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By Zachary Small

Otobong Nkanga Wins the Nasher Prize for Sculpture

Her expansive sculptures that tackle the plundering of minerals and resources have earned her the \$100,000 cash prize — one of the art world's top honors.



Otobong Nkanga, the winner of this year's Nasher Prize. Along with the cash award, she will become a laureate at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas.

The Nigerian-Belgian artist Otobong Nkanga makes unorthodox work addressing the global extraction of natural resources. She has sung to copper mines in Namibia and balanced potted plants on people's heads in Switzerland. But now, her expansive view of sculpture is being recognized by one of the art world's top honors: the Nasher Prize.

The prize is more than a \$100,000 award. A winner becomes a laureate at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, where curators help devise public programming, an exhibition and a published monograph.

"I wasn't expecting this, but I am extremely honored," said Nkanga, 49, who now resides in Antwerp, Belgium. The museum exhibition will be an opportunity for the artist to reintroduce herself to American audiences. Her last solo exhibition in the United States was in 2018 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, where she presented soap sculptures, large paintings and woven tapestries. Included in the 2022 Venice Biennale and Documenta 14, she is a fixture of the European museum circuit, where she has received six major exhibitions over the last two years, including at the contemporary art museum in Turin, Italy, called the Castello di Rivoli.



At a show at the Kröller-Müller Museum in the Netherlands, Otobong Nkanga's "Double Plot," 2018, on the wall, depicts the extraction of minerals and its impact. "Alignment," 2022, on the floor, is created from handmade ropes, Murano glass spheres, a tree trunk, soil and plants. Credit...Marjon Gemmeke

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, director of the Castello, was one of the nine jurors who made the selection. Other panelists included the artist Nairy Baghramian, who won the award in 2012, and Lynne Cooke, a senior curator at the National Gallery of Art in Washington.

The selection process starts with more than 160 nominees, according to Jeremy Strick, director of the Nasher Sculpture Center. Jurors convened in June to narrow down a shortlist of 60 finalists to a single winner.

"The work of Otobong Nkanga makes manifest the myriad connections — historical, sociological, economic, cultural and spiritual — that we have to the materials that comprise our lives," said Strick, who is not a voting member in the jury.

There have been changes to the Nasher Prize's schedule this year, the first time it will be awarded on a biannual basis instead of every year. Officials said the decision was made to enhance the experience of the winners, giving them more time to plan their exhibitions and publications.

"To be candid, financially it is a loss for us because we celebrate the laureate with a gala, which is a fundraising event," Strick said. "There are a lot of prizes in the art world. You set a number for the financial value and that is great. The artists appreciate it, but the programmatic aspect is what distinguished the Nasher Prize."

Nkanga said she would like her sculptures to inspire others to rethink their relationship with the natural world. She hopes that "a young generation will be able to consider the planet we live in and find ways of repair, connection and love."