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What Is the Sound of a Teardrop? You Can Hear It at MoMA

Otobong Nkanga's installations can seem simultaneously futuristic and primordial, apocalyptic and utopian. Her latest opens at the museum this week.



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By [Nina Siegal](#)

Nina Siegal reported this story from New York and Antwerp, Belgium.

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Gazing up at the 60-foot wall in the central atrium of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Nigerian artist Otobong Nkanga felt both excited and terrified.

“You look up, and you’re like, ‘Oh my god, where is it going to end?’” she recalled thinking. “I’m always interested in working in spaces that aren’t that easy. This is by far the most crazy space.”

That was her first reaction when she visited the space with the museum’s chief curator-at-large, Michelle Kuo, after receiving a major commission from MoMA to build an installation in its Marron Atrium. The resulting work, “Cadence,” opens on Thursday and runs through June 8, 2025.

Her second reaction, she said, was to sing.

She improvised, starting high and operatic and ending with low tones, listening for reverb and echoes. “How does the voice bounce off the walls and run around the space before it settles on the ground?” she said she wanted to discover. “It’s just like wanting to know where the light falls.”

Nkanga's voice is often a facet of her site-specific installations, which can seem simultaneously futuristic and primordial, apocalyptic and utopian. They are put together from tapestries, drawings, photographs and ceramics, which she assembles with found natural materials, and sometimes augments with performances and other sensory elements, like scents from herbs and oils.

“My work is connecting all these things and making it clear that it’s all intertwined,” Nkanga said.



Nkanga during the installation last month of “Cadence” at MoMA. Laylah Amatullah Barrayn for The New York Times

She met with The New York Times in September, on the eve of her 50th birthday, in her studio in Antwerp, Belgium, where she has lived since 2007. The main elements of “Cadence” had already shipped, but fragments remained in storage boxes: charcoal-colored ceramic vessels, coils of thick hand-woven rope, spheres of blown glass and test pieces for a shimmering tapestry, which she unfurled on the floor.

Nkanga’s milestone birthday coincides with a moment in the international spotlight. In addition to the high-profile MoMA commission, she was named the 2025 Nasher Prize Laureate, one of the art world’s most prestigious awards, with a \$100,000 grant to create a work in the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas in the spring. A major Paris exhibition is scheduled for fall 2025, at the Musée d’Art Moderne.

These honors were “a recognition of the work she’s been doing over many years,” said Alex Logsdail, the chief executive of Lisson Gallery, which represents the artist. “It’s been gradually building. She has had a very significant amount of attention in Europe for some time, and the U.S. is catching up.”

Her artworks — the product of extensive research and contemplation — often focus on the origins of the materials she uses. One recurring theme is mining, and other types of extraction, and how natural resources circulate globally.

All that might sound heavy, but Nkanga has a gentle, nonjudgmental touch, and she translates charged environmental questions into lush, vibrant pieces, often with a handful of glitter.

“She’s one of these artists who manages to connect earth, history and a particular spirituality,” said Joachim Naudts, a curator based in Antwerp. “These are all things that are contemporary, because they deal with climate and our new search for meaning. It’s not art for art’s sake; it’s a socially engaged practice.”



An installation view of “Double Plot” (2018) at the Kröller-Müller Museum, in Otterloo, the Netherlands.
Marjon Gemmeke, via Lisson Gallery

Nkanga’s work reflects a life lived between Africa and Europe, during which she has observed the dynamic political, social and economic forces that divide and bind these continents. She was born in 1974 in Kano, Nigeria, and raised in Lagos. Her father died when she was 7 and her remaining family moved to Paris in 1985, when her mother started a job with UNESCO, the United Nations’ educational and cultural agency.

There, she attended the international British School of Paris, where her art teacher, Diana Schops, recalled a special student, with a “real sparkle.”

“She was open to everything, whatever we were doing, whether it was sculpture, painting, printing, etching,” said Schops, now 80 and retired. “She fulfilled the commitment 100 percent, and then 200 percent,” Schops added.

In 1990, Nkanga’s family returned to Nigeria when her mother’s term at UNESCO ended. Her mother accepted a job at a government-run school in Lagos and supplemented her income by making hand-dyed batik fabrics, which she sold to international designers. Nkanga helped out after school.

