

press file

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**Musea
Brugge**

Otobong Nkanga

Underneath
the Shade
We Lay
Grounded

Sint-Janshospitaal
25.06 — 25.09



De Standaard



museabrugge.be

In brief

- Musea Brugge is proud to present a major solo-exhibition featuring work by the internationally respected Nigerian-Belgian artist Otobong Nkanga
- Nkanga is one of the most important of today's contemporary artists
- In the medieval St. John's Hospital, she creates a dialogue between her own works of art – both new and pre-existing – and works of art that she has selected from the collection of Musea Brugge, such as paintings by Hans Memling and Jan Beerblock
- 2,500m² of exhibition space offer a perfect setting for various installations, sculptures, drawings, tapestries, performances and poetry
- For the creation of the exhibition display, Nkanga has used no less than 50 tons of white stones and pebbles, 750 litres of turf, 30 kilograms of coffee and the same amount of black tea, but also cacao, cinnamon, pepper, incense resin, cumin and ginger
- The exhibition is entitled *Underneath the Shade We Lay Grounded* and offers visitors a landscape that invites them to explore, reflect and be healed
- The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue of the same name, published by Hannibal Books

Introduction

From 25 June onwards, Musea Brugge will host an important and large-scale exhibition of works by the internationally renowned Nigerian-Belgian artist Otobong Nkanga (°Kano, Nigeria 1974, now living and working in Antwerp) in the Sint-Janshospitaal (St. John's Hospital).

Otobong Nkanga is recognised worldwide as one of today's most important contemporary artists. She is famed for her installations and performances, in which she focuses on concepts such as identity; raw materials as a symbol for territory, power and conflict; exploitation of the landscape, people and labour; globalisation and transformation.

In this exhibition, entitled *Underneath the Shade We Lay Grounded*, Otobong Nkanga, interweaves a variety of different artistic forms, such as installations, sculptures, drawings, tapestries and poetry. On the ground floor and in the imposing wooden attic of the St John's Hospital, she creates a dialogue between her own works of art (some new and some pre-existing) and works of art she has selected from the collection of Musea Brugge. At the same time, she also wishes to create a parallel dialogue with visitors, with the historic St. John's Hospital, and with the city of Bruges. Otobong Nkanga creates an environment where visitors can come to rest. A place for contemplation and relaxation, through connection with her art.

The works and installations that fill the more than 2,500m² of exhibition space are made to a significant degree from natural materials. These include 50 tons of white stones and pebbles, 750 litres of turf, 30 kilograms of coffee and the same amount of black tea, but also cacao, cinnamon, pepper, incense resin, cumin and ginger.

3

We humans must once again feel connected to the earth, with our roots. In short, we need to ground ourselves again, spiritually and physically. Our relationship with the landscape, the earth, our body and our feelings is often disturbed. Our insatiable hunger for natural resources is causing damage and great harm. Not only to the planet but also to ourselves.

Nkanga offers visitors a landscape that invites them to discover, reflect and recover. It is a meeting place, a habitat that appeals to all the senses and encourages those who pass through it to come back down to earth. Also literally: on their knees, sitting on one of the carpets they will be given.

Otobong Nkanga concludes her exhibition outside the walls of the museum, in the herb garden of the old pharmacy, where she has intertwined a new poetical structure with the original herbs grown in the garden since medieval times.

To accompany the exhibition, a catalogue of the same name will be published by Hannibal Books, with textual contributions by Koyo Kouoh, Omar Kholeif, Michel Dewilde and Elisa Bonduel.

Curator: Michel Dewilde

The most important works in the exhibition

1. Underneath the Shade We Lay Grounded

Otobong Nkanga seeks to provide mental and emotional healing through her art. It is therefore no coincidence that the painting of *The Good Samaritan* from the Musea Brugge collection can also be seen at the start of the exhibition. In this Biblical story, the Samaritan in question helps a traveller who has been robbed of his possessions and left wounded at the side of the road to die. As such, the story symbolises the kind of mental and emotional healing that Nkanga has in mind for her visitors.

In *Underneath the Shade We Lay Grounded* Otobong Nkanga reflects on energy, which is the life force in all matter, and how it interacts with human beings and the environment. With her textiles, carpet of stones, ropes and recumbent wooden sculptures, she cuts through the 'classic' vertical and rectilinear museum display. In what she calls her 'horizontal museum', she invites visitors to reconnect with the ground, the earth and natural materials.



2. Healing carpets: Arched Gorges and Shaped by Morning Dew

At various points in the exhibition visitors will be confronted with a number of eye-catching carpets on the ground. These are connected with woven cords and sculptures made from wood, glass or stone, which call to mind the original function of the hospital: a place where 'guests' of many kinds could receive food, spiritual comfort and medical care.

