations, but also because it is an invitation to be part of that virtuous system of manufacture. The tactility of tapestries and their complex layered

weaves, as with *Sunburst* (2024) or *Between Embers and Ashes* (2024) or *Cadence* (2024), are also sensate and affective summons into the worlds they bring into being. Of *Cadence*, Nkanga says:

“It’s a mix of different worlds—from the underworld and the mining of minerals to the surface and the soil, to the atmosphere and the heat of the sun, into outer space—all collapsing together in one place . . . You cannot separate what is happening in the universe from what is happening underneath the soil in the core of the earth.”

The presentation of her work in a specific space engages its social and political history, its material and karmic attributes, so it is often unique at every instance of exhibition. For instance, *In Pursuit of Bling* (2014) first found form as a performance before it became an installation presented in the eighth Berlin Biennale (2014) made of such components as sculptural structures and objects, inkjet prints, raw minerals, video, and woven textiles. Initially, the mineral mica inspired the work—a shimmering mineral common to the landscape of Nkanga’s childhood and abundantly used in industries such as cosmetics, electricity, and construction. The installation in Berlin also considered copper and malachite. In a poem printed on stone and integrated into the sculptural network of tables, she refers again to the Namibian mining town of Tsumeb, located in what was known as German South West Africa for from 1884 to 1919, confronting Germany’s



Otobong Nkanga, *Veins Aligned*, 2018. Murano glass, paint, blast furnace fusion, wet sandblasted Lasa Venato Fior di Melo® marble, wooden plinth, overall length 85 feet (26 m), various widths, 19 3/4 to 27 1/2 inches (50 – 70 cm). Installation view from *May You Live In Interesting Times*, 58. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, La Biennale di Venezia, 2019. Photo by Andrea Avezzi, courtesy of the artist

colonial past and exploitation of the land's natural resources.

To *be* present is to become aware of oneself in the here and now; to *feel* present is to avail oneself physically, emotionally, and intellectually to the vibrant living worlds contained in an artwork. Nkanga's practice triggers both types of awareness of one's being. This understanding of the meaning and power of art is at once contemporary and ancestral. In other words, it harkens to a time when art was part and parcel of social life, of spiritual rituals, when artworks were given totemic, symbolic, or revelatory meanings. Nkanga's practice also collapses the fictitious temporal rupture of modernity, masterfully and with exquisite eloquence. Being and feeling present is an experience of time but on an entirely different scale; there is time requisite for providing, or giving care. In an interview with Alice Audouin, for *Art of Change 21*, in April 2020, Nkanga explains: "Time and care are synonymous. Giving care is giving time. This is what I try to carry out and promote in my work."

In recent years, scholars, intellectuals, and artists initiated the call to decolonize perceptions, experiences, and understandings of the world, systems of knowledge, and production of poetics, producing a fundamental and emancipatory paradigm shift. The decolonial reconsideration of ancestral knowledge recognizes it as the expertise collected from centuries of observational engagement with, and analysis of, the natural world that communities developed, exchanged, and transmitted to live, thrive, and manufacture.

The Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe has renamed it as "terrestrial knowledge," because it is a knowledge of the flora, fauna, soils, and climate that evolved and was synthesized for nutrition, agriculture, medicine, industry, trade, and religion. In this perspective, the ancestral attribute is freed from nefarious derogatory associations with chimera superstition and is revalued as precious wisdom transmitted from ancestors. Concomitant with the decolonial paradigm shift, the critique of extractivist capitalism and modernity is also imparting liberatory reconsiderations of how we are able to imagine and project a more equitable system for the whole world to live with a modicum of dignity, to breathe clean air, save species from extinction, and protect natural realms from becoming uninhabitable. The extractivist critique is not merely a commitment to ecological preservation: It compels a drastic change in unseating humans as superior to other living species.

The grounding power of Otobong Nkanga's artistic practice is what makes it terrestrial, in the manner it approaches the elemental components of our lives and engages the ambient natural world in which it is manufactured. And while her vocabulary is contemporary, and therefore decipherable, her artworks are thoroughly embedded in, and emergent from, our social, political, and spiritual reality. They are like intellectual, emotional, and sensory portals to worlds we are coerced to not see, not hear, not recognize and not connect with—a journey that might transform our understanding of our being in the world and what we might imagine as possible for repair and care. ■

Otobong Nkanga, *Carved to Flow: O8 Black Stone soap*. Cold-process handmade natural soap, butters and oils from across the Mediterranean, Middle East and North and West Africa, fused together with water, lye, and charcoal, 2 1/3 x 2 1/3 x 1 1/2 inches (6 x 6 x 4 cm). Photo Wim van Dongen, courtesy of the artist



CARVED TO FLOW

Introduction by Adrienne Lichliter-Hines

Carved to Flow is an ongoing project by Otobong Nkanga which proposes an alternative economy, highlighting international connections between ecologies, resources, and knowledge in a continuous cycle of exchange. Since its initial presentation in 2017 as part of Documenta 14, which was sited in both its traditional location of Kassel, Germany, as well as a second locus in Athens, Greece, the project has centered on the production and distribution of soap. Made in Greece during Phase 1, the marbled bars of soap include ingredients from the Mediterranean, Middle East, and Africa, demonstrating the global movements of extracted resources. During Phase 2 in Kassel, Germany, 15,000 bars of soap were sculpturally stacked, stored, and sold by 12 performers wearing costumes designed to present the goods. Through public activations and workshops held in Athens during Phase 1, and conversations between buyers and sellers in Kassel in Phase 2, Nkanga sparked curiosity about the origin of the soap's materials and its commercial flow from land to laboratory, and from laboratory to skin.

This story shares Phase 3. In addition to Akwa Ibom, a nonprofit art space in Athens, Greece, the proceeds from the ongoing sales of soap pass to Nkanga's Carved to Flow Foundation in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, where nearly 3,000 square meters of land has been purchased to create a biodiverse organic farm. Here, amongst palm trees, soil, and fruit, Nkanga's project has enabled a community to farm the land sustainably and revivify ancestral knowledge to transmit to younger generations.

Since 2017 Carved to Flow has been presented at various iterations across the globe, from Chicago to Dakar. This spring and throughout the summer the project will continue in Dallas at the Nasher Sculpture Center, where Nkanga is working with local artisans to produce soap composed of locally resonant ingredients. ■

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMAIZE OJEIKERE

In January of this year, Amaize Ojeikere, a Lagos-based artist and longtime friend of Otobong Nkanga, visited The Carved to Flow Foundation's organic farm in Uyo, Nigeria, where Nkanga was spending the month working on the land. Here, Ojeikere shares his impression of the experience through writing and photography.

When I was first tasked with documenting Otobong Nkanga's farm project, I was skeptical. What is with art and farming? How are they related? Even as an artist, I wondered. However, as I stood there, on the farm itself, my skepticism melted away.

Passing through the modest surrounding community, not much comes to mind. It's a simple environment devoid of any aesthetics, but as I entered the farm, a whole new perspective quickly emerged. Suddenly, a curiosity about what this place had to offer drew me in.

My experience began with a taste of fresh palm wine tapped straight from the source, enjoyed while walking through the plantation. The bleats of the goats sounded almost as melodious as the voices of a Catholic choir, adding to the serenity of the place.