“I used to draw on all these five-yard pieces of brocade, using wax, putting in the colors,” she said. “We sometimes worked until 3 in the morning.”



Nkanga's artworks — the product of extensive research and contemplation — often focus on the origins of the materials she uses. Laylah Amatullah Barrayn for The New York Times

At age 15, Nkanga had to choose a career track. “I wanted to be an artist, but it wasn’t the kind of thing you could say,” she said. “When I looked around me at artists, I didn’t see any female African artists.”

But her mother encouraged her. “My mother said, ‘You can have more freedom in art; you can do anything in art,’” Nkanga remembered. “She said, ‘If it’s art, and you have that passion and consistency, you’ll have stamina. You’ll do well.’”

While Nkanga was studying art at the Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife, Nigeria, her mother died in a car accident. When Schops, her former teacher, learned of Nkanga’s travails, she urged her to return to France. “She’d been such a spectacular student,” Schops said, “so when she sent me a letter saying her mother had been killed in a car crash, I talked about it with my husband, and we invited her to come and spend a year with us.”

The extra year allowed Nkanga to put together a portfolio and apply to the venerable *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. She ended up living with the Schops family for a few years while she completed her training there, before moving to Amsterdam, where she took a two-year residency at the *Rijksakademie* and then completed a master's degree in choreography at *DasArts*, the city’s theater and dance academy.

As a result of all these varied experiences, she feels there is no limit to the ways she can express her artistic vision. “I always try to remember what my mother said: ‘If you’re an artist, you can do anything.’”

The work that best exemplifies the artist’s global vision is “Carved to Flow,” which started out in the Documenta exhibition in 2017, and has since been presented across a number of exhibitions in several locations. It began with an on-site, interactive laboratory, producing bricks of soap that looked like black marble.

The soaps, developed in Greece, contained charcoal, as well as oil and butter from across the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and North and West Africa. In a second exhibit, the soaps were formed into fortresslike walls, while performers discussed and sold the soap to curious patrons.



A soap-making session, part of Nkanga's work "Carved to Flow: Laboratory," which she first presented in Athens in 2017. Otobong Nkanga, via Lisson Gallery



"Carved to Flow: Storage and Distribution," presented at the Neue Galerie in Kassel, Germany, in 2017. Otobong Nkanga, via Lisson Gallery

Proceeds from those sales helped establish a nonprofit foundation that purchased farmland in the city of Uyo, in southern Nigeria, and create an arts space in Athens. Nkanga said "Carved to Flow" was an international work that addressed global problems, but also led to real-world solutions — "a proposal for alternative systems of care," she called it.