Once again, Otobong Nkanga plays here with the decelerating effect of her installations, their ability to slow things down within her horizontal museum. The attractive forms, in combination with appealing sounds and scents (of healing oils, such as blue chamomile and St. John's wort, located in the holders built into the sculptures) lead visitors down to ground level, where they can listen, smell, experience and find peace.

The textile installation is reminiscent of a landscape, with paths that symbolise the search for healing. At the same time, the relief of the carpet sculptures contains microscopic and detailed images of minerals that are also said to have healing powers.



5



3. Unearthed - Sunlight and After We Are Gone

With *A view of the old infirmary wards*, Nkanga again uses a piece from the Musea Brugge collection as a benchmark from the past. This painting by Jan Beerblock gives some idea of how a hospital functioned in medieval times. Otobong Nkanga sees it as a time capsule that says much about life and death, both past and present. In short, it is the identity card of a historic space.

Nkanga has positioned the painting opposite the stone memorial tablets bearing the names of the sisters who used to live and work here. She commemorates them with flowers, which serve as symbols both of mourning and regeneration.

The reprocessing of energy that continues to live on is also central to the tapestry entitled *Unearthed - Sunlight*. After our death, we are transformed into new minerals within the earth, which help to feed plants, which in turn can be used as medicines. This is a process that also took place in the old hospital.

This same idea is also echoed in *After We Are Gone*, which is a new work. Against a background of burnt landscapes, new life is growing in the form of a hybrid of different plants.



4. Taste of a Stone

For the ground floor rooms in the St. John's Hospital, Otobong Nkanga has developed a new version of *Taste of a Stone*. In the white, stone-strewn landscape of this total installation – for which she uses no less than 50 tons of white pebbles and stones – she has created a refuge for reflection, dialogue and recovery. At the same time, she also invites visitors to make new connections on and through these stones.

This installation began life in 2010 as a creation with a clearly defined field of stones. These stones formed the basis for a space where the artist was able to invite people to pause on a large, flat, central stone, where they could connect with the stories and themes she offered them. As a result, the installation was not only a work of art in sich, but was also given an important complementary meaning as a kind of 'speaker's corner', activated by the visitors.

In this way, *Taste of a Stone* also serves as a free podium for word, music, song and performance, allowing the dynamic so generated to become part of the work of art. Further themes include loss, death and rebirth, which are explored in monumental tapestries and textile structures that cover the walls of the museum.

In the St. John's Hospital, *Taste of a Stone* has evolved into an all-embracing landscape of art and stories. The field of stones is now an archipelago, with islands that visitors can explore and where they are invited to connect, ponder and marvel.

Taste of a Stone contains all the elements of a 'healing museum'. The white carpet of stones refers to the rich history of the past and forges the disparate Romanesque and Gothic architectural styles of the infirmary halls into a coherent whole. At the same time, it also reconciles and unites human senses and emotions. In this way, the medieval hospital wards are transformed into an ethereal space, a place of refuge for reflection, dialogue and recovery.

7



5. Tied to the Other Side

The large tapestry entitled *Tied to the Other Side*, which is 6 metres wide and 3.5 metres high, depicts an undersea world, the floor of which is covered with human limbs. The composition is intended to reflect how we interact and deal with the elements of earth and water. For Nkanga, the depth of the sea and the earth is also closely connected in terms of meaning to the deepness of time.

As the demand and search for minerals increases, the sea and ever-deeper levels of the earth will become the new hunting grounds for global consortiums and their never-ending hunger for the valuable ores of copper, nickel and cobalt. On the blue tapestry, this hunger is depicted in the form of scaffold-like structure with arms, plants and a container, and by a needle injecting a human body.

Nearby, Otobong Nkanga has positioned the painting of *The first anatomy lesson in Bruges* from the Musea Brugge collection. This work is also a brutal confrontation with the nature and meaning of death, but at the same time depicts the value of new knowledge, which in due course can lead to new life.

Yet again, Nkanga is playing here with the dimensions and symbolism of the horizontal museum. Close at hand, her quest for a flat landscape of stones reaches its culmination in the sublime *St. Ursula's Reliquary*, which Hans Memling painted for the St. John's Hospital circa 1489.



6. Earthing

When you walk from the church that contains Hans Memling's *Altar piece of St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist* (1479) towards this textile sculpture, a cavity in the middle is illuminated. It is almost like a peephole in a wall. A ray of light shines on a body.