Continues on page 33

THE ART OF FARMING





The farm does not shy away. It invites you into a world of delightful surprises: Vibrant peppers and tomatoes glisten under the sun. The pawpaws evoke the songs of Nigerian children: “Sweet like sugar, yellow like Fanta, pawpaw is a kind of fruit.”. Pineapples, bananas and young budding mangoes offer up nature’s hidden exhibitions. The intricate pattern of pineapple leaves, or the way banana leaves protect their fruit—these are the kinds of details that inspire an artist. It’s clear why nature is such a powerful muse.

As a visitor to the farm, I found myself immersed in the wonders of the land, creating a sense of awe as I saw how plants are organically grown, how the soil is treated with such care, and how what we give to nature truly impacts the environment and shapes our lives. I felt a yearning to understand cause and effect, how actions and consequences are intertwined, from the care of the land to the fruits it yields, building our environment. Perhaps most importantly on the farm, I understood soil as the most vital source of sustenance.

Otobong tills the soil, nurtures the plants, and in doing so creates a living artwork that speaks of care, harmony, and the earth’s natural rhythm — the art of living. She has skillfully taken the earth as her canvas to create artwork that is alive and ever-changing. One of her key missions is to bring to light that art can come from renewable materials, showing that the earth itself is not only a source of food but an artistic inspiration as well.

Visiting the farm also provided the opportunity to have cross-cultural relationships with those in the community in and around Uyo. Interacting with those working on the farm, I gained a sense of respect and appreciation for how humans care for nature and how nature provides for them, in turn.

In the end, Otobong has created a space that is more than bare land to be cultivated to produce food, but a living breathing artwork. Her practice can be thought of as a cross-pollination of interests, and her blending of art and farming reminds us of the endless potential nature has in inspiring so many parts of our lives. This farm is a haven where creativity, soil, and community come together in harmony. ■



For hundreds of years, West African farmers have added charcoal to their soil to enhance its nutrition. The farm in Uyo uses these ancestral practices by creating biochar—burning bamboo in a kiln to make activated charcoal which is then mixed in soil along with other compost and manure from animals.





“The art is mingled with the soil, with the land, with the oils, with the plants. It’s entering into other people’s lives. At the same time, the land and soil melt into the art.”

—Otobong Nkanga





Nothing on the farm is wasted. A native palm tree yields fruit which is pressed for palm oil. The discarded seeds and shells produce palm kernel oil. The leaves are used to thatch roofs and form brooms for sweeping. After all purposes have been exhausted, whatever remains is broken down for compost to feed the soil.





