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## HOW EL ANATSUI BROKE THE SEAL ON CONTEMPORARY ART

*His runaway success began with castaway junk: a bag of bottle caps along the road. Now the Ghanaian sculptor is redefining Africa's place in the global art scene.*

By Julian Lucas

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*The artist pictured outside his studio in Nsukka, Nigeria. “Life is a way of one being shuffled,” Anatsui said. “And I’ve always wanted my work to be about life.”* Photograph by Lakin Ogunbanwo for The New Yorker

When I saw El Anatsui's exhibition "Triumphant Scale" in Bern, Switzerland, on March 12, 2020, the World Health Organization had just declared COVID-19 a pandemic. I'd been looking for a flight back to New York since three o'clock in the morning, after learning that the United States was closing its borders with Europe. The streets were nearly empty in the quiet medieval capital, a city once home to Paul Klee and Albert Einstein. Every other building seemed to be made of the same gray-green sandstone. Kiosk displays alternately flashed ads for the exhibition and public-health advisories, which had grown more alarming in the four days I'd waited for Anatsui. Walking into the Kunstmuseum Bern, a stately neo-Renaissance structure overlooking the Aare, I realized that I would likely never meet the artist.

Under a skylight in the second-story rotunda hung "Gravity and Grace" (2010), a thirty-seven-foot sheet of more than ten thousand liquor-bottle tops joined with copper wire. Anatsui's works are often draped and folded, but this one was flat, and it shone like a dragon's hide stretched on an invisible rack. Shapes appeared in the field of aluminum disks, intricately arranged by chromatic value. A red sun enveloped in pink haze—Gravity—held court at one end; an oval of dusty blue—Grace—glimmered at the other. Around them, red, yellow, and silver caps swirled as though caught between orbits. The sculpture presided over the room like a faceless eminence, cautiously greeted by a semicircle of nineteenth-century busts.

Anatsui, a seventy-six-year-old Ghanaian sculptor based in Nigeria, has transfigured many grand spaces with his cascading metal mosaics. Museums don them like regalia, as though to signal their graduation into an enlightened cosmopolitan modernity; they have graced, among other landmarks, the façades of London's Royal Academy, Venice's Museo Fortuny, and Marrakech's El Badi Palace. The sheets sell for millions, attracting collectors as disparate as MOMA, the Vatican, and Bloomberg L.P. In the past ten years, public fascination with their medium's trash-to-treasure novelty has matured into a broader appreciation of Anatsui's significance. The man who dazzled with a formal trick may also be the exemplary sculptor of our precariously networked world.

"Triumphant Scale," a career-spanning survey, drew record-breaking crowds when it opened, in March, 2019, at Munich's Haus der Kunst. From there, the show travelled to the Arab Museum of Modern Art, in Doha, where Anatsui was fêted by Qatari royalty. The exhibition had been slightly downsized for Bern, a city of mannered architecture and muted colors, where the artist's shimmering invertebrate creations seemed almost unreal by contrast. There were massive red and black monochrome works, whose uniformity drew attention to their subtle folds and textural variations. Others conjured up landscapes, like the sprawling floor sculpture that filled one small gallery with a garden of bottle-cap rosettes. I stood before the exquisitely varied "In the World but Don't Know the World" (2009) for half an hour without exhausting its cartography: white-gold seas, blue-and-yellow checkerboards, silver cities with grids of black streets and tiny red districts.

It was all aluminum, but up close I found an origami of distinct alterations. Many of the caps were crushed into the shape of fortune cookies; others were neatly folded into squares. A swath of see-through "lace" was linked together from the bottles' thin seals. Some of the caps weren't caps at all. The brightest blues were tiles of roofing strip, while squares of iridescent silver had been cut from newsprint plates. I leaned in to read the tiny headlines and trademarks: "Liquor Headmaster," "Plans for safe drinking water," "Game of luck explained." Every bit had been handled by countless individuals: Anatsui often describes his work as a gathering of "spiritual charge."

It was an incontestable demonstration that bottle caps have "more versatility than canvas and oil," as Anatsui recently wrote in the *Guardian*. A central principle of his work is the "unfixed form," which leaves a sculpture's final configuration up to curators and collectors. "He thinks of these as living objects, just like human beings," Chika Okeke-Agulu, who curated "Triumphant Scale" with Okwui Enwezor, explained during our tour of the exhibition. He showed me one early metal sculpture made of rusty milk

tins, which resembled a heap of oversized coins draped over a walrus. It was displayed as “Yam Mound,” but the same work, differently arranged, had appeared under other names and guises. Nobody sees the same Anatsui twice.

Okeke-Agulu, a scholar of modern and contemporary African art who teaches at Princeton, has known many Anatsuis. He studied with the artist as an undergraduate, later working as his studio assistant, and had carved two of the wooden wall reliefs on view. For Okeke-Agulu, the exhibition was a deeply personal milestone shadowed by the loss of his collaborator; Enwezor, perhaps the most influential curator of his generation, had died a year earlier. Confined by illness to his Munich apartment, where he kept a scale model of the museum’s galleries, he oversaw the final preparations from his deathbed.

“Triumphant Scale” was in some ways the culmination of a campaign that began in 1994, when Okeke-Agulu published an interview with Anatsui in the inaugural issue of *Nka*, a journal that Enwezor founded to secure wider critical attention for African artists. Anatsui, who then worked in wood, had speculated about using cheap local materials to create large immersive sculptures. “It was precisely anticipating this moment,” Okeke-Agulu told me. “The day that an African artist, alone, would occupy a major Western museum.”

When I reached El Anatsui in April, Nigeria, like most of the world, had locked down. The sculptor was at home, trying, he said, “to keep the mind blank.” He lives in a quiet hilltop neighborhood with sweeping views of Nsukka, the college town where he’s resided for forty-five years. From his balcony, he could see his shuttered studio, where a monumental sheet destined for the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, sat unfinished on the workroom floor. For Anatsui, who doesn’t sketch in advance—trees grow without a blueprint, he has remarked—work had more or less ceased. He’d cancelled trips to Bern, where I’d originally planned to meet him, and to Ghana, for the opening of a new studio near Accra. But he took the interruptions philosophically. “Life is a way of one being shuffled,” he said. “And I’ve always wanted my work to be about life.”

Anatsui is an extraordinarily deliberate man, prone to thoughtful silences that I couldn’t always distinguish from lags in our Skype connection. (“El doesn’t chat, inside the studio or out,” Amarachi Okafor, a former student of Anatsui’s who now works as his assistant and archivist, warned me.) His voice is low and gentle, with long, melodious vowels that he uses to dwell and reflect. Often stopping to revise and refine his words—or qualify them with a private laugh and a “Well, not *quiiiite*”—he gives the impression of being both incurably restless and infinitely patient. At public appearances, where he tends to dress in slacks and colorfully patterned shirts, he’s a warm, unflappable presence: arms crossed, slight slouch, gaze steady between his close-cropped white hair and silver brow-line spectacles.

The artist typically begins his mornings at six, waking to the sound of bells from a nearby Carmelite monastery. He drives to work in a Hyundai Tucson, stereo tuned to the Pidgin English station Wazobia, 93.7 FM. The studio, which opened in 2018, is a three-story fortress the color of gunmetal which towers over every other structure in the vicinity. Crews of young assistants shape bottle caps from distilleries in Nsukka and across Nigeria. (A supplier in nearby Onitsha, known for its storied market, ships more than a ton of them every few months.) The men work in two large halls of a gated complex equipped with offices, showers, security personnel, and enough room for several large works in various stages of assembly. But Anatsui says that his studio is, if anything, too small. A couple of years ago, he visited Anselm Kiefer’s studio near Paris, where the German artist invited him to ride a bicycle across the hangar-size workshop. In comparison, he said, “my studio has no size at all.”

Everything starts on the ground. Anatsui paces the floor in sandals, bottle caps crunching underfoot, taking pictures and inspecting each block of linked metal before indicating where it should fuse into the larger composite. The bigger sheets are made

of separable sections, and, often, Anatsui can't be sure of exactly what a composition will look like until it's installed. Sometimes he ascends a staircase to a small balcony for a better view. From there he directs assembly using a laser pointer, guiding his assistants like the conductor of a symphony orchestra.

Anatsui recruited more than a hundred and fifty temporary workers to complete three monumental commissions for "Triumphant Scale." In the words of his studio manager, Uche Onyishi, he "extended his workshop into the community." Many were rural women who worked at home; others were students, teachers, or civil servants, some of whom earned more than their yearly salaries from the project. Nsukka's authorities took notice. Shortly after Anatsui returned from Munich, the town's traditional monarch awarded him an Igbo chieftaincy title—a rare distinction, especially for a foreign-born man—in recognition of his contributions to local life.

Afamefuna Orji, a mechanical engineer who once worked at Anatsui's studio, first approached the artist for a job as an impoverished teen-ager. Anatsui not only hired him—paying enough that his mother visited to make sure that the "studio" wasn't a front for petty crime—but supported his education. "Boys come to the studio, and in a few months they have motorbikes, they have businesses set up," Okafor told me. "Some of them graduate and still come back. It's art on another level."

The virus interrupted this intensely collaborative work. Anatsui spent much of the spring and summer reading, growing produce in his garden, and walking for exercise around the empty university campus, where he taught sculpture in the fine-arts department for thirty-six years. His few indulgences revolve around wellness. A yoga and squash enthusiast, he attends yearly retreats at health resorts from Kerala to West Palm Beach, where he adopted a raw vegetarian diet. When I asked if he ever drinks the liquor that furnishes material for his sculptures, he said no, but added that, as a young man, he drank quite a bit. Now an occasional glass of beer or wine suffices, though a former colleague recently introduced him to single-malt whiskey.

Anatsui, a lifelong bachelor, lives alone, but keeps in close touch with family in Ghana and the United States. It isn't always easy; Internet access comes and goes. He enjoys the comedy of Trevor Noah ("a brilliant chap") and often exchanges memes with a nephew in Brooklyn, though he hardly uses social media, except to read the latest in a WhatsApp group dedicated to the highlife music of his Ghanaian youth. (His college band once performed alongside a formative group led by Fela Kuti, whose horn Anatsui played between sets; he says it was "decrepit.") Because the local utilities are so unreliable, he generates his own electricity using solar panels, and collects rainwater in a tank.

He lived in faculty housing until his retirement, in 2011. Even now, his circumstances are modest. A friend called his two cars "disreputable-looking," while Orji, the former assistant, described his two-story concrete residence as hardly one of the nicest in the neighborhood. "I think my house is more beautiful than Prof's," he reflected. "He knows where to show off and where not to show off."

Like his bottle-cap sheets, often mischaracterized as a form of recycling, Anatsui's austere life style can easily be taken as a high-minded statement. In fact, he lives simply for the same reason that he uses found materials: to afford himself the maximum possible freedom. Anything that might impede his creativity is out, not least his own sculptures; the walls of his home are bare. "If you feel attached to your work, it means you have a feeling you have gotten to the end," he told me.

Anatsui's first bottle caps were an accidental discovery. In 1998, he was walking on the outskirts of Nsukka when he found a discarded bag of loose caps along the roadside. It was an invitation. For decades, the artist had been resurrecting refuse in



metamorphic sculptures, expanding the significance of everyday objects without effacing their origins. “I let the material lead me,” he said. “If it can’t say something, then it better not be *made* to say it.”



*At the Nsukka studio, a new work bound for Houston's Museum of Fine Arts.* Photograph by Lakin Ogunbanwo for The New Yorker

His process requires a great deal of patience. Anatsui didn't know what to do with the first bottle caps he collected. Busy experimenting with other used metal—evaporated-milk cans, cassava graters—he kept them in his studio for two years before working them into a sculpture. Most were red and gold, with silver undersides and evocative brand names that changed as often as every few months. He eventually secured a regular supply from an area distillery, taking part in an active local market.

Later, Anatsui drew connections between his medium and the triangular trade that once linked Europe, Africa, and the Americas. But his first interest was in what bottle caps could *do*, and in what new dimensions they might open in his pursuit of flexibility and freedom. They proved an ideal material—vivid, malleable, local, abundant, and cheap.

Assisted by two former students, Anatsui started connecting the bits of metal with copper wire, as he'd previously done with can lids. There was little sign that anything significant was about to occur at the former warehouse then serving as his studio; Okafor, who worked with Anatsui on the first sheets, said that “playing” with the caps was at first a form of busywork. Her friends used to come by and laugh, asking why she wasted her time in a “dirty-looking place” surrounded by old wood and metal. But she'd learned to see art differently: “You finish making it in the dirt, and then you come out and put it in a clean place.”

Anatsui's Adam and Eve in the new medium were “Man's Cloth” and “Woman's Cloth.” The “male” was composed of flattened rectangular strips from the bottle's neck; the “female” added circular bottle tops. Doubtful whether the caps had enough tensile strength to hold together at larger sizes, Anatsui made each one only a few yards long. He had conceived the pair as a one-off experiment but discovered a sense of possibility in the material. A mesh of liquor-bottle caps wasn't a static thing but a kind of tactile “choir,” distilling opaque, elusive flashes from a community's life. “What I'm interested in is the fact of many hands,” he told me. “When people see work like that, they should be able to feel the presence of those people.”

**I**n the early days, Anatsui would sometimes transport his bottle-cap sculptures in a practical way that surprised their recipients: folded in small crates or even in suitcases that he delivered himself. The first to receive such a shipment was Elisabeth Lalouschek, the artistic director at London's October Gallery, where “Man's Cloth” and “Woman's Cloth” were installed in 2002. Anatsui hadn't yet decided how to exhibit the metal sheets; in photographs he'd sent ahead, they were draped over bushes. Lalouschek installed them in their now familiar format: as wall hangings with ripples and folds, like metal tapestries.

Lalouschek had championed Anatsui's work since the early nineties, when she saw his wooden reliefs featured in a Smithsonian documentary about contemporary Nigerian art. But the “alchemy” of these metal sheets struck her—and nearly everyone who saw them—as miraculous, a water-into-wine transformation. “It didn't matter who walked into the gallery, whether it was a child or an ambassador or somebody else,” she said. “It affected them all in some way or other. We had entered a completely new arena.”

Major collections that had previously paid scant attention to contemporary African art took notice. The British Museum acquired “Man's Cloth” and “Woman's Cloth.” The following year, Anatsui exhibited an entire group of the bottle-cap sheets for a solo show at the Mostyn Gallery, in Llandudno, Wales, an exhibition that ultimately travelled to nine other venues in Europe and the United States. By 2007, Anatsui's bottle-cap sheets were in the collections of San Francisco's de Young Museum, Paris's Centre Pompidou, and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The bottle-cap medium dramatically exceeded Anatsui's expectations. He devised a spectrum of new elements from the deceptively simple material, and recruited a team of part-time assistants to incorporate them into ever-larger works. “Sasa,” a twenty-eight-foot synthesis of his developing style, was his first monumental bottle-cap sculpture, and featured prominently in “Africa Remix,” a blockbuster group show that opened in 2004, in Düsseldorf, then travelled to London, Paris, Tokyo, Stockholm, and Johannesburg.

The ratification of Anatsui's new success came at the 2007 Venice Biennale, where his bottle-cap sculptures ravished the art world's most influential audience. For the central exhibition in the Arsenale, once a medieval shipyard, he designed two monumental commissions. “Dusasa II,” a twenty-four-foot sheet that hung between pillars at the end of a long hallway, served as

its culminating work. (The Metropolitan Museum swiftly acquired the sculpture, and recently showcased it in the autobiographical exhibition “Making the Met, 1870–2020.”) A third sculpture, “Fresh and Fading Memories,” fell like enchanted scaffolding over the fifteenth-century Palazzo Fortuny. It was the first of many flirtations with architecture, a white-gold sheet with colorful grid lines that bunched over the heavy wooden doors like a rising curtain. Careful tears disclosed the brick of the underlying façade; a curator told the artist that the work looked as if it might have been there for a hundred years.

In a highly factionalized art world, Anatsui found universal acclaim. To formalists, he was an Abstract Expressionist who worked in aluminum refuse; to the postmodern and the post-colonially minded, a maverick interrogator of consumption and commerce; to Old Guard Africanists, a renewer of ancient craft traditions. To most, his work was simply beautiful, with transcendent aspirations rare in the self-reflexive context of contemporary art. As it turned out, the unfixed form wasn’t just a way of sculpting. It was the principle of a career that had opened itself to the world without sacrificing its integrity.

**I**n 1944, thirteen years before Ghana declared independence from Great Britain, El Anatsui was born in the Gold Coast lagoon village of Anyako. He warned me not to go looking for his birth name. “El” was a later adoption, which he chose in his mid-twenties from a list of words for the divine. His father was a fisherman and a weaver, but Anatsui, the youngest of thirty-two children, learned neither trade. After his mother died, the family shipped him across the lagoon to his uncle, a Presbyterian minister. Anatsui grew up in a mission house, learning the discipline that characterizes his life as an artist: “You do what is necessary—only—and don’t bother with extravagance.”

He discovered an aptitude for drawing and enrolled in art school, without his family’s encouragement. It was seven years after independence, and President Kwame Nkrumah spoke urgently about the need to assert an “African Personality.” It had yet to manifest at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, in Kumasi, where Anatsui studied a curriculum imported from Goldsmiths, University of London. He chose sculpture for its novelty, and wrote a thesis on chieftaincy regalia, prefiguring a talent for sculpture that effortlessly projects authority. He impressed his instructors, but questioned their emphasis on imported materials like plaster of Paris, and looked beyond the classroom for ways to “indigenize his aesthetic.”

After graduation, he took a teaching position in the coastal town of Winneba, and started buying circular wooden trays that were used to display goods in local markets. He added metal inlays around the edges and used a heated rod to emboss them with symbols called *adinkra*. Often found on Ghanaian textiles, *adinkra* represent proverbs and adages. In “Triumphant Scale,” mounted on the wall like icons, they seemed to offer metaphysical sustenance in lieu of fish and beans.

The trays inaugurated a career-long commitment to making work from “whatever the environment throws up,” an embrace of the local that was also a pragmatic choice. Wherever Anatsui found himself, material would be readily available. In 1975, he left Ghana to teach at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, which had opened fifteen years earlier, and was the nation’s first university independent of any European institution. U.N.N., once among Nigeria’s leading schools, had suffered during the country’s civil war, when the majority-Igbo southeastern region attempted to secede as the Republic of Biafra. When Anatsui arrived, bullet holes still riddled the campus.

Under the debris, a revival was stirring, as Igbo artists and intellectuals unwelcome elsewhere in the country flocked to U.N.N. Among them were Chinua Achebe, who founded his magazine *Okike* at the university, and Uche Okeke, one of Nigeria’s leading painters, who had begun to fuse European modernism with indigenous design traditions in a movement called “natural synthesis.” Achebe opened one of Anatsui’s first solo exhibitions; Okeke was the chair of his department. Before long, the Ghanaian émigré

was embedded in the so-called Nsukka school, which took inspiration from *uli*, a tradition of body- and mural-painting among Igbo women that is characterized by spare, linear designs.

By immersing himself in local styles, Anatsui began to forge his own deeply hybridized notion of the “African Personality.” He studied a panoply of sign systems—including the Bamum script from Cameroon, Yoruba Aroko symbols, and a locally indigenous system known as *nsibidi*, as well as *uli* and *adinkra*—growing obsessed with the esoteric scripts of a continent often depicted as devoid of writing traditions. “Rather than feeling that there wasn’t any writing tradition in Africa, we had Tower of Babel syndrome,” he recalled discovering. He was similarly fascinated by Nigeria’s national museums and archeological sites, evidence of a patrimony more intact, as he saw it, than Ghana’s. History and its fractures, from the vanishing of ancient societies to the instability of post-colonial nations, became central to his subsequent works in clay and wood.

In Nsukka, Anatsui developed studio processes that could mimic the effects of time, the erosion and renewal of cultures. One influence was Nok terra-cotta figures, among the only remnants of a civilization that emerged in Nigeria two millennia ago. He began making “broken” ceramic sculptures from old potsherds, which he pulverized and fired at high temperatures with manganese. The metal admixture created a pockmarked, just-excavated appearance, and a solidity playfully at odds with their fragmentary shapes. “Chambers of Memory” (1977), which I saw in “Triumphant Scale,” resembles a Nok head, except that in the space behind its visage Anatsui has hollowed out empty rooms—voids of loss and forgetting, but also vessels of renewal. “When an old pot is destroyed,” Anatsui has written, “it comes back to life, providing that grog of experience which strengthens the new form.”

In 1980, Anatsui began working with a more brutal tool: the chainsaw, which became a surrogate for the colonial destruction of African cultures. He demonstrates its use in the Smithsonian documentary, appearing onscreen to the soothing narration of Ruby Dee. Laying a set of planks across the floor of his plein-air workshop, he gouges them along pre-marked lines, sawdust flying as he steps on the boards to keep them still. He applies the final details with a blowtorch, as though to cauterize gashes in the wounded wood—and, by extension, repair its shattered cultures. Fire, he explains, gives the cuts “an over-all black configuration which lends unity.”

The finished planks were mounted side by side on the wall like xylophone keys, provisionally ordered by the artist but left open to rearrangement. Sometimes Anatsui inscribed more delicate patterns using a router, or painted over certain markings in tempera. Of the many such works exhibited in Bern, the most arresting was “Invitation to History” (1995), a sculpture that dramatizes the boundary between our knowledge of the past and its reality. Designed to lean against a wall, the relief has two layers: a crooked outer “fence” of unpainted planks, and a burnt-black core that seethes with colorful designs, which seems to beckon through the gaps.

Often, the carving was done by studio assistants, who worked from Anatsui’s rough preparatory drawings. (The speed and irreversibility of chainsaw carving made sketching unavoidable.) Most, in the early days, were his students at U.N.N., where Anatsui was known for his relaxed attitude and enigmatic assignments. Chika Okeke-Agulu, who studied with him in the eighties, recalled a lesson in figuration and abstraction that involved drawing the Nigerian specialty *egusi* soup.

“Any student who was keen enough, bright enough, could show up at his studio, and join whatever was being worked on,” Olu Oguike, another artist who studied at U.N.N., told me. Recently known for erecting an obelisk to honor refugees and migrants in the central square of Kassel, Germany, he’s one of several former Anatsui students to achieve major success in the arts. Others



include Sylvester Ogbechie, an art historian, and Nnenna Okore, whose woven webs of recycled fibre also draw on the textures of Nsukka.

Oguibe credits Anatsui's generous extracurricular mentorship for their success. He and Okeke-Agulu spent time not only at Anatsui's studio but in his home, often poring over issues of the magazine *Sculpture*. "Because he was travelling and coming back with books and magazines on sculpture, visiting his home was like going to a big library for us," Okeke-Agulu said. "We pined to be invited."

The Nsukka art scene that sustained Anatsui's work foundered in the nineteen-nineties, when Sani Abacha's military dictatorship cracked down on universities. Colleagues like Okeke-Agulu and the painter Obiora Udechukwu left Nigeria. Increasingly, Anatsui turned abroad. He accepted residencies from Brazil to Namibia, and exhibited work in a group show of African artists at the 1990 Venice Biennale, earning a new degree of international recognition. His wooden reliefs were joined by larger, freestanding sculptures, often in groups suggesting themes of exodus. Driftwood from a beach near Copenhagen became "Akua's Surviving Children," a reflection on the Danish slave trade. Discarded palm-oil mortars from Nsukka households found new life as "On Their Fateful Journey Nowhere," a procession of migrants with pestle arms stretched skyward.

In 1992, Anatsui created one of his largest works in Manaus, Brazil, at a residency with artists such as Antony Gormley and Marina Abramović. "Erosion," a ten-foot sculpture carved from a single Amazonian pequiá-marfim tree, was as much performance as sculpture; after weeks of engraving the log's surface with geometric figures and evocations of crowds, Anatsui revved up his chainsaw and defaced it. When I saw the sculpture in "Triumphant Scale," it stood in the middle of the gallery like a wrecked totem, shredded in a spiral that ran from the top to a base surrounded by wood scraps and sawdust.



*"Dusasa II" (2007), a twenty-four-foot sheet made of bottle caps, copper wire, and plastic disks. Photograph courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY*

It was a step toward the monumental aspiration that Anatsui later discussed with Okeke-Agulu in *Nka*. In 1994, the man who would someday cloak entire museums in patchworks of gleaming aluminum was skeptical of the American vogue for immersive installations—“Most regale on mere size,” he says—but also wondered about ways to accomplish similar effects on the continent. Artists in Western cities might have art materials in abundance but so did Africans, Anatsui insisted, “depending on one’s choice.” Creators sufficiently attuned to their environment could sidestep scarcity and work in freedom, an old insight given new life by his experience in Brazil. “It could be that the freedom engendered monumental concepts,” Anatsui said. “I indulged in the extravagance.”

Anatsui has won several of the art world’s most prestigious awards—the Prince Claus Award, the Præmium Imperiale, the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement—and earned widespread recognition for the depth of his formal innovations, from his marriage of painting and sculpture to his insistence that art works need not be static objects “completed” by their creators. Robert Storr, who curated the 2007 Venice Biennale, credits him with renewing abstraction’s depleted emotional force, creating a formal language in which tragedy and sublimity are newly convincing. Yet, for all this, many casual museumgoers know Anatsui only as the man who uses recyclables to make kente cloth.

The simplification has a basis in reality. Anatsui had drawn connections between his earlier wooden reliefs and the weaving of Ghanaian narrow-strip cloth, which also connects small, patterned segments into a larger composite. He used the word “cloth” in the titles of a few early bottle-cap sculptures, not realizing how tenaciously the metaphor would cling. The Metropolitan Museum discussed the metal sheets in a monograph on African textile traditions. Osaka’s National Museum of Ethnology displayed them along with a mannequin dressed in kente. Soon every other review and snippet of wall text was mentioning “metal cloth.”

The metaphor’s popularity undermined Anatsui’s principle of letting materials remain themselves. “The colors were selected by the bottles,” he told one interviewer, but “lazy art writers” had failed to look beyond the coincidence. The association also threatened to confine his work to the realm of ethnographic curiosity. Okeke-Agulu told me that he’d watched other African artists get sidelined by the neo-traditionalist label. Neglected by contemporary collections, their works became solitary novelties surrounded by masks in dimly lit vitrines.

Anatsui began saying that he didn’t want to be geographically defined. After a final 2005 show at New York’s Skoto Gallery, a tiny but groundbreaking Chelsea venue devoted to contemporary African art, he began working with Jack Shainman, whose roster included such heavyweights as Nick Cave and Carrie Mae Weems. (Okwui Enwezor made the introduction.) Anatsui says that the decision was dictated by the size of his new bottle-cap sculptures, which had little room to breathe at Skoto. But the move also enabled him to command higher prices.

The ascetic artist turned out to be uncompromising when it came to the valuation of his work. His partnership with Shainman began at the 2007 Venice Biennale, when he asked the gallerist to prove himself by selling “Dusasa I” and “Dusasa II” for half a million dollars each. “My jaw hit the floor of the palazzo,” Shainman told me. “I want to be the piranha that everybody thinks pushed the market to that level,” he said, but, “truth be told, El tells me what the price will be. And, back then, it was always a lot more than I wanted.”

Anatsui’s insistence elicited a miserly racism from some collectors. “People will say to me, ‘My God, those prices! Why don’t you talk to him for me? That’s so much for an African artist. What will he do with all that money?’” Shainman told me. But Anatsui’s

stubbornness paid off. Aigboje Aig-Imoukhuede, a prominent Nigerian banker and art collector, described him as the first Black artist based in Africa to have his works valued at an “international” price standard: “Prior to him, there were always discounts.”

Nowadays, it isn’t unheard-of for modern and contemporary African art to sell for millions of dollars; in 2017, Anatsui was joined by the Nigerian-born painter Njideka Akunyili Crosby. Sotheby’s and other international auction houses have opened divisions dedicated to new art from the continent. Long-dead masters, like the Nigerian sculptor Ben Enwonwu, have found international markets. The wave of “discoveries” has even inspired Anatsui imitators, notably Serge Attukwei Clottey, a young Ghanaian whose monumental, draped hangings made of plastic jerricans are sometimes mistaken on Instagram for Anatsui’s work. (One of them hangs at Facebook’s headquarters, in Menlo Park.)

Along with the demand for contemporary African art have come new questions about who gets to see it. In the *New York Times*, Okeke-Agulu has decried what he calls the “gentrification” of African cultural creativity. Even as campaigns for the repatriation of colonial plunder meet with unprecedented success, Western collectors have dominated the market for African visual talent. Residents of London, New York, or Kansas City can see an El Anatsui bottle-cap sculpture on demand, but Nigerians and Ghanaians must travel thousands of miles.

The landscape may be changing with a new wave of art institutions, from Dakar’s Museum of Black Civilizations to the architect David Adjaye’s planned Edo Museum, in Benin City, Nigeria. In 2017, the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa opened in a former grain silo in Cape Town, becoming the world’s biggest museum dedicated to contemporary art from the continent. Anatsui was prominently featured in the inaugural exhibition; later, his largest bottle-cap sculpture, “TSIATSIA—Searching for Connection” (2013), was installed in the museum’s vast atrium.

More individual African collectors are buying, too. In 2017, Liza Essers, the owner and director of South Africa’s Goodman Gallery, organized Anatsui’s first solo exhibition of bottle-cap sculptures in Africa. She sold many of the works to collectors from the region, who are growing more numerous.

A small contingent of Nigerians have been collecting Anatsui’s work from the outset. The Yoruba prince Yemisi Shyllon, who recently opened a private museum in Lagos for his extensive collection, owns several of Anatsui’s early trays. Aig-Imoukhuede, who as the C.E.O. of Access Bank helped build one of the country’s largest corporate collections, has avidly acquired the artist’s bottle-cap sheets and wooden reliefs. The Nobel Prize-winning writer Wole Soyinka keeps Anatsui’s “Wonder Masquerade” (1990)—one of a series of freestanding wooden sculptures inspired by Nigerian masking traditions—in his sitting room in Lagos. “I’m not surprised that in Europe it’s this catapult again,” Soyinka told me. “But of course, long before then, *we* had seen and admired and enjoyed his artistic genius.”

**W**hen I last spoke with Anatsui, in early November, he’d just completed the long-delayed work for the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. On the final day, his assistants at the newly reopened studio cleaned the sculpture’s eight massive sections with soap and brushes before hosing them down, stomping them into crate-size bundles, and sending them on their way.

Like many of Anatsui’s recent installations, the sculpture is a complicated dance with architecture: in this case, an underground arrival hall for a new building to house the museum’s expanding collection of contemporary art. Visitors will reach it through a tunnel designed to “subtract color,” by the Danish artist Olafur Eliasson, known for his experiments with light. From there, they emerge to a dreamlike flash of sky: a hundred-and-ten-foot sheet of bottle tops displaying their metallic undersides along a curved

wall. Across this white-gold expanse play suggestions of weather—jagged lightning, storm-cloud abrasions, multicolored flecks strewn by invisible currents—which float as though painted on the gold-leaf paper of a Japanese landscape.

A section of the work arches to accommodate a second tunnel that leads to another gallery building. Anatsui told me that he sometimes dreams of renouncing shows and commissions to work in freedom, “like Christo and Jeanne-Claude.” For now, his negotiation with given spaces continues. For a site-specific installation at the Conciergerie, in Paris, several of his bottle-cap sculptures have been hung in fireplaces at the former royal palace.

Ultimately, he said, architectural obstacles are often productive. Three of the most ambitious commissions for “Triumphant Scale” were designed specifically for Munich’s Haus der Kunst. In 2017, when Anatsui first saw the museum, a gargantuan neoclassical construction from the Third Reich, he knew that he wanted to throw it off balance. “He kept complaining that everything in the museum was so rigid,” Damian Lentini, who assisted with the show’s curation, told me. “He wanted to mess up the symmetry.” The result was “Second Wave,” which covered the museum’s three-hundred-and-sixty-foot façade in slanting columns of aluminum newsprint plates.

Outdoor installations have given new dimension to his long preoccupation with the elements. In Marrakech, on the fringes of the Sahara, one large sculpture spent months in the sun. The red caps faded, acquiring an uneven delicacy that Anatsui compared to the unpredictably colored glazes of Japanese rakuware. “You can’t get it in any other way—it’s only time that can do it,” he said of the effect, which he hopes to duplicate in the studio. Light and longevity, to his mind, “shear things of their prose.”

Many have wondered when Anatsui might “move on” from bottle caps. A few years after Venice, critics were warning that the material risked becoming “formulaic” and its creator “a token African artist for Western collectors.” Now it seems clear that they underestimated Anatsui’s medium and misconstrued his persistence; in fact, he’s spent two decades ringing changes on his protean material.

Susan Vogel, a curator, scholar, and filmmaker, was once among the skeptics. “I wasn’t sure that maybe the bottle tops weren’t a kind of a gimmick,” she told me. But after making “Fold Crumple Crush” (2010), a documentary about Anatsui shot in Venice and Nsukka, she became one of the leading experts on his creative development. In her book “El Anatsui: Art and Life,” published in an expanded second edition this month, Vogel tracks the evolution of the artist’s medium from the first decade’s “cloth” works—rectangular, warmly colored, and quilt-like—to the past decade’s profusion of styles and shapes. Anatsui now works more like a painter, she writes, creating focussed, graphic expressions against simplified backgrounds. Greater shifts may come as he secures new sources of metal.

