

Otobong Nkanga Hearing from Artists

Otobong Nkanga works with textiles, drawing, photography, installation, video and performance to examine the relationships between people and land through our consumption of natural resources. Nkanga was born in Nigeria and is based in Belgium. Her solo exhibition 'From Where I Stand' launched at MIMA in March 2020. The show was initiated by Tate St Ives and reimagined for MIMA. Here, she is in conversation with Helen Welford, Assistant Curator, in May 2020.

HW: In March your exhibition *From Where I Stand* opened at MIMA. How does the title of the show, which is also the title of an artwork in the exhibition, connect with the themes of the exhibition?

ON: I begin with the pronoun 'I', so that the visitor, performer or artist can immediately question "Where do I stand with this? and when I look at this work, what is my position and what am I thinking?". The title also refers to a performative artwork in the exhibition. This is a large carpet piece which holds small metal tent-like sculptural forms containing metals and minerals. These objects are composed to feel like temples and create constellations. The work is a reflective space and you are encouraged to take a position on the carpet and to look closely at the elements or far beyond to wall drawings or the installation *Solid Maneuvers* (2015). It is a place where you can just be, contemplate and rest.

The title of the show and the artwork prompt us to reflect on the positions that we hold and to understand that we engage with the world from



Otobong Nkanga portrait. Photography by Wim van Dongen

a certain perspective. At this point in time during the coronavirus pandemic we are looking at the world from our respective positions as well as the positions that we think we know.

HW: What is the importance of tapestry as a medium in your work?

ON: As a child, I made Batik with my mum which is a method of dying cloth by using wax resist techniques. We sold our work to designers as a means of earning money. Historically, fabric and textiles have been used to communicate social messages, for example in English and Dutch wax prints. We can also consider commemorative clothing where text is written directly onto fabrics.

Textiles have always carried social and economic messages. For example, in Nigeria, women order many yards of woven fabric for use in marriages, burials or for very special occasions. This practice gives economic power to those women who make and sell the materials. In this way we can understand how textiles – the weaving of yarn into cloth – give power and economy to certain people. They can be used as a way to communicate status, political views and to illustrate a particular society or a community.

If we consider textiles within the Western hemisphere and specifically Belgian, Dutch or French tapestries of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries we see that textiles have long been connected to wealth. Wealthy families



From *Where I Stand* 2015. Installation image. From *Where I Stand*, MIMA. Photography by Hynes Photography

used textiles to communicate their status or as functional objects to give warmth in living spaces. Tapestries also enable owners to create a world beyond the reality of their living spaces.

Within these different constellations and worlds, I make tapestries to communicate the political and social issues of our time. The tapestry *The Weight of Scars* (2015), for example, addresses what it means to struggle for land and to fight for a place. This fight between different groups of people creates scars within those places and landscapes.

I started working in tapestry in 2010 with the Textile Museum in Tilburg, The Netherlands. Every year I make a new piece to consolidate my thoughts from that time and to experiment with different weaving techniques. So tapestries are story telling devices and we bring those stories to a home or to a museum. They allow you to extend the space that you are in and to think about other spaces in the world.

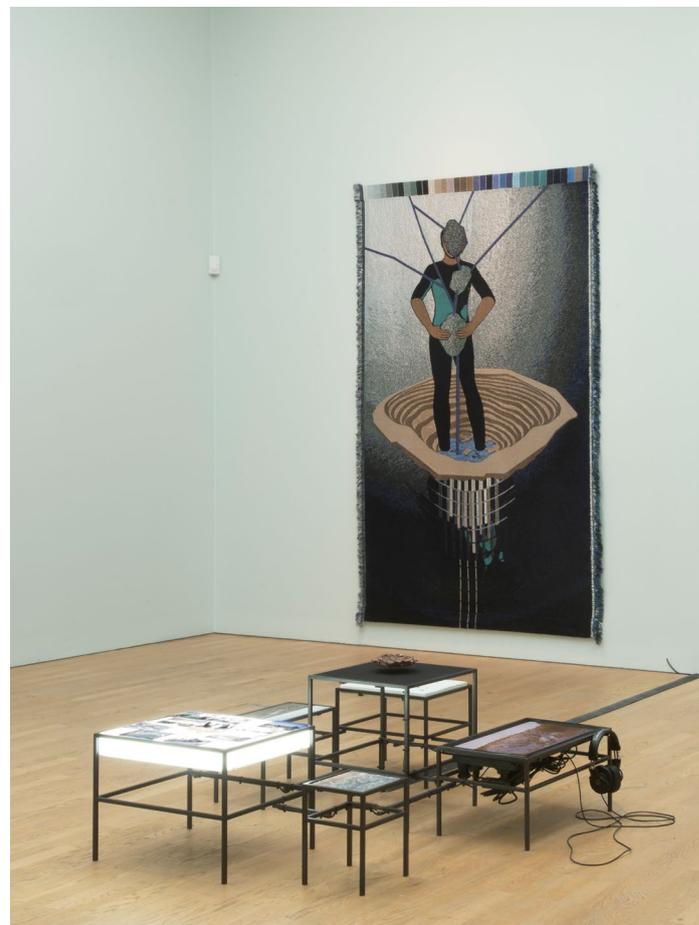
HW: You often represent the human body as intimately connected to land and global networks of exchange. What is the relationship between body, land and labour in your work?