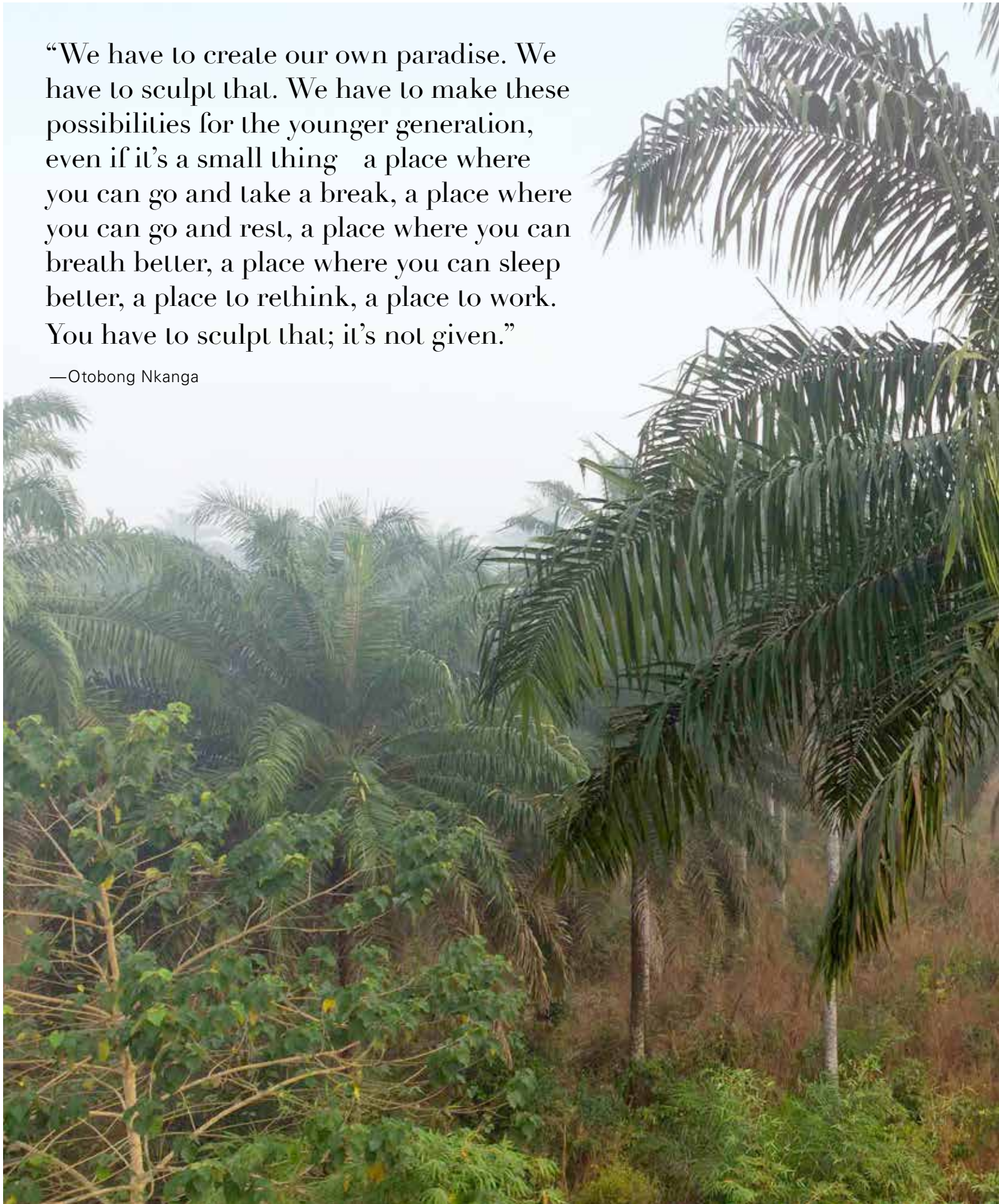




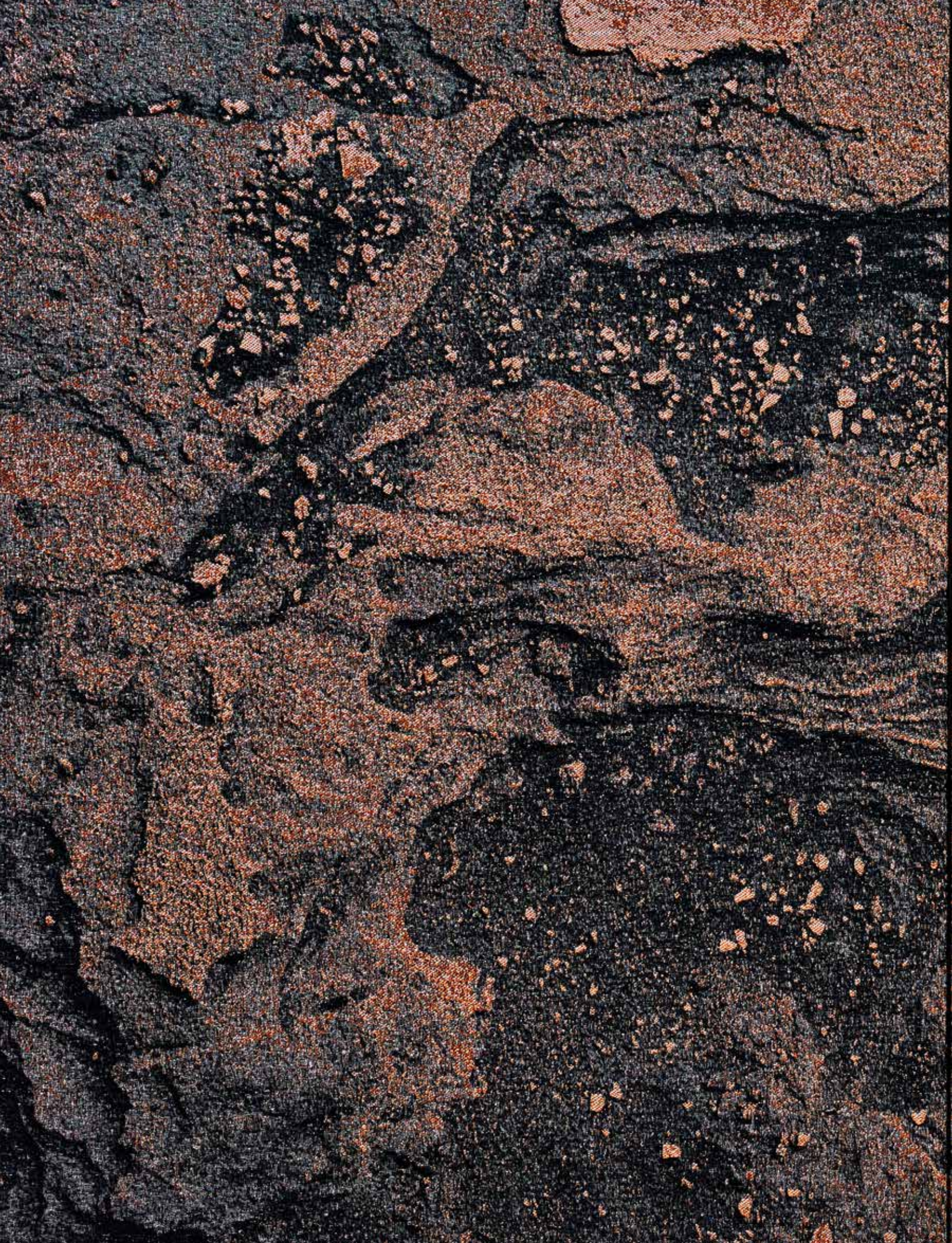
Pawpaws (a papaya variety), bananas, pineapples, peppers, tomatoes, plantains, fluted pumpkins, beans, potatoes, cassava roots, and mushrooms are among the foods growing on the property, sustainably produced alongside the responsible use of a palm tree forest.

“We have to create our own paradise. We have to sculpt that. We have to make these possibilities for the younger generation, even if it’s a small thing – a place where you can go and take a break, a place where you can go and rest, a place where you can breathe better, a place where you can sleep better, a place to rethink, a place to work. You have to sculpt that; it’s not given.”

—Otobong Nkanga







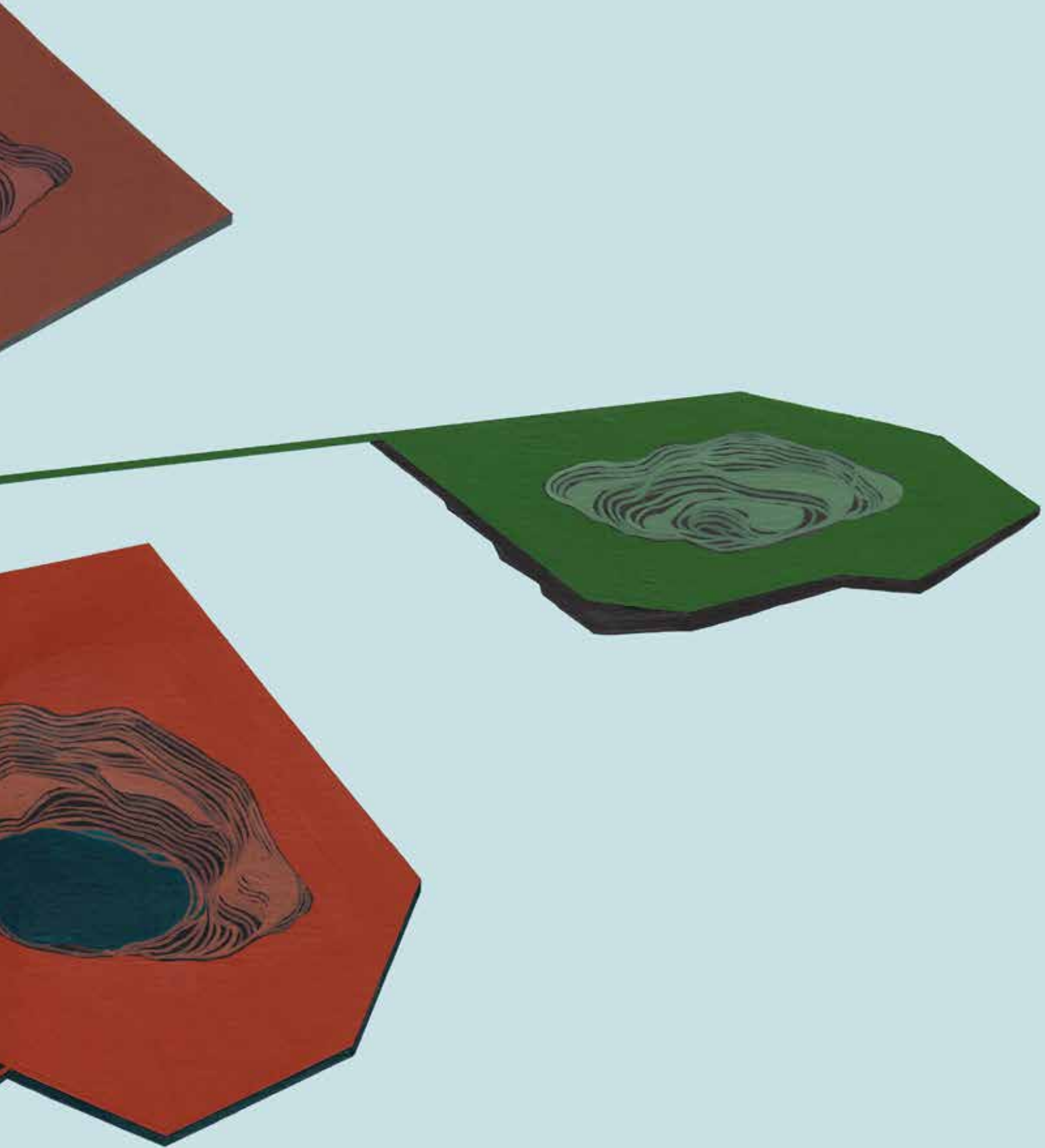


Otobong Nkanga, *Steel to Rust – Meltdown*, 2016. Woven textile mounted on aluminum frames, two parts, each 87 3/8 x 60 1/4 inches (222 x 153 cm). Photo Kunsthal Aarhus, courtesy of the artist