Anatsui used to buy liquor-bottle caps from a distillery near Nsukka, but his new supplier in Onitsha offers more variety: caps from bottles of medicine, bitters, and even wine. Aluminum roofing strips furnish certain colors, like blue, green, and beige, and serve as a way of introducing the textures of the local cityscape. Recently, he has started incorporating caps from bottles of Goya olive oil, which is imported for ceremonies in the deeply Christian region. Anatsui left the church at a young age, but a latent religiosity suffuses his sculptures. “There’s no way you can dodge it,” he said. “A lot of people are involved, so it has to touch your work.” David Adjaye, who designed Ghana’s new national cathedral, in Accra, has asked Anatsui to make an altarpiece.

The project will be a kind of homecoming for the artist. After four decades in Nigeria, Anatsui is finally returning, at least part of the time, to Ghana. Retirement isn’t the idea: he has constructed a two-million-dollar studio and residence in Tema, a bustling port city thirty minutes from Accra. The complex is shaped like three linked hexagons, in an allusion to the bottle-cap sheets, but



Anatsui will be looking for fresh material. One possibility is old fishing boats, which are plentiful in the area, not far from the lagoon where he grew up.

Anatsui also aspires to welcome local artists for residencies, as well as foreign ones who have “something to offer” artists and craftsmen in the community. He’s bothered that so few non-Africans see the continent as a destination for studying the arts. “There are as many centers as there are people, civilizations, societies,” he says. “And each can develop a center in a way that it’s able to offer something to the rest of the world.”

Someday Anatsui will stop making bottle-cap sculptures. Already, he has lost certain materials, as thrifty Nigerian distilleries switch to plastic or adventitiously rebrand their spirits. He uses more colors than ever, but deploys them sparingly, often as accents in monochromatic works. “In the past, I have revelled in color freely,” Anatsui told me. “But I think it’s getting too loud for somebody my age.” For Ghana’s pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale, he created “Earth Shedding Its Skin,” a wide sheet of brilliant yellow caps corroded by silvery cobwebs that disclosed the underlying wall. It marked a return to the elegiac mood of his wooden sculptures, a medium he’s revisiting: in a concrete lot adjoining the studio in Nsukka, he has amassed more than a hundred wooden mortars.

Lately, he’s been studying mathematics—in particular, the two fields known as chaos theory and catastrophe theory, which concern the self-organization of seemingly random systems. Among contemporary artists, he’s drawn to experiments with environment and light: Olafur Eliasson, Anish Kapoor, and James Turrell, who has spent more than forty years transforming an extinct Arizona volcano, Roden Crater, into a labyrinth of observatories for the contemplation of time and light. Anatsui would try his own hand at land art if he found an opportunity. In whatever medium, his works will go on evolving, unfurling their challenge to new sets of hands and eyes.

Shortly before I left Bern for the airport, I spent a few minutes with one of Anatsui’s rarely exhibited works on paper, a small black-and-white aquatint titled “Chief with History Behind Him” (1987). The subject is faceless, wearing a striped cap and billowing robes. Over his shoulders hovers a cloud of shapes and symbols: spirals, squares, zigzags, small creatures, curved swords. This detritus haunts the man, who reminded me of the central figure in Paul Klee’s monoprint “Angelus Novus.” Walter Benjamin, who once owned it, described it as the angel of history caught in a storm, ceaselessly blown into the future as he contemplates the wreckage of events.

Anatsui’s vision isn’t quite as melancholic. His sculptures are mirrors of entropy, but also affirmations of a collectively constructed freedom. There is grandeur and humility in his gathering of spiritual sediment, a profoundly material reminder that art, like life, is only an emergence from what the Chinese poet Du Fu called “the loom of origins / tangling our human ways.” Bottle caps, though, might have a better shot at eternity than most of us. In 2012, when Hurricane Sandy flooded galleries in Chelsea, Anatsui was among the few artists sure to find his works unscathed. He’s discovered a kind of immortality in something cheaper than a penny, fragile enough to tear by hand. ♦

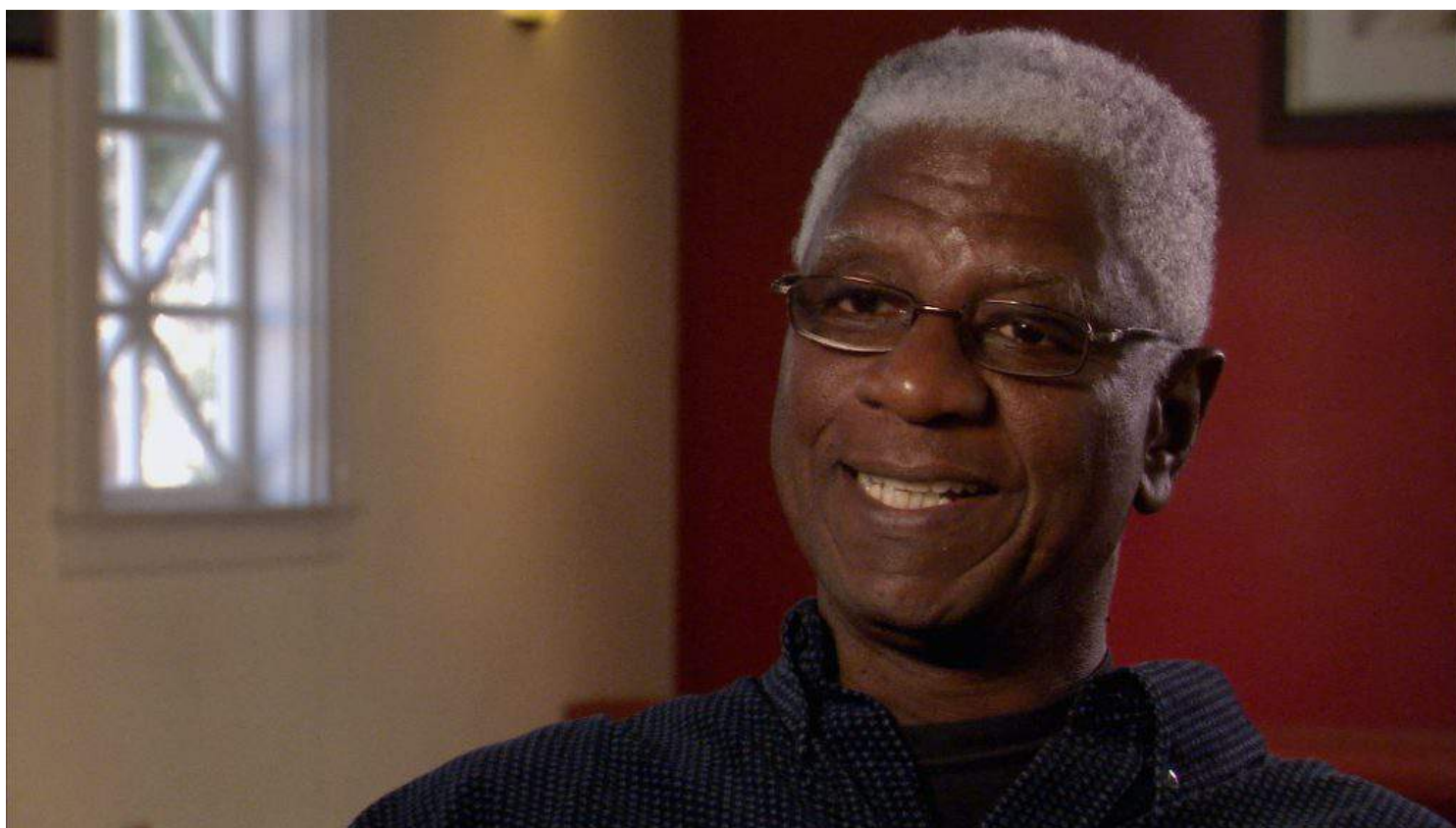
*Published in the print edition of the January 18, 2021, issue, with the headline “Structure and Flow.”*

People (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/people>)

## ‘They Are Given a New Life’: Watch Ghanaian Artist El Anatsui Weave Bottle Caps Into His Monumental, Innovative Sculptures

As part of a collaboration with Art21, hear news-making artists describe their inspirations in their own words.

Caroline Goldstein (<https://news.artnet.com/about/caroline-goldstein-596>), August 26, 2021



Production still from the "Art in the Twenty-First Century" Season 6 episode, "Change." © Art21, Inc. 2012.

Ghanaian artist [El Anatsui](https://art21.org/artist/el-anatsui/) (<https://art21.org/artist/el-anatsui/>) creates monumental assemblage sculptures woven from colorful, shiny objects, creating tactile curtains that seem to breathe on their own. The works sell routinely for more than one million dollars each at auction, but their beginnings are humble.

The works may be made from pieces of wood, metal, ceramic, and—most often—bottle caps, but they are not rigid at all. In fact, Anatsui says “as a matter of principle” the works don’t come with installation instructions: “since they are so free and so loose and so flexible, it would be difficult to have a specific format for any one of them at any time.”

The artist now lives in Nigeria. He employs local studio assistants from his neighborhood to create an environment of camaraderie and community.



Studio assistants working on El Anatsui's massive assemblages. Photo: production still from the "Art in the Twenty-First Century" Season 6 episode, "Change." © Art21, Inc. 2012.

In an exclusive [interview with Art21](https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s6/el-anatsui-in-change-segment/) (<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s6/el-anatsui-in-change-segment/>), filmed back in 2012 as part of the Art in the Twenty-First Century series, Anatsui explained why he uses bottle caps from discarded liquor bottles as such a primary medium. "How did liquor come into my culture and what does it mean?" he asks in the film, before describing the system of European traders who descended upon Africa, ultimately trading drinks for slaves who were brought to America to "grow more cotton and sugar cane to make more drink"—a continuous a cycle of trauma and colonization.

Another reason the artist was drawn to the caps is because an accumulation of the colorful, shiny baubles appears to replicate the popular kente cloth fabric of Ghana, though [he adds that](https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s6/el-anatsui-in-change-segment/) (<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s6/el-anatsui-in-change-segment/>), this provided its own difficulty because viewers began to look at the works as textiles, an art form that is often derided and not appreciated as fine art.

The artist is adamant that his practice shouldn't be considered a form of recycling, because he says it doesn't pertain to the industrial process. Instead, the process is more akin to reincarnation. "I don't, for instance, return the bottle caps back as mere bottle caps," telling Art21. "They are given a new life and I make them not objects that do something utilitarian, but objects of contemplation."

Right now through November 14, El Anatsui's work is [on view at the Conciergerie in Paris](http://www.paris-conciergerie.fr/en/News/EL-ANATSUI-REVISITS-THE-CONCIERGERIE#) (<http://www.paris-conciergerie.fr/en/News/EL-ANATSUI-REVISITS-THE-CONCIERGERIE#>), in a site specific exhibition curated by N'Goné Fall, general commissioner of the Africa2020 Season at the institution. Metal assemblages are installed surrounding the Hallway of Men-at-Arms in a winding route that alludes to the Seine, tracing a path through the medieval architecture of the city and its myriad cultural influences.

"The rivers flow, they do change their course," the artist tells Art21, "And I think my work has principally been about change and non-fixity of things, the fact that things are there and they have to grow old and change and do all kinds of things." Laughing he insists, "It's not because I'm old now!"

*Watch the video, which originally appeared as part of Art21's Art in the Twenty-First Century series, below. "[El Anatsui](http://www.paris-conciergerie.fr/en/News/EL-ANATSUI-REVISITS-THE-CONCIERGERIE#)" (<http://www.paris-conciergerie.fr/en/News/EL-ANATSUI-REVISITS-THE-CONCIERGERIE#>), is on view at the Conciergerie through November 14, 2021.*

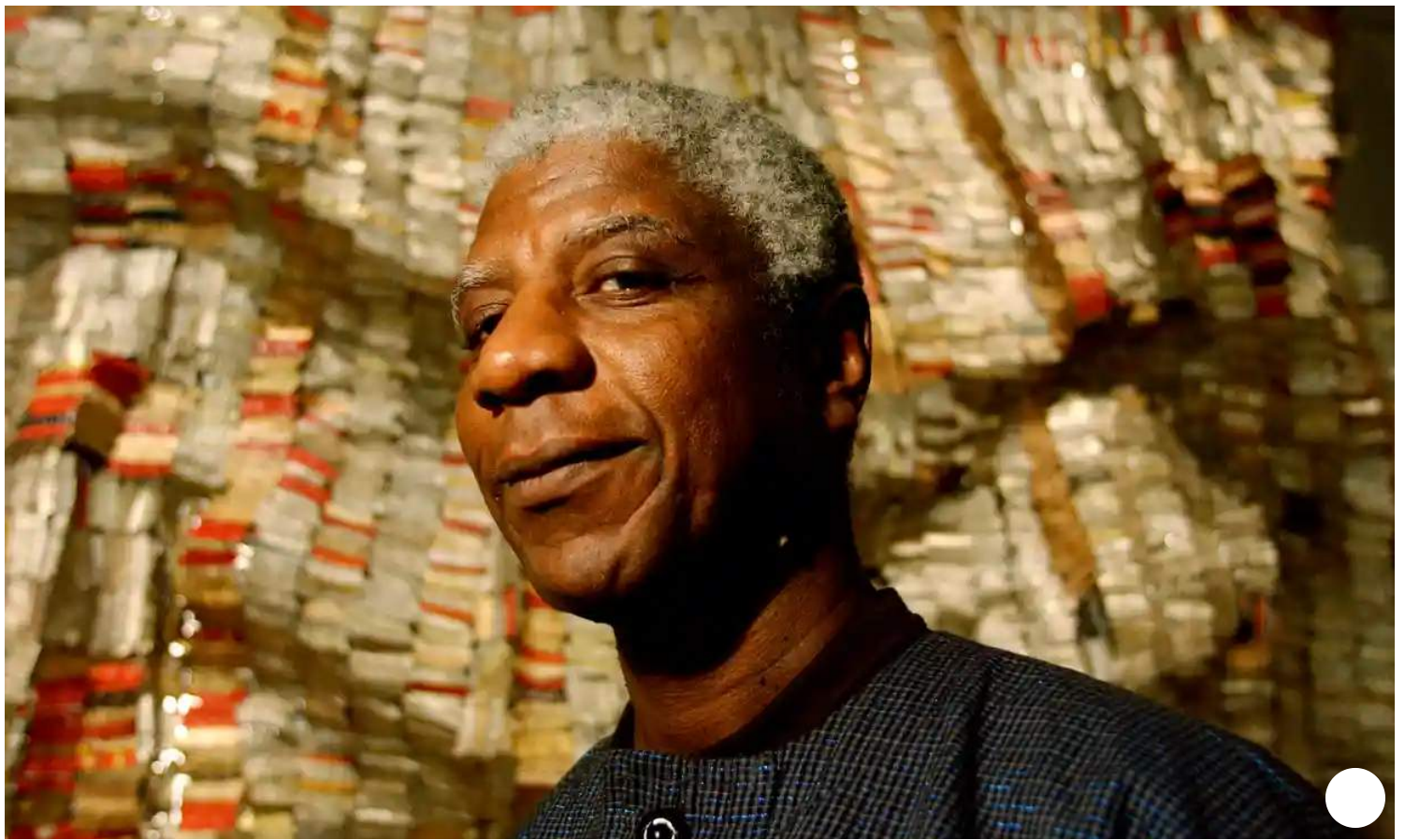
# The Guardian

## 'Bottle caps are more versatile than canvas and oil': El Anatsui on turning the everyday into art

The Ghanaian sculptor worked with cheap, commonly found objects for decades until he arrived at just the right one

*El Anatsui*

Sun 21 Jun 2020 07.00 EDT



**I**t wasn't normal for someone like me to become an artist. Growing up in rural Ghana, there was nothing like a museum or art gallery, and nobody pursued art as a profession, so I had no role models. When people heard I was going to study art, they wondered what precisely I would do when I finished. But I knew that I would go on to practise as an artist. I knew I was going to enjoy it and be on top of it.

It was in art school in Kumasi that I developed interest in sculpture. It was more free and versatile to me than painting or textiles or ceramics, and almost all the other forms are present within it. At that time there were terribly few books about African art or sculpture, but in the few that I could access, I saw that the artists were more interested in interpreting the human figure than copying



it. And they showed very great understanding of the media they worked with, be it clay or wood - they knew how to handle it so that it had integrity.

Later on, at the National Cultural Centre in Kumasi, I was introduced to more African work, and what attracted me were the pictograms I saw printed on fabrics. These pictograms were trying to capture abstract concepts, such as God's omnipotence. In the Renaissance, abstract concepts such as virtue were given a human form, but these artists were grappling with abstract concepts without reference to the human body.

When I finished art school, the first thing I did was to look for a material with which to continue my exploration. In the market I chanced upon round wooden trays that were used for displaying tomatoes, onions or fish. I thought that would be a very interesting medium, so I collected some of these trays and branded them with pictograms using rods dipped in fire - that was my first attempt at indigenising my aesthetic.



El Anatsui's Gravity and Grace (2010) on display during at the Museum of Arts in Bern, Switzerland, earlier this year. Photograph: Anthony Anex/EPA

A few years later, I got a job at the University of Nigeria. When I came to Nsukka, where I live and work today, the first material that I worked with was clay, because clay was everywhere - it was the earth on which you walked. I had the idea of exploring what I think is the most classical form that clay can produce - the pot - but I was attracted to broken pots. When pots break they are not gone, they are transformed into a new medium and they become more versatile.

After that, then I went for an artist residence in Cummington, Massachusetts, where I started using a chainsaw as sculpture tool. I saw that it had a very great appetite for tearing wood, which made me think of how the African continent was torn into little countries by European powers. It also allowed me to explore environmental issues: the clearing of forests and the denuding of the earth, and the environmental crisis that grew out of it.

After some time I gravitated towards wood forms that humans had used; the commonest one I could find was a mortar used in pounding. To disused mortars I gave new life by changing the mode of presentation - if it was a long, trough-like mortar that was laid horizontal while in active use, in its old age, when it's torn and in bits, I would stand it up and thereby give it more presence and grandeur.

I was working with used wooden objects - mortars, doors, windows - when I chanced upon the metal pieces that were to become my mainstay. First I started collecting milk tin lids and turning

them into big sheets, about two metres long and one metre wide, which I would shape in various ways.



El Anatsui's Change in Fortune (2018). Photograph: Jonathan Greet/October Gallery

But I didn't quite find the freedom in that form until I started working with bottle caps, which were far lighter, and with which I could create bigger and more versatile sheets. I kept discovering new things about the material, and 20 years on it's still yielding new ideas. I use the bottle cap to create dense forms, loose forms, very transparent forms that you can see through. Painting on them, you can do thick impastos, then smooth washes with acrylic, and then very transparent washes with watercolour - all of these things are possible with bottle caps.

All this time, I've been thinking about the history or function of the object, and that affects how I handle it. With the bottle caps, the story I've been telling is about transatlantic trade and the goods - including human goods - which were sent from Africa to America to produce rum and other things, which came back to Europe and then finally to Africa. So the drink represented here by bottle caps links all three continents.

Throughout my career, I've been using materials that are close to hand. That's one of the issues I sorted out after art school: you should always work with what's available. For one, it will reflect your environment, circumstances and history. Also, if an artist uses only very rare materials, it can stifle creativity, because you won't want to make any mistakes with a precious material. With something that's so common, however, you can experiment without any hindrance.

The bottle cap hasn't reached the end of its run yet. I doubt it can have an end, because it keeps coming up with new properties. People can work in painting for a whole career, but this has more

versatility than canvas and oil. It could be a medium to occupy a whole lifetime, easily.

*El Anatsui's exhibition Triumphant Scale is at the Kunstmuseum Bern till 1 November 2020*

. This article was amended on 22 June 2020 because El Anatsui's exhibition has been extended at the Kunstmuseum Bern.



MARCH 2020



El Anatsui, *Black Block*, 2010, aluminum, copper wire, 17' 2 3/4" × 11' 1/2".

## El Anatsui

MATHAF: ARAB MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

El Anatsui is the decolonial artist par excellence, known for rejecting Western modes and materials in favor of sustainability and indigeneity. It is with no small irony, then, that he should end up showing in Qatar, a country known for precisely the opposite. Organized by Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu, this major exhibition debuted at Munich's Haus der Kunst last year and will travel to Bern, Switzerland, and to Bilbao, Spain. Despite Enwezor's posthumous credit as curator of the next Sharjah Biennial, "El Anatsui: Triumphant Scale" bears the romance of being the curator's last completed show.



El Anatsui is best known for his monumental bottle-cap, wire, and liquor-label sculptures, which formed the heart of the exhibition. Perhaps in Europe the same works would invoke the centrality of both liquor and cloth in the transatlantic slave trade. In Doha, they suggested nothing so much as the oozy expanses of sand and sea that surround the city. Their rippling polychromatic folds evoked variously the contour-lined topographies of parts unknown, and patchy, eczema-afflicted skin. They exceeded metaphor; they curiously seemed to have a mouthfeel.

The survey also includes sections devoted to El Anatsui's lesser-known drawings, ceramics, and wooden sculptures. The last are especially rewarding in the way they deploy violent modes of mark-making—with chain saws and blowtorches—to record and transmute colonial brutality. These sections are ordered in a thematic trajectory that charts the artist's development over time. A small selection of prints speaks to his recent emphasis on capturing ephemeral traces of his own practice. The name of this "Benchmarks" series, 2017–, is literal: The tabletops where the artist and his assistants work—nicked and indented from decades of crushing force applied to bottle tops, wires, and other materials—had been 3-D scanned, then printed using an etching press.

The multi-decade sweep of the show provided its own trace-based pleasures in the way that premonitions of the cloth-like forms, and consideration of sculpture as graphic mark-making, already appear as faint impressions in early blowtorched-and-carved wooden works. And even as the power of El Anatsui's different bodies of work lies primarily in their transformation of materials, in being so exponentially greater than the sum of their parts, there's pleasure, too, in seeing his simple wooden trays from the 1970s, poignantly carved or branded with iron bars to bear symbols from Ghanaian textiles.

Of course, there are translations involved in a traveling show. Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, a converted school, is far smaller than the Haus der Kunst. Here, the sculptures felt too big for the walls they hung on, like tall people unconsciously ducking their heads in a doorway; two works had to be left out due to their overly triumphant scale. And there was no new work made for the institution's facade, as there had been in Munich. Especially interesting were the handful of photographic prints, detail shots of other works, that lined one small room. These were added by the museum explicitly to fill an awkward transitional space and retain viewer interest, and were presumably deemed more effective than an EXHIBITION CONTINUES THIS WAY sign.

One Munich commission did survive here: a gargantuan, diaphanous maze with a loose, almost construction-netting weave. I was particularly reminded of the first El Anatsui work I saw—huge and

yellow and unforgettable—on a visit to Mumbai, years before any artists at all were on my radar. I was charmed by how its material composition mirrored the very Indian concept of *jugaad*, of innovating—often via transformative recycling—in spite of limited resources. And in a room of mostly Indian contemporary works, I was struck by the palpable non-Westernness of it. I hadn't realized that art could be like that.

—*Rahel Aima*

ART • WEEKEND

## El Anatsui's Urgent Visions of the Past and Future

While the material itself consists of forgettable or disposable objects from everyday life, El Anatsui transforms these into remarkable forms embedded with narratives and histories in manifold ways.

Mohamad Khalil Harb January 18, 2020



El Anatsui, "Red Block" (2010), aluminum and copper wire (the Broad Art Foundation, Los Angeles)

DOHA — In an interview with the [\*Paris Review\*](#) in 1993, the late Toni Morrison once said,

I think of beauty as an absolute necessity. I don't think it's a privilege or an indulgence. It's not even a quest. I think it's almost like knowledge, which is to say it's what we were born for.

Her words resonated with me as I walked around El Anatsui's retrospective [\*Trimuphant Scale\*](#) at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar. The beauty of his work is at once bewildering and awe-inspiring. This beauty goes beyond aesthetics and is imbued with a world of ideological commentary dealing with colonialism in Africa, the politics of representation, conspicuous consumption, and the environment. The show is a historic work, long in the making by the late curator and intellectual Okwui Enwezor, as well as Chika Okele-Agulu, a professor at Princeton University and a former student of El Anatsui himself. While Enwezor passed away before the show premiered at the

recently embroiled Haus Der Kunst in Munich, it is a testament to his relentless mission to move contemporary art beyond European and North American modes of representation, and his dedication to bringing artists and intellectuals from Africa and elsewhere in the Global South to the forefront of the conversation on aesthetic practices, writing, and curation — especially when it relates to their own regional context.

El Anatsui, a Ghanaian artist, rose to prominence in the early 1970s with work inspired by the *Sankofa* (“Go Back and Pick”), a post-independence movement that sought to return cultural production and knowledge to their vernacular origins in Ghana. During this period he experimented with traditional woodcraft, producing pieces such as “On their Fateful Journey to Nowhere” (1974-75). This work — a wood disk with a cluster of footprints carved in the center — recontextualizes trays traditionally used by Ghanaian merchants in terms of migration and displacement. He strips the object of its utilitarian function and reconfigures its meaning with various symbols that comment on the disruption of cultural and economic systems that existed prior to colonialism.



El Anatsui, “On Their Fateful Journey to Nowhere” (1974-75), paint and lacquer on wood (Collection of Dr Elizabeth and Sandor Janos Peri, London)

It’s important to note that El Anatsui is as much an artist of his region in the Western Coast of Africa as of his native homeland. He moved in 1975 to Nigeria to teach at the university in Nsukka, where he became a member of the Nsukka Group, a collective of Nigerian artists concerned with re-imagining the vernacular crafts of the Igbo people in the world of contemporary art. In Chika Okeke-Agulu’s 2015 book *Postcolonial Modernities: Art and Decolonization and Twentieth-Century*

*Nigeria*, he comments on El Anatsui’s historic ties to institutions and artists in Africa, asking:

Is it really possible to fully understand, say, the magnificent metal and wood sculptures of El Anatsui . . . without any knowledge of his intellectual connections to two Mbari artists, Uche Okeke and Vincent Kofi, and to Kwame Nkruahmah’s politics and the rhetoric of African personality?

By posing this question Okeke-Agulu addresses the histories of art institutions and artists in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa and the manners in which those histories have often been forgotten in Euro-American contexts or disregarded as “imitations of western art.” From tracing the Sudanese Surrealist Movement to studying modernism and postcolonialism in Uche Okeke’s “the Art Society” in the late 1950s Nigeria, Okeke-Agulu attempts to create a cartography of grounded artistic practices from North to West Africa. In doing so, he affirms that they did not exist in vacuum, but in a confluence of ideological beliefs.

El Anatsui’s strength is his ability to reinvent himself and his mode of work in every period. Whether it is experimenting with chainsaws on wood or 3D-printing of portraits, he does not confine himself to a singular mode of practice. Yet his most inventive period was in the early 2000s, when he began working with metal and aluminum, creating epic sculptures out of bottle caps. “Gravity and Grace” (2010) reveals the true monumentality of his work. The 11-meter-wide work, composed of various recycled aluminum and copper scraps, is to be displayed differently each time. He re-shapes its draping and alternates between horizontal and vertical positioning. This speaks to the fluidity of his work and his relentless emphasis on context, and reaffirms the sculptural language of his wall-hung pieces. Whether it is the allure of the intricate and colorful weaving of details or the size alone, the work is arresting.



El Anatsui, “Gravity and Grace” (2010), aluminum and copper wire (© El Anatsui, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

Another striking work, “Tiled Flower Garden” (2012), makes a dramatic statement on the crumbling ecology of our world and the environmental legacy of colonialism. A vast ground-floor installation composed of liquor bottle caps and copper wire, it resembles a polluted wave engulfing the earth below it. The sense of environmental urgency El Anatsui communicates through this work is powerful. From its vibrant colors to its ghastly form, the piece conveys a visceral sense of an imminent

environmental collapse. By requiring viewers to gaze down at it, El Anatsui invites the audience to be participants in this conversation on ecology and not just passive observers.

Through his use of the Nigerian bottle caps, from such brands as Castello and Headmaster, El Anatsui relates this ecology to the history of liquor in the slave trade. In his article, “Alcohol under the Context of the Atlantic Slave Trade,”

scholar Jose C. Curto indicates that out of 1.2 million slave captives shipped from Portuguese colonies in Angola from 1710 to 1830 alone, “33% have been estimated as purchased through the importation of alcoholic drinks.” In light of these numbers, El Anatsui’s work serves as a commentary on the establishment of breweries on the backbone of enslaved captives and the economic relationship between free-market industrialization and colonialism. In weaving the bottle caps together as a tapestry, he is also addressing contemporary issues related to taste-making, community, and labor. Liquor companies, particularly those from North America, succeeded in exporting “western” middle class taste and a market for certain beers in West Africa. Beer brands, such as Castello and Headmaster, then become part of everyday consumption, particularly for individuals who continue to be disenfranchised under informal neoliberal economic structures in West Africa.



El Anatsui, “Invitation to History” (1995), wood and tempera (© El Anatsui, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

At a conversation I attended between El Anatsui and Okeke-Agulu at Mathaf, the former noted that the question of “monumentality” for him came from the realization that he was using “cheap material”; for it to have a commanding presence it had to have a certain scale and appearance. While the material itself is “cheap,” consisting of forgettable or disposable objects from everyday life, El Anatsui transforms these into remarkable forms embedded with narratives

and histories in manifold ways.

As El Anatsui combines traditional crafts from Ghana to Nigeria with contemporary art practices, his emphasis on hybridity informs his choice to bring different aesthetic possibilities to each sculpture. His commentary on ecology comes largely from his experience of collecting liquor bottle caps and cassava branches to bring back to his studio. Rather than approaching colonialism through a linear chronology, he couches it between the Atlantic Slave Trade of the past and the current unequal labor and market relations in West Africa. His tapestries and objects woven together signify that the current postcolonial and post-industrial moment cannot be understood without taking a critical look at the past. Breweries are tied to both ecological issues and an industrial history of slavery.

In an interview with academic and critic Carol Becker, Okwui Enwezor once stated:



El Anatsui, "Dusasa II" (2007), aluminum, copper wire and plastic disks, Collection of Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Lent by the Metropolitan Museum of Art)



El Anatsui, "Tiled Flower Garden" (2012), aluminum and copper wire (© El Anatsui, courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

We are grappling with very difficult historical issues that concern not only how we live and produce art and culture, but also how we experience it and our place as citizens within the global community.

When I look at El Anatsui's work "Black Block" (2010), I think of Enwezor's words. The work — overwhelming in size, the facade of a defined face emerging from its draping — is a reminder that our current ethical, cultural, and environmental choices exist between the dread of a stolen future and an unresolved relationship to the past.

[El Anatsui: Triumphant Scale](#) *continues at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art (Education City, Doha, Qatar) through January 31.*

MORE FROM HYPERALLERGIC



## On View

### Ghana's Buzzed-About Venice Biennale Pavilion Is a Clear First Step in the Country's Bid to Become a Global Art Destination

The knockout pavilion, which includes work by John Akomfrah and Ibrahim Mahama, appears to be part of a bigger plan.

Julia Halperin, May 9, 2019



Installation view of El Anatsui in the Ghana Pavilion at the 58th Biennale di Venezia. Photo: David Levene.

Throughout the Arsenale, the medieval dockyard complex that houses a number of national pavilions for the Venice Biennale, a common refrain can be heard echoing through the corridors: Which way to the Ghana Pavilion? The West African country has made a splashy debut in the international art exhibition, which opened for previews yesterday. Its pavilion—a series of curved, interlocking chambers designed by architect David Adjaye—houses an all-star lineup, including new works by sculptor [El Anatsui](#), video artist John Akomfrah, and painter [Lynette Yiadom-Boakye](#). Nearly all of the art was commissioned especially for the occasion.

All this flash is by design. At the inauguration yesterday—which was attended by Ghana's First Lady, Rebecca Akufo-Addo—officials were unusually direct about their objective for the project: to enhance Ghana's position on the global stage and to increase tourism. This is art as a tool for soft power—a diplomatic tactic that many countries across the globe have stepped away from as governments continue to slash arts funding.

Ghana, however, is moving in the opposite direction. And it is well positioned to capitalize on the international growth of interest in art of the African diaspora. The budget for the country's ministry of tourism, culture, and creative arts rose 120 percent between 2014 and 2018, from just \$6.5 million to \$14.5 million, according to published government estimates. The latter figure is expected to more than triple by 2022, the documents state.





The installation by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye in the Ghana Pavillion at the Arsenale during the 58th International Art Biennale on May 07, 2019 in Venice, Italy. (Photo by Luca Zanon/Awakening/Getty Images)

### Enter the Biennale

The Venice Biennale project—designed to present Ghana as the “preferred tourist destination in sub-Saharan Africa,” the country’s tourism minister, Barbara Oteng Gyasi, said at the launch—is a part of this grand plan. The pavilion’s debut also coincides with the so-called “Year of Return,” a major national marketing campaign launched to mark the 400th anniversary of the arrival of enslaved Africans to the United States. “We welcome our brothers and sisters of the diaspora home,” Gyasi said in Venice, encouraging all who were gathered there to visit Ghana. The pavilion itself echoes the notion that those in the Ghanaian diaspora are an important part of the country’s story. Of the six artists in the exhibition, only three currently live in the country; one, Yiadom-Boakye, was born in the UK. Both the curator of the pavilion, Nana Oforiatta Ayim, and the architect, Adjaye, have been working with the government for years on various other arts initiatives, including the construction of a new cathedral in Accra and the transformation of a 17th-century castle into a museum.

An ultramodern, 240-acre cultural village is also underway in the capital. The Venice exhibition will also travel to Accra after the biennale closes.

