The decline of nkisi in Congo at the turn of the twentieth century did not stop the interest in their image. Just as Catholic images of Saint Sebastian resonated with Bakongo artists and led them to change the shape of nkisi, Bakongo notions of affliction and healing associated with nkisi resonated with the historical experience of slavery and dehumanization among African Americans artists.

This meaning is evident in the contemporary sculpture Techno-Kisi I by the Oakland-based African American artist Karen Seneferu. Instead of nails, she created small clay balls with hidden properties, i.e., charms, covered them with dyed fabric, tied them with raffia, and sewed them onto the adult-size, soft figure. At the center of the figure, replacing the original nkisi box, is an MP3 player, which plays a slideshow of people Seneferu interviewed from a broad cross-section of society. The interviewees answer questions like, “What is a sustainable future,” and, “How is it determined?” Seneferu thus attempts to unhook the seat of power by including the images and voices of those who are oftentimes outside it. As she notes, “in order for us to have a sustainable future, everyone on the planet must be seen as having a particular value that should be shared with the world.”

Perceptions and interpretations of the nkisi figure have changed dramatically. Colonial powers justified colonial rule as a necessary means to provide progress and civilization to African peoples. For this, African cultures were portrayed as primitive and savage, a notion nkisi figures epitomized. A century later, well after the end of colonialism, the interest of African American artists in nkisi is in their capacity to rework the oppressive past and to create positive identities out of histories that functioned to deny them such identities.

—Peter Probst, Professor of African Art and Visual Culture, Tufts University