Otobong Nkanga, *Social Consequences IV: The Mapping - The Pile - Emptied Pit - Ruin*, 2013, acrylic on paper, four parts, each 16 1/2 x 11 3/4 inches (42 x 29.7 cm). Image courtesy of the artist

OBJECT



Abigail Lucien, *When Day and Hour Come* (detail), 2024. Cacao butter, enamel on rebar, chicken foot, beeswax candles. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist

AND WITNESS

Abigail Lucien and
the transformation
of cacao butter

BY ALYSSA MATTOCKS

Before Abigail Lucien casts and carves a sculpture from cacao butter, the material has already undergone an extensive process to be what it is. That process begins far from the studio: First, cacao trees must be planted and harvested, their pods picked, beans fermented, dried, roasted, shelled, ground, pressed, and finally refined to extract the richly scented fat. When it reaches Lucien's studio, the cacao butter is in dense, 50-pound blocks, pale and solid. The artist breaks them down like stone, reducing the stuff to smaller, workable pieces to be melted, shaped, and reshaped. As its temperature rises, its perfume crescendos, sweet and cloying and hanging in the air only to almost disappear once the butter cools and hardens. The butter's resolution serves as a reminder of its origins—a material shaped by labor, both human and natural, long before it arrived at this new point of making.



Abigail Lucien, *When Day and Hour Come*, 2024. Cacao butter, enamel on rebar, chicken foot, beeswax candles. Dimensions variable. Installation view from *Tituba, Who Protects Us?* at Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2024. Image courtesy of the artist

Cacao butter is both an object of transformation and a witness to it. It carries the weight of systems designed to disappear: colonial networks of extraction and exploitation made less visible over time. Cultivated for centuries in the Amazon basin and later across West Africa and the Caribbean, cacao was introduced to Europe by Spanish conquistadors in the 16th century, reshaping global economies. The labor-intensive process of fermenting, drying, and pressing cacao beans fueled wealth in countries such as Spain, Portugal, and England, while enslaved and exploited laborers in colonies bore its physical and emotional costs. Today, West Africa accounts for more than 60 percent of the world's cacao production.

Fair-trade organizations, such as the Ghanaian farm Lucien procures the material from, have emerged to counterbalance the socioeconomic destruction borne out of the extraction and exploitation of cacao butter, yet the structures of global trade often dilute their impact, as multinational corporations prioritize profit over people. In this context, cacao butter embodies both the weight of exploitation and, as a moisturizing product, the possibility of care—pointing to a potential for reimagining systems of value and labor.

“For me, cacao butter carries a material metaphor of healing and labor, and in particular the ritualistic labor of self-care.”

— Abigail Lucien



Abigail Lucien, *Swallowing our own spit to salivate once more*, 2019. Detail featuring coconut oil and rebar



Abigail Lucien, *Swallowing our own spit to salivate once more*, 2019. Enamel, acrylic, soap, cacao butter, coconut oil, satin, rebar. 80 x 41.5 x 33 inches (203.2 x 105.4 x 83.8 cm). Image courtesy of the artist. Photo by Dev Hein



Cacao butter in Lucien's studio. Photo by the artist



Lucien's work forces these histories into view. "For me, cacao butter carries a material metaphor of healing and labor, and in particular the ritualistic labor of self-care," says Lucien. Introduced to it as a salve for dry skin and hair, cacao butter was an early lesson in restoration for Lucien, and, in Lucien's hands now, the butter continues to carry this duality, manifesting the labor/healing cycle.

The artist first used butter for sculpture in *Swallowing our own spit to salivate once more* (2019), a work that comprises cacao butter, enamel, acrylic, soap, coconut oil, satin, and rebar. The materials are gathered alongside a structurally vulnerable rebar arch, held in place by the soft, yielding presence of cacao butter. Rebar, typically concealed within concrete walls and foundations, is laid bare here, exposed in its raw industrial form. Together, the materials summon histories of repeated work necessary to hold something together. In this work, the body of the sculpture is both architecture and ruin, enduring and decaying, an ongoing cycle of care and collapse. What remains, then, is a reflection on the systems we live within, the ones we lean on without question, their capacity to renew, and the echo of their eventual failure.

Lucien's most recent cacao butter sculpture, *When Day and Hour Come* (2024), was part of *Tituba, Who Protects Us?*, a group exhibition curated by Amandine Nana at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, which invited 11 artists to consider grief, memory, migration, and ancestry as it relates to their diasporic identities. *When Day and Hour Come* is part of Lucien's exploration of the Caribbean's real and imagined sites, drawing from the inherited language of the region's architectural vernacular. The perforated 'breezeblocks' in this piece are inspired by a still-existing building built by the artist's grandfather in Pignon, Haiti. The sculpture borrows the building's same style of heart-motif cinder blocks, now cast cacao butter and stacked in an ascending staircase formation that accumulates into a quiet corner. Steel rebar traces the path along each uppermost block, balancing a beeswax candle at its lowest step and, at its highest point, a pale yellow and lavender painted chicken foot. Chicken feet are used by spiritual practitioners for protection, to shield against negative energies, and guard spaces and belongings. The chicken-foot talisman, poised like an offering, becomes a subtle reminder of forces unseen.

Abigail Lucien summons the whispered utterances of materials, allowing them to articulate their most profound truths through stillness. When gathered together, they engage in a subtle exchange, speaking to one another through a language of care, memory, and transformation. They bring into view what would otherwise remain intangible, suggesting that what is invisible can carry weight, can shape and protect. How do we carry what is intangible, what passes between us unseen? How do we make the invisible tangible, not just for ourselves, but for those who come after us? ■



Frank Reaugh, *Driving the Herd*, 1904.
Oil on canvas, 24 x 48 inches (61 x 122
cm), Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas Art
Association Purchase. Image courtesy
of Dallas Museum of Art