The stakes are high. Although Cape Town and Marrakech currently boast more developed arts infrastructure than Accra, no city in Africa has emerged—as Hong Kong has in Asia—as the continent’s clear art-market hub and international meeting place. And Ghana’s economy has been looking up since the discovery of offshore oil deposits in 1992. This year, the International Monetary Fund projected its economy would grow 8.8 percent, making it the fastest-growing in the entire world.



Installation view of El Anatsui in the Ghana Pavilion at the 58th Biennale di Venezia. Photo: David Levene.

### **What's In It?**

Still, no country can become a cultural destination without good art and artists. But the Venice presentation makes clear that Ghana has those in spades.

One could spend hours in the pavilion, whose sand-colored walls are made with soil imported from Ghana. Each of the six artists chosen by Oforiatta Ayim (with input from legendary curator Okwui Enwezor, who served as an advisor on the project until his death in March) has an older or younger counterpart in the show—a canny way to illustrate how Ghanaian artists of different generations are using similar media and genres to quite distinct effects.

The pavilion is framed by two artists who use found and cast-off objects as raw material: El Anatsui and Ibrahim Mahama. The former, a grand figure in the African art world, has created three new tapestries from his trademark smashed bottle caps. The largest, a wall-engulfing yellow work, references the damage gold panning has wrought on Ghana's rivers.



*A Straight Line Through the Carcass of History* by Ibrahim Mahama at the Ghana Pavilion. (Photo: TIZIANA FABI/AFP/Getty Images)

Mahama, meanwhile, has created a bunker-like space constructed out of the mesh used to smoke fish—a reference to another water-based industry that has been transformed with the introduction of new technologies, which now threaten to damage the river ecosystem. The mesh cages are filled with maps, exercise books, and even bits of dried fish, creating what Oforiatta Ayim describes as “a visceral archive of the country.” (Believe it or not, the fish smell is evocative and not at all overwhelming—a true artistic feat.)



Installation view of John Akomfrah in the Ghana Pavilion at the 58th Biennale di Venezia. Photo: David Levene.

The exhibition also presents two artists who work with video: John Akomfrah, a decorated London-based artist with multiple international exhibitions under his belt, and Selasi Awusi Sosu, an artist who has never had a major international exhibition.

Akomfrah’s epic three-channel video, *Four Nocturnes*, and Sosu’s video installation both seek to create a portrait of lost history through fragments. Akomfrah’s work juxtaposes various episodes of violence in West Africa, from the German genocide of the Herero people to the mass slaughter of elephants, while Sosu traces the construction, investment in, and ultimate abandonment of glass factories after Ghana’s independence.



Felicia Abban's self-portraits at Ghana's pavilion. Photo: Julia Halperin.

The final duo, painter Yiadom-Boakye and Felicia Abban, considered Ghana's first female professional photographer, is perhaps the richest pairing. Yiadom-Boakye's portraits of imaginary figures—including one jubilantly opening the door in front of a wall of peacock feathers and another running elegantly through space—are one testament to the power of imagination to invent the self; Abban's photographs are another.

Abban was the personal photographer of the country's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, but also maintained a robust studio practice. She particularly liked taking self-portraits and photographs of other women in a wide variety of attire. Abban offers an energizing new narrative for West African studio photography (which has long been dominated by men like Seydou Keïta, [Malick Sidibé](#), and Samuel Fosso), illustrating that art can be an effective way to present oneself to the world—which is a point that the nation of Ghana seems to be emphasizing on the whole.



DECEMBER 2019

## SUSANNE PFEFFER

Susanne Pfeffer is the Director of the Museum Mmk Für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt, where she organized the current exhibition “Museum” as well as a recent survey of the artist Cady Noland. For the German Pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale, she curated Anne Imhof’s *Faust*, which was awarded the Golden Lion.



El Anatsui, *Tiled Flower Garden*, 2012, aluminum, copper wire. Installation view, Haus der Kunst, Munich. Photo: Maximilian Geuter.

### 4

#### EL ANATSUI (HAUS DER KUNST, MUNICH; CURATED BY OKWUI ENWEZOR)

Enwezor’s final exhibition was a wondrous affirmation of faith in his lifelong ethos, according to which we cannot comprehend the world unless we adopt a genuinely global view of contemporary art. Working with the detritus of consumer capitalism in his hometown of Nsukka, Ghana, Anatsui and a host of helpers produce dazzling tapestries that transform the gaze of the colonized (in Fanon’s phrase) into the triumphant rays of a shimmering dawn.

Triumphant Scale is curated by the late poet, art critic, art historian and curator, Okwui Enwezor, and Chika Okeke-Agulu, Professor of Art History at the Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University.



The exhibition is spread across ten separate gallery spaces in Mathaf and the works include Logoligi Logarithm, an installation specially created for the gallery's performance space. Structurally related to his 2010 work Gli (Wall), in this complex site-specific work, the diaphanous form is achieved through the stitching patterns developed by Anatsui and his assistants using thin bottle cap seals. Logoligi Logarithm's alluring play of light and material recalls the refraction of sunlight in a mist or fog. The work is dedicated to the Ghanaian poet, Atukwei Okai who died in 2018.







El Anatsui has consistently worked to transform the formal possibilities of African sculptural idioms and, over fifty years, he has repeatedly revised and reinvented his material and compositional techniques to astonishing effect – from the early smaller wooden reliefs with their incised markings and broken ceramic forms, to the monumental outdoor cement sculptures, and, more recently, the vast and spectacular metal wall and floor works, which blur the boundaries between sculpture, painting and assemblage.

“El Anatsui insists that the idea of great art can be made anywhere in the world and I can say in parallel to his quote that a great museum can be built anywhere in the world,” says Abdellah Karroum, Director, Mathaf.

*The exhibition organised by Haus der Kunst is still on view through 31 January 2020.*



*All the above information has been sourced from Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art press release.*





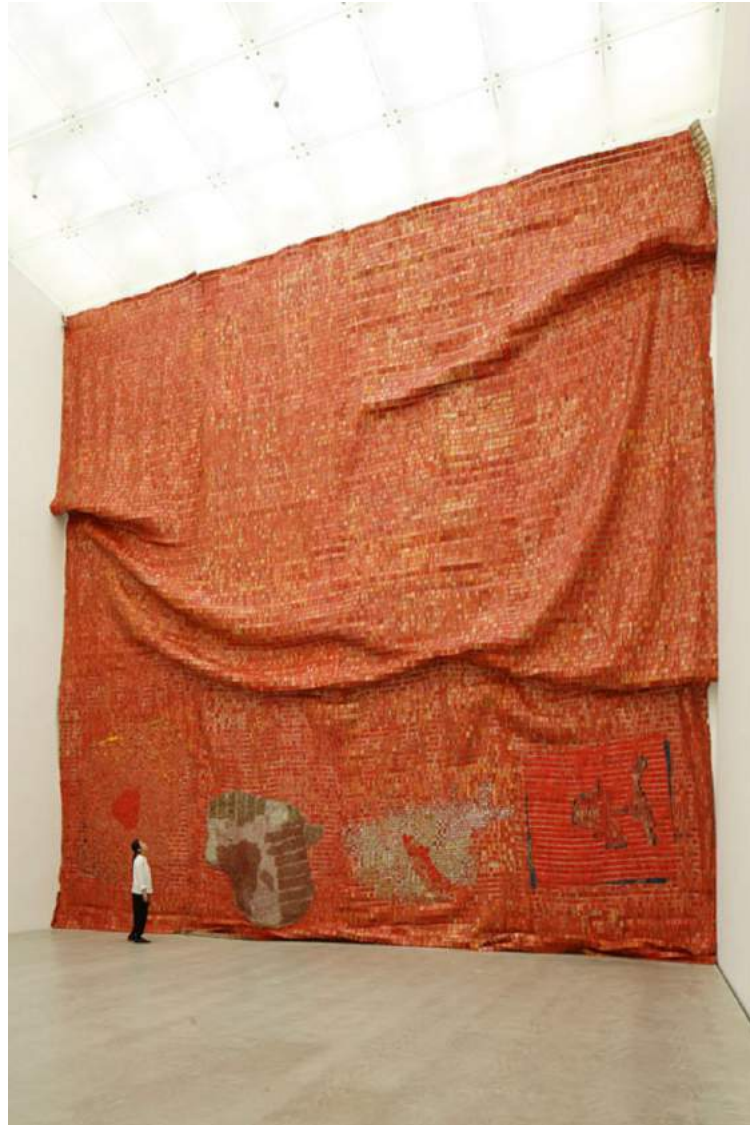
## EL ANATSUI: THE GHANAIAN ARTIST GIVING OUR WASTE MORE LIFE

October 25, 2019

Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. It's a mantra we all try to follow, perhaps with varying levels of success. When we do it, it's always in the pursuit of saving the planet never for something as glamorous as art. Perhaps unintentionally, Ghanaian artist El Anatsui has come to represent an appreciation of this mantra; somehow transforming our waste into the most stunning metal tapestries. Born in Ghana in 1944, he lives and works in Nigeria now. He is both a painter and sculptor, dealing with a variety of different materials, ranging from aluminum bottle caps, metal, driftwood, railway sleepers, milk tins, and wood.



His works explore contemporary issues but are deeply rooted in history and cultural significance. One key aim of his metal artworks is to shed light on the history of West Africa. The bottle caps sourced from alcohol that he uses represent a traumatic past of slavery. This connection makes more sense once you understand the context. Alcohol and other commodities were traded for slaves. Anatsui reflects on the exchange of people and objects as well as its effect on West African culture. There's also a more contemporary relevance too, he explores the theme of consumption. He uses the 'leftovers' of bought goods, these materials often have a deep economic and social significance, especially in everyday life in western Africa.



El Anatsui, Perspectives, 2015, Aluminium (liquor bottle caps) and copper wire. Photo by Keizo Kioku

In this way, he is influenced by his surroundings and a desire to explore Western Africa's past and present. He transforms normal, simple, everyday objects, such as the bottle cap into large metal hanging sculptures. Through collection and processing, he shows that you can reuse what is considered to be rubbish and make it into something of value. Traditional African craft techniques and locally sourced materials are used. El Anatsui focuses on the form of his works as well as the material they are made of. You would've thought that since he uses metal, most of his works would be a collection of silver tones. But nope, he employs bright warm colors that remind us of his West African origins. The color and patterns we see in his artworks almost appear like a rippling piece of fabric. A massive patchwork quilt.



*“... I have experimented with quite a few materials. I also work with material that has witnessed and encountered a lot of touch and human use ... and these kinds of material and work have more charge than material/work that I had done with machines.”* El Anatsui, in 2010



El Anatsui, *Awakened*, 2012, Aluminium (Liquor Bottle Caps) and Copper Wire, 133 x 105 in. Photo courtesy, Jack Shainman Gallery.

Most of Anatsui's works are intended to challenge preconceived notions of sculpture. When we think of sculpture, we usually consider it as a rigid, fixed object, an old school Greek figurine or a contemporary collection of blocks. Anatsui challenges this by making his pieces malleable, dynamic and fluid. Some of them even spill onto the floor like a liquid. The most amazing thing is that each time any of his hanging metal works are installed, they have different wrinkles and creases, always changing never the same.

The scale of his works all tend to be quite large, in some cases, they are even designed to drape over the façade of buildings. The fact that these massive sheets of metal are so massive and are made up of the smallest pixels of color invites us to take a step closer. It's only then we the tiny intricate copper wire connecting these metal plates that we are fully able to recognize the number of man-hours that went into creating it. El Anatsui can remind us that there's beauty in the second hand. A lesson that we may have all needed a recap in.



El Anatsui, *Strips of Earth's Skin*, 2008, Aluminium (liquor bottle caps) and Copper Wire. Photo courtesy, October Gallery.

# El Anatsui's Monumental New Show Is an Act of Justice

A pilgrimage to Munich finds a resplendent tribute to the Ghanaian-born artist, and a fitting epitaph for the curator, Okwui Enwezor.

By **Jason Farago**

March 28, 2019



Detail of "Earth's Skin" (2009) at Mr. Anatsui's show at Haus der Kunst in Munich evokes layers of African history and postcolonial culture through its recycled materials. Laetitia Vancon for The New York Times

MUNICH — I find it so hard to describe them: as vast, undulant tapestries, each one rippling and fluttering like a flag by the seashore? Or as heavy, defensive tessellations of metal, like the plate armor of soldiers in medieval Europe or Japan? As monumental mosaics, as landscapes of metallic bits and bobs? The wall-mounted sculptures of El Anatsui here at the Haus der Kunst cry out for metaphorical comparisons — but no metaphor ever seems enough to sum up these commanding artworks, each intricate enough to leave you gasping.

Mr. Anatsui, born in Ghana and based in Nigeria, was already an acclaimed artist and teacher in West Africa when he hit, 20 years ago, on a technique that would propel him to create some of the most extraordinary sculptures of this new century. On a wander one afternoon, he came across a plastic bag full of aluminum bottle caps, left for trash. Leaving behind his previous work in wood, he began to flatten, fold and fasten these caps into mutable wall-mounted compositions, lying somewhere between sculptures and textiles. Each massive work takes thousands of man-hours to produce, and bears traces of the lives of countless tipplers, revelers and serious drunks. Their puckers and pleats convey the oceanic sweep of history, and his abstract compositions bristle with attention to trade, slavery, consumerism, and the environment.





For his exhibition, Mr. Anatsui created “Second Wave,” an installation for the facade of the Haus der Kunst. Consisting of nearly 10,000 plates used in offset printing, it is longer than a football field. Laetitia Vancon for The New York Times

Sixteen of them are on display in “El Anatsui: Triumphant Scale,” an exhibition of overwhelming power and beauty. It’s almost certainly the largest solo presentation ever of a black African artist in Europe, and “triumphant” is very much the word for this show, which continues through the end of July at what was originally a show palace for the Nazis, now a major German museum with an uncertain curatorial future. (The show then travels from the Haus der Kunst to museums in Doha, Qatar; Bern, Switzerland; and Bilbao, Spain.) It flanks the bottle-cap works with Mr. Anatsui’s ceramics, wood sculptures and works on paper from the 1970s to 1990s, plus remarkable new commissions, including a 66-part maze of free-hanging curtains and a frieze made of German and Nigerian printing plates bolted to the museum’s facade.





“Logoligi Logarithm” comprises 66 individual units. The diaphanous structure is made using ultra-thin stitching made with bottle cap seals.  
Laetitia Vancon for The New York Times

I came to Munich to see this towering exhibition after admiring several previous shows of Mr. Anatsui, including one at the Brooklyn Museum in 2013. But my pilgrimage was also an act of remembrance for its co-curator: Okwui Enwezor, who served as director of the Haus der Kunst from 2011 until last summer, and who died on March 15, a week after this show’s opening. He was only 55. (Though he worked until the very end from his Munich hospital room, Mr. Enwezor — who organized this show with his friend and colleague Chika Okeke-Agulu, a professor of art history at Princeton University and a former student of Mr. Anatsui in Nigeria — was not able to see it.)





“Tiled Flower Garden” (2012), made with aluminum (liquor bottle caps) and copper wire. Laetitia Vancon for The New York Times





Detail view of “In the World But Don’t Know the World” (2019). Laetitia Vancon for The New York Times





Detail view of "Dusasa II" (2007), with aluminum, copper wire and plastic disks. Laetitia Vancon for The New York Times



"Peak Project" (2015), made with tin and copper wire. Laetitia Vancon for The New York Times



Mr. Anatsui was born in 1944 in Anyako, Ghana — or Gold Coast, as the colony was known before winning independence in 1957. His art education in Kumasi followed a British academic tradition. The students in independent Ghana had to discover African art for themselves, and Mr. Anatsui and his friends supplemented their academic training with study of West African design, such as the rhythmically interwoven strips of cotton and silk in kente textiles, or the polysemic ideographs stamped on Adinkra cloths.

His efforts to forge a unique abstract language out of both European and African influences began in the early 1970s, with painted wood discs whose rims were incised with his own idiosyncratic glyphs. He left Ghana in 1975 to take a teaching position at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, where he still lives and works, and where he has trained a whole generation of pioneering artists and curators.

When he began to work with bottle caps, Mr. Anatsui undertook a substantial upshift in scale, and in artistic ambition. First the aluminum caps, as well as the thin tamper-evident bands beneath them, are fashioned into fixed shapes: flattened into long hexagonal strips, pounded into squares, cut and twisted into O-rings, or crumpled like a pie tart. Then they are tied into sheets via tiny loops of cooper wire, and those sheets combine into sweeping compositions of 1,000 square feet or more.

Though resplendent, they do not glimmer; the aluminum is dull and matte, and on most caps you can still see the brand names of Nigerian liquor companies like Castello or Headmaster. Like his earlier works in wood, these sculptures are essentially reliefs, composed of interchangeable parts that bulge and buckle from the wall and sometimes run onto the floor.

Look at the ravishing monochrome works “Red Block” and “Black Block” (both from 2010, each more than 16 feet tall), and you can see how Mr. Anatsui and his assistants transform the bottle caps into a sculptable material that permits endless possible forms. In each, the panels can be pleated like a bed skirt, draped like a toga or cinched like a sausage link — and Mr. Anatsui isn’t fussy about their display. I had seen “Earth’s Skin” (2009) in Brooklyn, where it hung mostly flat; here in Munich, its thousands of gold, red and yellow and black components are bunched more densely, and flaps extend from two sides.



Installation view of “In the World But Don’t Know the World” (2019). The artist often refers to a traditional African graphical system used to form patterns on textiles, where each symbol has a particular meaning. Laetitia Vancon for The New York Times

This show’s meticulous arguments about shape, color, medium and scale rebuke the narrowness — and, in some cases, the racism — of many western art museums. It remains sadly uncommon for African contemporary art to receive this kind of full reckoning, and all too often, when it makes it to Europe or the United States, our museums often shrink it to fulfilling a single political or educational function.

Yet Africa is not a monolith, and great African art interweaves form and meaning in as complex a fashion as the European and American art our museums call “universal.” The curators’ insistence that Mr. Anatsui merits just as thorough an exhibition as Georg Baselitz or Louise Bourgeois (two recent solo shows at the Haus der Kunst), with all the technical, historical, and symbolic analysis that museums afford such western artists, constitutes its own act of justice.

Still, Mr. Anatsui’s art also displays an intense involvement with the postcolonial experience, first in the glyphs and nicks of the wood sculptures, and later in each bottle cap. Though the alcohol the caps once stoppered is made in Nigeria, the drinks carry vestiges of centuries of cultural exchange; beer comes from Egypt and the Middle East, gin from the distilleries of England, and rum from West Indian plantations worked by slaves brought from Mr. Anatsui’s home continent.





“Rising Sea” (2019) is one of the new works Mr. Anatsui created for “Triumphant Scale.” It is mostly made of small, white stripes of liquor bottle cap seals stitched together with copper wires. Laetitia Vancon for The New York Times

His use of recycled materials, too, points to Mr. Anatsui's underappreciated engagement with environmental crises, which comes through most strongly in the sublime "Rising Sea" (2019). Running 45 feet across, soaring 26 feet to the ceiling, this new work consists of thousands of white breakaway bands, each reading "TURN TO OPEN," that give way, at top, to dull silver bottle caps that suggest a horizon line. "Rising Sea," along with "Earth's Skin" and earlier wood sculptures like the slashed "Erosion" (1992), are proof that Mr. Anatsui's recycling is not a make-do act by an artist from a "deprived" region, but a complex fusion of material, political and historical concerns into a medium with unique expressive potential.

Due recognition of artists like Mr. Anatsui owes so much to the work of Mr. Enwezor, who, more than any curator of the last 30 years, broadened and globalized our view of contemporary art. He and his team raised the ambitions of the Haus der Kunst through shows such as the landmark historical exhibition “Postwar,” and presented solo exhibitions by Germans like Thomas Struth and Harun Farocki, and also leading black and African figures like Ellen Gallagher and David Adjaye.





Installation view, “The Beginning and the End” (2019). The artist used bottle caps, aluminium roofing sheets and copper wire.  
Laetitia Vancon for The New York Times

Not everything went well here; budgetary troubles arose, and attendance for “Postwar” was lower than expected. But after Mr. Enwezor’s resignation last year, for health reasons, the Haus der Kunst’s interim director canceled several shows he had programmed, replacing them with innocuous German painters; the local press reports that the next director, unlike Mr. Enwezor, will have to speak German.

It’s hard not to see this as a repudiation of Mr. Enwezor, who fought for a global Haus der Kunst even from his deathbed. Now, amid a distressing nativist reaction taking hold in Germany and across Europe, is the time for museums to reaffirm the values of global perception and cultural exchange that he embodied. They come through like a clarion call in Mr. Enwezor’s final exhibition — wide as the world, blazingly beautiful. Let it stand as his epitaph.

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### **El Anatsui: Triumphant Scale**

Through July 28 at the Haus der Kunst, Munich; [hausderkunst.de](http://hausderkunst.de).

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# At Jack Shainman's Upstate Space, a Venice Golden Lion Winner Has Room to Spread Out

**CULTURE** | BY LAURA NEILSON | MAY 18, 2015 4:30 PM



An installation view of El Anatsui's "Stressed World," on view in "El Anatsui: Five Decades" at Jack Shainman's The School in Kinderhook, New York. Credit Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

The New York gallerist Jack Shainman loves a fine spectacle, especially when it surrounds one of his artists. This Sunday, El Anatsui's retrospective show debuted at Shainman's massive upstate space, **The School**, where a crowd of more than 1,000 flocked to take in the Ghanaian-born sculptor's large-scale metal works, along with early painting and pottery projects. Outside, tents offered shade from the afternoon sun and 80-degree weather, as visitors lingered over snacks from local Hudson Valley food trucks stationed on the property.

“El Anatsui: Five Decades” is a comprehensive assemblage of more than 40 pieces by the award-winning artist, from the 1970s through present day, all of which were installed by Shainman himself. “He really gave me carte blanche. He believes in other people putting their energy into the work,” said Shainman, who also owns two gallery spaces in Chelsea. “The fact that it can be different every time — he encourages that,” he added, referring primarily to Anatsui’s more recent collection of imposing hanging sculptures, which are mutable in form and presentation. Constructed from small pieces of aluminum woven together with copper wires, the works defy their material, taking on a tapestry-like quality. “I always wanted a space with ceilings high enough for an El Anatsui



Anatsui's "Womb of Time."

Credit Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

piece,” Shainman said of **The School**, a converted 1929 Federal Revival building that was once indeed a middle and elementary school for residents in the town of Kinderhook. During renovation of the 30,000 square-foot structure, the basement auditorium was excavated and renovated to include staggering 24-foot-tall ceilings. Currently, Anatsui’s 2011 sculpture “Stressed World” (approximately 15 feet tall) hangs on the far wall.

The show’s opening also marks the first-year anniversary of The School’s debut. To match last year’s grand fête, which included an outdoors dance performance by dancers costumed in artist Nick Cave’s hallmark Soundsuits, Shainman enlisted the soulful singer and musician **Imani Uzuri** to take the stage. All the more reason to celebrate: Anatsui, now 71 years old, was recently awarded the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at this year’s Venice Biennale. “We could not have asked for a more perfect coincidence,” Shainman said.

*“El Anatsui: Five Decades” is on view through September 26 at Jack Shainman Gallery: The School, 25 Broad Street, Kinderhook, New York, [jackshainman.com/school](http://jackshainman.com/school).*



## El Anatsui Will Use a Humongous Sheet of Bottle Caps to Drape a Whole Museum for the Carnegie International This Fall

Tavares Strachan, Park McArthur, and Mimi Cherono Ng'ok will also contribute site-specific works.

**Taylor Dafoe**, August 1, 2018



El Anatsui working on his installation for the 57th Carnegie International. Photo: Bryan Conley, courtesy of the Carnegie Museum of Art.

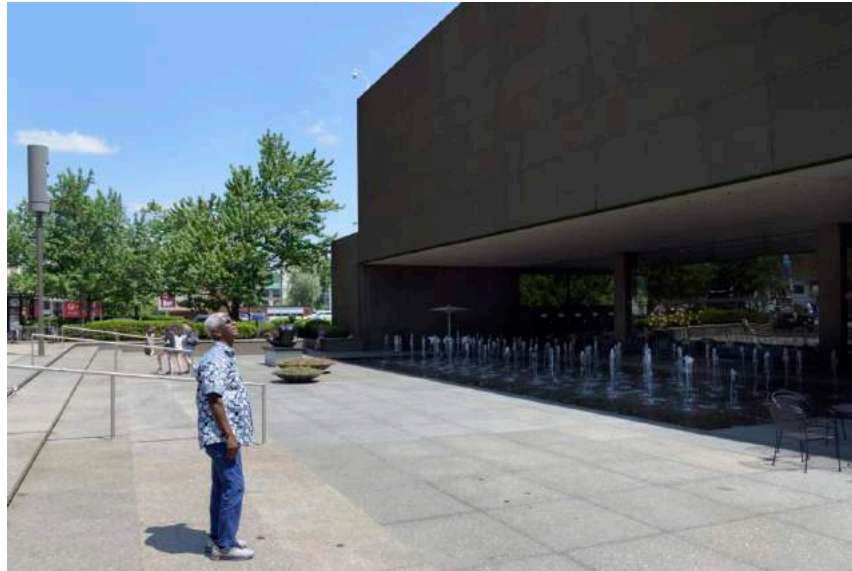
On a gray day last year, the Ghanaian-born artist El Anatsui visited Pittsburgh, where he was struck by Richard Serra's 40-foot-tall COR-TEN steel sculpture installed in front of the Carnegie Museum of Art. It seemed to blend into the nearly 50-year-old building behind it, inspiring the artist to try to achieve a similar effect with his new installation for the museum's exterior, commissioned as part of the 57th edition of the Carnegie International.

El Anatsui now plans to drape the building in one of his signature sculptures composed of hundreds of thousands of discarded liquor bottle tops, all strung together with copper wire. The flowing metallic artwork will cover the entirety of the museum's 160-foot-long façade and continue onto the front lawn. There, the bottle tops will connect to a series of printing plates, sourced from a nearby Pittsburgh press. The plates, in turn, will link up to a series of reflective metal sculptures fabricated by a local artist, which will surround the Serra sculpture, *Carnegie* (1985).



The museum announced Anatsui's work, along with three other projects that will be included in the upcoming exhibition, today. All four projects, like many of those previously announced, were inspired by the structure of the museum itself.

"I guess you can't come to the Carnegie Museum and not use the building itself as your vessel and material and make it part of the exhibition," Ingrid Schaffner, the show's ambitious curator, tells artnet News.



El Anatsui in front of the Carnegie Museum of Art. Photo: Bryan Conley, courtesy of the Carnegie Museum of Art.

Though Schaffner didn't expressly encourage the 32 artists and collectives in the exhibition to consider the building, the surrounding city, or the history of the Carnegie International—the oldest survey of contemporary art in North America—many of them have done so anyway.

Another work on the museum's exterior will be a project by Bahamian artist Tavares Strachan, who was similarly inspired by a "feature of the museum," Schaffner says. But she won't tell us just what that feature is until the work is unveiled at the opening of the exhibition itself on October 13. "The gift of the surprise is part of the work," she says. But she did give one little hint: "Prepare to be illuminated."



Tavares Strachan. Photo: Brooke DiDonato, courtesy of the Carnegie Museum of Art.

Inside the main entrance, the nomadic Kenyan photographer Mimi Cheron Ng'ok will install a billboard-sized diptych that's inspired, in part, by the late artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres). A third image by Ng'ok will appear on the backside of the museum map handed out to guests, an idea that connects to her interest in peripatetic photography, or, as she puts it, "emotional cartography"—the circulation of images and their ability to document place.

Finally, a sound work by New York-based artist Park McArthur will greet visitors entering the museum. McArthur researched the stones that make up the building itself and traced their origin back to the Larvik quarry in Norway. She then commissioned an Oslo-based engineer to travel to the quarry and make record audio recordings of the stones being extracted. It's a way of "mining the materiality of the museum," Schaffner says.



Mimi Cheron Ng'ok, *Untitled* (2014). Courtesy of the Carnegie Museum of Art.

"For me it's less about Pittsburgh, per se, than it is about context," Schaffner says. "Because the International has such a pronounced character, because of the museum's reputation, and because of the city's rich history, I see why artists are drawn to the setting itself as material."

# Renowned Ghanaian Sculptor, El Anatsui, elected into the American Academy of Arts and Letters

By The Nigerian Expression on March 1, 2018

Lagos, March 1, 2018 (TNE) Ghana's award-winning and globally-acclaimed sculptor, Prof. El Anatsui, has recorded yet another achievement by being elected into the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

According to a press release issued by the New York-based, 250-member Academy, the 2018 honorary members will be formally inducted at its annual induction and awards ceremony in May.

Anatsui who is Emeritus Professor of Sculpture at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), will be honoured along with 12 elected members. He is one of three foreign honorary members and one American honorary member.

Among those elected are the Pulitzer Prize winning novelist Jeffrey Eugenides; Historian Ron Chernow; Playwrights Lyn Nottage and Terrence McNally; and musicians Ben Johnson and George Lewis. The honorary members elected along with El Anatsui are the Dutch writer, editor and historian, Ian Buruma; the Columbian sculptor, Doris Salcedo; and the American conductor, pianist and composer, Michael Tilson Thomas.

Among Anatsui's most recent honours and awards are Japan's 2017 Praemium Imperiale International Arts Award, considered the art world's Nobel Prize, the highly revered Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement of the 56th Venice Biennale, and the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) Charles Wollaston Prize.

According to Mrs. Thérèse Nweke, Head of Media and Communications at the ANATSUI ART INITIATIVE in Lagos, El Anatsui is an Honorary Royal Academician of Britain's RSA, and has been inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Science. He is a Fellow of both the PanAfrican Survey of Artists and the Forum for African Artists.

Among Anatsui's honorary doctorates are those of Harvard University; his alma mater, the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST); and the University of Cape Town (UCT).

El Anatsui has held over 70 solo exhibitions and more than 215 group exhibitions on every continent. His sculptures have been collected by more than 60 major international museums, globally recognised art galleries, auction houses such as Sotheby's, as well as corporate and individual art collectors.

Sculptor, art scholar and mentor, Anatsui has influenced and inspired a generation of artists and students nationally, continentally and globally.

The American Academy of Arts and Letters to which he has just been elected, was founded in 1898 to honour America's leading artists, writers, musicians and architects. This year's new members join some of the most distinguished of these; including Mark Twain, W.H. Auden, Henry James, Frank Lloyd Wright, Ezra Pound, Theodore Roosevelt, Edith Wharton, Duke Ellington, Woodrow Wilson, John Updike, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Wole Soyinka and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

Among some of the Academy's aims is the need to "foster and sustain an interest in Literature, Music and the Fine Arts". To this end, it administers over 70 awards and prizes, one of which is the Gold Medal for Sculpture.

The Academy also exhibits art and manuscripts, funds performances of new musical theatre works, and purchases outstanding artworks to donate to museums across the U.S.

(TNE)





L'artiste ghanéen El Anatsui travaille depuis vingt ans avec les rebuts de nos sociétés, capsules de bouteilles, canettes en aluminium ou râpes à manioc usagées. Tel un Midas moderne, El Anatsui est l'homme qui transforme les déchets en or.

/ Texte Valérie Bougault

La naïveté, feinte ou réelle, a parfois du bon. « *Quelle est votre définition de l'art ?* », demande à ses invités, mi-ingénue, mi-impertinente, la présentatrice d'une récente émission de télévision traitant de la planète artistique. Question hasardeuse, digne d'un (mauvais) sujet de philo du bac, pense-t-on. Pourtant, insidieuse, la voici qui nous obsède, et réveille, en écho, d'autres interrogations. L'œuvre d'art est-elle synonyme de retrouvailles avec une beauté qu'elle révèle ? Et, en conséquence, que fait-elle de la laideur ? Des contradictions qui hantent nos vies, des incohérences meurtrières de nos sociétés, des choix destructeurs auxquels nous sommes

sans cesse soumis ? Quand peut-on considérer que l'œuvre incarne la résolution d'une somme de conflits ? Et si l'artiste est cet alchimiste qui transforme les dissonances en songes sublimes, alors, à coup sûr, El Anatsui est un maître en la matière.

L'artiste, né au Ghana en 1944, a été classé en 2007 par le journal britannique « *The Independent* » comme l'un des acteurs les plus importants de la culture africaine contemporaine. En 2015, il a reçu le Lion d'or de la Biennale de Venise pour l'ensemble de son œuvre. Il est exposé dans les collections du MoMA de New York, du Centre Pompidou, à Paris, du British Museum, à Londres. Au domaine de Chaumont-sur-Loire, il est pratiquement chez





El Anatsui  
à son studio  
au Nigeria, 2009  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST  
AND JACK SHAINMAN  
GALLERY, NEW YORK.

Page de gauche  
*Commercial  
Avenue*, 2014,  
bois, aluminium  
et peinture,  
214 x 280 x 6 cm  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST  
AND JACK SHAINMAN  
GALLERY, NEW YORK.





“ Dans ma culture, un pot brisé n'est pas perdu, il a beaucoup de fonctions. La nécessité est mère de l'invention ”

lui. Dans le cadre d'« Arts & Nature », il y a exposé des œuvres en 2015 et 2016 et s'apprête à réitérer l'expérience en avril 2017, pour un projet qui devrait mettre en scène des gabarres, bateaux à fond plat de la Loire. À chaque fois, il a adapté son travail à l'espace qui lui était proposé. Calmement, il l'explique : « *Je ne dessine pas, ou très peu. Je ne veux pas être l'esclave des idées mortes ; elles doivent rester vivantes tout au long du processus de création* ». Chantal Colleu-Dumond, directrice du domaine, confirme et s'en émerveille : « *Il est toujours dans l'improvisation, ce qui donne à ses interventions une dimension totalement imprévue, qui évolue au jour le jour. La première année, il était entendu qu'il travaillerait sur un seul mur de la galerie du Fenil, l'ancienne remise à foin ouvrant sur la cour de la ferme. Dès qu'il y est entré, séduit par le lieu, il a décidé de recouvrir l'ensemble de la pièce...* ».

