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How Otobong Nkanga Shapes The World

The 2025 Nasher Prize Laureate builds an ever-evolving body of work rooted in place, history, and possibility.



By [Okla Jones](#) · Updated May 3, 2025

Otobong Nkanga’s practice is a lesson in fluidity—of thought, form, and philosophy. Born in Kano, Nigeria, and now based in Antwerp, Belgium, the multidisciplinary artist has spent decades constructing an expansive and dynamic oeuvre that resists easy categorization. Whether through sculpture, drawing, installation, or performance, her work acts not as fixed monuments, but as ever-evolving structures—changing each time they are activated by a new context. With each iteration, her art recalibrates itself to local materials, histories, and ecosystems.

This capacity for change is not simply an aesthetic strategy—it’s a worldview. “With a lot of work, some of them are condensed for that moment. That’s the way I see it,” Nkanga tells ESSENCE. “But I see potential. It means that the work has the possibility to exist in many other forms.”

It's precisely this approach that made Nkanga such a resonant choice for the 2025 Nasher Prize, a biennial honor awarded by the Nasher Sculpture Center to a living artist who has made an extraordinary impact on the medium. In expanding the timeline of the prize, the Nasher has allowed more room for reflection, dialogue, and evolution, which are all values that sit at the core of Nkanga's efforts. In turn, she developed a major exhibition in Dallas, presenting new and reimagined versions of existing projects, including her seminal, ongoing piece *Carved to Flow*.



OtoBong Nkanga with the Nasher Prize. Photo Credit: Can Turkeyilmaz.

Originally created for Documenta 14 in 2017, *Carved to Flow* traces the circulation of resources through the production of soap made from ingredients sourced across Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. In its first iteration, Nkanga oversaw its production in Athens before transferring it to Kassel, where it was discussed, performed, and sold. Since then, the work has grown into a foundation based in Akwa Ibom, Nigeria, supporting an organic farm and an exhibition space.

This act of letting go speaks to a larger understanding of interconnectedness—a theme Nkanga explored in Dallas. Collaborating with local artisans and responding to the ecology and history of North Texas, she engaged ideas of migration, labor, and community through new commissions and reactivations of past work. It's an approach that mirrors the complexity of the region itself, a convergence point of cultures, industries, and geographies. "The time for plants, soil, all of the life forms have different temporalities and different timelines," OtoBong reflects.

“So it’s been a learning curve on patience, and how to align your timeline with other timelines and also relinquishing control.”

In addition to sculpture and installation, Nkanga is also a poet; a role that deepens her intuitive, layered relationship to language and form. “Poetry for me is a place where you can actually break down words,” she explains. “You can shape and play with it.” Her resistance to rigid punctuation or academic language reflects a broader skepticism about power and interpretation. “A word that started with a certain group of people becomes a word that is used against the same people,” she notes. “So the poems come from a place of deep emotion in relation to the making of my work and the consequences of that.”

Otobong’s ability to blend the emotional with the material, the poetic with the political, has been shaped in part by the obstacles she’s faced, particularly as a Black woman working in predominantly Western art institutions. “Other people wanted to have their voice through me,” she recalls of her early education. “It was always a kind of starting from the negative to talk about a place within a Western society.” Refusing to conform to reductive expectations, Nkanga turned instead to histories and aesthetics that reflected the full spectrum of life and legacy. “I might want to just draw a flower,” she says. “But that flower could have two edges around it. It could be talking about its poison as it could be talking about its healing properties.”



Installation view of 2025 Nasher Prize Laureate Otobong Nkanga: Each Seed a Body, Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, Texas, April 5, 2025 – August 17, 2025. © Otobong Nkanga. Photo by Kevin Todora, courtesy of Nasher Sculpture Center.

That duality—and refusal to be flattened—has become a throughline in her art. “As a Black woman, nothing is given to you. Nothing,” she explains. “You have to fight for that space that you want, but not bury others while fighting.” Her work, instead of demanding space, creates it—for stories, for relationships, for transformation.

This ethos has also influenced how Nkanga thinks of sculpture itself—not as an inert entity, but something that lives both physically and conceptually. “There’s a relationship of the world of material tangibilities where things are transformed from our thoughts into objects,” she states. “But that object also contains something that expands into a volume also in the virtual and digital worlds. So for me, it’s this kind of place that asks, ‘will matter, *matter*?’”

As we move further into a digital age, Nkanga remains rooted in the tangible: in earth, in memory, in the politics of extraction and exchange. Her work reminds us that form is never fixed. It moves, it adapts, and—like life itself—it learns.

“It’s not about an end,” the artist says. “Not about completeness, not about a beginning. It’s about the potentiality of the work and wherever it finds its place, it should find a way of having a form that can complete that moment.”