Sikkens Prize 2026: Otobong Nkanga

In Otobong Nkanga (1974, Kano, Nigeria) the jury, also the board, encounters an artist who sets us thinking, feeling and looking ahead in colour: conflicting colours, colours that stimulate contradictory narratives; colours, not as an aesthetic choice but as a critical language of pigments and minerals - a political act, rooted in the earth, in extraction, in what is lost, to arrive by new rituals at a methodology that can in some sense restore what has been plundered from a mutilated landscape. Her installations, tapestries, drawings, paintings, videos and photos allude to that landscape: to the depleted earth of copper mines, to the past, current (and probably future) era of mineral extraction worldwide, to the traces of resilient nature in a disrupted ecosystem.

'There is, therefore I miss': loss, in Nkanga's work, refers to the gaps in historical records, a dream that the memory cannot quite recall. Loss evolves into imagination. And colour, time and again, is a conductor of imagination.

When Nkanga – poet, visual artist, performer – exerts her imagination through colour, she creates an interplay of distance, image, object and power, sweeping us into a dance encircling the mystery: into examining our relationship as humans to a world that we not only explore but exploit, sometimes plunder, and which, in the Al era, using a multiplicity of technical and innovative techniques, we invoke as a mirror of the soul. In this exploration, colour gains in ultimate strength through its constant subjection to material and extraction, thereby retaining its ability to surprise. Just as Nkanga herself constantly moves between disciplines, organically choosing different forms to tell stories that arouse her interest.

The jury, also the board, greatly values how Nkanga confronts us with the need for hesitance, for humility, when we realise our error in seeing ourselves as the centre of the universe; she provides us with images that quietly declaim an ode to the complexity of reciprocity; analytically and sensuously she leads us to an essential notion - that of material emotionality - the thinking, feeling and remembering of objects. If we surrender to that notion, the distinction between body and landscape also melts away and we then embody the pain, the mutilation that is inflicted on the earth. And we realise how we are formed by our response, conscious or otherwise, to the everyday space that we invade.

A space where flowing onwards and making connections is the lingua franca, where the observer is inextricably connected to, and often complicit with, what is shown, in a process that is geared not to completion, but rather to revelation. As experienced by visitors to her installation *Cadence* (2024) at MoMA in New York when they encounter a colour palette in which the sound of a falling tear is interwoven with a monumental tapestry; at its centre, with its kaleidoscopic panorama of dreamlike colours, is a woman embracing the body of a man, the veins beneath their translucent skin running like new roads to the heart of the universe, uniting the ultimate present with eternity. Once the observer has recovered from the first overwhelming impression, an amalgam of associations comes into being: admiration of the weaving technique, which many find reminiscent of medieval tapestries, mingles with the perception of a post-Covid earth dominated by a present-day sense of collective loss and guilt capable of self-reflection: *'Everything is Everything'*, according to Lauryn Hill. But what price do we pay when worlds collide?

The jury, overwhelmed as it is by the questions that Nkanga's work evokes, is not sure whether the beauty of colour puts us in a better position to examine possible future scenarios, to foresee the future. But it is convinced that Nkanga shows that the power of colour begins where it originates, in the earth, in the community, in life itself.

In her work Nkanga links body and landscape, the local and the global, the personal and the political; in an era that cries out for imagination and responsibility, pigments and minerals in her work are not mere passive materials but active witnesses: of landscapes and lives, of extraction and reconstruction.

Where is time?
Time is here. Here, at Nkanga's art class at Obafemi Awolowo University in Nigeria, where she sketches the contours of Orishas, under the burning sun, that fierce light in which shrines acquire an almost visionary intensity, and are at the same time lovingly preserved in the collective mind. Here, in the Tate Modern in London, where, in the performance *Contained Measures of Shifting States*, Nkanga receives the public at round tables displaying a hundred images from the museum collection - landscapes, maps, diagrams - as in a slow dance of memory, of recalibration. Recalibration cannot take place without colour, without colour knowledge cannot be passed on, dreams cannot be interpreted or memories transmitted.

For, not least, it is the rite de passage of dream image to memory, through her exceptional colour palette, that the imagined world of Otobong

Sikkens Prize

Jury report

Nkanga has kept us transfixed for three decades now. The jury is honoured to include her in the long tradition of the Sikkens Prize, which distinguishes winners for social, cultural and scientific developments that celebrate the distinctive role of colour in society.

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Novaire is a writer who made his literary debut in 1999 with the short-story collection 'Reigers in Caïro'. His novels 'Maïsroest' and 'Zeg maar dat we niet thuis zijn' were both nominated for the Libris Literatuur Prijs. In February 2026 he published the book 'Achtentwintig letters'.