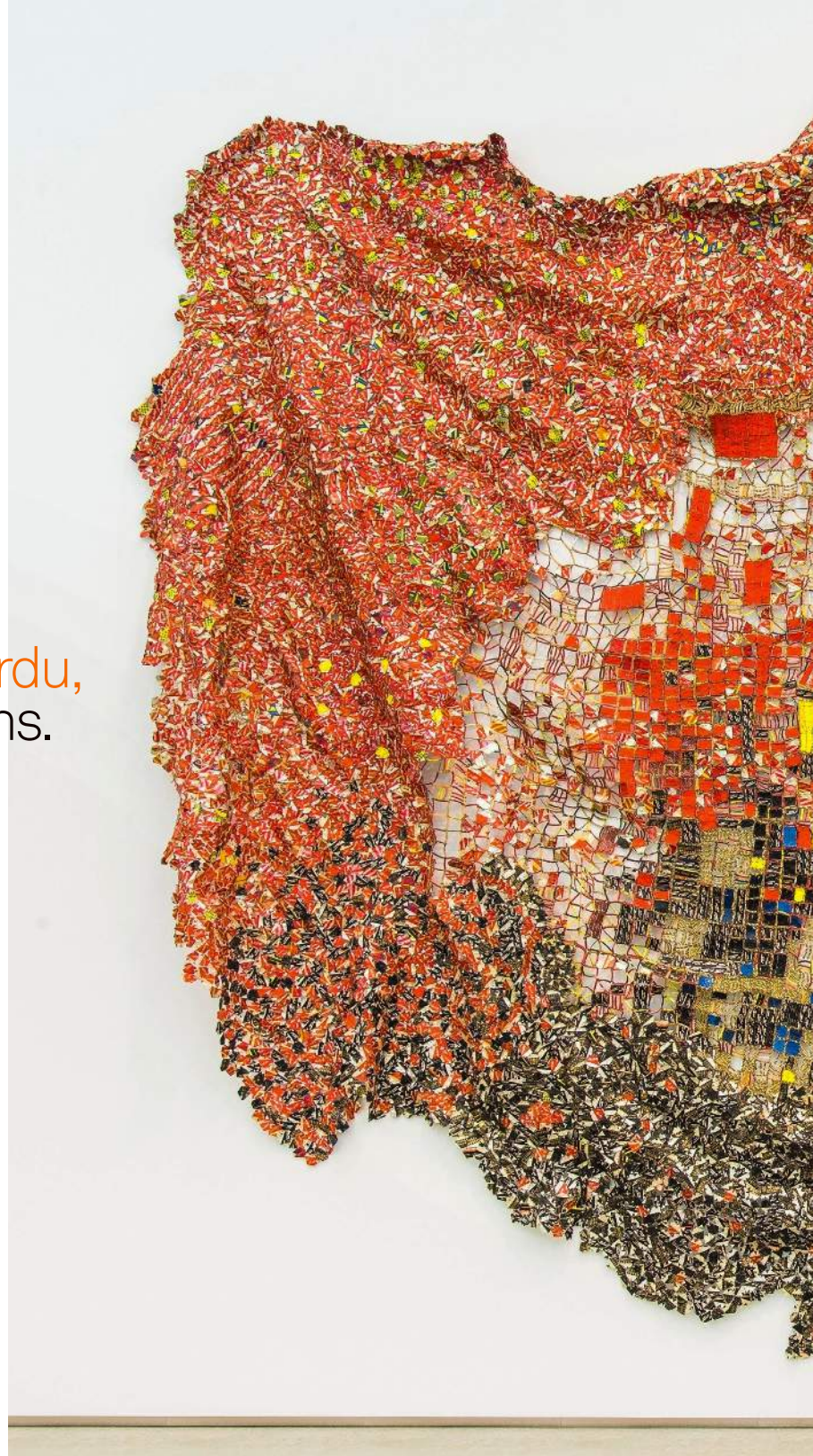
### Draperies scintillantes et capsules

Le résultat, qui devrait hélas quitter Chaumont au printemps, est simplement magique. De grandes tentures recouvrent les parois d'un manteau chatoyant, cote de maille ou draperie futuriste selon l'imagination du spectateur, et l'on pénètre dans une caverne scintillante, dont les parois semblent onduler. Vagues d'un océan archaïque, vents de sable du désert ? Un peu tout cela. Mais la matière, elle, ne doit rien à la nature. Ce sont des milliers de bandes de

métal, de celles qui enveloppent le col des bouteilles de vodka, cognac, gin ou rhum qu'on trouve au Nigeria sous les marques Chairman, Dark Sailor ou King Solomon. Aplaties, percées, soigneusement cousues avec du fil de cuivre, elles sont l'humble matière d'un patchwork rutilant dont les bandes enroulées sont venues d'Afrique, et dont l'assemblage sur place a demandé la collaboration de cinq élèves de l'école des Beaux-Arts de Bourges. Tout compte fait, matériau et main-d'œuvre expriment, chacun à sa manière, la pensée de l'artiste :

« *L'art surgit selon les situations particulières et les artistes ne peuvent que bénéficier de ce que leur environnement leur renvoie* ».

Après des études au collège d'art de Kumasi, au Ghana – « *L'art a été un voyage solitaire*, dit-il, *personne dans ma famille ne savait de quoi il s'agissait* » –, il rejoint un groupe d'artistes nigériens dans les années 1970 et enseigne à partir de 1975 à l'université Nsukka du Nigeria. Il y restera trente ans et c'est là que se trouve aujourd'hui son atelier où de nombreux étudiants l'assistent, pendant les vacances scolaires. Longtemps,







**Page de gauche**

El Anatsui  
à Chaumont-sur-Loire,  
et montage de  
l'exposition, 2015  
©E. SANDER ET ©DR.

**Ci-contre**

*Stressed World*, 2011,  
aluminium, cuivre,  
450 x 549 cm  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST  
AND JACK SHAINMAN  
GALLERY, NEW YORK.

**Ci-dessous**

El Anatsui  
au Nigeria, 2007  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND  
JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY,  
NEW YORK.



**3 ŒUVRES PHARES D'EL ANATSUI**



*Untitled*, 1980's, acrylique  
sur masonite, 61 x 92 cm  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK  
SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK.



*Fan*, 1995, bois d'oyili-oji,  
71 x 77 x 2 cm  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK  
SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK.



*Searching for connection*,  
2013, aluminium, cuivre,  
1560 x 2500 cm  
©OCTOBER GALL., LONDRES/J. GREET.



**Ci-dessous**  
*The Ancestors*  
 Converged Again,  
 1995, installation,  
 bois et tempera  
 COLLECTION PRIVÉE.  
 ©OCTOBER GALLERY,  
 LONDRES/O. AMUZIE.



“ Je ne dessine pas, ou très peu. Je ne veux pas être l'esclave des idées mortes ; elles doivent rester vivantes tout au long du processus de création ”

il a été avant tout sculpteur, initié aux techniques de la culture ashanti, céramique, gravure, poterie. Ses sculptures en bois, remarquées à la Biennale de Venise en 1990, sont de grandes planches gravées, peintes et à demi brûlées. Il a aussi utilisé des pots d'argile brisés, les mêlant à des tessons de verre. Faut-il y voir le début de son affection pour les matériaux pauvres, abandonnés, et sous nos cieux occidentaux, méprisés ? Plutôt l'accompagnement logique d'une philosophie africaine. « Dans ma culture, un pot brisé n'est pas perdu, il a beaucoup de fonctions. La nécessité est mère de l'invention. » C'est au tournant du xxi<sup>e</sup> siècle qu'El Anatsui a commencé à assembler ces capsules, canettes et autres matériaux « de rebut ». « Un jour, j'ai trouvé un plein sac de capsules dans la campagne. Pendant presque un an, je l'ai laissé dans un coin de l'atelier. Je ne voyais pas quoi en faire, cela me semblait anecdotique. Puis je les ai assemblées pour une œuvre de quatre mètres sur quatre que j'ai montrée à Londres, au cœur d'une exposition de mes sculptures. Tous les visiteurs ont été attirés, fascinés. Je pensais que j'épuiserais le sujet assez vite, jusqu'au moment où j'ai compris les possibilités de ce travail. » Et c'est aussi ce qui donne le vertige face à une œuvre d'El Anatsui : l'esprit, frappé de stupeur et d'enchantement,

perçoit d'un coup qu'il n'y a aucune limite à l'utilisation infinie de la matière.

Cela ne va pas sans ironie. Les fastueuses tapisseries métalliques entretiennent une parenté indéniable avec les traditionnelles cotonnades des ethnies éwé et ashanti, ces tissus aux motifs géométriques de couleurs vives, formés de bandelettes cousues ensemble. Nommés d'après des événements historiques, voire des proverbes, ils ne sont tissés que par des hommes (dont le père et le frère d'El Anatsui) et étaient portés lors des grandes fêtes par les chefs ghanéens et leurs reines. Attributs du pouvoir, habits de la noblesse, ils projettent leur ascendance glorieuse sur une œuvre d'art tissée, elle, de déchets. Pas n'importe lesquels, cependant, puisqu'il s'agit des fragments de bouteilles d'alcool des distilleries locales, le premier apport des Européens et le symbole des relations complexes entre un continent et ses colonisateurs.

Occident et Afrique, opulence et pauvreté, rebut et œuvre d'art, l'œuvre d'El Anatsui nous confronte à ces antagonismes qui sont sa dynamique. Le ranger dans la catégorie de l'art du recyclage serait absurdement réducteur. Ugwu, « montagne », sa dernière création à Chaumont, en 2016, a pris la forme d'un amoncellement de grumes colorées, placardées d'emballages plastique

et de plaques offset, et propulse la question de sa destruction au cœur de la nature. La tenture du fenil, en 2015, portait le titre de XiXe. « Le titre de l'œuvre, qui provient de la langue éwé, n'est pas si simple à traduire et d'ailleurs cela ne m'intéresse pas réellement, mais il renvoie à la liberté du grand air, du ciel, de l'univers et de l'environnement et à toutes les questions qui s'y rapportent. » Cet hiver, une exposition à Amsterdam retraçant son parcours s'intitule « Meyina », « Je vais ». Inutile de demander vers où, El Anatsui a déjà donné la réponse, « là où, dans son atelier, il lui semble que le ciel se penche pour parler à l'oreille de la terre ».

#### À VOIR

★★★ « EL ANATSUI : MEYINA »,  
 The Prince Claus Fund Gallery,  
 Herengracht 603, Amsterdam,  
 31 20 344 9160, [www.princeclausfund.org](http://www.princeclausfund.org)  
 du 24 novembre au 28 avril.

★★★ ARTS & NATURE 2017,  
 Domaine de Chaumont-sur-Loire, 41150  
 Chaumont-sur-Loire, 02 54 20 99 22,  
[www.domaine-chaumont.fr](http://www.domaine-chaumont.fr)  
 du 1<sup>er</sup> avril au 5 novembre.

#### À SAVOIR

EL ANATSUI EST REPRÉSENTÉ  
 par les galeries Jack Shainman Gallery,  
 New York, et October Gallery, Londres.





**El Anatsui**  
**et ses installations**  
 au Domaine de  
 Chaumont-sur-Loire,  
 2015  
 ©E. SANDER.







AUSTRALIA

## El Anatsui

### CARRIAGEWORKS, SYDNEY

The Ghanaian artist El Anatsui is best known for his transformative approach to materials, repurposing bottle tops, milk tins, wood, aluminium printing plates and tin boxes into sculptures, ceramics, tapestries, carvings and large-scale installations. Carriageworks' survey traversed five decades of work that uses recycling as an aesthetic principle to navigate aspects of post-colonial African culture and politics – from trade histories to corruption and consumption – and, with the inclusion of over 30 works, showcased the scope of the artist's work beyond his familiar bottle-top tapestries.

Carriageworks has recently expanded to incorporate the space previously occupied by Anna Schwartz Gallery; Anatsui's works took over the floor and walls of these two vast rooms. A large-scale installation, *Tiled Flower Garden* (2012) – created from red, yellow and black bottle tops, flattened, concertinaed and woven together – spread out across the floor of the main space. It undulates like a landscape or, perhaps more ominously, a textured skin shed by a vast snake-like animal. Opposite, the wall-mounted *Adinkra Sasa* (2003) – shimmering black bands interspersed with yellow, bronze and duck-egg blue stripes – was also constructed from aluminium bottle tops; it's part of an important group of 11 works that comprises the 'Gawu' series (2001–04). *Adinkra Sasa* is a phrase in Anatsui's language, Ewe, and has several potential meanings, including 'metal' and 'a fashioned cloak'; *adrinka* is the name of the dyed cloth stamped with symbols made by the Akan people of Ghana and worn during periods of mourning.

Anatsui's father was a renowned weaver and the artist's initial exposure to art was through traditional African patterns and fabrics. It was while at art school in Ghana that he realized his interests lay more in the origins and meanings of these patterns than the process of making them. Interested in using what Anatsui describes as a 'language from home [.] from my own culture and environment', the artist has played a major role in the redressing of a Western-centric art canon that deemed abstraction a primarily American or European endeavour.

Anatsui's ceramic works from the late 1970s are a remarkable and lesser-exhibited aspect of his oeuvre. While teaching at the university of Nigeria in 1978, he worked with clay to develop a series titled 'Broken Pots', which make art-historical references to Nok terracotta sculptures, West African earth myths and the everyday use of clay. *Omen* (1978) is a hollow sphere out of which a creature's tendrils seem to slither. Combined with its threatening title, the work has an unnerving effect, suggesting an unknown entity in a state of transition and growth. Other works, such as *Imbroglia* (1979), recall dried and stacked coral forms. Wooden sculptures from the 1980s, including *Devotees* (1987) carved from black afara wood, provide a hint of humour: expressive, cartoon-like faces recall mass-produced totems piled high in souvenir shops; eyes, nostrils and mouths bevelled as holes suggest hypnotism, anger, awe, bemusement and joy. (These were further mirrored in the artist's undated charcoal drawings.)

While Anatsui's earlier works are indicative of cultural specificity and local symbolism, it is his later works of repurposed materials that have a voice both unique and universal. Crafted from bottle tops, *Stressed World* (2011), for example, is perhaps one of the most political and complex pieces in the show. With a belief that the 'environment is one of the richest places to be' the tapestry evokes both a landscape and a map of the world. Patches fall away or seemingly dissolve, exposing the bare wall beneath and suggesting depleted foliage. Anatsui has described how 'we were able to move faster than nature and destroyed it in the process as a result of mechanization, resulting in global warming'. Underpinned by a playful imagination, his materials move through different states of transformation and call to mind an unstable world in flux. Concerned with the effects of environmental degradation and human fallibility, Anatsui's works nonetheless harness a sense of joy in our ability to adapt and evolve, seeing beauty in the everyday; this is, however, underpinned by the inescapably bleak implications of a world economy that continues to be bound by consumerism and waste.

LOUISA ELDERTON



# The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

## A Million Pieces of Home



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

"Earth's Skin" (2007).

By HOLLAND COTTER

Published: February 10, 2013

Unless there's terrible news Africa doesn't get much notice in this part of the world. But at the Venice Biennale six years ago it was the object of thousands of beauty-bedazzled eyes, even if some of those eyes didn't know at first what they were looking at.

One of that show's most popular sights was an immense sheet of undulant light floating, floor to ceiling, at the very end of the Biennale's main, long, cavernous exhibition hall, the Arsenale. In a city of mosaics, it could have been a super-mosaic, inlaid in silver and gold, or a fabulous gold-threaded tapestry, its surface broken by shimmering swags and folds. Distance made a difference in understanding. When you moved



closer you saw that the whole glinting thing was pieced together from countless tiny parts: pieces of colored metal pinched and twisted into strips, squares, circles and rosettes, linked together, like chain mail, with bits of copper wire.

Closer still, very close, you could make out words printed on some of the metal scraps: Bakassi, Chelsea, Dark Sailor, Ebeano, King Solomon, Makossa, Top Squad.

Some of them sounded foreign, non-European. So, when you learned it, did the artist's name: El Anatsui. Hard to place geographically, it was just beginning to ring international art-world bells. He's from Ghana, you heard, or Nigeria.

This was perception-altering information. Suddenly, in that great sheet of light, you saw Africa, not Europe; kente cloth, not Baroque tapestry. That the metal pieces looked like scrap material became significant. Clichés clicked into place: Africa = recycling. And art that, a moment before, was simply blow-away gorgeous was now exotically mysterious.

The mystery wasn't so much in the art itself as in the Western cultural politics surrounding it. How, against stacked odds, did art by an African artist become the centerpiece of the world's most prestigious contemporary showcase? Historically black artists from Africa had achieved international attention only when they lived and worked outside the continent. And then, paradoxically, their art was embraced to the extent that it advertised African-ness. Mr. Anatsui's Venetian tour de force fit neither criterion.

Now, six years later, those "how did this happen?" questions may again arise for a new audience around the sparkling retrospective exhibition "Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui," which just opened at the Brooklyn Museum. But time has made a difference. Mr. Anatsui's art has been visible in major public collections. Books have been written. (The best of them is "El Anatsui: Art and Life by Susan Mullin Vogel.) Films have been made. We know more about him than we once did.

He was born in 1944 in Ghana, which was then the British colony of Gold Coast. His father was a fisherman and master weaver of kente cloth, a skill Mr. Anatsui himself never learned.

Instead he studied art in high school and university programs conceived on British models and staffed with European teachers. At the same time he made an effort to immerse himself in local Ghanaian traditions. "When I left art school, my idea was to try to indigenize — to get a bit of indigenous material into my psyche," he once told an interviewer. And his first work as a professional artist, in the early 1970s, was local in a literal way.

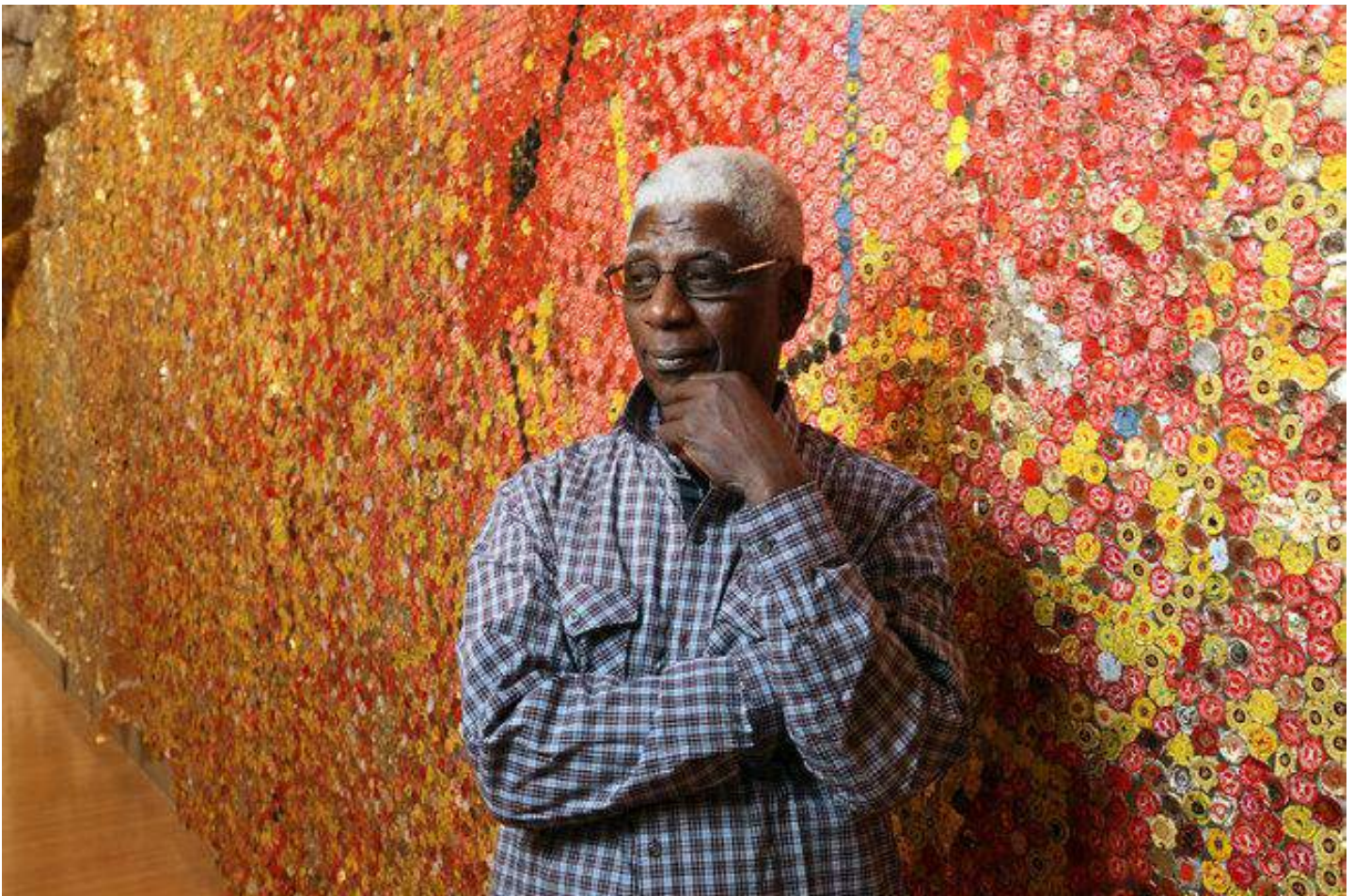
It was a series of wall pieces made from wooden display trays collected in town markets. On the surface of each tray, using hot iron bars, he scorched graphic symbols from Ghanaian textiles, symbols of myth and memory. Seen in a Western context the results looked abstract; in Africa they had specific meaning. The combination of apparent ornamentalism and usefulness answered to the aesthetic values of two very different cultures.

The series also established features that would characterize much of his future output: a reliance on mediums close at hand, portability and abstraction. There was a measure of humor. It must have amused market workers to see plain old fruit trays so elevated. And, in what was fundamentally conceptual art, there were social and spiritual dimensions. The trays originally held food, which carried associations of abundance, want and generosity. The textiles from which the graphic symbols came were often used for funeral wear.

In 1975 Mr. Anatsui was invited to teach sculpture at the University of Nigeria in the town of Nsukka. It became his new and, so far, permanent home, a stimulating one with a lively creative community that included the influential painters Uche Okeke and Chike Aniakor.

Soon after arrival he started making ceramic sculptures in the form of shattered and patched-together versions of traditional pots, their interiors filled with seething, snakelike forms. These were fierce, agitated, disintegrative objects, responses to his own mood of displacement, or to a post-colonial Africa entering dire, disillusioning times.

The sense of turbulence continued when he returned to wood as a medium. In 1980, during a residency at the Cummington Community in Massachusetts, he adopted power tools — drills and chain saws — to make sculpture. Back in Nsukka he stayed with an unruly, sometimes brutalist style of gouging and slicing.





And, as with the pots, fragmentation was a preferred mode, in relief sculptures composed of several separate panels designed to be randomly combined and recombined.

In the 1980s his reputation in Africa was building. He worked nonstop and produced a lot, experimentally moving among and combining mediums in ways that few of his colleagues were. Through periodic residencies, like the one at Cummington, he stayed tuned into developments abroad, some of which would affect him significantly. Multiculturalism was in the air in the West, and starting to shape the market. High-profile shows like the 1989 “Magicians of the Earth” in Paris included, however marginally, new art from Africa. By 1990, when the Studio Museum in Harlem sent curators to Nigeria to scout for its “Contemporary African Artists: Changing Tradition,” Mr. Anatsui was high on the go-to list.

And when five artists from that exhibition were chosen for the 1990 Venice Biennale, he was one. The occasion was historic; it was the first time sub-Saharan artists had been in the Venice show. And the experience was invaluable. Not only was his art seen in an international forum, he also got a sweeping look at what the European-American market was promoting, much of it installation art on a spectacular scale.

Within a few years his career trajectory, already high in Africa, began to ascend abroad. In 1995 a London dealer, who came across a video of him sculpturing with a chain saw, offered a show that coincided with the city’s breakthrough Africa ’95 Festival. In the same year a traveling museum solo show in Japan came through. And in 1996 in New York the dealer Skoto Aghahowa, intent on positioning new African art in a global context, paired Mr. Anatsui in a show with Sol LeWitt.

A tipping point, or the start of one, arrived in 1998, when Mr. Anatsui invented a new art form. One day, by his own account, on a routine scavenging hunt through Nsukka, he picked up a trash bag filled with twist-off liquor bottle tops of a kind manufactured by Nigerian distilleries. Although it took him a while to realize it, he had found his ideal material: locally made, in ready supply and culturally loaded.

Liquor had come to Africa with colonialism. Production of rum propelled the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Later Africa had made a double-edged European import its own. And the history of all that was printed, in shorthand, in the brand names on the bottle tops: Bakassi, Chelsea, Dark Sailor, Ebeano.

In addition, crucially, the metal was visually magnetic. The colors — reds, yellows, silvers, golds — were bold and bright. And it was easy to manipulate, to “fold, crumple, crush,” to quote the title of a documentary film on Mr. Anatsui made in 2011 by Ms. Vogel, a curator and former professor of African art and architecture at Columbia University.

Finally the bottle caps answered Mr. Anatsui’s growing interest in expanding the scale of his art. Pressed flat, twisted, or cut into circles, then punctured, the caps could be wired together into panels or blocks, which were joined to form pliant, fabriclike sheets, each sheet a whole made of fragments, and, potentially at least, endlessly expandable. “When I started working with the bottle caps,” he said recently during a trip the United States, “I thought I’d make one or two things with them, but the possibilities began to seem endless.” The labor involved was arduous but communal, a kind of three-step performance. Studio workers

in Nsukka made the initial blocks. Mr. Anatsui determined the configuration of the blocks into a larger works. Whoever installed the finished piece could hang and drape it as they pleased. No way was the only way, no way was permanent.

And when a piece, no matter how large, came down, it could be folded up to fit in the equivalent of a suitcase or trunk.

Mr. Anatsui has treated similar mediums comparably; as early as 1998 he was wiring together milk-can tops to create floor-bound sculptures. But for charisma and variety, the bottle-top hangings are unsurpassed, as evident in the nine examples in the new retrospective, conceived by Ellen Rudolph for the Akron Art Museum, and installed in Brooklyn by Kevin Dumouchelle.

Surfaces are clotted and encrusted in one example, or appear like openwork lace in another. Mr. Anatsui himself compares his metal work to painting and sees the show as a record of his move from the equivalent of oils to watercolor, “from opaqueness to transparency.”

The palette can be solid and bold, or as mixed and nuanced as a hazed-over wildflower field. Several titles — “Earth’s Skin,” “Ozone Layer” — have ecological associations. But like the earlier ceramic and wood-panel sculptures they speak in universal terms of decay and regeneration.

It’s surely no accident that the exhibition’s title, which is also the title of a stunning 2009 hanging, comes from the French philosopher Simone Weil (1909-43). Weil lived the life of both a social and spiritual activism, and Mr. Anatsui’s art may be considered in those terms.

His is eminently public work, with a subtle commentarial undertow. This is true of a piece called “Broken Bridges II” that he recently installed on a building facade near the [High Line](#) in Chelsea. An immense, pieced-together mural made partly of mirrorlike material, it gives a narcissistic city and art world capital a fractured, yet sky-flooded view of itself.

Outdoors is the direction Mr. Anatsui wants to go in the future; he will be doing an installation on the exterior of the Royal Academy in London in the spring and another in Amsterdam. Large but light and lighter is the goal. “I’m working toward buoyancy,” he said.

Will that buoyant art be African? Western?

Neither, or rather both, in ways that make such categories expansive rather than confining. It will be the art of someone who, through a combination of brilliance, hard work and circumstance — the same factors that shape most major art careers — has become a global star and has achieved that status by working at home, finding a grand and modest beauty there, and spreading that beauty everywhere.

A version of this article appeared in print on February 10, 2013, on page AR1 of the New York edition with the headline: A Million Pieces of Home.



*Et Anatsui*

# A Ceaseless Search for Form

OKWUI ENWEZOR

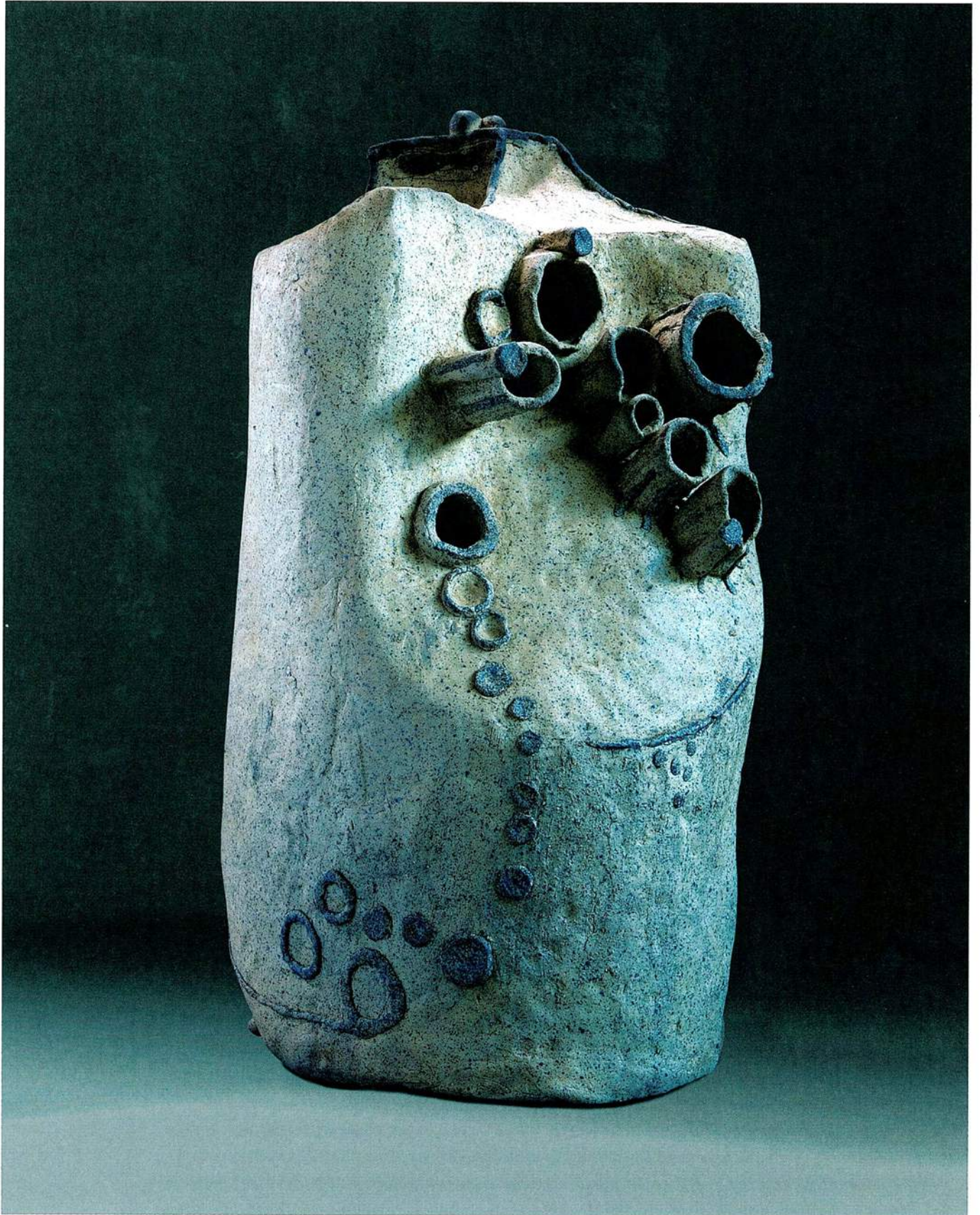
In the art of El Anatsui, the search for form in the course of sculptural production never begins with a predetermined outline. Nor would the motivation that sets in progress the emergence of a particular form, shape, or arrangement be defined purely in formalist terms. Instead, Anatsui tends to privilege and focus enormous attention on the language of his materials—on his media. Even while morphological affinities may lead one to consider the work's relationship to classical African sculpture, there is never a single line connecting his engagement to this tradition. This is particularly relevant given the built-in expectations that Anatsui maintain his African authenticity.

Reserved, wry, and philosophical, Anatsui is contemporary in every way. He creates his art in the tense boundary between tradition and modernity, medium and process. From one project to the next, his practice represents the search for sculptural solutions sensitive to prevailing idioms. He stringently emphasizes the primacy of process over compositional pre-determination, concept over formal completeness, chance over pre-prescribed formulations. Understanding this allows us to more fully appreciate a practice centered around accumulating ideas rather than producing forms. This brings resolution to an apparent contradiction: While there is artisanal dominance suggested by the work's strong sense of craft, it is this craft that provides us with a rich dialogue between the work's content and its significance.