ON: The land that we live in cannot be disconnected from the human body. Our actions on the environment affect the landscape and this in turn affects the way that we breathe, the way that we eat, the water that we drink and the food that we produce. If we treat the land poorly, our body will also be sick. The idea that we are separate entities from the land is false. It is very important in my work to constantly emphasise that these two are intricately connected. It's not about one over the other but about how one can be in sync with the environment and also care for the body.

We live in a world focused on extraction and producing – systems that require a human body to do work. There is a complete mismatch and imbalance between the labour and the energy that goes into producing things, to get a certain amount of money to survive, and the compensation given to the body at the end of the day. We must care for the people that we work with and at the same time care for the environment. In this way, there comes an understanding between each part, body, structure or system.



From *Where I Stand* 2015 detail. Installation image: From *Where I Stand*, MIMA. Photography by Hynes Photography



Tsumeb Fragments 2015 (foreground); *Infinite Yield* 2015 (background). Installation image: From *Where I Stand*, MIMA. Photography by Hynes Photography

I consider the different ways that things are connected and pose the question “*how can we care for what is uncared for?*” and “*how do we put light on things that are being obscured?*”.

The current crisis, for example, prompts us to think about the way in which huge corporations extract and transform energies from people. Each step in the system displaces a certain amount of energy from the human, from energy A to energy Z. Companies achieve maximum profit because they prioritise their output at the expense of caring for the human body that labours or the land itself.

Right now, we’re looking at a system that is breaking down because the part of care – which was supposed to have been done for decades now – has been neglected. We are now looking at a system that is saying “*we have all to stop*”, because that crucial part of the care is omitted. We are witnessing deaths and particularly so for certain groups of people. The black communities and the brown communities are dying more because the system has exploited the energies of those bodies but not returned care. Enormous companies gain huge profits to the detriment of those that labour for it by transforming their energy into matter. At this time, I am thinking through what this means.

HW: Positive and negative monuments are a reoccurring idea in your practice. You describe a negative monument as an ‘emptied out landscape’, resulting from mining processes. Can you expand on a meaning and presence of monuments in your work?

ON: I started thinking about monuments during my work with The Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt. I looked at metals in the museum including throwing knives, known as Kipingas. The description accompanying the knives noted that they were commissioned by a King of a certain village. It is important to know that next to the King, the Blacksmith was one of the most valued members of the community. Looking at these objects, I began to question if that material and everything that is around it could actually be the monument. Not necessarily the weapon itself but the holes from which the material and knowledge had been extracted in order to make the object.

In 2015, I visited abandoned mines in Namibia and witnessed holes in the landscape where material had been emptied out. These holes are not in our consciousness most of the time but the resulting objects are, because we hold and



The Weight of Scars 2015 (tapestry); Constellation to Appease 2019 (sculpture). Installation image: From Where I Stand, MIMA. Photography by Hynes Photography

use them constantly in our lives. We rarely look beyond these objects to question their material origins. There was something very powerful for me in that moment of standing in front of a hole dug in the landscape. When I questioned people about the pit, that summer in Namibia, most people did not know or recall the mine and this is perhaps in part because it is closed off and not accessible to the inhabitants.

We commemorate people and events by erecting buildings, structures or sculptures. I want to delve further and ask, *“could the place that is holed out actually be a place of remembrance, commemoration and warning?”*. Many discussions circulate around the commemorated individual but that person could very well be implicated in creating those losses in the landscape. We remember the person and we hide the holes.

Ongoing debates around the removal of certain monuments for specific people and occasions could be extended to the repair of holes in the landscape that were created to build those structures. The stories around these monuments are told from particular perspectives and I am interested in expanding rather than erasing these

narratives. For example, if you are standing on the side of the victor, the story will be different to that of the defeated. And so, we should think about monuments in a multi-faceted way and show what they represent from different standpoints.