Barbed wire image overlay. Image
courtesy © Kasprí | dreamstime.com

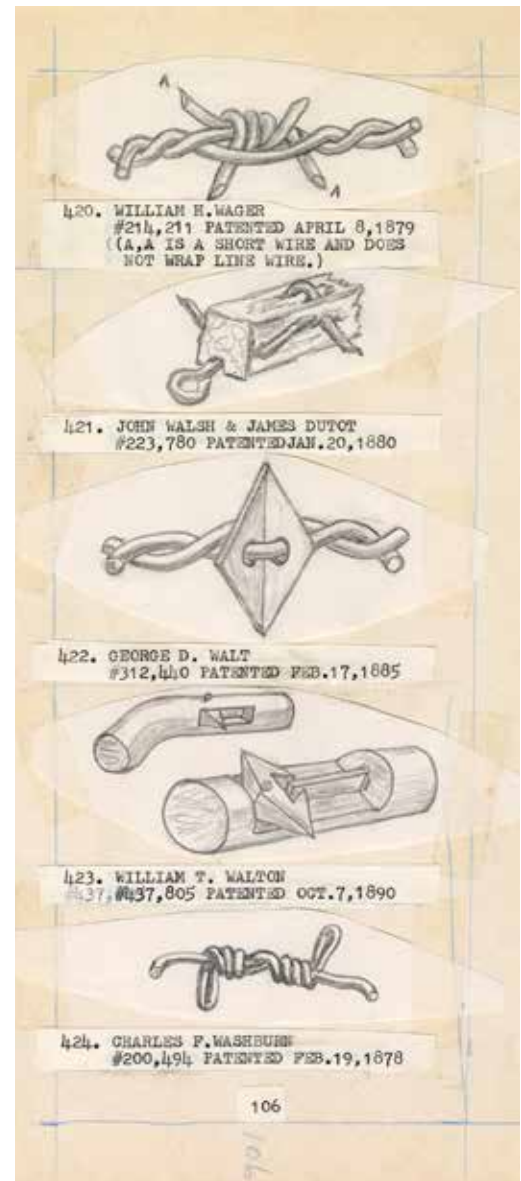
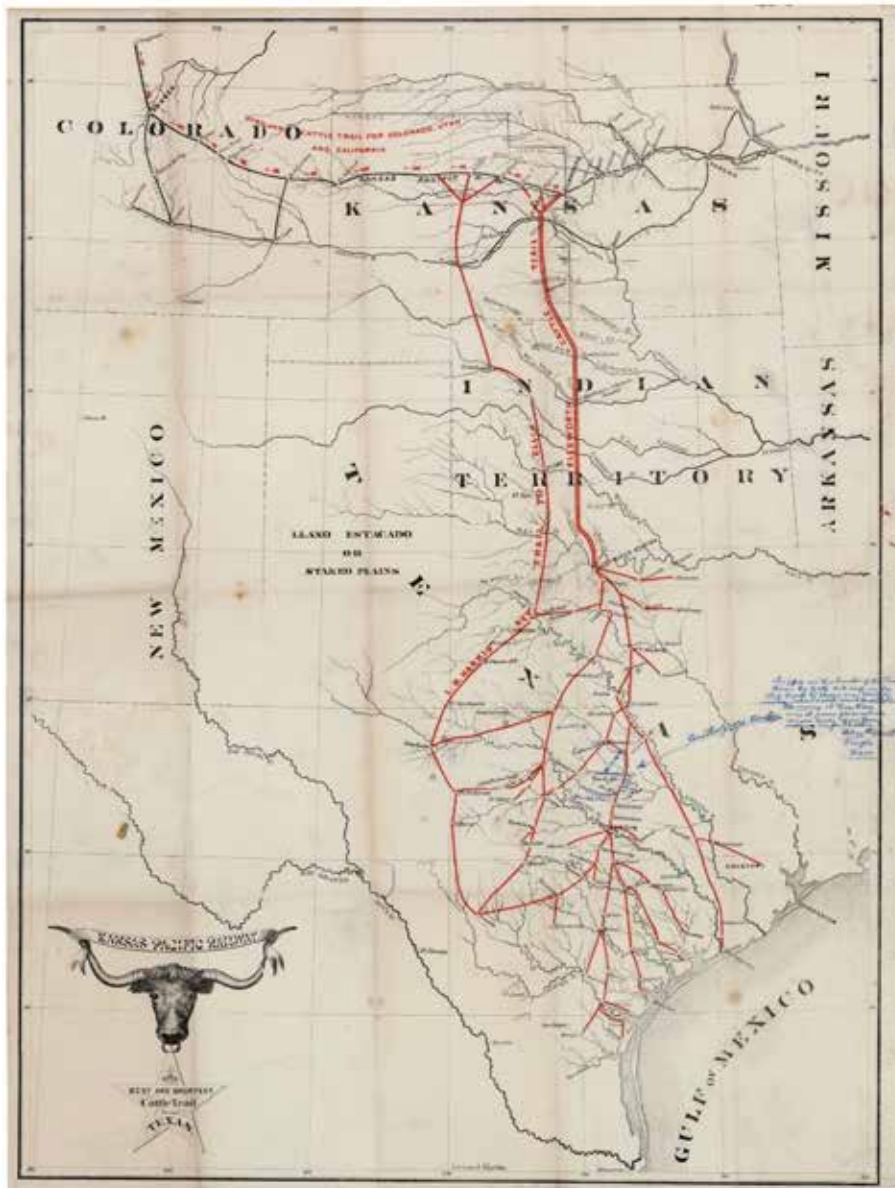


SEWING WITH THE DEVIL'S ROPE

A textile artist uncovers how the introduction of barbed wire carved the Texas prairies, forever changing how people experience and access its lands.

BY DARYL CELESTE MEADOR

Around 1880, a prominent cattle rancher in the Texas Panhandle came across a Pueblo chief who was lost near the rancher's land. The chief and a group of Pueblo men were returning from a trading trip with the Kiowa, who had recently been forcefully relocated onto reservations in what would later become Oklahoma. The chief was distraught by his unexpected sense of dislocation. The rancher asked the chief how he could have lost his bearings in a region that he had traversed his entire life, and the chief replied in dismay, "*Alambre! Alambre! Alambre! Todas partes! (Wire! Wire! Everywhere!)*"



Left: Guide Map of the Great Texas Cattle Trail from Red River Crossing to the Old Reliable Kansas Pacific Railway, 1873. Rees-Jones Digital Map Collection. Courtesy of the Rees-Jones Collection, Dallas, Texas. Right: Drawing by Jay Jenkins for his book *Old West Barb Wire & Patent Dates*, published 1966, housed in the Jay Jenkins Papers, UTA Libraries Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington

The chief was referring to the lengthy stretches of barbed wire that had recently begun to carve up the landscape of West Texas. The anecdote relays the swiftness with which barbed wire transformed vast amounts of previously common lands into private property, in Texas and across the nation. Barbed wire is often heralded as taming the West—its affordability and flexibility positioning it as an indispensable technology in meeting the speed with which the US divided its recently emptied grasslands into plots of personal property. As a means of enclosure, however, barbed wire is a particularly menacing one. Invented as a mode of controlling cattle, its effectiveness has always relied on its capability to inflict pain. The anecdote of the Pueblo chief reminds us that property always relies upon a process of forceful dispossession.

Barbed wire is now one of many symbols that circulate in the broad cultural romanticization of the Old West. Like much of this visual archive, its status within broader mythologies effectively obscures the lesser-known systems of colonization, dispossession,

ecological devastation, and labor exploitation that it enforced. Fascinated by its symbolic complexity, I have begun to weave barbed wire motifs into my work as a textile artist, reappropriating it in order to revisit the underlying violence of its history.

Barbed wire did not come calmly to Texas, one of the states in what was known as the Cattle Kingdom, where distinct dynamics of land use allowed privatization and fencing to unfurl on an intensified scale. Cattle had been procreating on the unfenced plains of West Texas since the Civil War, when cattlemen began operating on the open range, grazing their herds freely. As the cattle market boomed, cowboys sometimes drove herds north, where they could be sold for a larger profit. Cattle brands as markers of ownership negated the need for fences, and stockholders could cash in so long as they could catch an unbranded cow and scorch their mark on it.

By around 1880, open-range cowboys were dismayed to find



Daryl Celeste Meador, *A Quilt For Lucinda*, 2023. Cotton fabric, batting, natural dyes, thread. 37 x 28 inches (94 x 71 cm). Image courtesy of the artist

expanses of barbed wire enclosing prime grazing lands and coveted water sources. Syndicates, backed by Northern and British capital, began to buy up and enclose massive amounts of West Texas land in a veritable free-for-all. Fencelines sometimes ran for thousands of miles around unprecedentedly large cattle ranches.