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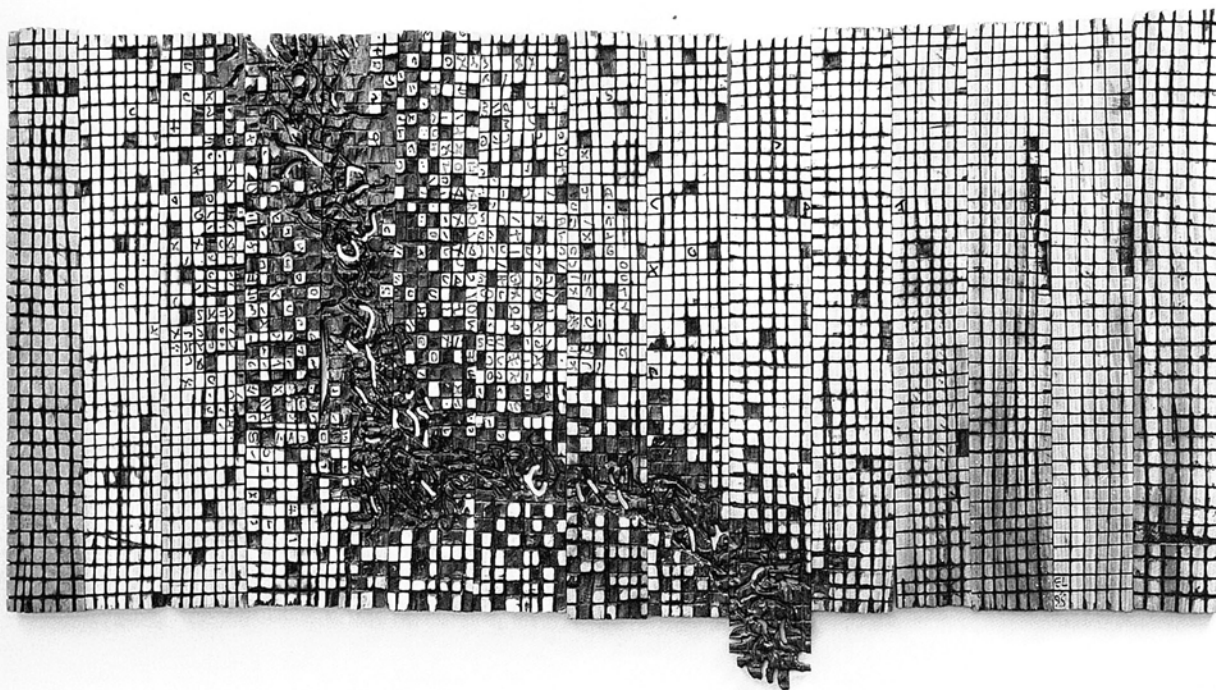
OKWUI ENWEZOR is Director of Haus der Kunst, Munich, and Artistic Director of La Triennale 2012 at Palais de Tokyo, Paris. He is Kirk Varnedoe Visiting Professor at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University in Spring, 2012.







Anatsui's spontaneous way of working does not, however, mean that he embarks on a project without a game plan. Nor does it suggest that he has a lack of interest in the formal registers that ultimately compel him to engage a particular sculptural problem, such as combining gestural mark-making and storytelling (consider his use of a power saw in the wood pieces of the late eighties and nineties, and his use of negative space and fragmentation in the *Broken Pot* series). Found materials also figure dominantly in Anatsui's work. They are repurposed not merely as a commentary on obsolescence, but to shape sculptural installations. These allude to the display formats which the arrangement of objects engenders, while also evoking



EL ANATSUI, *OLD CLOTH SERIES*, 1993, wood, paint, 31 1/2 x 60 1/4" / *SERIE ALTER STOFF*, Holz, Farbe, 80 x 153 cm.

(PHOTO: COURTESY OF MUSEUM OF AFRICAN ART)

a temporality suggested by the worn surfaces of the transformed objects. What I mean by this is that Anatsui responds to every material he works with as if he has encountered it for the first time in the flux of history, all the while concentrating on how he might exploit a material's most meaningful plastic potential. He is driven by the desire to incessantly experiment and sculpturally analyze whatever material he is working with—clay, wood, cement, metal—as he tests the possibility of what each may yield in relation to scale, presence, color, shape, and idea.

While the result of a final piece rests inexorably upon its materiality, its conceptual language flows from an entirely different structuring device, which equally determines the "mark" that the

material carries and the form the work ultimately assumes. In the ordinary course of events, a shattered terracotta vessel is usually swept up and thrown away. But in Anatsui's process, the same shards might be swept up and placed carefully in a box for future consideration. This consideration might entail a meditation and analysis of the gravitational force that would have initially propelled the vessel down from its perch. Or perhaps Anatsui would make some other observation in subjecting it to his methods of physically processing phenomena. In the early eighties, Anatsui participated in an artist residency in rural Cummington, which was when his monumental wood pieces began to emerge. There was a wide availability of wood in the region—particularly logs of pine, which he would find cut and neatly arranged in rows. Anatsui wanted to do something with the logs, but knew he had to resist the temptation to carve to avoid this cliché of African art. Earlier in the seventies, Anatsui worked with flat polished wood discs that he branded with pre-designed, hot iron tools forming what were seemingly lexical designs. At the residency, Anatsui resorted once again to the power saw, but this time as he cut the wood he became intrigued by the beauty of the uncontrolled marks made by the saw, due to its imprecision. The chance discovery that he could use the saw almost counterintuitively—against the cutting function for which it was designed—led to the beginning of one of the most fruitful experiments he has ever undertaken.

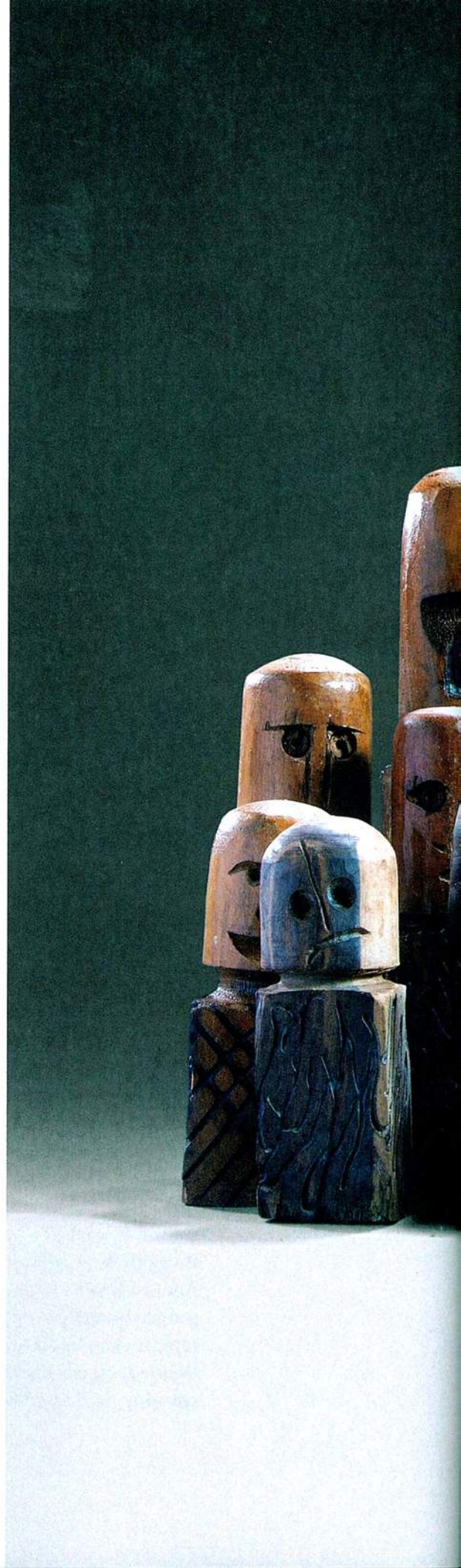
El Anatsui is arguably the most significant African artist of his generation and one of the few sculptors who can genuinely be credited for inventing a completely new and unique visual idiom with his woven metal sculptures. Throughout his distinguished career that spans more than forty years (while teaching and mentoring young artists), his work has stood the test of time as the world has undergone enormous global change significantly impacting the African body politic, and hastening the collapse of markets, economic crisis, erosion of social capital, and the deracination of so many institutions. The passage of time, the shift in the fortunes of African societies, and the universality of the work of art—a tool to help manage complexity—seem only to infuse his work with a sense of purpose, buoyed equally by resilience and fragility. Anatsui's employment of fragmentation as a compositional technique serves as a mordant reminder that even the most abstract works can have the capacity to humanize the most lowly of objects and infuse them with iconic power. Here the work of the artist's hand—the laborious, silent task of flattening aluminum liquor bottle caps; the twisting of copper wires into slender tendrils of metal thread that would suture one flattened panel to another; the weaving of such pieces into one resplendent, epic piece—serves as a metaphor for humanity. The act of cutting, flattening, scrunching, twisting, and piecing together thousands of fractured panels offers another analogy between labor and cognition: a body/mind articulation that manifestly reinforces the importance of material beauty. It would take a visionary artistic sensibility like Anatsui's to map these associations into objects whose cascading lightness masks the underlying forms of a powerful social, indeed political-minded critique.

Across his career, Anatsui has developed several distinct modes of articulating his sculptural concerns. These have come to be emulated by other artists in the region. He has assiduously worked with the transformational plastic properties of the African sculptural idiom through his constant reformatting of both his materials and compositional techniques. El Anatsui's early, far less dramatic works, which employed branded wood and broken ceramics, paved the way for his monumental cement sculptures, installations, and his now renowned tapestry-like sculptures, the latter composed of flattened panels of liquor bottle caps that are braided into architecturally scaled impressive structures, blurring the line between sculpture, painting, and assemblage.



*EL ANATSUI, GROUP PHOTO, 1987, wood, dimensions variable /  
GRUPPENBILD, Holz, Masse variabel.  
(PHOTO: COURTESY OF MUSEUM OF AFRICAN ART)*

His early works were based on the simplicity and humility of materials, yet they contained within them a very tense rebuttal to the formalism of the Western academic rules that governed his art training during his student years in Ghana, as well as the traditional African art that surrounded him throughout his upbringing. The conceptually rich language that he has created unites these incongruous artistic idioms and formally bridges the gap between them. The result of this hybrid is a vital, uncompromising contemporary artistic practice that reflects the situation of art in postcolonial Africa. The key themes of Anatsui's practice are constant experimentation and the testing of new ground while remaining inventive and creatively open to chance. Even though a cursory viewing of his work might suggest that there is a paradox—the tension between the artisanal and the conceptual—the key properties of his work are the continuous attempt to challenge, push, and expand the boundaries of what sculpture can be today. Anatsui has more than succeeded in doing so, and he is indeed one of the rare artists whose work is immediately identifiable and recognizable both for its genuine form and technique. His work stands as a unique achievement in the ceaseless search for an opening through which to actively create sculpture.









EL ANATSUI, *BUKPA OLD TOWN*, 2009,  
detail, aluminum, copper wire, 120 x 84" /  
BUKPA ALTSTADT, Detail, Aluminium,  
Kupferdraht, 305 x 213 cm.

When attempts are made to characterize the cultural blinders and biases that bedevil "The Western Tradition" and its art-historical canon, discussion tends to move quickly to matters of representation. More specifically it jumps to how the non-Western Other appears in work made in the service of empire. Fair enough, there has always been much to be said about such matters and there is still much to be said. It is worth noting, though, that the critique of colonialism began long before currently fashionable post-modern discourses "conquered" university curricula. Indeed, coming both from communities of the oppressed and from dissenters within generally oppressive societies, that critique forms an integral part of colonialism's legacy. But let's start somewhere



# Ambition

ROBERT STORR

else for a change. And let's finish by considering how ingrained attitudes toward the medium-specific qualities of "ambitious" modern and contemporary art have even rendered invisible much that falls well within "The Western Tradition."

Take, for example, the concept of the picture plane. As modernists are well aware, the format in question does not necessarily limit its dominion to pictures, though its utility with regard to the problems of picture-making is where its ostensibly absolute authority was initially invoked. The paradigm derives from the fact that, for the most part, images

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in Western art have been painted on flat surfaces and presented on flat surfaces. Rigid panels and taut canvases were the preferred support. They were hung on plumb walls, if the wall itself was not being used as a ground upon which to depict figures or inscribe designs, which was often the case. Given the standard sizes and conventional locations of most portable paintings and even of immobile murals, the Renaissance notion that a painting should be looked at as though it were a window onto worlds beyond, required that the planar surface of the support, in effect, be graphically folded inwards. This meant that the boxlike spaces could be constructed within the frame and behind it to accommodate illusions consistent with the boxlike room in which the viewer



stood. And so, along Euclidean lines, perspective was invented.

Of course, styles strictly based on perspectival paradigms as well as on their equally planar, equally systematic reconfiguration or dismantling—Cubism, for example—ignored prehistoric precedents such as European cave painting where animals roam freely on undulating, underground hollows, while glossing over or dismissing the extravagant conjuring of Baroque and Rococo art where lunettes, cupolas, and flared moldings perforate and explode upright walls and level ceilings, or fanciful illusions simply dissolve them. A fair number of these spaces were hung with tapestries but they too generally adhered to the spatial models of the Renaissance developed by Leon

Battista Alberti even when the actual fabric bellied or rippled to a greater or lesser degree. But what of unattended possibilities of non-planar geometry, not to mention formats that are folded and draped rather than stiff or stretched? And what of entire civilizations that embellish soft rather than hard surfaces with shapes and colors and symbols—tents, flags, hangings, garments? All the fundamental questions old-school formalism has begged—to the impoverishment of art and the detriment of other traditions—are threaded through these simple queries.

To the extent that such means of expression can be set aside as “mere” craft or decoration by defenders of the old orthodoxies, they usually have been. Nonetheless they remain capable of being exigently,

EL ANATSUI, *installation view / Installationsansicht*, 2010, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.





inventively “modern”—or if anyone prefers post-modern—in the hands of someone with a fresh idea about how to address their unrealized potential. Sixty-seven-year-old Ghanaian-born, Nigeria-based El Anatsui is such an artist. The fact that he has only recently “emerged” internationally is a clear demonstration of how mainstream taste not only deprives non-Western talent of visibility and opportunity—or at least delays gaining access to them—but also how it denies itself the experience of genuine innovation. With work in major international shows and important public and private collections around the world, Anatsui has become a breakthrough figure for contemporary African abstraction in the way that Chéri Samba was for representational painting, and Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé were for photography.

However, two dangers remain. The first is that the extent and variety of Anatsui’s actual accomplishment might be reduced to the most reductive reading of his best-known body of art—colorful meshes or recycled metal refuse—and the second, that few others of true merit will be allowed through the door he has opened because he has come to be such an imposing presence, and because it is the custom of cultural institutions “in the mainstream” to fasten on a handful of artists “outside the mainstream” and focus on them to the exclusion of others—as if the public could only handle so much genuinely fresh material at one time, and only so much learning.

Happily, Anatsui’s career has been so sufficiently long and his oeuvre so sufficiently varied that to whatever degree he is temporarily destined to be the *primus inter pares* of abstraction from Africa for European and American audiences, the range of what he has done will suggest how broad the overall field of activity has been.

An exhibition organized by The Museum for African Art in New York that is currently touring the United States and Canada vividly makes this point. The fact that delays in construction of the museum’s building on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan—up from the Guggenheim, Metropolitan Museum, and the Museum of Modern Art—has, as a silver lining, slowed reception of Anatsui’s work down so that the scope of his art has had a chance to sink in. I saw the earliest examples contained in his retrospective

in the woefully ill-suited Daniel Libeskind galleries of the Royal Ontario Museum almost two years ago. It encompassed oils of the 1980s in a modernized pictographic idiom enhanced by process-derived effects: drips, sprays, punctures, prints featuring archetypal African figures and faces belonging to a long tradition of such work from throughout the continent, carved and rough-cut wooden sculptures (some with added metal and cloth elements) that go from low relief patterning to checkerboard or Mancala designs, and phalanxes of chessmen-like totems to large, whimsical, freestanding figures that partially recall the work of the late Senegalese sculptor Moustapha Dime. Of the chiseled reliefs, two in particular presage the faceted facture of Anatsui’s metal curtains—WHEN I LAST WROTE YOU ABOUT AFRICA (1986), from which the survey exhibition takes its title, and LEOPARD’S PAW-PRINTS AND OTHER STORIES (1991), a gem in which the clustered, visually percussive effects of gouges or cuts intersect, much as polyrhythmic drum beats come together in African music. A tantalizingly small, formally separate group of ceramics and related drawings rounds out the selection of Anatsui’s work prior to his exploration of the possibilities of mixing textiles, formats, and assemblage techniques, and they are, in shape and substance, as densely monumental as the later work is expansive—though, like that later work, they body forth a universe that is essentially pliant and therefore perpetually metamorphic.

Consequently, by the time one arrives at the exhibition’s “main event”—virtually the only thing that those of us who have thus far missed the exhibition know of Anatsui—one has come to know an artist of genuinely large ambition who has tested that ambition against numerous materials in various scales. Not like someone who was just warming up, but like someone who was playing to win each time and pushed himself and the medium hard at every opportunity. In short, when radical invention comes about, more traditional mastery was already an accomplished reality, such that innovation is all the more authoritative and exhilarating.

The prototype of Anatsui’s wall hangings would seem to be PEAK PROJECT, a floor piece from 1999, that is composed like the hangings of tin and foil





EL ANATSUI, *PEAK*, 2010, tin, copper wire, 374 x 295" /

GIPFEL, Zinn, Kupferdraht, 950 x 749 cm.

(PHOTO: YUKIYA KAWAGUCHI)

scraps stitched together by twists of copper wire. Its collapsed appearance, bunched-in-the-corner disposition, and detritus-based facture might suggest the "informe" to those for whom any and every seemingly inchoate shape and "de-skilled" mode of production is an anti-aesthetic, Bataillean allegory of degeneration. However, were they ever to be applied, such interpretive overlays would in fact constitute an incidence of critical neocolonialism in the uniform of postmodernism. Rather, the contrast between the organic quality of the work's articulation and orientation—it resembles ground-covering vegetation or rock-hugging lichen—and the industrial traits of its cellular components conflate into a vivid hybrid of

nature and culture, primordial beauty, and the eye-catching beauty of what is, in fact, pollution. How the viewer regards and evaluates this hybrid aesthetically and culturally may vary widely and the difference between the "Third World" art public and that from the "First World" may become pronounced at this very juncture.

To better indicate where the distinctions arise, it is perhaps useful to tell a joke that in different versions has circulated among ethnomusicologists. It concerns a right-thinking American doing research in remote African villages who comes upon a man playing a *mbira* or finger piano. Traditionally such instruments are sometimes adorned with shells so that they can also serve as rattles when the keys are plucked. Looking at the *mbira* in the hands of his new acquaintance, the American notes that the shells have been replaced with Coke bottle caps and challenges the man to explain himself. "In the old days you used shells. Why do you use Coke bottle tops





EL ANATSUI, *THEY FINALLY BROKE THE POT OF WISDOM*, 2011, detail, aluminum bottle tops, copper wire, 185  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 276" / *ENDLICH ZERBRACHEN SIE DEN TOPF DER WEISHEIT*, Detail, Aluminium-Kronkorken, Kupferdraht, 472 x 701 cm.



now?" to which the musician answers, "Son, in the old days we couldn't get Coke bottle tops."<sup>1</sup> Here too neocolonialism is a factor insofar as some of those who profess to love African art mournfully insist that it remain unchanging and that overt exploitation of thoroughly contemporary materials and processes betrays its heritage. This amounts to saying that African art can never be modern but must be arrested in the state that European travelers found it in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and that European artists imitated in the twentieth century.

Anatsui's genius resides, to the contrary, in having pinpointed the motive and found the means for effecting a transformation of an abiding aspect of African art that is wholly contemporary and, ul-

timately, free of "preservationist" stylizations of the old ways. That some family members have engaged in producing kente cloth weavings is a pertinent fact. However, Anatsui's re-invention of the color field of abstraction as a manifold, chain-linked picture surface rather than a rigid picture plane is radical in aesthetic dimensions far exceeding anything that might simply be attributed—and worse, explained away—as a clever but "inevitable" permutation of either modernist tradition or African tradition. Instead we are dealing with a genuine paradigm shift coming from a place where no one was looking for one.

True, there are some intriguing antecedents or analogs to Anatsui's heroic and heroically scaled new departure for abstraction that call for men-

EL ANATSUI, *THEY FINALLY BROKE THE POT OF WISDOM*, 2011, aluminum bottle tops, copper wire, 185 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 276" /

ENDLICH ZERBRACHEN SIE DEN TOPF DER WEISHEIT, Aluminium-Kronkorken, Kupferdraht, 472 x 701 cm.





tion and reward examination. Among the most obvious are the draped color-field paintings made by the Washington-based artist Sam Gilliam during the late 1960s and into the 1970s, and more recent assemblage paintings by David Hammons also come to mind. That both these artists are African American is relevant at least in the measure that neither has yet been accorded full recognition by formalist or neo-formalist commentators who take it upon themselves to decide whether painting and its off-shoots are still capable of renewal and reconfiguration (Remember how many deaths painting has endured since the sixties?), and if so, who are the artists responsible for extending its lease on life. Other points of references—other Others with respect to mainstream accounts—are located in the work of “fabric artists,” almost all of whom have been women. Foremost among the examples useful for our purposes are the early hangings of the Polish Magdalena Abakanowicz, the sculptures of the Americans Sheila Hicks and the late Claire Zeisler, with Anni Albers and others tracing the heritage back to the beginnings of modernism on the “distaff” side.

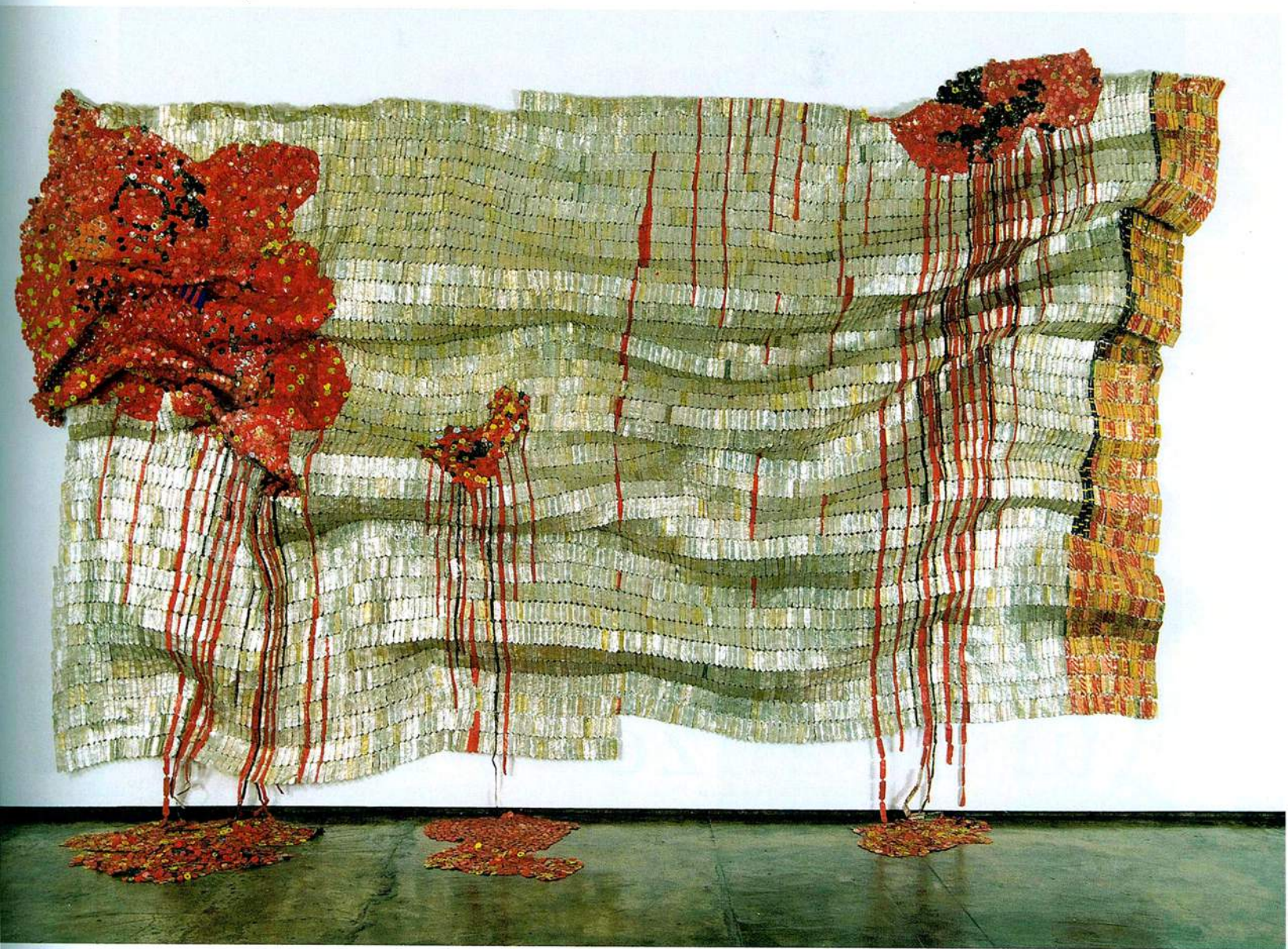
Abakanowicz, Hicks, and Zeisler long ago demonstrated that weaving and binding filaments could match the ambition of large-format painting, and then some. But Anatsui’s metallic meshes have a majesty that depends less on sheer size, than on the principle of constant expansion and contraction intrinsic to his structural methodology, and on the hypnotic mix of macrocosmic sweep and microcosmic intensity basic to his way of piecing discreet, chromatic bits of elements into “broad-cloth” chain-mail compositions. Thus *DUSASA I* (2007), which he created for the Arsenale in the 2007 Venice Biennale, commanded the final chamber of that voracious, belittling hall of a building like an altarpiece in a Romanesque cathedral. Now in the collection of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, it awaits alternative configurations according to the different spaces in which it might be installed, such variability being not just a matter of museological convenience but also of active reconsideration and even re-composition according to the specificity of site. From that angle, one might think of Anatsui’s work as being akin to a Sol LeWitt wall drawing that can be peeled away from

its support and loosely tacked to a new one with all the wrinkles, stress marks, and crumpled facets that would result, appearing as a set of genetically mutating characteristics of the original.

Indeed the scintillating polychrome matrix of Anatsui’s hangings is a maximalist rejoinder to the minimalist model, a symphonic amplification of the spare chamber music intervals of sixties grid work. As such, it is a major step forward and out of the cul de sac of the formalist thinking characteristic of that era in that domain. Moreover, for all its jazzy flash and dazzle, the sometimes clangorous and jarring, sometimes somber resonance of Anatsui’s orchestrations of tin fragments has deeply unsettling overtones. *BLEEDING TAKARI* (2008) renders them explicit both in its title and in the manner in which the integrity of the design has been violated, punctured, and mortally injured—with blood oozing from wounds on to the floor. The imagery is certainly obvious—to jaundiced eyes, perhaps even obvious to a fault. Yet the unease it inspires has at least as much to do with the public’s habitual embarrassment when faced with an artist who unapologetically wears his heart on his sleeve and with art that is overtly symbolic as it does with any doubts one could possibly cast on the artist’s sincerity or on the aptness of such symbolism. How long has it been since a “Western” artist attempted to make abstract art that was avowedly and convincingly tragic? The Abstract Expressionist did it all the time but the answer is a long time, and it indicates how much has been lost to art in the process. With ongoing wars in Somalia, Darfur, the Congo, and elsewhere and with political as well as criminal violence a daily reality throughout Africa, Anatsui has put his finger in the gaping wound of a continent even as he has shown by example its extraordinary creative vigor. An art world besotted by the gambits of those who game the system needs more of the seriousness behind Anatsui’s sustained endeavor and more of a sense of the human stakes for which art plays in places where less is taken for granted and more is demanded of it.

1) A story told by Paul Berliner as remembered by musician Rosamund Morley. Berliner is Professor of Ethnomusicology at the John Hope Franklin Center for Interdisciplinary & International Studies at Duke University.





EL ANATSUI, *BLEEDING TAKARI II*, 2007, aluminum, copper wire, 155 x 226  $\frac{3}{4}$  " / *BLUTENDE TAKARI II*, Aluminium, Kupferdraht, 394 x 576 cm.



# El Anatsui's Metamorphic Sculptures



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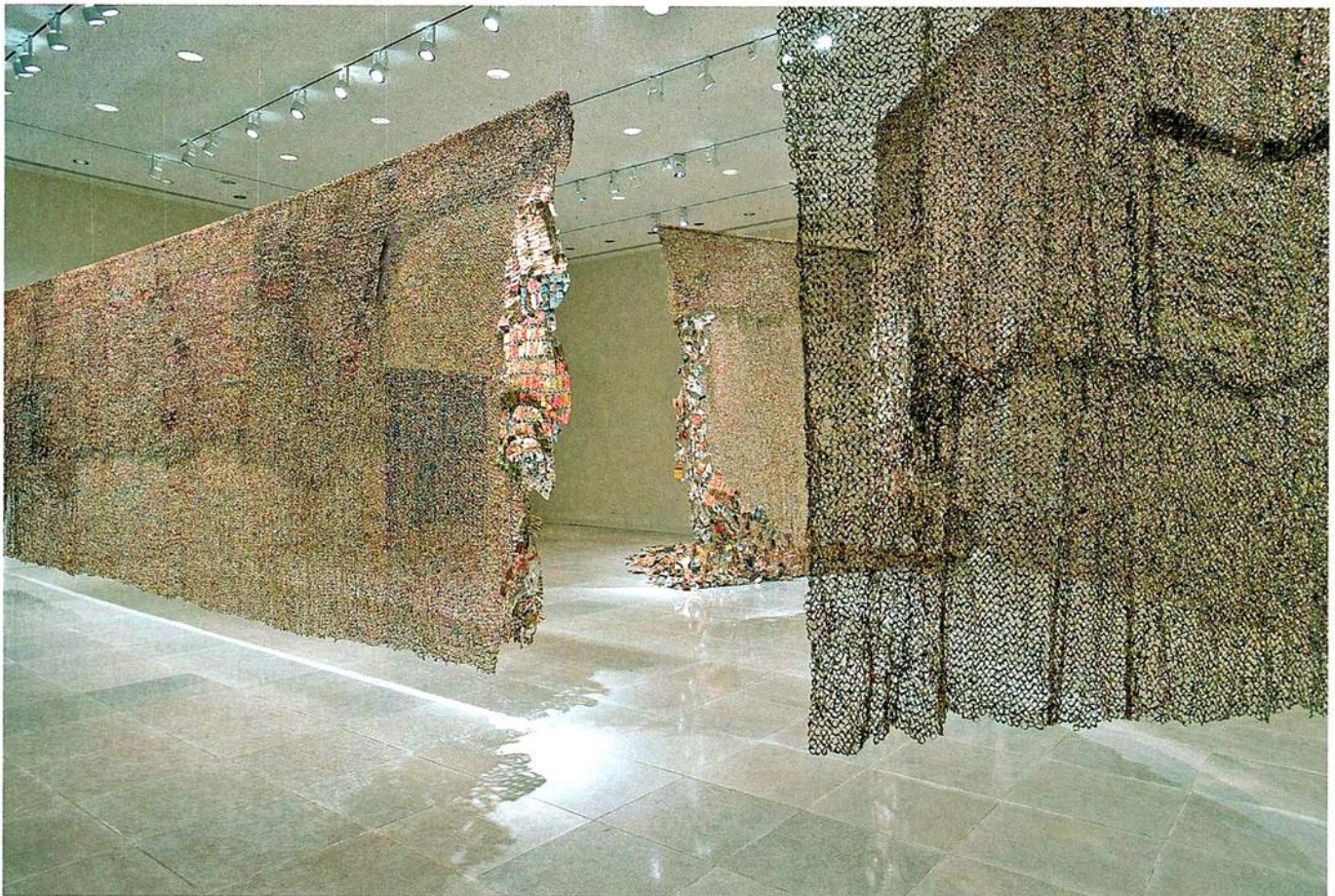
CHIKA OKEKE-AGULU

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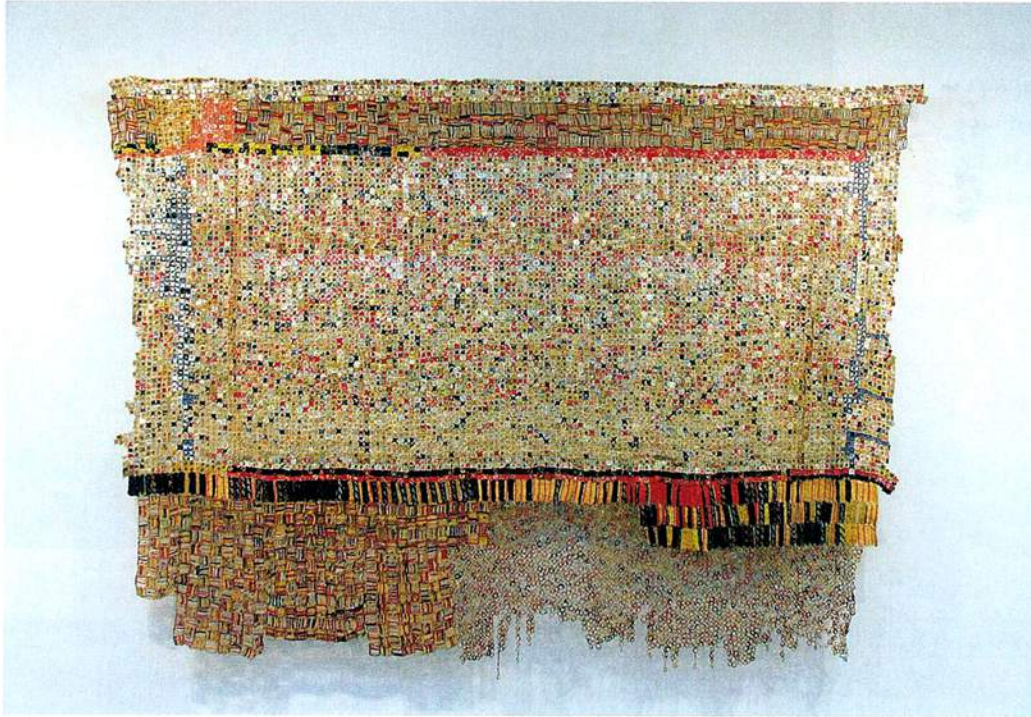
One thing that distresses and bewilders curators and collectors of El Anatsui's sculpture is the burden the artist places on them to make important decisions about the work's installation. Puzzling as it might seem, his apparent *laissez-faire* attitude toward the process of presenting his monumental metal sculptures, which can invoke anything from aesthetic grace to imponderable awesomeness, is a crucial aspect of his artistic philosophy. There is an element of play, which the artist often speaks about. He ignores the ingrained urge of collectors and curators to treat his works with near-sacral deference; they are play objects that can be touched or rearranged with little or no regard to his original design. The sculptures that emerge from his studio are not simply the final product of his rigorous, conceptual, and exacting technical processes. Rather, they are suggestions or proposals for what is possible once the works enter other spaces and contexts beyond the artist's studio. There is an inexorable link between his flexibly constituted sculptures and the ambivalent, shifting relationship that has defined the past and present histories of Africa and the West.<sup>1)</sup> Our awareness of this intriguing connection between the formal and conceptual in his work completely changes the meaning



*EL ANATSUI, GLI (WALL), 2010, aluminum bottle caps, rings, copper wire, dimensions variable, detail and installation views, Rice Gallery, Houston / GLI (WAND), Aluminium-Flaschenverschlüsse, Ringe, Kupferdraht, Masse variabel, Detail und Installationsansichten. (PHOTOS: NASH BAKER )*







and implication of the play his sculptures invite, and complicates our interactions with them.

