

LISSON GALLERY

Press Release

Otobong Nkanga *We Come From Fire and Return to Fire*

24 May – 3 August, 2024
27 Bell Street, London

Opening: 23 May, 6 – 8pm

For her inaugural exhibition with Lisson Gallery, Otobong Nkanga presents new sculptural objects, tapestries and a sound installation, as well as wall-hung and floor-based works – combining materials as diverse as clay, rope, glass, wood, textiles, oils and herbs. As an evocation of natural environments, Nkanga incorporates the images and properties of various stones and minerals into a new, monumental carpet, while towers of raku-fired ceramics create intermittent forests of scorched tree trunks. For every suggestion of destruction – a parched or ruined landscape – there is also the possibility of hope and renewal in the same space – a pool of rejuvenative liquid, the scent of essential oils or a purifying powder.

A series of hand-braided rope sculptures, collectively titled *Silent Anchors*, hang or lay in each room as talismans or spatial cleansers for certain bodily or worldly ailments, some works hooked to the wall and cascading down to a selection of wooden, dice-like charms or biomorphic, blown-glass repositories. Nkanga fills indentations in these glass vials with scents or remedies, such as lavender (antioxidant, anti-anxiety), chamomile (anti-inflammatory, soothing), or St John's Wort (anti-bacterial, anti-depressant), representing circulatory systems of materials that are harvested, traded and ingested – both on an individual and a global level.

Other zones of respite in the exhibition include a carpet installation, coloured in deep red and purple tufts, based on the minerals pyrrargyrite (from the Greek *Pyr* for fire and *Argyros* for silver) with the addition of actual samples of shungite (a carbon-rich metallic black stone, known to block electromagnetic radiation and purify water) and tourmaline (a crystalline gemstone valued by some for its detoxifying properties). New tapestry works by Nkanga employ a multilayered surface of fibrous layers, some incorporating figurative and evocative imagery, while there are also abstract and malleable levels to these complex textiles, allowing the uppermost black veils to be sculpted and shifted by the artist's hand. Flame-licked ceramic towers made from stacked and striated columns of cracklelured cylinders (produced for a major museum show in Spain last year) create tree trunk-like punctuations, each work accompanied by bowls of sustaining seeds, soil or materials proffered as ritualised gifts.

Below this otherworldly landscape is a dark cavern of voices, a six-channel audio piece performed by the artist under the Pidgin Nigerian title, *Wetin You Go Do* (2020), asking 'what are you going to do'? In this soundscape, Nkanga chants, sings and pronounces in six distinct voices and overlapping characters; some representing mother earth, others simulating extreme psychological states and one even caricaturing a spokesperson at a political rally.

Combining poetry, sculpture, audio and performance, Nkanga has created a complex, fluctuating environment in which some elements appear to have been scorched by flames, while others are, by their very nature, reparative or restorative. This exhibition hints at the full range of her capacious practice, linking themes of global warming with personal self-care and the interconnectedness of all things.

About the artist

Otobong Nkanga's work foregrounds ecological themes of relationality and becoming through a distilled poetics of entanglement. Her multidisciplinary practice examines the complex social, political, and material relationships between bodies, territories, minerals and the earth. Unsettling the divisions between minimal and conceptual or

sensual and surreal approaches, the artist's research-based practice constellates humans and landscapes, organic and non-organic matter, Global North and Global South economies. Through drawing, installation, performance, photography, textiles and sculpture, Nkanga creates pathways translating the natural world – its plants, herbs, minerals and living organisms – into networked, aggregated situations evoking memory, labour, home, care, ownership, emotion, touch and smell.

In addition to producing distinct and rigorously researched art objects, Nkanga has consistently broken new ground through her ambitious, long-term projects. *Landversation*, which toured four cities from 2014-20, puts the artist and visiting publics in dialogue with multiple local communities who have deep connections to the land; while The Carved to Flow Foundation, established in Akwa Ibom, Nigeria, on the occasion of a series of performances held at documenta 14 in 2017, is a platform dedicated to researching material cultures and fostering shared experimentation and exchange locally. These projects, and Nkanga's practice more broadly, evidence a transhistorical and cross-cultural diversity of influences, pointing to the planetary scale of her artistic investigations. Reframing people and objects as compressed multitudes and as entities that come into being in relation to other entities, Nkanga deftly weaves insights from geology, botany, poetry and non-Western knowledge systems. Her works' allusions to the reparative potentials of connectivity urgently gesture towards the possibility of more liveable futures.

Otobong Nkanga (born 1974, Kano, Nigeria) lives and works in Antwerp, Belgium. She studied at the Obafemi Awolowo University in Ife-Ife, Nigeria; the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris and did her masters in the Performing Arts at DasArts, Advanced Research in Theatre and Dance studies in Amsterdam. Nkanga has been an artist-in-residence at the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten in Amsterdam in 2002-04, DAAD Berlin programme in 2013-14 and at the Martin Gropius-Bau in 2019. Her most recent solo exhibitions include: Sint-Janshospitaal, Bruges, Belgium (2022); Kunsthau Bregenz, Austria (2021); Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art, Turin, Italy (2021-2022); Villa Arson, Nice, France (2021); Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Høvikodden, Norway (2020-2021); Gropius Bau, Berlin, Germany (2020); MIMA, Middlesbrough, UK (2020); Tate St Ives, UK (2019); Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, Cape Town, South Africa (2019); Ar/ge kunst Galleria Museo, Bolzano, Italy (2018); MCA Chicago, US (2018); Kunsthau Aarhus, Denmark (2017); Nottingham Contemporary, UK (2016). Nkanga was given the Special Mention Award at the 58th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, Italy, 2019 and won the 2017 Belgium Art Prize. Other notable awards include the Peter-Weiss-Preis, Sharjah Biennial Prize, the Lise Wilhelmsen Art Award, the Flemish Cultural Award for Visual Arts - Ultima and the Yanghyun Prize.

About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and promotes the work of more than 60 international artists across two spaces in London, two in New York, one in Shanghai and Beijing, as well as a new gallery in Los Angeles. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Art & Language, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt and Richard Long. In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors to the programme, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. Since 2000, the gallery has gone on to represent many more leading artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah and Sean Scully. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists led by Cory Arcangel, Ryan Gander, Van Hanos, Hugh Hayden, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost, Pedro Reyes, Wael Shawky and Cheyney Thompson.

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