The rapid corporatization of land was often negotiated by the state itself. When Texas dissolved its republic and joined the Union, in 1845, it retained control of its public domain—the only state to do so besides the original 13 colonies. In 1850, the state sold 67 million acres of land to assuage the massive debts it also accrued as a failed republic. In 1882, the state sold three million acres of land in the Texas Panhandle to a Chicago-based investment company, using the profit from the sale to fund the construction of the state capitol building. The resulting XIT Ranch was soon surrounded and cross-fenced with 1,500 miles of barbed wire.

Land speculators took advantage of the haphazard ways the

state disposed of its public lands. Texas sold extensive acreage to railroads in the form of scrip, certificates entitling their holders to obtain certain portions of public land, which was also sellable and transferable, creating a booming speculative market that encouraged large-scale and fraudulent acquisitions. Often, cattle barons fenced in public land without even buying it. The result of this swift and haphazard takeover of public land is the Texas that we know today, about 95 percent of which is privately owned. In West Texas, this monopolization led quickly to an overstocked range, and eventually to waves of ecological devastation.

Landless cowboys did not accept this mass usurpation of public lands peacefully. In response, small-scale stockmen began a defiant and organized project of cutting the newly installed “devil’s rope,” as it was called by Native American tribes. Throughout the summer and fall of 1883, fence cutters sprang up around Texas, sometimes organized into bands with names such as the Owls, the Javelinas, and the Blue Devils. Local newspapers



Daryl Celeste Meador, *Devil's Rope*, 2024. Cotton fabric, batting, natural dyes, thread. 42 x 57 inches (106.7 x 144.8 cm). Image courtesy of the artist

reported miles of fences cut, pastures burned, and occasional notes left, avowing access to public lands or, in one case, depicting a drawing of a coffin. The outlaws armed themselves and the corporations hired their own armed guards in response, spurring what became known as the Fence Cutting War. It began in Texas and spread into the Great Plains beyond.

Ultimately, Texas Rangers were sent in to quell the rebellion, the state legislature passed a law making the cutting of a fence a felony, and barbed wire became naturalized into the Texas landscape. The closing of the open range dispossessed landless cowboys from their ability to graze their cattle, effectively ending the role of the roaming cowboy. They instead sought work as wage laborers.

The cowboys' loss is undercut by the fact that the public lands they previously grazed upon were themselves stolen, and that access to these lands, whether in free grazing or ownership, was sharply delimited by race. As barbed wire had unfolded across the West during the era of Reconstruction, it transformed some 270 million acres of unceded Indigenous land into the property of homesteaders, almost all of whom were white. Texas's ownership of its public domain exempted it from the Homestead Act, allowing it to more formally enforce a racist system of land distribution. The vast inequity and fraud through which land

was made property offers clarity to the need for an enclosure as defensive as barbed wire.

As a writer, researcher, and quilting artist, my work frequently appropriates potent symbols used to tell stories about Texas. These stories and symbols often obscure as much as they reveal. Texas is culturally imagined as "the West," a dusty landscape where lone cowboys ride horses and drive herds of cattle into barren vistas. My work draws from this romantic imagery to interrogate the many ways in which its implied assurances of freedom and flourishing often fall flat in real life. In *A Quilt for Lucinda* (2023), a running horse breaks through a barbed-wire fence upon an otherwise empty horizon. The cowboy was once judged for his ability to tame a wild horse, an animal of incredible force whose domestication fed into the broader subsumption of the West into US control. In weaving a wild horse together with country music lyrics that thematize labor, I appeal to the actual inhibitions upon autonomy that the settlement of the West enforced, symbolized in this barbed-wire enclosure. Like the fence-cutters, I find that labor is a site through which Texas' many assurances break down most acutely.

The quilt is a material object that holds as many stories and juxtaposed notions as barbed wire. A domestic craft, quilting was its own tool of settler homemaking. But quilts are also archives in themselves, stitching together complex stories of materials, makers, and communities. The intensive labor of quilt-making imbues the quilt with a certain weightiness that sits in tension with its inherent softness.

My recent work, *Devil's Rope* (2024), looks closely at the materiality of barbed wire, using archived drawings and images to illustrate its signature coiled steel with double-pointed barbs. Barbed wire's inward facing prongs, originally intended to prevent the escape of cattle, foretell its eventual use in several types of incarceration. In translating the violent form into sewn quilt blocks, this quilt mimics the romanticization through which barbed wire is often taxonomized. I incorporate lines from Edwin Ford Piper's 1917 poem, lamenting the violence the new invention inflicted upon his horses. Piper describes the fenced-in range as a descent into hell, where we find "barbed wire for the devil's hat band." Like the country-music lyrics I have incorporated into previous pieces, Piper's poem weaves in historic artistic interpretation whose poetic sorrow undercuts the common romanticization of the West.

In making these recent textiles, and by writing about barbed wire's history, I hope to open space to reflect upon why land privatization requires methods that resemble incarceration, and how Texas's proudly privatized attitude toward land has impacted the ways Texans live together and interact.

Sewing soft forms of the thorniest of violent infrastructures into a domestic object of comfort is an uncomfortable thought. Materiality reimagined, however, in showing us something new, never promises comfort as a result. ■

LANDLESS COWBOYS DID NOT ACCEPT THIS MASS
USURPATION OF PUBLIC LANDS PEACEFULLY.
IN RESPONSE, SMALL-SCALE STOCKMEN BEGAN
A DEFIANT AND ORGANIZED PROJECT OF CUTTING
THE NEWLY INSTALLED "DEVIL'S ROPE," AS IT WAS
CALLED BY NATIVE AMERICAN TRIBES.



A barbed wire fence on the
Texas plains, 2024. Photo by
Daryl Celeste Meador

EARTH WATER AIR FIRE

The elemental forces of Bosco Sodi's bricks

BY ANNA SMITH

The Nasher Sculpture Center recently received a one-star review—not for bad service or high prices, but for a pile of bricks. Someone had seen Bosco Sodi's *Muro* (2017) and dismissed it as “not art.” Such complaints are not uncommon in a modern or contemporary art museum, where splashes of paint, raw materials, and familiar ready-made objects have risen to the height of institution display. In this case, if I could speak with them about *Muro*, which has been in the Nasher's collection since 2018, I would start with the story of clay.

Clay is one of humanity's earliest materials of expression. It's a medium of survival and story, shaped first by hand, then by fire. As Sodi puts it, clay has been “our best friend since the very beginnings of civilization.” It's not just dirt; it's history. Clay carries the memory of its place of origin, a quiet witness to everything that has happened there.

The clay that formed *Muro* was sourced in Sodi's native Mexico. There, it was shaped into timbers—elongated clay bricks—and dried in the arid heat of Oaxaca. Sodi describes clay sculptures as the fruit of the four elements: the earth that yields the clay; the water that binds it together; the air that cures it; and the fire that renders it solid. Sodi fires many of his clay sculptures in kilns made by hand and fueled with traditional materials, such as wood,

coconut husks, and jacaranda seeds. The finished timbers are imperfect. They emerge scorched and solid, each one bearing the legacy of fire and earth and human hands.