There is, however, what seems like a strain of idealism in Anatsui's methodology, evident in what he sees as the pedagogical potentialities of his manipulable work; he uses his sculptures to awaken the latent artist in the privileged curator and collector. This notion—which stops short of the radical utopianism of Joseph Beuys's social sculpture theory—reveals, in practice, the fact that artistic creativity of the ambitious kind (perhaps taken for granted by those who, like Anatsui, are endowed with lots of it) is not freely available to everyone, including curators and collectors. How else does one explain the anxiety and distress of those entrusted with composing what Anatsui calls “data” without instructions from the artist—if not that they do not subscribe to his theory of pan-human, high-artistic ability?<sup>2)</sup>

In any case, the labile structure of Anatsui's sculptures and the relational and participatory practices they motivate, or insinuate, are the most visible manifestation of his longstanding meditation on time. If he has one enduring article of faith, it must be

EL ANATSUI, *THEY ARE STILL COMING BACK*, 2006,  
aluminum bottle caps, copper wire, 96 x 130" /  
*SIE KOMMEN IMMER NOCH ZURÜCK*, Aluminium-  
Kronkorken, Kupferdraht, 244 x 330 cm.

something closely aligned with the popular maxim that “no condition is permanent.” As I have written elsewhere, this is “one of the more ubiquitous affirmations in modern Africa of the precarious place of human beings in the scheme of things.”<sup>3)</sup> Capacious in its applicability, this maxim has been propagated and illustrated by popular musicians and sign painters, and is often invoked in everyday speech to affirm, or explain, the quirky trajectory of history, the bewildering capriciousness of contemporary life, and the inscrutability of what is yet to come. That is to say, our understanding of the past, present, and future must always be provisional. As Anatsui has noted, this explains the prevalence of orality as the primary mode of social discourse and remembrance in African societies. It is to this condition of provisional-



ity—with all its philosophical, existential, and formal implications—that his work aspires.<sup>4)</sup>

This way of imagining a work in perpetual progress—a living object prone to change like any other living thing—presents a problem to the critic and historian, and to curators and collectors who must decide how the work will look each time it is displayed. Let me explain: consider the short lives of Anatsui's DUSASA II (2007) and INTERMITTENT SIGNALS (2009). DUSASA II was first shown at the 2007 Venice Biennale and has been installed twice (2008, 2010) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, its permanent home. In these three incarnations of its public presentation, we face three similar yet dramatically different relief sculptures distinguished compositionally by their wave patterns and color shapes. Similarly, when INTERMITTENT SIGNALS was first shown at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York (2009), we saw a rectangular wall relief with bold lateral waves across its entire surface. In 2010 at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Mas-

sachusetts, the same sculpture became a muscular, dynamic piece either crawling off the wall or apparently set upon from the right side by some mysterious entropic force. The question then for the critic and historian is this: Is it possible to produce definitive, confident readings of these sculptures and not wonder if what is written about them now will make sense in the future? This is when we realize that Anatsui's sculptures force writings that take on the ever-changing structures of oral narratives. In them, no formal condition is permanent.

1) Okwui Enwezor, "Cartographies of Uneven Exchange: The Fluidity of Sculptural Form, El Anatsui in Conversation with Okwui Enwezor," *Nka* 28 (2011), p. 104.

2) "El Anatsui in Conversation with Chika Okeke-Agulu" in *El Anatsui at the Clark*, exh. cat., Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute (Williamstown, Mass. 2011), p. 11.

3) Chika Okeke-Agulu, "No Condition is Permanent: The Art and Politics of Euro-African Encounter" in Udo Kittelmann, Chika Okeke-Agulu, and Britta Schmitz, eds., *Who Knows Tomorrow* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2010), p. 389.

4) "El Anatsui in Conversation with Chika Okeke-Agulu," p. 10.



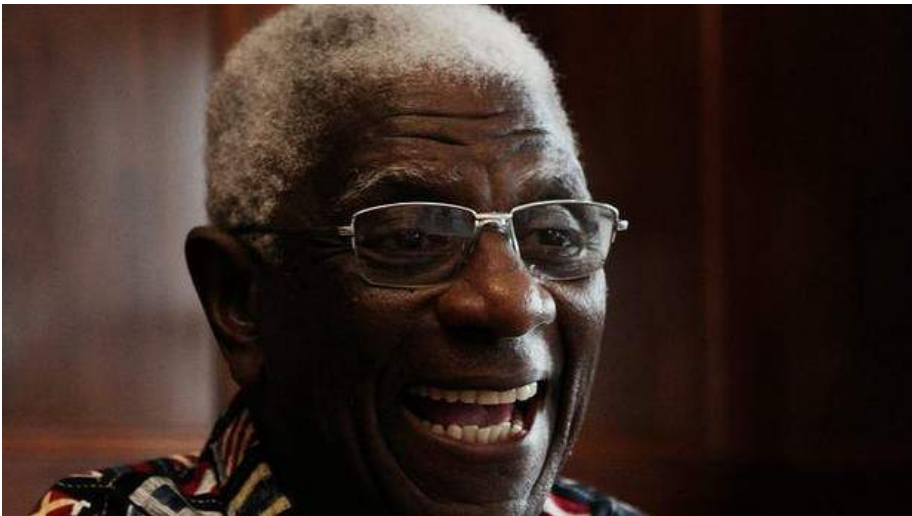


# The Sydney Morning Herald

## El Anatsui: out of Africa and taking the art world by storm

February 6, 2016

John McDonald

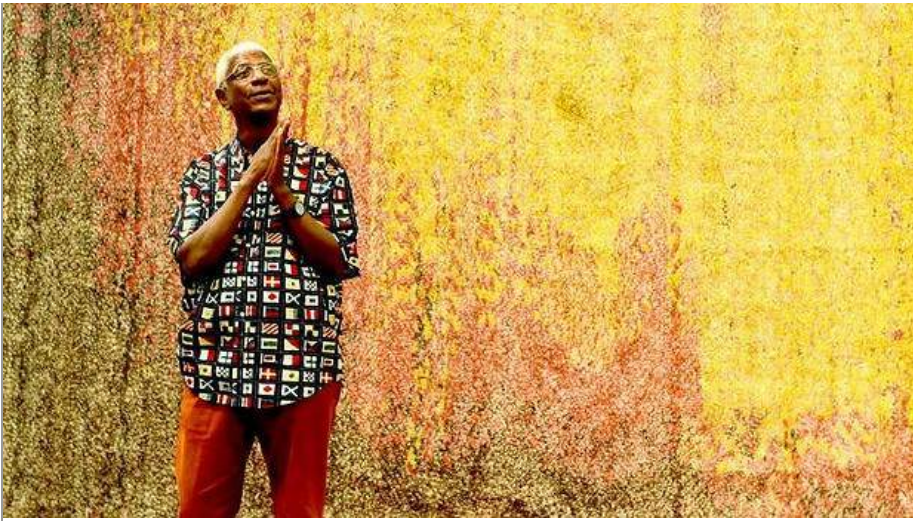


Ghanian artist El Anatsui talks about his show at Carriageworks. Photo: Peter Braig

El Anatsui makes one feel there might actually be some substance in the talk of a globalised art world. The idea that artists from places other than Europe and America can be players on the contemporary scene has been around ever since Jean-Hubert Martin's landmark exhibition, *Magiciens de la Terre*, held at the Centre Pompidou in 1989. That show was derided by curators and gallery directors who had no quarrel with the status quo, but it addressed an underlying anxiety that Western art was growing tired and decadent.

The notion of greater inclusiveness surfaced again in the 2002 *Documenta*, put together by Nigerian-born curator Okwui Enwezor. This show included artists who originated in many exotic locations, although they all seemed to live in New York or Paris or Berlin, just like the curator.

It has taken many years to find artists who can occupy a prominent place on the global circuit while choosing to reside outside the metropolitan centres. William Kentridge has made his reputation from Johannesburg, and El Anatsui has conquered the planet while living and working in the Nigerian university town of Nsukka.



El Anatsui with his work "Garden Wall". Photo: Steven Siewert

*El Anatsui: Five Decades* at Carriageworks is the artist's first exhibition in Australia, although he was included in the 2012 Sydney Biennale. This selection features items from as far back as the 1970s, revealing a career that was already well advanced by the time Anatsui began making the hanging works that have become a trademark. The show is the first instalment of a new partnership with dealer-turned-philanthropist, Anna Schwartz, who has donated \$500,000 to help Carriageworks host major overseas exhibitions.

Anatsui was born in a small town in Ghana in 1944, the youngest of 32 children whom his father had sired with "five or six wives". He would be raised in the family of an uncle who was a Presbyterian minister, but he never felt the appeal of religion. Anatsui excelled as a student, but when he gained admission to university and decided to study fine arts, his uncle was aghast.

This wasn't the act of a rebel, but a young man who was clear about what he wanted to do, and determined to succeed. In search of a name that was short, simple and neutral, Anatsui re-christened himself "El". It was years before he realised some people mistook him for an Arab or a Muslim.



El Anatsui's work "Drainpipe". Photo: Steven Siewert

After getting his degree in Ghana, Anatsui was advised to apply for a teaching post at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He got the job and has remained there ever since, although his best memories relate to the early years on campus when he was part of an exceptionally talented group of artists and writers, including Chinua Achebe, West Africa's leading modern novelist.

In the years from 1975-78, Anatsui produced a series of ceramic sculptures known as the Broken Pots. He combined local clay, ceramic shards and manganese from Ghana to create dark-flecked pots that were deliberately mangled. He was inspired by the idea that when one makes a sacrifice in a local shrine, a broken vessel is used.

The works have been interpreted as a comment on the broken-down state of the Ghanaian economy, but Anatsui saw them in more universal terms, implying a destruction that leads to renewal. The paradox was that each piece, no matter how shattered, was presented as a finished work of art. Could a work be apparently broken but conceptually complete? One thinks of Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass*, which the artist declared finished only when it was cracked.

Anatsui continued to experiment and in 1980 began carving wooden sculptures with a chain saw. This may sound crude but he managed to attain a high level of finesse, drawing into a slab then carefully smoothing the grooves. He also made works by burning designs into wood, a process we



call pokerwork.

When he discovered a collection of used aluminium printer's plates, Anatsui's imagination went off in a different direction. He fashioned the battered plates into a set of large-scale *Waste Paper Bags* (2003), on which newspaper stories were still readable. These pieces acted like monuments to the lives of refugees and poor people, forced to carry all their possessions from place to place. They are also a form of Pop Art, echoing Claes Oldenburg's overscaled versions of everyday objects.

Examples of all these earlier works may be seen at Carriageworks. They reveal an artist who has tried to remain true to the materials and themes of his native land, while demonstrating a shrewd knowledge of Western art history. Anatsui is inventive and open-minded, but also incredibly patient. He has persevered with each phase until its possibilities seemed exhausted, without ever closing the door. Years later he would return to pottery with new inspiration.

Anatsui's breakthrough came in 1998 when he found a bag of tin-can lids in the bush. By joining them together he created a soft sculpture, like a metallic blanket that could be arranged into diverse shapes. The largest example is *Drainpipes* (2010), in which giant-sized tubes lean against the gallery wall at Carriageworks and sprawl across the floor.

An even more important discovery of 1998 was a bag of tops from alcohol bottles. Anatsui began to flatten the tops and link them with copper wire, creating sheets that made use of the colour and reflective qualities of the material. The genie was out of the bottle and soon Anatsui's work would be appearing in many countries. The first two hanging works, *Woman's Cloth* and *Man's Cloth* (both 2001), were purchased by the British Museum from a commercial gallery show in London. Museums from Tokyo and Washington D.C. were waiting in the wings.

Over the past decade these hangings have grown larger and more complex, some stretching for more than 16 metres. There are vast pieces at Carriageworks, including *Garden Wall*, which cascades like a coloured waterfall. To create such works, and meet the growing demands of museums and collectors, Anatsui has developed a formidable workshop in Nsukka, with as many as 40 employees flattening bottle tops, drilling holes, and stitching panels together with copper wire. He takes care of the compositions and leaves the manufacturing to others.

In the decade-and-a-half in which he has been making these pieces they have undergone considerable changes.

*Adrinka Sasa* (2003) is a relatively early work that refers to a traditional form of cloth from Ghana. It is an elegant, formal composition, mainly black with parallel bands of gold. The configuration one sees in the gallery may change with each hanging, as Anatsui encourages installers to follow their own preferences. As far as he's concerned there is no top or bottom, no right or wrong way to exhibit a piece.

Such freedom is in line with Anatsui's own developing view of the work. In the beginning he was happy to make references to textiles, and allow a piece to be interpreted as a kind of cloth. Now he accepts that these works elude easy categorisation, having elements of sculpture, collage, landscape, textiles, tapestry and mosaic. They are intensively hand-crafted, but also conceptual. There are echoes of many different art movements, from the junk assemblages of artists such as Schwitters and Rauschenberg, to the delicate washes of colour found in the abstract painting of the 1970s.

One might even discern a political message in the idea of works made from the tops from African alcohol bottles becoming highly sought-after, multimillion-dollar acquisitions for Western museums. It's a stunning reversal of the colonial legacy, whereby African nations provided markets for the cheap manufactured goods of Europe. The alcohol once traded for slaves is now providing raw material for fine art – the ultimate in luxury goods.

Such success might go to anyone's head, but Anatsui is remarkably unaffected. His rewards have come late in life, and he continues to live in much the same way that he has for the past 40 years. His chief motivation is not fame and fortune, but the feeling that he is continually making artistic progress. Anatsui is a modest man, but he would be less than human if he didn't feel the excitement of this great, late work coming out of Africa, and taking the world by storm.

**El Anatsui: Five Decades, until March 6 at Carriageworks.**

[johnmcdonald.net.au](http://johnmcdonald.net.au)



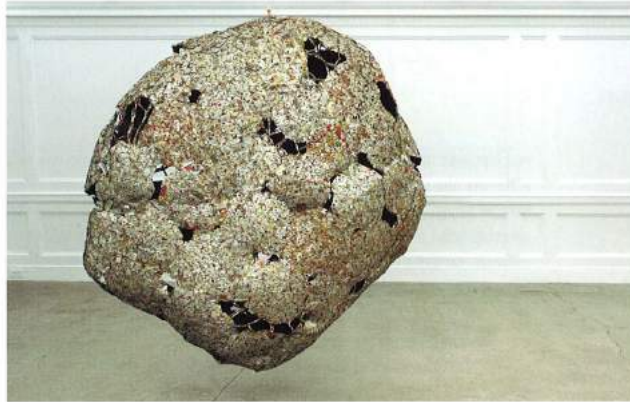
Artist El Anatsui's work made up of bottle tops and discarded items is on exhibition at Carriageworks: pictured is "Awakened". Photo: Steven Siewert



El Anatsui's work "Womb of Time" at Carriageworks. Photo: Steven Siewert

# sculpture

December 2015



## KINDERHOOK, NEW YORK El Anatsui

### The School

Gallerist Jack Shainman's outpost of culture in upstate New York did a terrific job of exhibiting 50 years of work by the Ghana-born, Nigeria-based artist El Anatsui. Now in his 70s, he has had a long, prolific career fashioning shimmering panels out of bottle caps linked to each other with copper wire. After beginning his artistic career as a good painter, El Anatsui is now known as a remarkable sculptor. Early on, he worked with African ceramics. The changes that he made to existing ceramic masks signified a willingness to combine his personal cultural past, understood at least partly as colonized, with what amounts to a visionary reification of Western insights into abstraction.

The School's renovated space, now a year old, shows just how novel and ambitious a gallerist Shainman has become. Redone by the late Spanish architect Antonio Jimenez Torrecillas, the former high school

is a model of late-Modernist interior design. El Anatsui's large-scale works were spectacularly exhibited in a central room with high ceilings. *Tiled Flower Garden* (2012), a huge floor piece of linked bottle caps, curved around another sculpture, giving every appearance of transcending decoration to exist as part of nature—this despite the metallic caps.

*Stressed World* (2011), a very large work made of found aluminum and copper wire, hung from the far wall of the main room. Colorful in the extreme, the aluminum reflected red, yellow, and green among other hues. El Anatsui has a commanding comprehension of low relief and fully three-dimensional design. For *Stressed World*, he used his material to create a highly painterly image—

but one whose undulating folds highlight his understanding of sculpture. The title *Womb of Time* (2014) accurately describes the silver, boulder-like sculpture that hung from a hallway ceiling. With irregular holes that open into an empty interior, the work feels like a chthonic, elementary ode to the notion of time's passage. If time were to begin in a physical place, this is where it would start.

*Peck Project* (1999), a work created with the tin caps of evaporated milk cans, was placed on the second floor. Its overall shape resembles a blanket-like triangle with a hump rising toward one end. Here, as in all of El Anatsui's three-dimensional work, one is nearly stunned by the extraordinarily sculptural quality; in this case, *Peck Project* possesses a

real elegance despite its humble materials. The hump is deeply satisfying as a form, lending a vertical presence to an otherwise horizontal medium. An earlier sculpture, *Chambers of Memory* (1977), reworks a traditional African ceramic mask, with very small ceramic jars placed in the chambered back of the face. The action feels like a way of remembering a damaged piece of art—a way of keeping memory alive. Clearly El Anatsui wants to salvage the past, as well as move forward. This process is deeply centered in a sculptor whose cultural ethics are as advanced as his art.

—Jonathan Goodman

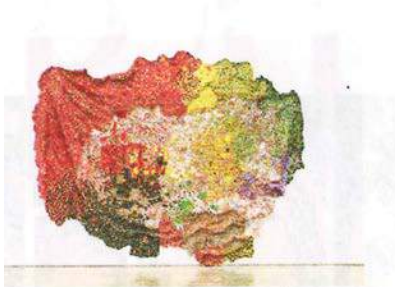


# The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, MAY 24, 2015

## Arena

HIGHLIGHTS FROM TMAGAZINE.COM



ON VIEW

### El Anatsui

"El Anatsui: Five Decades," a new retrospective at Jack Shainman's large upstate gallery, the School, comprises more than 40 pieces by this award-winning artist, from the 1970s to the present, all of which were installed by Mr. Shainman himself.

"He really gave me carte blanche," Mr. Shainman said. "He believes in other people putting their energy into the work."

"The fact that it can be different every time, he encourages that," Mr. Shainman added, referring primarily to Mr. Anatsui's more recent collection of imposing hanging sculptures, which are mutable in form and presentation. Constructed from small pieces of aluminum woven together with copper wires, the works defy their material, taking on a tapestry-like quality.

"I always wanted a space with ceilings high enough for an El Anatsui piece," Mr. Shainman said. (A centerpiece of the exhibition, Mr. Anatsui's 2011 sculpture "Stressed World," above, is about 15 feet tall.) The School, a 30,000-square-foot converted 1929 Federal Revival building that was once a middle and elementary school, fits the bill. The show's opening was also the first-year anniversary of the gallery's debut.

Mr. Anatsui, now 71, was recently awarded the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at this year's Venice Biennale. "We could not have asked for a more perfect coincidence," Mr. Shainman said.

LAURA NEILSON

# ARTFORUM

## Kinderhook

### El Anatsui

**JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY | KINDERHOOK**  
**25 Broad Street**  
**May 17–September 26**

The spacious, light-drenched galleries of the School in Kinderhook, New York, provide an ideal setting for El Anatsui's current retrospective surveying his prolific fifty-year-long career. One senses an increasing self-reflexivity in his latest output, which is perhaps most apparent in works such as *Generation Mix*, 2014, wherein the shimmering metal fragments used in his most celebrated series of the last decade are affixed to wooden assemblages that recall his "Old Cloth" series of the 1990s, examples of which are also on view.



El Anatsui, *Womb of Time*, 2014, aluminum and copper wire, 24 x 86 x 44".

Anatsui's "Broken Pots" series, first shown in 1979 at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, reflects on cultural fragmentation and resilience. Inspired in part by Nok terra-cotta sculpture, works such as *Chambers of Memory*, 1977, and *Gbeze*, 1979, invoke the chaos of colonization and affirmed the promise of independence for new African nations. Thirty-five years later, echoes of this series are legible in the artist's metal constructions. One such sculpture appears as a giant suspended orb punctured with gaping holes, marking a departure from his flattened wall hangings. Titled *Womb of Time*, 2014, it also links the global unrest felt during the postwar era to that of our present day.

While only a small number of works are directly figurative, many of the artist's most abstract sculptures are treated as bodies that may be wounded or healed. *Stressed World*, 2011, one of the largest works on view, appears worn and neglected, as if embodying the strain placed on our natural environment. Anatsui's handling of found materials is both violent and conscientious, consistently evoking themes of disorder and reinvention while inviting an awareness of the consequences of ecological and cultural destruction.

— Allison Young



## New York: Two Shows up the River

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Kasia Maciejowska | New York | 12 Sept 2015

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A train ride up the Hudson River from Manhattan will take you to two utterly different exhibitions: Robert Irwin's new minimalist architectural installation at Dia: Beacon titled *Excursus: Homage to the Square*<sup>3</sup>, and *Five Decades*, a solo exhibition featuring work by El Anatsui, who was awarded the Venice Biennale's Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement, at Jack Shainman's large gallery in Kinderhook. From Irwin's serene screens and ephemeral shadows to Anatsui's weighty drapes of folded metal, the two exhibitions represent the American art world's present fascination with two very different sets of aesthetics and conceptual concerns; the pared back illusion play of the Light and Space movement, and the politically engaged expressive craftwork defining a portion of contemporary African art.

El Anatsui

*Five Decades*, at Jack Shainman Gallery, Kinderhook, New York State

Until 26 September 2015

In art discourse today there is much discussion on how contemporary art is becoming a globalised arena. Certainly the western art world's gaze does appear to have widened to take in the art of Africa, Arabia, and Asia. This year's Venice Biennale is curated by the event's first African curator, Okwui Enwezor, the Nigerian-born director of Munich's Haus der Kunst who titled this iteration of world's largest exhibition "All The World's Futures". In addition, Nigeria-based Ghanaian artist El Anatsui, was awarded the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement by the festival, with Enwezor calling him "perhaps the most significant living African artist working on the continent today", and someone "who has contributed immensely to the recognition of contemporary African artists in the global arena".



Installation view, El Anatsui, *Five Decades*, at Jack Shainman Gallery, Kinderhook, New York State. Image courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery

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Before Anatsui or his American gallerist Jack Shainman knew he would receive the respected accolade, they were planning a retrospective of his life's work spanning fifty years. Rather than being at either of Shainman's Manhattan galleries, they opted for the more spacious outpost—a converted school building now redecorated with requisite gallery-grade white walls and grey floors—in picturesque Kinderhook, upstate New York, near fashionable weekend haven Hudson. Wisely so, as Anatsui's capacious articulated assemblages sprawl through several rooms over three storeys,



rising creepily across floors and hanging beautifully from walls of different sizes, suiting the spectrum with the generally large scale of his works.



Installation view, El Anatsui, *Peak Project*, 1999. Tin and copper wire 39 x 84 x 155 inches. Image courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery

Experiencing Anatsui's work like this, as a whole interrelated body, impresses one thing most of all; this is a committed artist with an obsessive vision and an established language. His sculptural hangings, which are his dominant works, are woven from the waste materials like bottle tops and packaging labels, gathered from plants in Nigeria, as they have been throughout his career. This transformative act of re-using waste means a postcolonial note runs through these woven works; it's a disturbing message, but delivered as a subtle undertow because the clarity and strength of the forms themselves take precedence. This gives the creativity and beauty of these works a poignancy that is both uncomfortable in its honesty and optimistic in its dedication. The hangings occupy a juncture between sculpture and tapestry; both structural and fluid, intricate and vast, they can appear uplifting in places and ominous in others, while still very clearly belonging to the same

formal language, reminiscent of mosaic and chainmail.



Installation view, El Anatsui, *Five Decades*, at Jack Shainman Gallery, Kinderhook, New York State. Image courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery

The selection at Shainman is hung variously, to bring out new shapes in each piece, as Anatsui doesn't pre-define how they are hung, and likes how the pieces reform themselves differently each time according to which parts of them are fixed to the wall, or occasionally, the floor. Sometimes their texture appears as matt black scales, which combined with their organic-looking shapes can look like a disturbing creature from the natural world. In other examples, the folded scales glitter prettily in gold and yellow like sparkling waterfalls, or colourful abstract zones layer into a glinting curtain. Anatsui's forms give his materials an intense aura that makes the viewer acutely aware of their own physicality; their elusive mix of heavy structure and fluid translucency makes the human body feel very fragile and vulnerable beside them. This trait places aligns them with the discourse of contemporary sculpture. The rhythm and reiteration of those small folds of metal runs through the exhibition to build up an impression of Anatsui as someone of meticulous and meditative



psyche, expressing his unique vision through this very particular craft and medium.



Installation view, El Anatsui, *Womb of Time*, 2014. Found aluminum and copper wire 85 x 80 x 25 inches. Image courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery

Punctuating this powerful aesthetic are examples of Anatsui's ceramics, woodcarvings and paintings, dating from early in his career, with one or two recent returns. Ceramic and wood are common materials in Nigerian art, and Anatsui has said with a view to working in these media that everything has a form that can be expressed in them. Anatsui's works are held in numerous important collections including the MET, MoMA, the Pompidou, and the British Museum. Jack Shainman offers a rare opportunity to develop a more sophisticated feel for this artist's significant oeuvre, see the different shades within his idiosyncratic language, and get a feel for how a craft-based artistic practice can be used to materialise political commentary as well as to build a nuanced artistic vision.—[O]

# ARTNEWS

## THE NEW RAZZLE-DAZZLE: EL ANATSUI ON HIS 'GEM'-ENCRUSTED TAPESTRIES, IN 2008

BY The Editors of ARTnews POSTED 08/28/15 12:25 PM



El Anatsui, *Stressed World*, 2011, found aluminum and copper wire.  
©EL ANATSUI/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

*With five decades of El Anatsui's work on view at Jack Shainman Gallery's The School, in upstate New York, we turn back to June 2008, when Barbara Pollack profiled the Ghanaian-born artist for ARTnews. Anatsui, who won the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement earlier this year at the Venice Biennale, is known for his large-scale, abstract metal sculptures. As Pollack points out in her profile, the joy of Anatsui's work is that it is so ambiguous, and that it can literally be seen in so many different ways—Anatsui's sculptures can be hung on a wall or on shown on the floor. Pollack's full profile of Anatsui follows below.— Alex Greenberger*

**“The New Razzle-Dazzle”**  
**By Barbara Pollack**



*Using bright-colored caps and golden bands from discarded liquor bottles, African sculptor El Anatsui weaves rich 'gem'-encrusted tapestries*

The rich gold- and jewel-toned tapestry undulating on the wall at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is not an African tribal weaving. Nor is it a painting by Gustav Klimt. Composed of strips of metal stitched together with copper wire, the piece most resembles a bolt of kente cloth, native to Ghana, whose weavings symbolically unite history, philosophy, literature, morality, religion, political thought, and esthetics. The tapestry is actually a work by Africa's leading sculptor, El Anatsui, a master at meshing indigenous influences and contemporary materials and ideas.

"My work fits into a variety of categories in most museums," says the artist, who was in New York earlier this year for the installation of *Between Earth and Heaven* (2006) in the Met's Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, devoted to the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. "If they have an African gallery, it fits into it, and if they have a contemporary wing, it fits there also." But Anatsui is particularly happy at the Met, where his work is surrounded by traditional ritual and ceremonial objects. "It's like the past is facing the present, and it shows that art creation didn't ever come to a stop in Africa," he says."

Met curator Alisa LaGamma, who chose the sculpture for the museum, recalls, "I was just dazzled by the beauty of the work. I thought it would be a very lovely and eloquent bridge between the kinds of historical works from Africa already in our collection and a lot of the contemporary innovations that have developed in response to those forms."

Indeed, Anatsui's career parallels a growing appreciation for contemporary African art over the past 20 years, even before artists like Ike Ude and Odili Donald Odita put that continent on the art map.

Born in Anyako, Ghana, in 1944, and today based in Nsukka, Nigeria, the tall, affable bachelor has had his work shown worldwide, most notably last summer at the Venice Biennale. There he hung *Dusuasa I* and *Dusuasa II* (both 2007), 20-by-30-foot tapestries that rippled like jewel-encrusted robes, between the classical columns of the Arsenale, and *Fresh and Fading Memories* (2007) was installed on the exterior of the Palazzo Fortuny on the Grand Canal. All of these shimmering pieces were made from the artist's favorite material: metal seals covering the caps of liquor bottles. As Robert Storr, the Biennale's artistic director, comments in the exhibition's catalogue, "El Anatsui demonstrates that the smallest bits of scrap metal can map fields of colour and texture as lovely as a painting by Georges Seurat."

Beyond their sheer beauty, the pieces reflect the artist's personal history as well as the legacy of slavery and colonialism. Anatsui was 13 years old when Ghana achieved independence in 1957. As a child, he navigated both traditional and colonial worlds. While he watched his father and brothers weave kente cloth as part of their Ewe heritage, Anatsui was being educated in a British-modeled system that paid scant attention to indigenous traditions.



El Anatsui, *Ascension*, 2014, found aluminum and copper wire.  
©EL ANATSUI/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

He studied at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, Ghana, earning a B.A. in art and a postgraduate in art education. As a student, he was exposed primarily to European painting, but he spent much of his free time at the National Cultural Centre in Kumasi, which offered workshops in traditional crafts. Between 1969 and 1975, he lectured at a teacher-training college in Winneba, where he was fascinated by the wood carvings he saw in the local markets. The techniques used to make the carvings, including burning motifs into wood with a hot knife, turned up in his earliest works.

In 1975 Anatsui was appointed to teach in the department of fine and applied arts at the University of Nigeria Nsukka, where he continues today as a professor of sculpture. The department was headed by Uche Okeke, an influential artist who argued against formal British training in favor of a “natural synthesis” of indigenous elements with topical issues. Anatsui adopted the phrase *sankofa*, a Ghanaian term meaning “go back and pick,” to describe this process of reclaiming one’s roots in the act of making art. For the next decade he worked primarily in ceramics, making pieces inspired by objects he saw in Nigeria’s museums. Then, in 1980, he was awarded a residency at the Cummington Community of Arts in Massachusetts, and he turned back to wood, this time using a chain saw and hot irons to fashion wall hangings made from multiple panels.

“The idea of trying a new medium brings fresh challenges,” Anatsui says. “I feel that each medium has its own language and changes the way that you want to express things.” So, too, do new places. “Art doesn’t grow in a vacuum,” he adds. “When you leave your normal domicile and travel, a lot of times your feeling for your original home grows stronger; the distance can make you reach new levels of empathy or feeling for it, so having a distance from any usual terrain provided an influx of ideas.”



Perhaps his most famous work from the late 1980s and early '90s addresses the erosion of cultural values. Created for the international artists' workshop at Arte Amazonas in Brazil, and later exhibited at the Modern Art Museum in Rio de Janeiro, *Erosion* (1992) is a wood column nearly ten feet tall, standing in a circle of wood shards. It is intricately carved, burned, and gouged, as if self-destructing.

Beyond its social connotations, *Erosion* can also be viewed either as a modern rendition of a traditional totemic object or as a reinterpretation of Minimalist sculpture.

By the time Anatsui created *Erosion*, he was already attracting attention outside of Nigeria, participating in the Studio Museum in Harlem's first show of contemporary african art in 1990, and then in the first presentation of African art at the Venice Biennale the following summer. As Grace Stanislaus, curator of both exhibitions, who met Anatsui in Nigeria in 1988, explains, "He had a cosmopolitanism and cleverness and an understanding of art and art history that was very compelling."