For Otobong Nkanga, death is not the end, but simply a link in the 'eternal' process that is living and regenerative energy. Time after time, she creates new landscapes that illustrate this process, which is also the case with *Earthing*. The landscapes symbolise regeneration, but also make a connection with the history of the hospital, since the drawing is a dialogue with the landscapes of Hans Memling.

With her drawing of a body, Nkanga makes reference to the people who once worked in the hospital, such as the Sisters of St. John, whose memorial tablet is also nearby.

7 Anamnesis/{Re-collection}

For the magnificent attic of the St. John's Hospital – famous for its original wooden roof trusses, which are amongst the best preserved in Europe – Otobong Nkanga has created a new version of her well-known sculptural work *Anamnesis*.

This installation is a world where the history of the city of Bruges coalesces with the worldwide global economic system that we know today. All along the waterline in the panel, the aromas of coffee, cumin, tobacco, myrrh, black pepper and incense can be discerned. These costly products were transported across land and sea from the four corners of the earth to the trading metropolis that was Bruges in the Middle Ages.

Anamnesis symbolises the insatiable demand for precious raw materials, as well as the exploitation of both people and planet to which it leads, even today. It also refers to the trade routes of this commerce, whilst at the same time linking the earth and its valuable resources to the history of Bruges and even to the history of the St. John's Hospital itself. In this way, *Re{collection}* makes a further connection between medicine and its origins in the herbs gifted to us by the earth.

A number of different pieces from the collection of Musea Brugge enter into dialogue with *Anamnesis*: pots used to mix and preserve herbal remedies, measuring scales used to weigh them, but also objects that serve as mementos or as tokens of thanks for healing, which the earth has made possible through regeneration. The central work here, however, is the tapestry *America* (Atelier Van der Borcht, Brussels, c. 1700), from the Gruuthusemuseum.

Finally, the large tapestry *Unearthed - Abyss* completes the display in the attic of the St. John's Hospital. This work, created in 2021 for Kunsthaus Bregenz, shows a view under the sea and forms an impressive combination with *Anamnesis* and *America*. *America* is about trade in spices and minerals, among other things, and the relationships between North and South and West and East. *Unearthed - Abyss* highlights the darker pages of the trade, showing, among other things, the bodies of deceased slaves from that trade who were thrown overboard on these routes.

10



Practical information

Otobong Nkanga
Underneath the Shade We Lay Grounded
25.06 - 25.09.2022

Curator of the exhibition: Michel Dewilde

Location
Sint-Janshospitaal
Mariastraat 38,
8000 Bruges
museabrugge.be

Hours of opening
From Tuesday to Sunday, from 09.30 to 17.00

Tickets and more info
museabrugge.be

11

Press conference

24 June 2022, 11.00

Press images

All images can be downloaded via museabrugge.be/en/press

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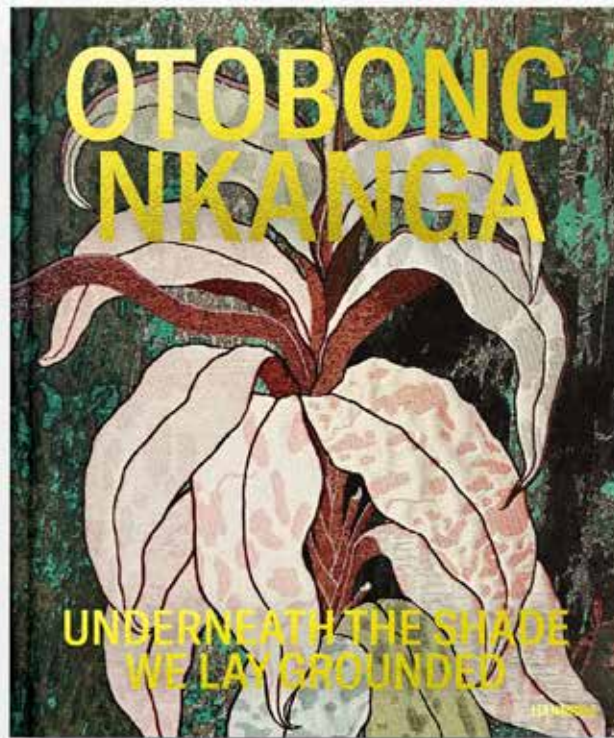


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Publication



12

To accompany the exhibition, a catalogue of the same name will be published by Hannibal Books, with texts contributed by Koyo Kouoh, executive director and senior curator of the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town, and Omar Kholeif, director of collections and senior curator at the Sharjah Art Foundation. Other contributors include Michel Dewilde, curator of contemporary art at Musea Brugge and Elisa Bonduel, who is attached to the faculty of medieval history at the University of Ghent.