Sixteen hundred of these timbers became *Muro*, a wall that rose as part of a one-day performance staged in Washington Square Park in New York City in 2017. It was nearly 7 feet tall and more than 26 feet long, a structure as simple and unyielding as its name. The performance now exists as a time-lapse video wherein the wall is assembled, row by row, over the course of a morning. People walk past it, some ignoring it, others pausing to wonder at its presence. For hours, it stands, a monument to division. And then, Sodi invites a gathered crowd to dismantle it.

People in the frame begin to organize. A hand reaches out to take a brick off the top row. Another follows. The wall disappears quickly—a rhythm of hands and motion, the bricks scattering by hand into the city like seeds on the wind. The video shows the wall's brief life compressed into one minute: the weight of it; the shadow it cast; the way it disappeared, piece by piece, until only one brick remained, alone under a streetlamp at dusk.

Sodi said of it:

“I decided to do this wall made by Mexicans, with Mexican soul, with the four elements of Mexico and to bring it to United States the same way as the illegal immigrants come. . . The concept was how you can assemble a wall in one day and [on] the same day, it can be disassembled. Same thing how when society gets together, they can dismantle any wall, either political, either gender, either economical. It was a very beautiful metaphor of life.”

Muro was a wall, yes, but it is also a question: How are walls built, and why? How can they be taken down? It is a meditation on division and unity, on permanence and impermanence. The bricks—stubborn, heavy things—can be disempowered by nothing more than human hands working together.

So, if someone thinks it's just a pile of bricks, they are not wrong. But it is also clay shaped by elements and hands. It is a wall undone by will. It is the story of how things come together and how they fall apart. ■

Installation and performance view, *Bosco Sodi: Muro*. Washington Square Park, New York, September 7, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York. Photo by Diego Flores and Christopher Stach, courtesy of Paul Kasmin Gallery



IT'S NOT JUST DIRT; IT'S HISTORY. CLAY CARRIES THE MEMORY OF ITS PLACE OF ORIGIN, A QUIET WITNESS TO EVERYTHING THAT HAS HAPPENED THERE.





MOM OBJECTS

Hannah Marie Marcus, *Mom Objects*, 2024. 4 x 8 inches (10 x 20.3 cm). Wood, Sculpey, and found scent objects (acrylic paint, vanilla chicory tea, plasticine, Tiger Balm, turpentine, Avon fragrance, and gesso). Photo by the artist

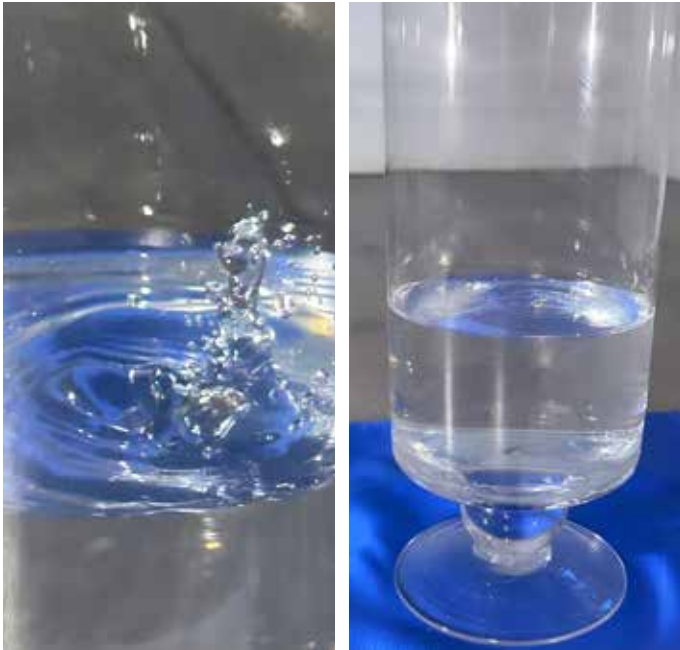
OLEFACTORY

BY ANDREAS KELLER

Art museums are full of status-affirming works made from expensive materials. But as one proceeds from exhibitions of antique treasures and medieval art to modern and contemporary art, unblemished marble, precious metals, and porcelain give way to sculptures made from crushed cars or soap boxes. It becomes clear that, somewhere along the way, the notion that the material value of a work of art is crucial for its worth has been abandoned.

Comedian (2019), a banana duct-taped to a wall by the Italian prankster artist Maurizio Cattelan, sold in November 2024 for \$6.24 million at Sotheby's in New York. The banana had been purchased on the day of the auction from a fruit stand outside Sotheby's for 35 cents. *Comedian* would not be better art if it were made of gold or used more expensive fruit. What matters in contemporary art is not the material but the intention, meaning, and effect. However, this turn away from material to meaning has complicated things. It is easy to agree that a funerary mask made of 22-karat gold and inlaid with gemstones is valuable, but whether one thinks a banana is worth a few cents or millions of dollars depends on its meaning, which isn't fixed in the way its materiality is fixed.

MATERIALITY



Ro Miller, *leak* (detail), 2024. Chlorine tablet, city pipe, lilac water, drip irrigation system, apothecary jar. Image courtesy of Olfactory Art Keller

While visual art underwent this change decades ago, it has just begun in olfactory art, which uses scents as a medium. Amongst perfumers, materiality is still fetishized like ultramarine pigments were amongst painters in medieval Europe. The value of natural perfume materials is determined by rarity and cost. Orange oil, a by-product of orange-juice production, is easier to produce in large quantities than rose oil, which comes from rose blooms that must be harvested by hand before sunrise. Rose oil, in turn, is not as rare or difficult to procure as oud, a defense secretion of an endangered tree, or ambergris, a waxy substance produced in the digestive system of sperm whales.

Despite the continuing focus on materiality in commercial perfumery, idea- and concept-driven olfactory art is slowly establishing its niche, as artists seek to immerse their audience aromatically, challenging it to engage with scent in novel ways. In the last four years, as the owner and curator for Olfactory Art Keller, a gallery in New York that exhibits contemporary olfactory art, I have had the pleasure of working with many innovative artists who create their art using unusual materials.

Alexis Karl scented her multisensory installation *The Exquisite Inevitable* (2023) with tinctures of mosses, wood, and bones she found over the years in local forests. The combined tinctures, each unique and irreproducible, created a scentscape for the sinister, post-human world presented in Karl's installation, where verdant new growth had overtaken what looked to be an unseen character's living room. Ro Miller's *leak* (2024), which was part of a group exhibition of found-scent art, consisted of a vase on the floor that collected water dropping from the eponymous leak in the ceiling. The water was scented by the artist with commercially available chlorine tablets. For the same exhibition, Hannah Marie Marcus took scented objects from her 92-year-old mother's apartment, without her mother's knowledge, over a period of two months to construct an assemblage she called *Mom Objects* (2024). Some of the scents had special poignancy because they were collected during significant events, such as the artist's late father's last birthday.