El Anatsui, *Open(ing) Market*, 2004, metal (tin), paper, paint, and wood (iroko and plywood).  
©EL ANATSUI/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

His exhibition record reflects both these qualities and the increased receptivity worldwide to art coming from places other than the United States and Europe.

The artist offers this quick summary of his early career development. "First I exhibited in Ghana, at my school, then in Accra in the big city, then I moved to Nigeria, showing at my university before exhibiting in Lagos, which eventually led to exhibiting in group shows outside of Africa." Starting in 1995 he began to have solo shows at October Gallery in London, which continues to represent him, and in 1996, he began showing in New York, at the Contemporary African Gallery and at Skoto Gallery, and in 2005 at David Krut. Since last year he has been represented in New York by Jack Shainman.

As the '90s progressed, Anatsui's sculptures became increasingly complex, involving collections of carved wood posts or panels. Some of these refer to migration and globalization. *Visa Queue* (1992), for example, consists of caved blocks of Nigerian

woods assembled into a seemingly endless line of miniature figures awaiting their fate. In *The Ancestors Converged Again*, faces are carved into the tops of 23 branches and poles cut from a variety of trees, then hung as a group of ragtag figures across a gallery wall. Other works, like his '90s "Ancient Cloth Series," composed of wood slats, evoke textiles. His pieces now sell for between \$100,000 and \$500,000.

It was in 1999, in the bush outside Nsukka, that Anatsui came upon a garbage bag filled with the kind of metal seals found on liquor bottles in Africa: red, green, black, and yellow labels printed on gold- or silver-colored backing. This material, which the artist sometimes crushes into circles resembling bottle caps or cuts into half-inch strips, inspired his recent, much acclaimed sculptures. Found objects, such as tins from evaporated milk, old metal graters, and discarded painting plates, have also turned up in his work, conveying the spirit and survival strategies of Africa, a place where citizens recycle materials out of necessity, not choice.

"I saw the bottle caps as relating to the history of Africa in the sense that when the earliest group of Europeans came to trade, they brought along rum originally from the West Indies that then went to Europe and finally to Africa as three legs of the triangular trip," explains Anatsui. "The drink caps that I use are not made in Europe; they are all made in Nigeria, but they symbolize bringing together the histories of these two continents."

Often the names of Nigerian liquor brands can be spotted in the weave of the artist's constructions—brands with names like Dark Sailor or King Solomon resonate with the history of slavery. (A more recent brand, Ecomog, is named for the West African armed forces established in 1990 to intervene in the Liberian civil war.) Anatsui says he is not making these works simply to condemn colonialism or to comment on recent controversies in African history. He acknowledges with a smile, "I speak English; I don't know if I would have spoken English if that era had not occurred."



El Anatsui, *Fan*, 1995, oyili-oji.  
©EL ANATSUI/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK



Most recently, he is celebrating the opening of “[El Anatsui: Gawu](#)” on view through September 2, at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C., the final stop of the exhibition’s U.S. tour. In the catalogue Anatsui explains that the “ga” in “Gawu” alludes to the use of metal and that “wu” is a term for a cloak; together the words describe the seven works in the exhibition. In the sculpture *Versatility*, the liquor brand names are prominently displayed, but the pattern is reminiscent of the motifs in traditional cloths, such as kente and *adinkra* (which is used for funeral rites). *Crumbling Wall* (2000) transforms the graters used to prepare *gari*, the West African grain made from cassava flour, into a sagging architectural structure composed of rusted metal. As with all of Anatsui’s works, including his early wood wall reliefs, location affects how the pieces are hung, says Christine Mullen Kreamer, curator at the National Museum of African Art. “Each work comes with incredibly detailed instructions.” Tall works may hang in a high-ceilinged room or be spread out on the floor in a gallery of lesser height.

“I still insist that they not be mounted flat,” he says. “I want to show the softness, because this transgresses the stereotype of metal as a rigid medium.” On the other hand, after a decade of having critics identify his work with kente cloth, Anatsui resists the analogy as being too formulaic. “The bottle caps tend to replicate the colors of kente cloth,” he says, “but when I work, I think more about sculpture than those issues.”

Nevertheless, color is a key factor in his works, as in *Bleeding Takari II* (2007), a 20-foot-wide wall relief shown last winter at Shainman. With its large splotches of red metal strips pooling into the floor, the work looks as if it is spilling blood.

Anatsui is satisfied that his current medium perfectly conveys his ideas. Referring to the *Dusuasa* works he made for Venice, which are now owned by the [Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art](#) in Kansas City, he explains: “*Sasa* means ‘difference,’ or something made of different portions. The word literally comes from textiles, like when you have a sheet that’s made from patchwork. But for me, it also celebrates the beauty of people coming together as one.” Pointing out that maps of Europe and Africa both look like patchwork quilts, he concludes, “We have more in common than we think.”



## Last-Minute Art Getaways: El Anatsui at Jack Shainman's The School

Cait Munro, Friday, July 3, 2015



El Anatsui, *Stressed World*. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

It's hard to believe that [Jack Shainman Gallery](#)'s charming exhibition space inside a refurbished schoolhouse in Kinderhook, New York, is just one year old. This summer, The School celebrated its birthday by installing several of El Anatsui's majestic tapestries and sculptures, which will remain on view until September.

Draped with lush works by the Ghanaian artist, who is also a recent recipient of the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement award at the Venice Biennale, the 30,000-square-foot space truly shines.

Anatsui is certainly best known for his shimmering, textural tapestries, which he creates using bottle caps, discarded aluminum bands, and wire. These works occupy an aesthetic gray area between sculpture and painting, and are always pinned slightly differently in each installation, providing an experience that can't be replicated.



But the show at The School also puts a spotlight on some of the lesser-known aspects of Anatsui's career, including his floor sculptures, photography, and use of mediums like wood, clay, and paper. Drawing on works from the 1970s to 2014, it encompassing five decades of the artist's life within 40 pieces. Despite their variations in form, almost all of them deal in some way with concerns about the environment and the cycle of consumption and waste. Many also provide a portal into contemporary African life.



El Anatsui, *Open(ing) Market*. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

In November 2014, Anatsui held two concurrent solo shows at Jack Shainman Gallery and [Mnuchin Gallery](#) and in 2013, [a solo exhibition](#) at the Brooklyn Museum. During [a video interview](#), Anatsui told artnet News that the wall hangings that have made him so famous were not initially conceived to be wall hangings at all. "The first one I made was right in the middle of the studio, hung from the ceiling," he said. "What I'm trying to do now is to create them in such a way that you don't need to put them on the wall. [I want to] make them thick and heavy so that they can stand on their own."

# Rural Intelligence

## The School: One Year And Art Five Decades In The Making

By Robert Ayers

It has been almost exactly a year since Jack Shainman changed the contemporary art landscape in this part of the world by opening **The School** in Kinderhook, NY. On Sunday, May 17, he is throwing a big party to celebrate that anniversary and to mark the opening of this summer's School exhibition, a major retrospective of the Ghanaian artist **El Anatsui**. It promises to be quite a day: the remarkable Imani Uzuri — whose voice, the *Village Voice* suggested,

“would sound equally at home on an opera stage or a disco 12-inch” — will be performing, local food trucks will be on site, and the organizers have already received more than 500 RSVPs.



*El Anatsui, “Stressed World” (as installed at The School, Kinderhook, NY).*

El Anatsui is as big an art name as there is out there. He has just been awarded the Venice Biennale's highest honor, the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement. His work was the subject of a big show at The Clark in 2011, but if you have not seen it before, then you are in for a remarkable experience. Though Anatsui's principal material is garbage, what he creates from it is little less than magical: he salvages huge numbers of crumpled metal bottle tops from liquor bottles and threads them together with copper wire into huge sculptures. Stand close, and you see their tiny glistening components, stand back a few paces and you are struck by their size and weight. In fact they are unlike anything else you've ever seen, though they might suggest strange metallic animal hides or perhaps flags or tents.



*El Anatsui: Five Decades at The School, Kinderhook, NY (installation shot).*

Anatsui is happy with the ambiguity. He actually allows their final shape to be decided by the people installing them. He does not see himself as the maker of monoliths, in other words, but of things that have a life. “I don't want to be a dictator. I want to be somebody who suggests things,” he says.

Jack Shainman shows a wide range of artists at The School (and at his **two prestigious New York galleries**) and says simply that he aims to “to exhibit, represent and champion artists from around the world, in particular artists from



Africa, East Asia, and North America.” Anatsui is typical of these artists to the extent that his work is not only visually arresting but resonant with cultural meaning as well. Every one of those tiny pieces of metal that he uses means another bottle of hard liquor consumed, either in celebration or relaxation or perhaps something very different. Ask yourself what it means that an artist can build a whole career’s worth of work out of them and you begin to appreciate the seriousness of Anatsui’s work.

We are fortunate indeed to have *El Anatsui: Five Decades* — and The School itself — on our doorstep, and it has come about because of local connections. Jack Shainman grew up in Williamstown, MA, and he harbors an abiding affection for our area. He has a home in Stuyvesant, NY where he can escape the pressures of the international art world, and it was while he was driving there in the summer of 2013 that he realized that Kinderhook’s former public school had fallen into disrepair and was for sale.

What he did with the building deserves the lavish praise it has received. (The correspondent for *Whitewall* magazine described herself as “blown away.”) Working with the Spanish architect **Antonio Jiménez Torrecillas**, Shainman converted the classrooms, offices, gymnasium and cafeteria into a showing place for contemporary art that rivals not only other galleries, but any public museum in the country.

And now you have the perfect opportunity to see it. Last year’s opening attracted something like a thousand visitors. This time around you are invited and the gallery will be providing transportation from New York City to Kinderhook. For more information on transportation, check the **website**. All the gallery asks is that you let them know you’re coming.



**“He has invited the world to come see Kinderhook.”**

A new showplace for contemporary art such as The School would be heralded anywhere, but the fact that it’s in the Village of Kinderhook seems to some in the area to be an unexpected gift from the art gods.

“The School has put Kinderhook on the map in a way that was previously unimaginable,” says Renee Shur, the Village’s director of economic development. “Jack Shainman has an audience

that’s world wide, and every time he promotes his gallery he’s also promoting the Village of Kinderhook. We want people to come here, see his artists’ work and what Kinderhook and the Hudson Valley have to offer.”

Could anything be better? Only this: Shur reports that there’s been a mutual embrace between Shainman and the local community.

“He’s very concerned about the impact of what he’s doing and the concerns of the community. Last year (at the opening) he made a special effort to invite the locals to come and party. People from New York City were mingling with our community and it really worked.”

And while Shainman turned a school into a spectacular gallery, he was sensitive to the school’s place in the town’s history.

“A lot of people who went to school in that building still live here, and remember walking through the front door into the beautiful foyer, which is still as it was,” says Shur. “There have been dramatic changes but Shainman maintained respect for the history of the school. It’s an incredible example of adaptive reuse.”

### **The School — First Anniversary Celebration**

Sunday, May 17, 1-4 p.m.

25 Broad Street, Kinderhook, NY

(212) 645-1701

The event is free and open to the public. Please RSVP to: [RSVP@jackshainman.com](mailto:RSVP@jackshainman.com)



# HYPERALLERGIC

## El Anatsui Goes to School

by **Melissa Stern** on May 21, 2015



*El Anatsui's "Womb of Time" (2014) at The School (all images ©El Anatsui, and courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, unless otherwise noted)*

KINDERHOOK, NY — [The School](#), Jack Shainman's splendid gallery in Kinderhook, NY, is about to blow its own roof off. The power of the El Anatsui retrospective there is palpable and deeply moving. The exhibition shows works reaching back from the 1970s to 2014. Included are works in clay, photography, drawings wood, and of course the large, changable sculptures made from discarded aluminum bands and bottle caps that have propelled Anatsui into the art world stratosphere. The inclusion of pieces made of clay and the works on paper are particularly revealing as they evidence the continuum of Anatsui's aesthetic interests.

But first a word about the building: In this exhibition, the installation in the former Martin Van Buren High School built in 1929 is an integral part of the experience. The gallery is a wonderful architectural marriage of stunning white spaces, lit by banks of surprisingly sympathetic fluorescent lights, and rooms that echo with the ghost of the building's past. The architecture of the building is significant both in how the curatorial installation decisions that were made and to the experience of the artwork. Anatsui's works arrive with very little installation instructions, so it is up to the discretion of the curator, who will decide how to bend and shape the pieces. They are forever mutable, and that is part of their power. Anatsui's work is never static, always open



Installation view of El Anatsui's "Peak Project" (1999) at The School ([click to enlarge](#))

and willing to change. At The School, the building and Jack Shainman have become collaborators, if you will, in our perception of the works.

An old girls bathroom on the second floor has been left, more or less in a state of elegant decay. Bits and pieces of pink paint remain on rough cement and plaster walls. Shades of grey, white, pink, and buff dominate the room. A solitary window allows natural light to flood the space. And hanging on one entire wall is a new El Anatsui piece made of old newspaper printing plates. Entitled "Metas I" (2014), the work has a new and subtle color palette. The work is mostly grey, in contrast to the very brightly colored works for which Anatsui is well known. The metal has been cut into small squares and threaded together with copper wire, the soft grey of the printing plates flecked with hits of color and bits of half recognizable words. The piece moves dimensionally, bent so that it both hugs and leaves the wall, existing as both a painting and sculpture. Deliberate open spaces in the hanging allow the pink, plaster, and cement wall to show through, becoming a part of the piece. The ways in which the wall colors and shapes relate to the artwork is both calculated and brilliant serendipity. The artwork and the wall dance together in genuine poetry.

There are several other rooms in the gallery where this architecture of the past is a perfect complement to Anatsui's work. The boys bathroom (the walls were once blue, of course) houses a single tall figure fabricated out of found metal and wood. Entitled "Lady In Frenzy" (1999), this striding figure has been caught as if by the flash of a camera as she runs from the room.



Detail of El Anatsui's "Metas I" (2014) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)





El Anatsui's "Lady in Frenzy" (1999) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic) ([click to enlarge](#))

There is no disconnect here between the pieces installed in these un-renovated rooms and those installed in the pristine cool white spaces of the rest of the building. It all works. In the contemporary spaces, the ceramic and carved wood pieces create a different type of contrast with their surroundings.

Anatsui's newest pieces in the exhibition show him at a point of transcendence in his use of both the materials and ideas that have been a hallmark of his mature work. The aluminum and zinc newspaper printing plates have a dulled sheen to them. The metal has been fashioned into bent squares about two inches in size. This bent squares and their very subtle silver-grey allow light to define the sculptural forms of the *Meta* pieces more

than in past work. They feel somewhat related to minimalist painting, the square patterning of the metal feels more regularly rhythmic than some of the earlier works. They are as much painting as sculpture. All of the pieces in the *Metas* series exhibit this highly refined and delicate sense of form and light. At the same time the very nature of their fabrication by hand and the eccentricity of the materials (found metal and copper wire) ties these pieces both to Anatsui's entire body of work, but also to the traditions of materiality and handwork that tie him to his artistic roots in Africa.



Detail of "Open(ing) Market" (2004), a 1,755 piece installation. (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

In the new pieces in which Anatsui is using color and shiny metal, similar to his past works, the visual narrative feels fresh and new. “Ascension” (2014) and “Dissolving Dreams” (2014) hanging in the same room use gold and silver as their primary colors. There is a pleasingly sharp difference between the brilliance of the silver and the duller sheen of the gold. Using contrasting toned aluminum bands, Anatsui snakes the color through, creating deliberate, abstracted narratives.

As always with Anatsui’s work, these pieces undulate on the wall, creating shadows, depth, and dimensionality that are always arresting. In addition to their visual beauty there is a pulse, a movement to Anatsui’s work. They feel very alive. The spaces between the art and the wall, the spaces between the art and the viewer, the floor, the ceiling are as important as the art itself. His willingness and desire to allow the curators and the spaces to affect change to his artwork makes for passionate spatial relationships. The very bottom of “Stressed World” (2011) ever so gently brushes the floor, just a whisper of contact — it’s a casually graceful gesture that acknowledges the possibility of blurring the boundaries between art and the space it inhabits.



*El Anatsui's "Ascension" (2014), left, and "Dissolving Dreams" (2014), both found aluminum and copper wire. (photo courtesy Jack Shaiman Gallery)*

One of the strengths of this show is that includes so many early and rarely seen pieces. Carved figurative works from the 1980s, like “Devotees”(1987)and “Group Photo”(1987) are reminders of where El Anatsui was artistically 30 years ago and adds depth to our understanding of the evolution of his work. These two carved wood pieces each consist of a group of abbreviated figures — each is an abstracted shape that reads as a torso and a second one that reads as a head.

The ten individual figures that make up the piece “Devotees” (1987) are bunched tightly together, their bulbous heads morphing into long thick necks that rest on top of “shoulders.” Elegantly shaped wooden forms with very little detail, these are figures distilled to their visual essence. Facing in different directions, they all share eyes that have a vacant stare and slack mouths.



Anatsui's comment, perhaps, on those who are unquestioning followers of a religion or political movement.



El Anatsui's "Stressed World" (2011), Photo Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

"Group Photo" (1987) is a much larger group of figures, thirty-five in total. They are more varied and detailed in surface carving, and each is individualized, with facial expressions and carving on the torsos that identify them as the opposite of the "devotees." Each is completely individual, and massed altogether they form a family or clan. The point is that although they are many, they never lose their identity in the group. In this exhibition the gallery has chosen, with the artist's permission, to group them in niches that rise high up onto a stark white wall in the white-box section of the building.



A view of El Anatsui's "Chambers of Memory" (1977) at The School (photo by the author for Hyperallergic) ([click to enlarge](#))

Both "Devotees" and "Group Photo" establish Anatsui's early interest in the power of repetition and its relationship to the whole. The impressive continuum of Anatsui's development is on full display, from a rhythmic cadence of wooden figures in the 1980s, to the increasingly more ambitious projects made of multi-colored found metal in the 2000s, to the gorgeous tableau of silver-grey printing plates of his recent work. It is the marriage of rhythm, repetition, and constant evolution that informs not only individual pieces, but the body of Anatsui's work as a whole.

Locals refer to "The School," Jack Shainman's 30,000 square foot gallery space as "The Museum." After visiting the El Anatsui retrospective, I can fully understand why. The artworks and the space that

seems to cradle and nurture them combine to delight the eye and challenge us in a way most unusual for a more conventional gallery space.

[El Anatsui: Five Decades](#) at the Jack Shainman's The School (25 Broad Street, Kinderhook, NY) continues until September 26.



*El Anatsui, "Devotees" (1987) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)*



*Detail of El Anatsui, "Group Photo" (1987) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic) ([click to enlarge](#))*



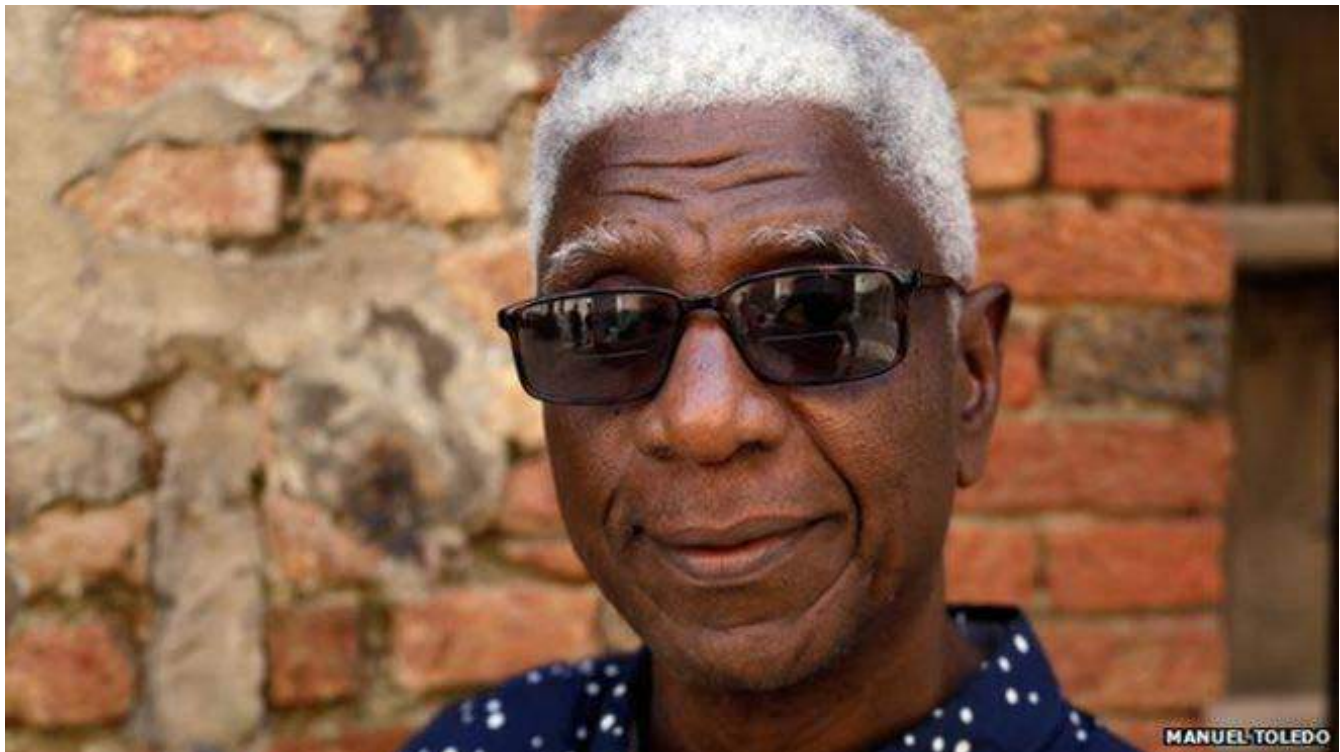
*"Commercial Avenue" (2014) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)*



## Venice Biennale honours Africa's 'bottle-top artist' El Anatsui

By Manuel Toledo  
BBC Africa, Venice

9 May 2015 [Africa](#)



El Anatsui has been described as "the most significant living African artist"

The Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui, one of Africa's most influential artists, says he is delighted to be receiving the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale.

"It's a good feeling to be recognised but at the same time it puts a lot of responsibility on one to make sure that you live up to the award's expectations," he told BBC Africa.

"A Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement would tend to give the impression that one is at the end of the road," he added, laughing.

"It means that there's a feeling that my practice is maybe at an end, which I don't think so."

The 70 year old, who works in Nigeria and Ghana, is getting the award at a ceremony on Saturday on the recommendation of the curator of this year's exhibition, Okwui Enwezor.



One of his largest wall-hangings was displayed at London's Royal Academy

Mr Enwezor is the first African curator of the biennale in its 120-year history.

"El Anatsui is perhaps the most significant living African artist working on the continent today," the Nigerian wrote.

"The award for which I am recommending him is an important honour to an artist who has contributed immensely to the recognition of contemporary African artists in the global arena."

### 'No role models'

El Anatsui was born in Anyako, Ghana, and trained at the College of Art, University of Science and Technology, in the city of Kumasi.

"At the time I went to art school, any parent would think that his child is crazy if he chose of all disciplines, of all professions, to do art because there wasn't anything like a role model or a famous artist in the area that I grew up in."

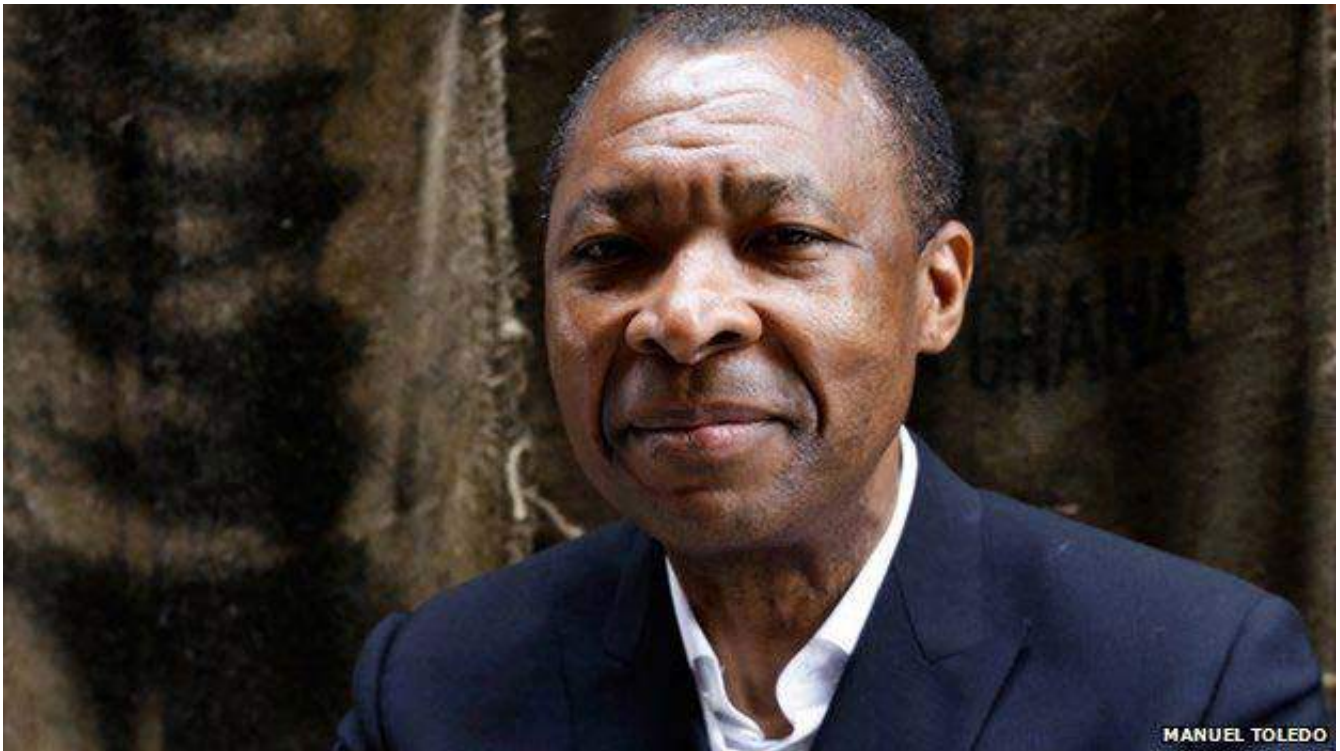
He said that he decided to become a sculptor because he was already familiar with painting from his secondary school days and wanted to try something new.



"I haven't regretted making that decision because I think that in sculpture you can subsume all the other areas of art, like painting, because sculpture can also engage with colour."

As happened with many other African artists of his generation, the artistic training that he received was primarily based on Western art schools.

"Through my art history course we didn't do anything about African art. In sculpture there was a time that they brought somebody who was African, a practising sculptor... that was the first time there was someone who was part of our culture," the artist pointed out.



Venice Biennale curator Okwui Enwezor says El Anatsui has raised the profile of African art

As a result, he decided to think more about his culture and started using local materials to create his works.

Many of his early pieces included wooden trays used by market women.

Through them, he reflected on the use of traditional signs and symbols from the area where he was living.

**'Not recycled'**

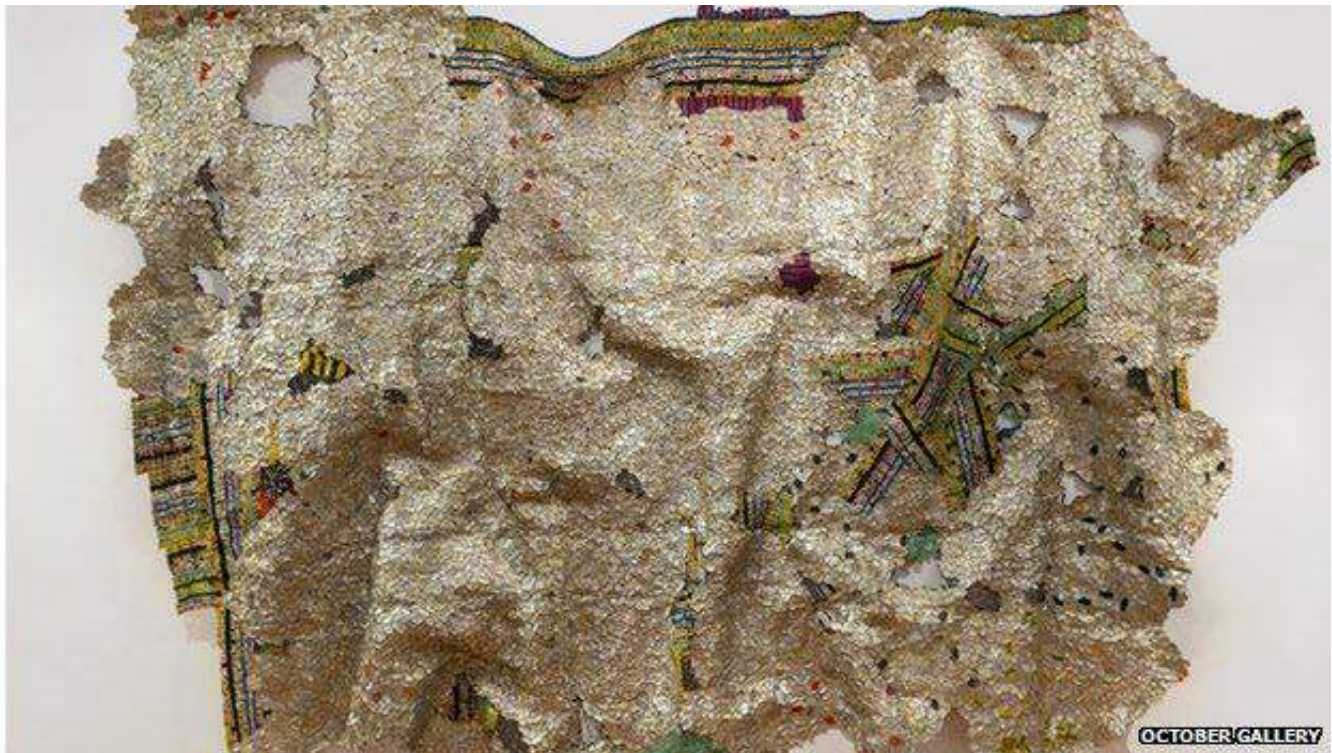
Later on he started using clay to make pots, according to him, "the most classical shape that the medium clay can make".

"After clay I came back to wood again, this time exploring the symbolism of power."



He eventually decided to start experimenting with metal objects, such as cassava graters.

"When they were new they were gleaming, just like youth, and now they're old and they're disused and left to rot away, and I decided that the best thing was to give them a new lease of life and a new meaning."



El Anatsui used aluminium and copper wire for his piece Timespace



The rich texture shimmers and seems alive



He believes that when things have been used "they have acquired a lot of history and meaning, and a lot of maybe spiritual energy, as well".

Several of his best known recent works - which have been displayed in galleries and museums across the world - are huge tapestry-like installations made with bottle tops and deal with themes such as power, migration and the environment.

But El Anatsui points out that his work is not about recycling.

"In fact, I object to people using the word recycle in connection with the way I use my materials because my materials are not recycled, they are given a new life, they are transformed."

"The bottle caps are no longer going back as bottle caps; they are part of an art work and, being part of an art work they have a higher status... a higher dimension."

## **El Anatsui's works**

### **Venice Biennale**

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# With Anatsui's Golden Lion Award, Africa Rises

By Tajudeen Sowole on May 3, 2015



*El Anatsui*

Again, Africa confirms its growing status on the global space of visual arts as El Anatsui has been announced as Winner of the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the 56th Venice Biennale.

Two years ago, first timer, Angola, picked the Golden Lion prize award for the best national pavilion courtesy of the work titled 'Luanda, Encyclopedic City', a photography composite by Edson Chagas.

Recall that the Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy-led five member jury, which included Ali Subotnick, Bisi Silva, Jessica Morgan and Francesco Manacorda, also awarded a Berlin, Germany-based British artist, Tino Sehgal Golden Lion as

the best artist of the 55th Venice in 2013.

For Anatsui, it's an individual recognition for lifetime effort. The awards ceremony, according to a press statement from the organisers, will be held on Saturday May 9, 2015 at Ca' Giustinian, the historic headquarters of la Biennale di Venezia.

Based on recommendation from of the Curator of the 56th International Art Exhibition Okwui Enwezor, the Board of Directors of la Biennale chaired by Paolo Baratta, agreed on the award.

Members of the 56th Venice Biennale jury include Naomi Beckwith (US), Sabine Breitwieser (Austria), Mario Codognato (Italy), Ranjit Hoskote (India) and Yongwoo Lee (South Korea).

The recommendation states: "Born in 1944 in Anyako, Ghana, and based at the university town Nsukka in Nigeria since 1975, El Anatsui is perhaps the most significant living African artist working on the continent today.



The award for which I am recommending him is an important honor to an artist who has contributed immensely to the recognition of contemporary African artists in the global arena.

It is also a worthy recognition of the originality of Anatsui's artistic vision, his long-term commitment to formal innovation, and his assertion through his work of the place of Africa's artistic and cultural traditions in international contemporary art.

The Golden Lion Award acknowledges not just his recent successes internationally, but also his artistic influence amongst two generations of artists working in West Africa.

It is also an acknowledgment of the sustained, crucial work he has done as an artist, mentor and teacher for the past forty-five years. "A graduate of the sculpture program of the acclaimed Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Anatsui's career direction was determined not so much by the still neo-colonial 1960s curriculum of the art school as by his identification with the progressive cultural politics championed by Ghanaian and African cultural nationalists of the independence era.