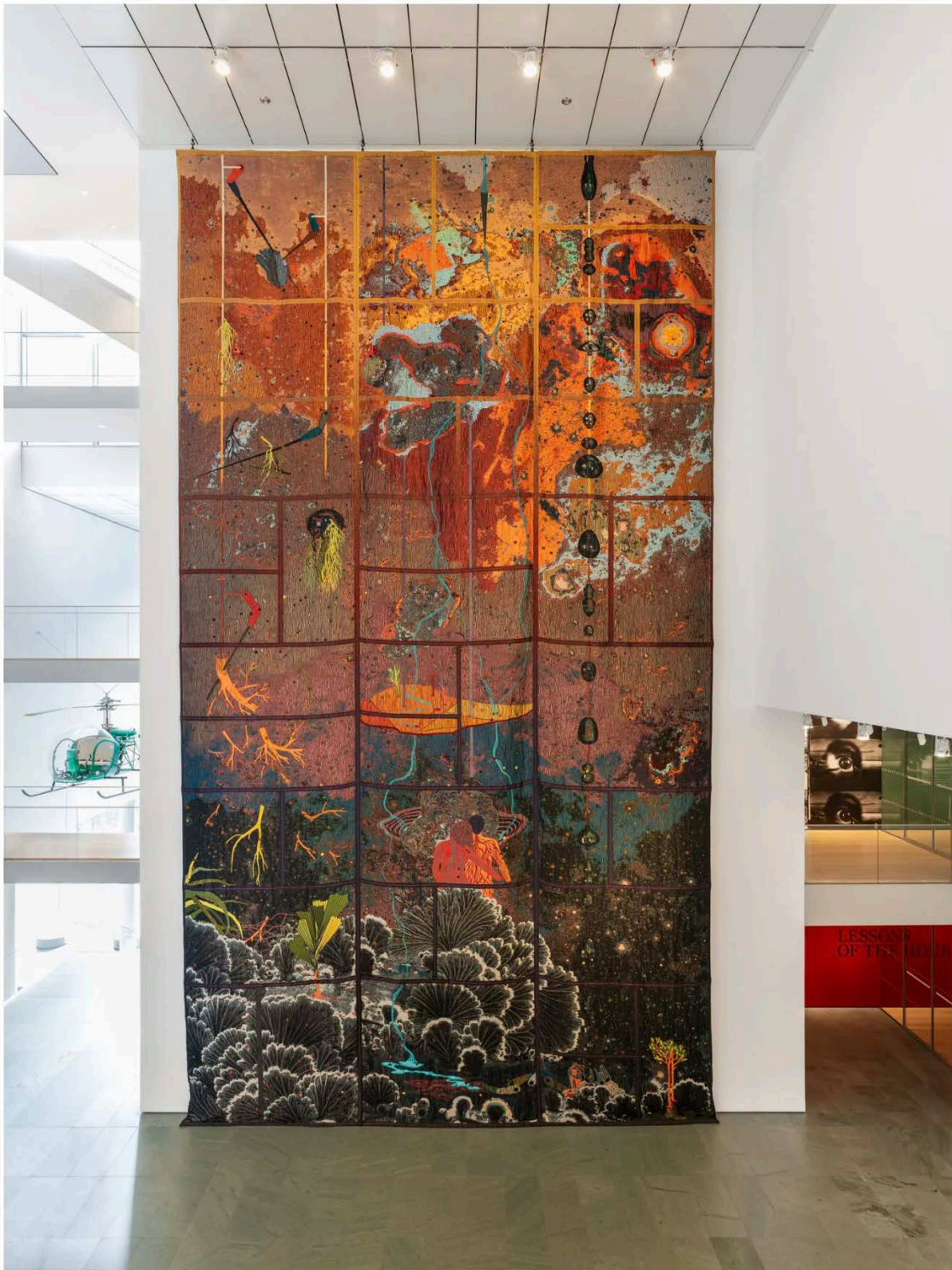
This work especially impressed the Nasher prize jury, said Jed Morse, the chief curator of the Nasher Museum, leading them to select her from among 130 nominees.

"She thinks so deeply about materials and how they connect to our lives, and that's something that goes right to the heart of sculpture," he said. "She takes this deep dive into materials and how they manifest in our lives and what they mean to us."

Nkanga's fascination with how "everything is connected," as she puts it, has evolved. Her early works linked mineral extraction in one country to cosmetics production in another, affecting global beauty standards and health. Now, she's making broader and more abstract connections — like how grief can be its own kind of ecosystem.

Her MoMA installation, "Cadence," argues that the entire world, right now, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, is connected through death and loss.

The centerpiece of the installation is a luxuriously woven tapestry in luminous threads reminiscent of gilded medieval textiles, covering the 60-foot, 5-inch wall. Two figures stand at the center of the tapestry, seated amid fan-like flora. Their backs are to the viewer, and they face an orange orb that might be a rising (or maybe a setting) sun. The scene unfolding before them, full of explosions, dust and debris, could be a catastrophic stellar event or a moment of genesis, like the Big Bang.



A detail view of "Cadence" at MoMA. Jonathan Muzikar, via MoMA

Dangling from the ceiling are ceramic bowls made using a Japanese firing technique called raku, linked to orbs of blown-glass and connected by thick hand-knit rope. Nkanga explained that she tried to give substance to a teardrop.

“It’s one teardrop in slow motion,” she said, explaining that she wanted to give material shape to the minerals within our tears, like sodium hydroxide and iron. She imagined how they become crystallized, she said, and represented them as a rock of anthracite on the ground.

She also wanted to give voice to the teardrop, so she created a 10-channel sound installation that was fitted into the pieces of the dangling sculpture. She sang short phrases of poetry, gasping, wailing, and also laughing, which will reverberate throughout the MoMA atrium.

“After losing my parents, there’s always a feeling of emptiness,” she said. “I think how we all carry these emotions, and so much weight, out of everything we’ve lost. This was a way of trying to render tangible lots of things which are not so tangible. It’s giving form and voice to something we all share, a human condition. Even our teardrops are an ecosystem.”

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