Using their mother's herbal tea and plasticine, or a cheap, industrial sanitizer, allows these artists to create works in which the material is not a tangible commodity but carries meaning determined by the context of its creation and the artist's intentions. The material's worth does not lie in its market value, but in its contribution to the piece's narrative and its effect on the audience. With the material's value no longer tied to its price, artists are free to explore scents for which no supply chain exists. ■



Mother of artist Hannah Marie Marcus smelling a found object scent at Olfactory Art Keller, 2024. Image courtesy of the artist



Fragrance produced for Alexis Karl: *The Exquisite Inevitable*, 2023. Fragrance: oakwood, Bois des Landes, honey, balsam of Peru, tree moss; bottle: painted glass with overglaze. Photo courtesy of the artist and Olfactory Art Keller

Installation view of Alexis Karl: *The Exquisite Inevitable (The Growing Chair)*, 2023. Forest tinctures, live plants, resin, paint, plaster, mushrooms, vintage chair, moss. Dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of the artist and Olfactory Art Keller



The Plot thickens

The living language
of Liz Larner's sculpture

BY SALLY GLASS

In the opening scene of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), the viewer is led through a moving tableau of imagery seen from the vantage point of the protagonist, L.B. "Jeff" Jefferies. The intimate lives of his neighbors are revealed through windows, on balconies, and in a courtyard, each providing glimpses of a stranger's existence for the restless, temporarily wheelchair-bound Jefferies to observe and scrutinize. It is through this singular lens that the plot unfolds.

As a Los Angeleno of now eight years, I have found it functionally impossible to avoid the ways in which cinema shapes one's experience living in this city. Mundane occurrences take on plotlines; quotidian objects develop into characters; landscapes become sets. It was from this frame of mind, not long after watching *Rear Window*, that I revisited the stunning and beguiling ceramic works by sculptor Liz Larner. Encountered in the round, as Larner intends, the work conjured a cinematic sensation for me akin to that presented by Hitchcock: as living vignettes. I gently wondered whether these two encounters share a connection. It certainly seems possible that Larner, who has been based in LA since her undergraduate studies in photography at the California Institute for the Arts, could be subject to the same persistent, cinematic influence.

To me, the sculptures of Larner exist not as static objects, but as dioramas or *mise-en-scènes* upon which we project our own interpretive language. Like cinema, her clay works draw on character and circumstance. Larner's vision of ceramics appears to highlight this: She conceives of clay as telling its own story, by presenting to her what it wants to be. And, in being manipulated, the individual identities of her sculptures emerge like personalities.





Liz Larner, *MacGuffin is not in the thesaurus*, 2024.
Ceramic, glaze, aluminum, stainless steel, enamel paint.
24 1/2 x 33 1/4 x 12 inches (62.2 x 84.5 x 30.5 cm).
© Liz Larner. Courtesy of Regen Projects



Above: Liz Larner, *Blue and Green*, 2010. Ceramic and oil paint. 16 x 24 x 3 3/4 inches (40.6 x 61 x 9.5 cm). © Liz Larner. Courtesy of the artist. Below: Film still from *Red Desert*, 1964. Directed by Michelangelo Antonioni.





Installation view of *Liz Larner: magnetic instinct*, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, September 12 – October 26, 2024. © Liz Larner. Courtesy Regen Projects. Photo by Evan Bedford

Primarily made of clay, Larner's works suggest that while one may harness a certain amount of control, in the evidence of mark-making, ultimately forms take on lives of their own. In this collective process, there is a sort of alchemy that takes place in the spontaneity, the presence of performance, and the live action that cannot be predicted or brought forth in any reliable way, nor can it be replicated exactly. The conceits at play for Larner mirror cinematic spectacle when deployed simultaneously.

Here again, I think of cinema. Despite all the preparation that goes into a film, there are invisible variables that cannot be accounted for. Orson Welles called these divine accidents: actors missing lines; lights malfunctioning; scenery collapsing; all gifts meant to be embraced. "My definition of a film director is the man who presides over accidents," explained Welles. "It's the only thing that keeps films from being dead. There's a smell in the air, there's a look, that changes the whole resonance of what you expected."

Larner's series *Red Desert*, created throughout the early 2000s, presents a symphony of painted ceramic surfaces, or "Planchettes" inspired by the Michelangelo Antonioni film *Red Desert* (1964), his first in color. In an artist talk at Regen Projects for her 2024 exhibition *magnetic instinct*, Larner expressed that she prefers these sculptural works to be experienced in the round,

in real time. "I work with embodied experience," she explains, "walking around something and getting your information from it that way." As the viewer moves around and past and through these slabs, they are somehow personified. They work on us, as much as she has worked on the clay itself. There is an almost humanization taking place; they become alive as we interact with them. After her artist talk amid the exhibition, I happened to overhear someone jokingly question whether Larner herself is an animist, one who attributes inanimate objects with essence. Her seeming parallels—between cells and celluloid; slides of film and slides of a microscope—are evident throughout her career both in material and language. It seems she approaches clay the way directors approach film.

In *magnetic instinct*, Larner debuts the work *MacGuffin is not in the thesaurus*. A MacGuffin, titled after a term coined by Alfred Hitchcock screenwriter Angus MacPhail, refers to a driving force that moves a plot along, but ultimately is insignificant. The sculpture itself, according to Larner, has appeared as many things to many people. Like the idea of a MacGuffin, the piece is not perhaps truly representative at all unless we believe it is. "It's something that seems very important in the beginning, that sort of fades away as the movie or the story goes on," Larner says. It's something that convinces the audience what to expect; subverting expectations—a thrilling trick. It seems that clay, to Larner,





Larner's vision of ceramics appears to highlight this: She conceives of clay as telling its own story, by presenting to her what it wants to be. And, in being manipulated, the individual identities of her sculptures emerge like personalities.

plays the same trick on us. We make plans and clay laughs, she appears to say. "With most things, I'm always trying to let the form tell me what it wants to be, so that I'm working with what I put into the process, but also the material," she explains. "I look at it for a very long time, like: Who do you want to be? Is this how you want your hair done? What do you want from me? And then I do it and just go from there."

Larner plays with ruptures in her work. Inviting breaks in her slabs, or "caesura" as she has termed them, then addressing them with respect, honor, and intention: divine accidents, if you will; materials that are living beings unto themselves. To her, materials can be living beings unto themselves, rather than problems that need solving. In the exhibition text for *magnetic instinct*, Larner excerpts the writing of French film director Fernand Deligny, offering that "*wander* is a verb that needs no object...My aim is to limit myself to the ingenuity of innate action, to be awed by it, and not to try and clear up its mysteries."

It doesn't escape me that, as an artist trained and based in Los Angeles, this linkage of film and ceramic practice in Larner's work could be a subtle seeping-into; suggested by osmosis or divine accident. It may be that these coalescences are seamless even as, and often especially since, the seams themselves are made apparent, like frames on a roll of film, if you slow down just enough to see them. ■

Liz Larner, *vi (caesura)*, 2013. Ceramic, epoxy, and pigment. 21 1/2 x 35 x 10 1/2 inches (54.6 x 88.9 x 26.7 cm). © Liz Larner. Courtesy of Regen Projects

Smell Is the Last Memory to Go

BY FATIMAH ASGHAR

on my block, a gate
on my block, a tree smelling

of citrus & jasmine that knocks
me back into the arms of my dead

mother. i ask Ross how can a tree
be both jasmine & orange, on my block

my neighbors put up gates & stare
don't like to share, on my block

a tree I can't see, but can smell
a tree that can't be both but is

on my block, my mother's skirt twirls
& all i smell is her ghost, perfume

on my block, a fallen orange
smashed into sidewalk

its blood pulped on asphalt on my
block, Jordan hands me a jasmine

by the time i get home
all its petals are gone

Alexandra Hulsey, *Transcendence*, 2018. Digital photograph,
mixed media, courtesy of the artist