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- 176 pages
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- Bilingual edition English-Dutch
- ISBN 978 94 6436 643 3
- € 45,00

Images from the publication



13



About Otobong Nkanga

Otobong Nkanga (1974 – Kano, Nigeria) is a visual and performance artist, who lives and works in Antwerp. Nkanga focuses on concepts such as identity; raw materials as a symbol for territory, power and conflict; exploitation of the landscape, people and labour; globalisation and transformation. Nkanga's oeuvre is multi-faceted, including drawings, performances, sculptures and other media.

Otobong Nkanga is regarded worldwide as one of today's most promising contemporary artists. She has already built up an impressive track record of success, with exhibitions in the Tate St Ives, Biennale d'art contemporain in Lyon, M HKA in Antwerp, Documenta 14 in Athens and Kassel, and Kunsthaus Bregenz.

She was the first laureate of the Lise Wilhelmsen Art Award (Oslo, 2019), and in addition has received the Peter Weiss Award (Bochum, 2019), a Special Mention Award at the 58th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale (Venice, 2019), the Ultima for Visual Art (Brussels, 2019), the Belgian Art Prize (Brussels, 2017) and the 8th Yanghyun Art Prize (Seoul, 2015).



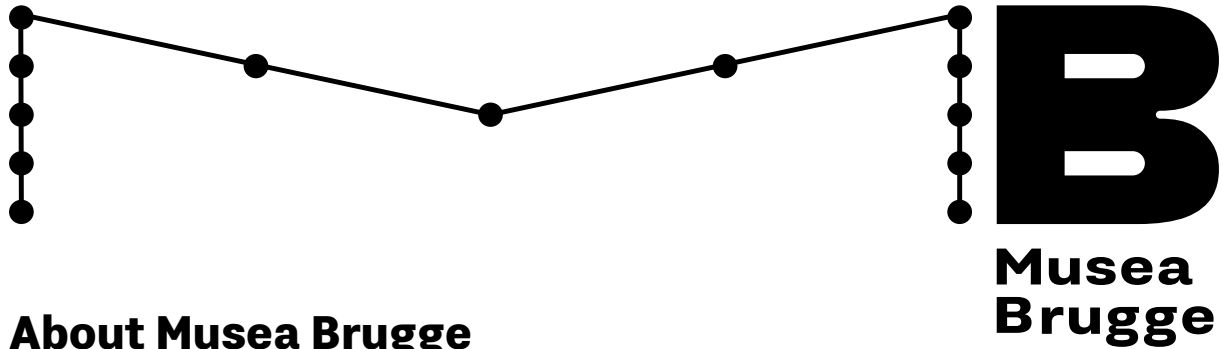
14

About the Sint-Janshospitaal (St John's Hospital)

The St John's Hospital is one of the oldest preserved hospital buildings in Europe, dating from the middle of the 12th century. Initially, these early hospitals were not hospitals in the modern sense, but rather guest houses. These were places that provided shelter and also a meal for any guest in need: pilgrims, travellers, merchants, passers-by, homeless, sick, elderly... The so-called 'medical care' in the earliest period was minimal, whereas mental or spiritual care was provided by the priests present.

Today, the medieval wards and their associated church and chapel house an impressive collection of archives, works of art, medical instruments and seven works by Hans Memling, including the famous Ursula shrine. The museum also houses the hospital apothecary and the Diksmuide attic, whose oak roof truss is among the oldest and most monumental in Europe. Early February 2023, after the exhibition *Face to Face with Death*, the Bruges St John's Hospital will close its doors for a thorough renovation. The museum will be restyled and get a new permanent collection presentation.

On the basis of universal themes, relevant, topical and stimulating stories will be told about our collection, the historic hospital site - including the old pharmacy and herb garden - and (healthcare) history. The renewed museum will be a place that speaks to the heart. The refurbished St John's Hospital will open its doors in the autumn of 2023.



About Musea Brugge

Musea Brugge invites diverse audiences to discover, to study, to admire and enjoy, to add meaning and to enrich the significance of its world-class collections.

