

Otobong Nkanga: What Are You Going to Do?

Tom Morton | Reviews | 05 September 2024 | ArtReview



Otobong Nkanga, *Sunburst*, 2024, woven textile, 130 x 356 x 2 cm. © the artist. Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London

Nkanga's first show at Lisson entreats us to consider different models of knowing, and valuing, the natural world

Resembling the trunks of palm trees scorched by some apocalyptic conflagration, three ceramic works rise up in the main space of Nigerian artist Otobong Nkanga's first solo exhibition at Lisson, London. Inspecting their blackened, carbonised surfaces, we get to thinking of the devastating blazes that, in our age of global heating, are razing more and more of the world's forests, laying waste to ecologies and choking our shared skies. Perhaps what Nkanga is presenting in her *Beacon* works (2024) is a vision of an imminent future, in which this trio of charred forms are all that remains of Earth's arboreal life. At the base of each of these works the artist has placed steel and ceramic vessels containing dried medicinal plants, like offerings before an idol or flowers on a tomb. Get close to *Beacon – Prominence*, for example, and our nostrils are met with the scent of lavender, an herb used to treat anxiety and depression. Is this enough to cure humanity of its self-destructive impulses, or is it too little, too late?

In the show's titular installation, *We Come from Fire and Return to Fire* (2024), a thick, hand-braided rope, threaded with huge smoked-raku ceramic beads, descends from the high gallery ceiling and snakes across a hand-tufted rug that – with its ashy blues and purples enlivened by flashes of volcanic red – evokes a simmering pool of magma. Resting among the rug's fibres are polished spheres and jagged fragments of semi-precious stone, among them shungite and tourmaline, which some alternative healers claim possess protective and purifying qualities (mainstream Western science strongly disagrees). It's a work that employs the argot of tasteful, high-end domestic decor to seduce us into thinking about the millennia-long process of

geological formation, and humanity's rapacious, often environmentally devastating extraction of minerals from the earth; about different models of knowing, and valuing, the natural world.



We Come from Fire and Return to Fire, 2024 (installation view). © the artist. Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London

Over three metres long, Nkanga's tapestry *Sunburst* (2024) is a God's-eye view of a circular form, part heat-hazed sun, part pulsing, unstable atom, hovering above a parched and inhospitable landscape. A network of branching lines might be read as roads, along which people and goods once travelled. Now, these are empty, nothing but scars on the face of a murdered planet. A tapestry, of course, is an object heavily invested with human labour. Is *Sunburst*, then, a work about how our overproductive species weaves its own, disastrous fate? Descend into the gallery's basement space, which is illuminated with red, infernal light, and we encounter the audio installation *Wetin You Go Do? Oya Na* (2020) booming from a set of wall-mounted speakers. Here, the artist plays a number of characters – from a drunkard to a politician at a rally – whose often incoherent voices declaim, chant, cut across each other, occasionally harmonise and eventually swell into a crescendo. We might interpret them as noisy, disembodied shades, trapped in a hell of their own making. The work's Nigerian Pidgin English title translates as 'what are you going to do? It's time.' As the flames of ecological crisis lick ever higher, how we answer this is – as Nkanga's stark, urgent, yet ultimately galvanising show demonstrates – a matter of life and death.

We Come from Fire and Return to Fire at Lisson Gallery, London, 24 May – 3 August

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