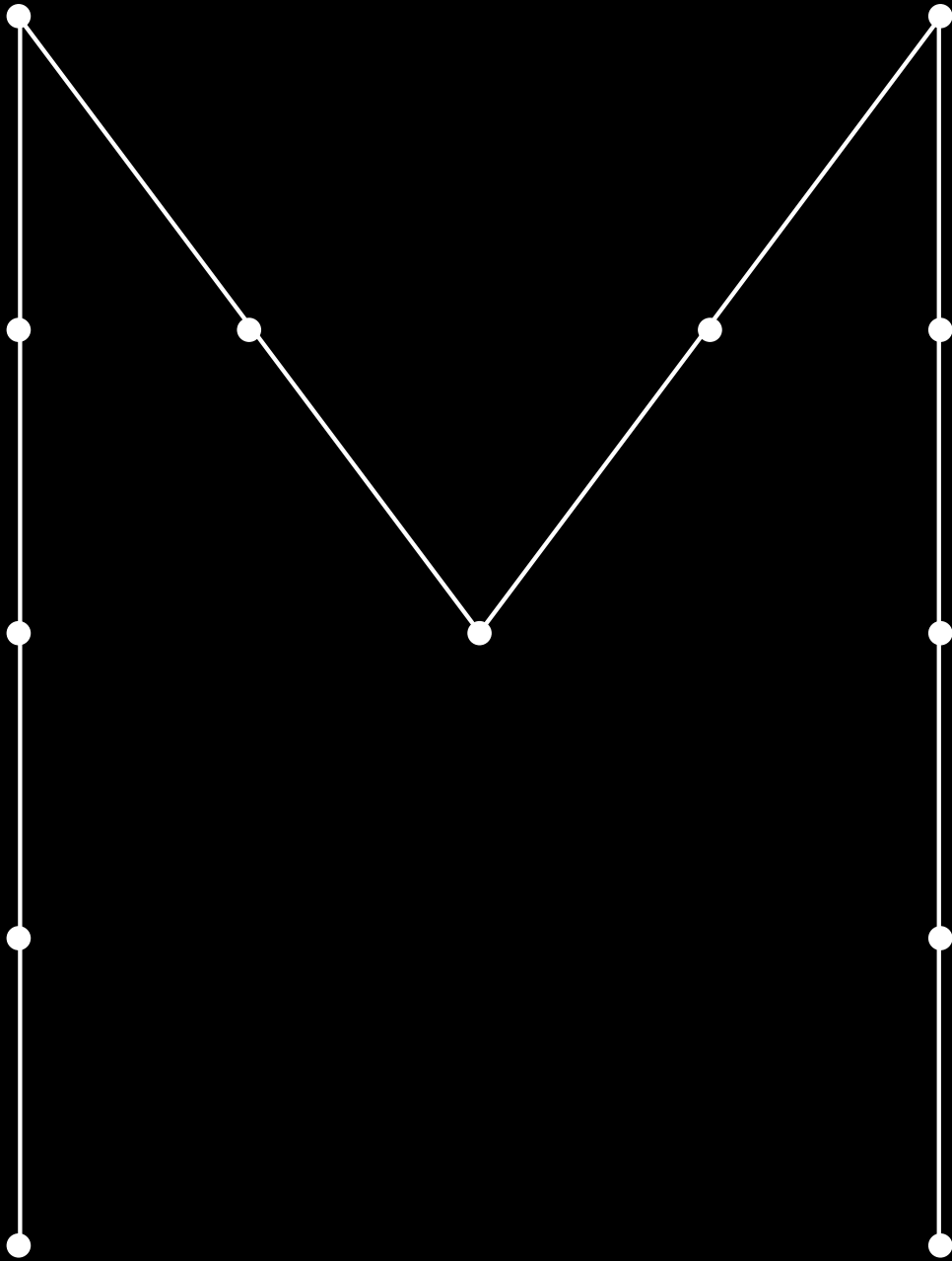
Musea Brugge enjoys international renown for its rich collections, and in particular for its outstanding collection of 15th- and 16th-century masterpieces from the Southern Netherlands. In addition to the collection presentations and temporary exhibitions of Ancient Art, Musea Brugge regularly invites a number of contemporary artists to set up projects and enter into dialogue with the location, the collections or the work of a particular artist.

15

In 2003, the South African photographer Santu Mofokeng brought his exhibition *Chasing Shadows* to St. John's Hospital, and in 2017 the Iranian artist Barbad Golshiri entered into dialogue with Hieronymus Bosch's *The Last Judgment* with his project *Orifeus and Oublietta*. That same year, the South African artist William Kentridge was a guest at St John's Hospital with his remarkable exhibition *Smoke, Ashes, Fable*, where he set up a dialogue with the work of Marcel Broodthaers, among others.

Finally, there was the Syrian-American artist Diana Al-Hadid, who during the exhibition *Memling Now* (2020) created an intriguing site-specific work inspired by various works by the early Renaissance painter Hans Memling.

The exhibition of Otobong Nkanga continues this exhibition trajectory and at the same time marks the new museum policy and the founding of the new art space BRUSK.



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