Working with everyday objects on which he imbued philosophical and idiomatic signs, Anatsui's earliest work consisted of round wood reliefs inspired by trays used by Kumasi traders for displaying their wares.

On these trays he carved adinkra motifs and other designs and in the process was attracted to the dynamic relationship between the rich symbolism and graphic power of adinkra signs.

Once aware of this possibility of simultaneous evocation of significant form and idea in adinkra, Anatsui, who in 1975 joined the faculty of the Fine and Applied Arts Department at the University of Nigeria, expanded his field of artistic resources to other West African design and sign systems, and syllabaries, including Igbo Uli, Efik Nsibidi, Bamun and Vai scripts. In time, he became a leading member of the famed Nsukka School presented at the important art exhibition at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in 1997.

Today, Anatsui remains committed to the development of new artistic forms from African sources as well as from materials available in his local environment." Anatsui is picking the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement Award in the year of the Venice Biennale when Africa has more artists showing their works at the global event.

With All the World's Futures, as the theme of the 56th Venice Biennale art exhibition, about 35 black artists from Africa, the U.S and Europe have been announced with nearly half of them based in Africa.

The 2015 Venice Biennale, which opens from May 9 with previews beginning May 6, and runs through November 22 has over 136 artists from 53 countries.

According to a press statement from the organisers, it will feature a space called The Arena, for performance in the Central Pavilion designed by David Adjaye.

"The linchpin of this program will be the epic live reading of all three volumes of Karl Marx's Das Kapital," said Enwezor. "Here, Das Kapital will serve as a kind of Oratorio that will be continuously read live, throughout the exhibition's seven months' duration."

Among several other features is what has been described as a new production of Vincenzo Bellini's Norma (1831), which will be staged at La Fenice Opera House and directed by Kara Walker.

Nigerian artists at the event include Karo Akpokiere, b.1981, lives and works in Lagos/ Berlin; Invisible Borders: Trans-African Photographers, an artists' organisation founded in 2011, based in Lagos, but led by Emeka Okereke, a France-based photographer; Emeka Ogboh b. 1977, lives and works in Lagos/ Berlin.

They are however not exactly representing the country formally. Nigeria has never had a pavilion at the Venice Biennale, a gathering regarded as the 'Olympics of The Arts'. Artists from Africa showing at the event include John Akomfrah, b.1957.

Ghana, lives and works in London; Kay Hassan, b.1956, South Africa, lives and works in Johannesburg; Samson

Kambalu b. 1975 Malawi, Lives And Works In London; Gonçalo Mabunda, b. 1975, Mozambique, lives and works In Maputo; Ibrahim Mahama, b.. 1987 Ghana, lives and works in Tamale; Abu Bakarr Mansaray, b. 1970, Sierra Leone, lives and works in Freetown/The Netherlands; Wangechi Mutu, b. 1972, Kenya, lives and works in New York; Cheikh Ndiaye, b. 1970 Senegal, lives and works in New York, Dakar And Lyon. Others are Joachim Schönfeldt, b. 1958, South Africa, lives and works in Johannesburg; Massinissa Selmani, b. 1980 Algeria, lives and works in Algiers/Tours; Fatou Kandé Sengho, b. 1971 Senegal, lives And works in Dakar; Sammy Baloji, b.. 1978 Democratic Republic Of Congo, lives and works in Lubumbashi/Brussels.

Anatsui. An alumnus of the College of Art, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana, El Anatsui (b. 1944) is one of the most exciting international contemporary artists of our time.

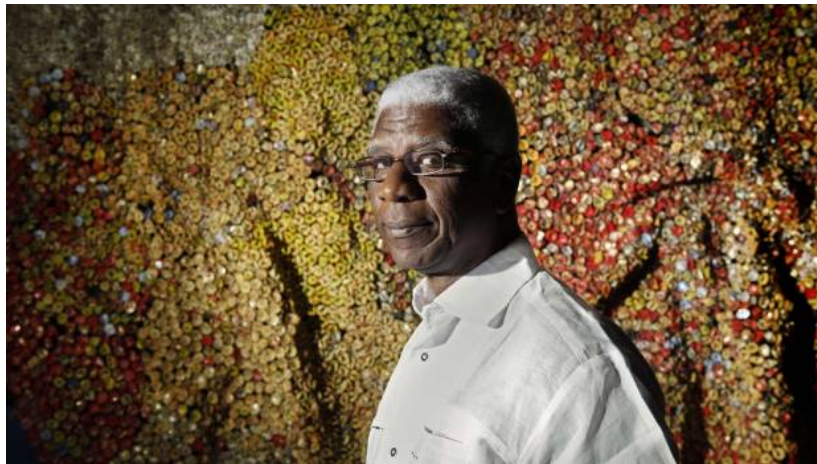
Throughout a distinguished forty-year career as both sculptor and teacher – he was Professor of Sculpture and Departmental Head at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka – El Anatsui has addressed a vast range of social, political and historical concerns, and embraced an equally diverse range of media and processes.

His sculptures have been collected by major international museums, from the British Museum, London to the Centre Pompidou, Paris; the de Young Museum, San Francisco, USA; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Guggenheim, Abu Dhabi; Osaka Foundation of Culture, Osaka; Museum of Modern Art, New York and many other prestigious institutions besides.



## El Anatsui Honored with Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at Venice Biennale

Sarah Cascone, Thursday, April 23, 2015



El Anatsui.

Photo: Moe Doiron, courtesy the *Globe and Mail*.

When the 56th [Venice Biennale](#) opens in just over three week's time, the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement will go to Ghanaian artist [El Anatsui](#), whose shimmering, chainmail-like wall relief sculptures, crafted from old liquor bottle caps pieced together with copper wire, became an international sensation following the 2007 edition of the international art exhibition, curated by Robert Storr.

El Anatsui was chosen by the Biennale's board of directors based on the recommendation of this year's curator, Okwui Enwezor (see [Venice Biennale Curator Okwui Enwezor on "All the World's Futures," Karl Marx, and the Havana Biennial Boycott](#)).

In a statement announcing [El Anatsui](#)'s selection, Paolo Baratta, the board's chair, called him "perhaps the most significant living African artist working on the continent today," noting that "the Golden Lion Award acknowledges not just his recent successes internationally, but also his artistic influence among two generations of artists working in West Africa. It is also an acknowledgment of the sustained, crucial work he has done as an artist, mentor and teacher for the past 45 years."

Susanne Ghez, former longtime executive director and chief curator of the [Renaissance Society](#) at the University of Chicago, will also be recognized with the Special Golden Lion for Services to the Arts. A statement announcing the award praised Ghez as "undeniably one of the most distinguished personalities in international contemporary art." She is currently an adjunct curator at the [Art Institute](#)

[of Chicago](#). (See [Plastics Mogul Stefan Edlis Donates \\$500 Million to Art Institute of Chicago](#).)



El Anatsui, *In the World, But don't know the World?* (2009), private collection.  
Photo: Jonathan Greet, courtesy [October Gallery](#), London.

Additional Golden Lion awards based on the work in the international exhibition, "All the World's Futures," curated by Enwezor (see [The 2015 Venice Biennale List of Artists Is Out—See Our Exclusive](#)), will be selected by a jury comprising [Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago](#) curator Naomi Beckwith, [Museum der Moderne Salzburg](#) director Sabine Breitwieser, [21er Haus Vienna](#) chief curator Mario Codognato, writer and curator Ranjit Hoskote, and former [Gwangju Biennale Foundation](#) director Yongwoo Lee.

El Anatsui is represented by London's October Gallery and New York's [Jack Shainman Gallery](#), which hosted a solo show of his work late this past year (see [El Anatsui's Exciting New Work Is Even More Majestic Than Ever](#)), and is opening another El Anatsui survey at its year-old [the School](#) location in Kinderhook, New York (see [Jack Shainman Sets May Opening for Massive Outpost in Upstate New York](#)), on May 17.

A retrospective on the artist, "[Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui](#)," appeared at the [Brooklyn Museum](#) in 2013. In 2014 El Anatsui became the first honorary academician at London's Royal Academy from Africa (see [El Anatsui, First African Artist Appointed at London's Royal Academy](#)).

*The Golden Lion Award will be presented at a ceremony on May 9, 2015, the opening day of the 56th Venice Biennale.*



## Stunning El Anatsui Exhibit On Display At Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego



Credit: Andrew McAllister, courtesy of the Akron Art Museum.

Above: An artwork called "Gravity and Grace" by African artist El Anatsui. It's made from discarded liquor bottle caps.

Monday, March 9, 2015

By [Angela Carone](#)

Artist El Anatsui likes to make art with items that have been thrown away.

It's not recycling that interests him. It's the idea that an item was touched by another human being. "Because then it comes with not only energy, but history and it has a story," explained the 71-year-old African artist who splits his time between homes in Ghana and Nigeria.

"And I think the story has a way of continuing into the work."

He believes there is a human residue left on every day items. Offered as further proof, he cites the work of spiritual healers in Africa.



Andrew McAllister, courtesy of the Akron Art Museum.

A detailed look at a work called "Mask of Humankind." These are the discarded liquor bottle caps El Anatsui uses in some of his work.

"Say somebody wants to have the love of another person. The healer you are consulting might ask you to bring something that a fellow has used and with that he'll be able to make a connection," Anatsui said. "So things that humans have used have a spiritual energy in them."

In his most famous pieces, many of which are on view at the [Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego's](#) downtown location, Anatsui uses discarded screw-top caps from liquor bottles – everything from whiskey, gin and rum. He flattens and stretches the caps. Sometimes he uses the ring left on the bottle after the cap is twisted off. He wire stitches thousands of the mutated caps together into massive wall tapestries.

Some pieces are as big as a movie screen in a large theater. And they take a long time to make. I asked him how long it takes him, and he reminds me that he needs 30 assistants to help him.

"So if you're working with 30 people, it takes two weeks to make a work. That means that one person making it is 30 times two weeks, which means it takes 60 weeks for one person to make one," Anatsui said.



Joe Levack, courtesy of the Akron Art Museum.

A work from 2010 called "Wall," by artist El Anatsui, whose work is on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego's downtown location. This installation is from the Akron Art Museum.

The bottle caps are different colors: gold, silver, reds and blues. Many have logos and crests with names like Liquor Headmaster or Duke Beverages. The caps also reference the historic relationship between Europe and Africa, specifically the introduction of liquor to the continent.

"European traders brought items to Africa to trade with and this was one of the earliest items that was brought," Anatsui said.

The internationally acclaimed artist was born in a small fishing village in Ghana, the youngest of his father's 32 children. His mother died when he was young, so he moved in to a mission house in another town with his uncle, who was a Presbyterian minister.

It wasn't until later that he was exposed to many of the indigenous traditions in his country, like weaving Kente cloth. He would see this kind of weaving when he visited his hometown.



Andrew McAllister, courtesy of the Akron Art Museum.

A hanging wall sculpture by African artist El Anatsui. It's called "Black Block" and is currently on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego's downtown location.

"In my hometown, almost everybody wove, because the place was a peninsula. And the main occupation was fishing, but when the lagoons would dry up, they'd switch to weaving," Anatsui said.

Anatsui's father and many of his brothers wove. But he says he was never interested in it. His wall sculptures resemble glittering metal fabric. But he's more interested in abstraction and ideas, than he is in the craft of weaving textiles.

"I have unconsciously come to textiles not as a technical process but as something which has meaning," Anatsui said.

The wall pieces can be manipulated to curve and fold. Most don't hang straight. Unlike most artists, El Anatsui lets the staff at each museum install the pieces in whatever way they want. He doesn't provide the staff with instructions on how the works should look. That makes them change over time, he explained. They are not fixed works.

"Like David or Statue of Liberty, which is there for many centuries holding the torch," Anatsui said. "It's something I've rebelled against. I want art to reflect the vicissitudes and changes that life confronts us with every day.

Life is not a fixed thing and I want my artworks to be things you can change."

"Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui" will be on view through the end of June at [the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego's downtown location](#).

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ANGELA CARONE, Cultural Enterprise Reporter | [Contact angela-carone](#) | [Follow @acecarone on Twitter](#)

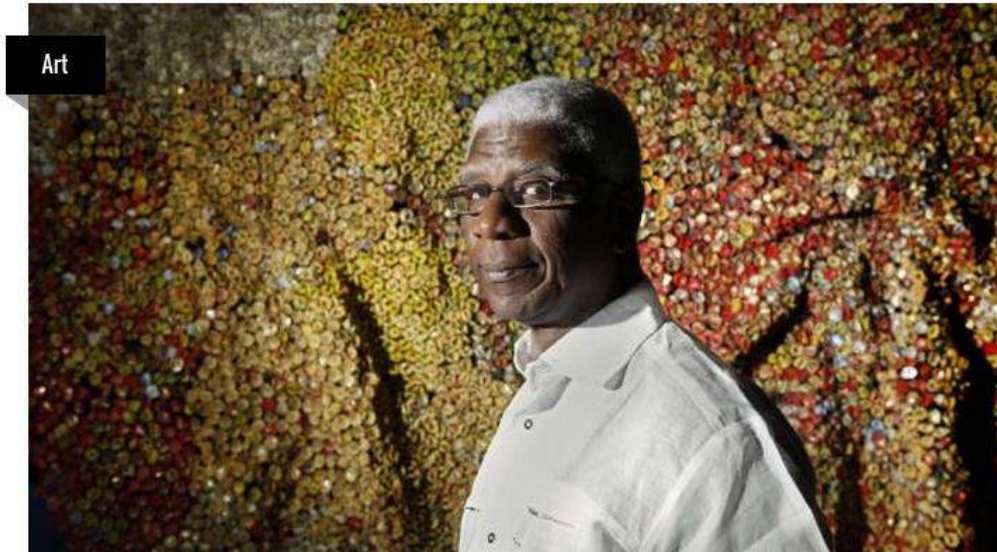
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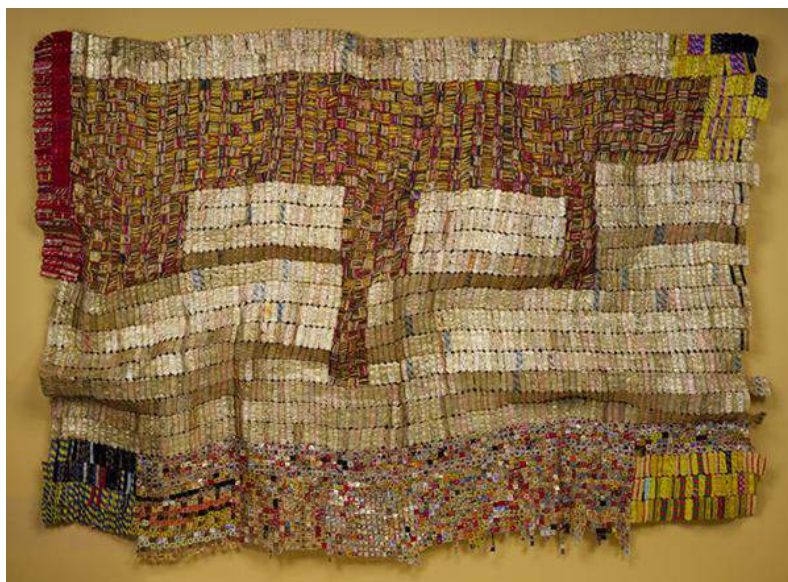




## Art World Super Star: El Anatsui

By Sehba Mohammad on October 29, 2014

El Anatsui grew up in a small corner of Ghana, the son of a fisherman. Now he's an art world super star with solo presentations at the Venice Biennale, the oldest and most prestigious art biennial, and his work hangs in major collections around the world including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the British Museum in London. Anatsui is one of the most well-established contemporary African artist.



El Anatsui's *Between Earth and Heaven*, 2006 part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection.

Anatsui infuses his cultural background into his artistic practices, in particular his childhood had a profound effect on his work. His father was a weaver of Kente cloth, made by combining strips of silk

and cotton fabric together. Anatsui uses a similar technique with a contemporary twist for his most iconic pieces. He uses bottle caps and foil wrappers from discarded liquor bottles, flattens them, and weaves them together with wire, creating massive shimmering tapestries, some up to 33-foot-long, in reds, yellows, silvers, and golds. His works create an illusion, the rich colors and metallic sheen that make them look sumptuous and luxurious even though they are created out of discarded metals.



*Earth's Skin*, 2007 by El Anatsui

He discovered the bottles caps and foil by accident one day in 1998 when he was outside a distillery in Nsukka, a small city in Nigeria where he was teaching sculpture at the University of Nigeria. He liked the material not only because there was an abundance of it but because it had a layer of cultural symbolism. The caps and metal come from Nigerian brands of alcohol, namely Chairman, Dark Sailor, King Solomon, Makossa, and 007. Including them references the slave trade and the history of alcohol, introduced to Nigeria by Europeans.



A detail of El Anatsui's crushed bottle caps

Not all of Anatsui's pieces are made of metal, his earlier works are made of wood, which he shaped using power tools and chainsaws. He also made ceramic objects, pieced together from shattered traditional pots.



# NEW YORK OBSERVER

OPENINGS

## One Man's Trash: El Anatsui Remixes Refuse at Jack Shainman and Mnuchin

By Emily Nathan | 10/27/14 2:09pm



El Anatsui, *Stained Story*, 2014. (Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery)

El Anatsui, contemporary art's master of recycled scrap metal, never wears gloves. A habit of bare hands can be worrisome for some artists, but for Mr. Anatsui, it's downright dangerous: his works may resemble glittering tapestries, but really they're all barbs and sharp edges, a rough network of flattened and hammered

metal parts, hinged with copper wires into massive sheets of rippling armor.

“You develop a kind of relationship with the materials that you know how to touch them and they won’t cut you,” Anatsui told us last week, fondling a net of twisted metal rings installed at **Jack Shainman Gallery for his current exhibition, “Trains of Thought.”** The artist is perhaps best known here for his Brooklyn Museum retrospective of 2013.

“You need to feel what you are doing—if you put on gloves you can’t feel,” he went on. “My assistants and me, we work with bare hands.”

Born in Ghana in 1944, the artist moved to Nigeria after graduating from the University of Science and Technology and quickly surged to the forefront of the Nsukka group, which is known for integrating the traditional practice of uli design into contemporary art. Anatsui’s signature compositions embody his ongoing exploration of non-fixed form, which he began in the mid 1990s with recycled wood panels arranged in modifiable sequences.

“Their flexibility is one of the concepts that I have worked with—the idea of flexibility and freedom, to first of all relate to each other in various ways, but also to shape themselves in ways that are not fixed,” the artist said.

So, too, with his abstract metal works. They arrive at a gallery folded and piled in a small box. Where and how they should be displayed—whether hung flat on the wall, bent, folded, tilted, or left free-standing on the floor—is not specified, left instead to the discretion of art handlers.

“The first piece I did was actually hanging in the middle of the studio like a curtain,” Anatsui recalled. “But I think that galleries tend not to prioritize the space that you can move around in. They all deal in walls, so I’ve noticed that works I originally meant to be things that you move around end up hung on the wall all the time.”

In the late 1990s, Anatsui moved to his scrap metals works, inspired by the different types of metallic trash that litters the Nigerian landscape. He was especially attracted to aluminum liquor bottle caps, which he took to be tokens of the brutal history of cross-cultural exchange.

“I asked myself, how did bottle caps come along, because they’re not a thing indigenous to West Africa,” the artist explained. “So it didn’t take long to find out that, OK, these things were brought in by Europe for trade by barter, and as time went on they exchanged them for so many things, including humans. Slaves were bought with drink and brought here, and they would produce sugar cane used in more drinks to go to Europe and ship some back to Africa, to exchange for more. No



**El Anatsui, *Another Place*, 2014. (Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery)**



matter how you look at it, these caps are a strong link factor between continents and peoples.”

Site-specificity has not traditionally been part of Anatsui’s project—until now. **Opening October 28 at Mnuchin Gallery on the Upper East Side**, a second exhibition organized by Sukanya Rajaratnam debuts a brand-new series the artist made for the gallery’s historic, three-story townhouse.



**Installation view of “El Anatsui” at Mnuchin Gallery.  
(Courtesy of the artist and Mnuchin Gallery)**

The series, “Metas,” marks a departure from the color-saturated bottle cap works he has been producing in recent years. Instead, they are primarily monochromatic, mostly featuring chalky expanses of white, silver, gold and gray, turning in the light like the inside of an abalone shell.

Meta II courses with serpentine waves that evoke a Futurist deconstruction of human form and upstairs, the sculptural *Womb of Time* is hung from the ceiling and hovers just above the floor, like a seething nest shot through with holes. There’s no bottle caps to hint at the dark history of transatlantic trade winds, but the evocation of his home continent is there.

“I think the process too is symbolic—the process of linking the parts together, and linking them in a way which is not fixed, in a way that the relationship can change,” Anatsui reflected. “Like you can have a big piece, and when you fold it, things that have fallen apart can come together and fall apart again.”

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**FILED UNDER: AFRICAN ART, EL ANATSUI, JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, MNUCHIN GALLERY, NIGERIA, UPPER EAST SIDE GALLERIES, WEST AFRICA**

# HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

(<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/arts>)

The Huffington Post | By [Mallika Rao \(/mallika-rao/\)](#) ([/users/login/](#))

Posted: 11/21/2014 10:19 am EST | Updated: 11/21/2014 12:59 pm EST

In 1990, a man named El Anatsui was among the first batch of sub-Saharan Africans ever to present at the Venice Biennale, the grand ball of the art world. By 2007, the Ghanaian artist was the beau of the very same ball, having transformed the end of the Biennale's main hall, the Arsenale, into a corridor of disorienting light, beamed off the sort of ingenious piece that would become his calling card: a suspended sheet woven of flattened liquor bottle caps.



Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery

*Anatsui's new work looks familiar, but tackles fresh concerns.*

The New York Times declared him a "global star (<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/10/arts/design/a-million-pieces-of-home-el-anatsui-at-brooklyn-museum.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>)," one of a few African artists on which every critic in the Western world felt compelled to make some kind of judgment. In Anatsui's case, the reviews tended to be as glittery as the work -- witness the [thelitz](#) (<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/01/arts/design/gravity-and-grace-by-el-anatsui-at-brooklyn-museum.html>) surrounding his sweeping retrospective last year at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the launch of which prompted the Times anointment. His, after all, are beautiful sculptures rich with innuendo, not only about the detrimental effects of colonization (European countries were the first to introduce, and reap handsome profits from, the sale of liquor in parts of Africa -- a continent now plagued by alcoholism), but also in terms of environmental concerns such as recycling and waste. Then there is the poetic commentary on the shiftiness of a work of art: Anatsui's are made with much help from local workers, and draped according to the whims of each setting's curators.

But a new show overturns many of those expectations. One year later, Anatsui has picked a wholly unpredictable setting to debut a quietly daring exhibit. "[Metas](http://www.mnuchingallery.com/exhibitions/el-anatsui_1) ([http://www.mnuchingallery.com/exhibitions/el-anatsui\\_1](http://www.mnuchingallery.com/exhibitions/el-anatsui_1))," at the Mnuchin Gallery in Manhattan's Upper East Side, might at first glance seem to present more of the same: Bottle caps? Check. A closer look, however, reveals an artist grappling with the fixations of a different place and era than his own.





Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery

*The legacy of abstract expressionist Carl Andre, who famously worked in a grid pattern, is evident in several of Anatsui's newest pieces.*



Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery

From a series of flattened steel plates to sculptures strung of caps of a single color, the works at Mnuchin represent an artistic "leap," says Sukanya Rajaratnam, a partner at Mnuchin, who worked closely with Anatsui on the exhibit. The conversation begun in Venice is morphing into "a more art historical dialogue," in Rajaratnam's assessment, one that loops in the voices of American minimalists like Donald Judd (the subject of a recent exhibit (<http://www.mnuchingallery.com/exhibitions/donald-judd>) at Mnuchin), and 20th century European cubists.



*Metas III*, by El Anatsui, 2014. Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery.

What were once shimmering portals into African history are now experiments in form and line. Just as Pablo Picasso entered a blue period as a way to explore the dimensions of a single color, Anatsui is "moving away from color into a grey palette," Rajaratnam points out. Pinned onto the walls of Mnuchin -- an unconventional gallery space, set inside a townhouse -- these new bottle cap sculptures recall the oeuvre of artists not typically associated with Anatsui. The clarity of geometry and color, the shocking simplicity of the work's direct placement onto the walls, it all calls to mind the phenomenon of Kazimir Malevich, the Russian abstract expressionist who in 1915 stunned war-weary audiences with the purity of the first totally non-representational painting in Western art, titled simply, [Black Square](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/philip-shaw-kasimir-malevichs-black-square-r1141459) (<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/philip-shaw-kasimir-malevichs-black-square-r1141459>). The subversion here is circumstantially different. Set against the townhouse's innate decorum, Anatsui's sculptures seem vaguely revolutionary, the gallery version of a child's wild scrawls on the walls of the wealthy parents' brand new home.





Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery

*Womb of Time*, by El Anatsui, 2014. Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery.



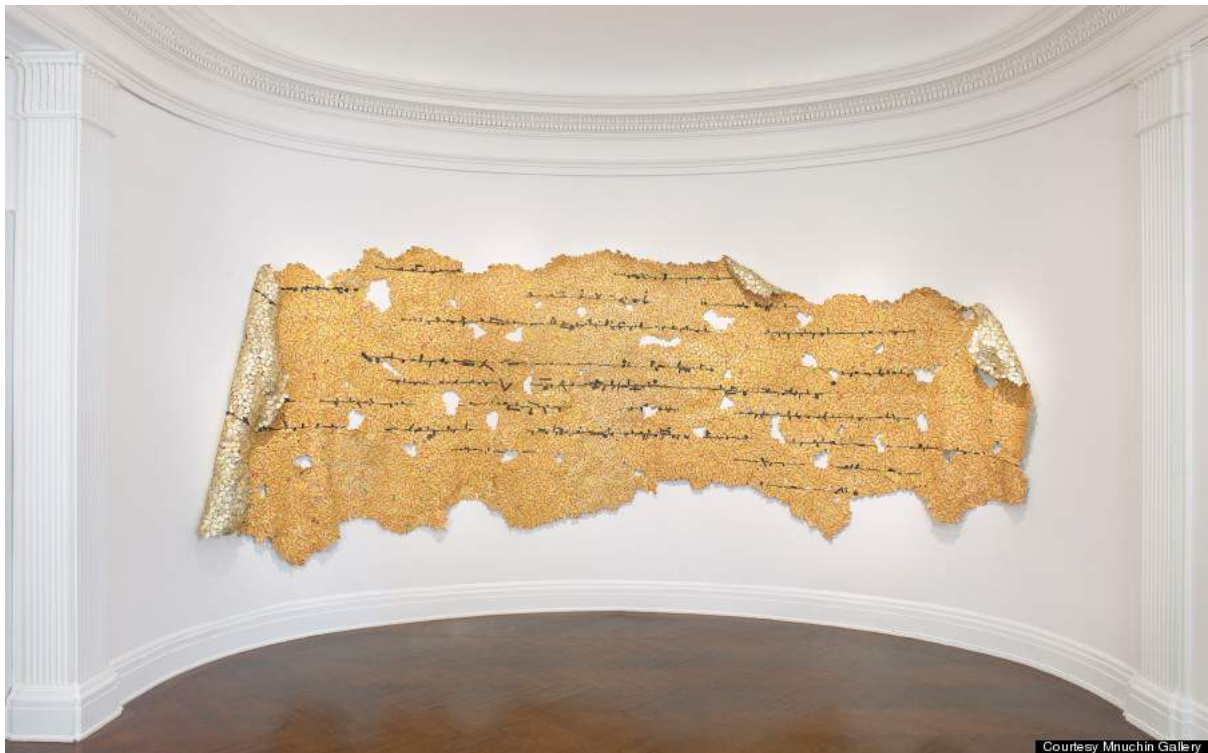
Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery

*Disciples*, by El Anatsui, 2014. Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery.

The historic townhouse is full of the sort of architectural details popular in romantic comedies set in New York City: high molding, a grand rotunda, and an arched stairway curling up the building's three floors. Every piece was newly created for this space. According to Rajaratnam, Anatsui welcomed the chance to design for a setting so different from any he'd shown in, where the simple fact of the juxtaposition of his work inside creates drama.



Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery



Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery

A few pieces span curved walls. One clings to the stairwell side, likesort of jewel-encrusted cobweb, creating what Rajaratnam calls an "interface with the environment." Anatsui typically builds work that can be folded into a suitcase and shown anywhere, and this exhibit reverses that notion. The work befits the space, and vice versa. "We are not a traditional white box," Rajaratnam says. "And El is not your typical artist."

*Metas is presented in collaboration with the Jack Shainman Gallery, and runs through Dec. 13 at the Mnuchin Gallery.*



# Material Splendor

A Conversation with

## El Anatsui

*Ozone layer*, 2010. Aluminum and copper wire, detail of installation at the Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin.





BY ROBERT PREECE

When I first interviewed El Anatsui, back in 2006, I was captivated by his use of found materials, form, and social context, but I consciously steered away from critical and art historical issues. To me, there was a more interesting story that acknowledged the heart, particularly in the haunting sculpture *Visa Queue* (1992). Later, I was pleased to learn that Anatsui had been included in the main show of the 2007 Venice Biennale (and floored to see a long excerpt of my interview, which was published in the July/August 2006 issue of *Sculpture*, on his artist page in the catalogue).

During the Biennale, Anatsui's work received a great deal of attention. Since then, his visibility and the level of his opportunities have only increased. He has exhibited numerous works across the United States and around the world, and his CV lists more than 55 shows (some traveling to multiple venues), installations, group exhibitions, and biennials. The most recent of these is "Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui," which originated at the Akron Art Museum (2012) and then traveled to the Brooklyn Museum of Art (2013), the Des Moines Art Center (2013–14), and the Bass Museum of Art in Miami (2014).



Above and detail: *Dusasa I*, 2007. Found aluminum and copper wire, 731.52 x 914.4 cm. View of work as installed at the Venice Biennale, 2007.

GIOVANNI PANCINO, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NY

*Ozone layer*, 2010. Aluminum and copper wire, view of installation at the Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

**Robert Preece:** *The reception of your work has really taken off since I last spoke to you in 2006. Some high-level decision-makers called your installation the star of the show at the 2007 Venice Biennale. How did you feel about this? Did things change after that, or are they not really that different?*

**El Anatsui:** It was probably due to the fact that I had almost a whole year to work on these pieces, as opposed to when we were invited to show at the 1990 Biennale in the first Africa pavilion. Then, the invitation came in at the last minute, so we had only two rather hectic months to prepare. I didn't know that an artist could make several appearances at this forum, but I longed for a chance to go there again when I had enough notice. I was pleasantly surprised when I was invited by the curator of the 2007 show, who I later learned saw my work at the Dakar Biennale a couple of years earlier. This time, I was included in the international segment of the Biennale.

I also had another invitation for an outdoor piece in Venice. I immediately visited the site to sit in the spaces and study and feel their ambience. The space that I was allocated in the Arsenale—two walls facing each other at the far end of the hall—called for a work consisting of two parts that "talked" across the space in between. One work used hard, geometric, masculine elements; and the other used soft, organic feminine elements—all from different portions of bottle caps. Together, they would make a conversation between a male and a female form.

I am gratified that the pieces eventually turned out to hold dialogues not only with each other, but also with many viewers. With more invitations and other such demands, I'm increasingly spending more time inside the studio and less time outside of it. My studio timetable and space are, as a consequence, getting choked up, calling for fresh strategies. These are challenges I believe that the Biennale set up.

*Broken Bridge*, 2012. Mixed media, rusted metal, and reflective material, view of Paris Triennial installation at the Palais de Tokyo.

TOP: COURTESY OCTOBER GALLERY, LONDON / BOTTOM: ERIK LASALLE, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NY



**RP:** *Do you feel you've changed as a result?*

**EA:** Personally, I feel that the pressure and demands have changed me from being a hardline purist who believed in facing only one project at a time. Now, I'm increasingly forced by circumstances to line up and execute several projects simultaneously, and I'm beginning to notice their tendency to symbiotically feed off of and positively catalyze each other.

**RP:** *Ozone layer (2010), which was installed at the Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin, is quite spectacular. Was the entire work shipped from Nsukka? Was it easy to install?*

**EA:** What struck me on the site visit, apart from the museum being a venue for mostly older forms of German nationalistic art, painting, and sculpture, was the strong gusty wind outside on the façade, where my piece was to be, with a little hiatus between it and the body of the building. I had just been exploring open formats with the liquor-bottle caps, so I took this opportunity to work not only with openness, but also with movement and, to some extent, with sound. I thought that I should take advantage of the wind, which would rustle







**Uwa**, 2012. Found aluminum and copper wire, sphere: 30 in. diameter; 172 x 77 in. overall.

**RP:** *How about Broken Bridge (2012)?*

**EA:** This work was installed on the façade of the Palais de Tokyo, a museum of couture. The new element that I introduced was the reflective sheet, the mirror. A handy compliment and reference to fashion, the mirror also effectively facilitates reflection, reviewing or looking back—and around—at oneself without physically turning to do so. The venue faced the iconic Eiffel Tower, and I wanted to appropriate its image into the work as the identity or fashion signature of Paris. On clear days and at night, when the lights flickered on the hour, its reflection was incorporated into the piece.

**RP:** *Could you explain Gli (Wall) (2010)? In particular, the final room, which reminded me of a meditation space.*

**EA:** This work was created after my visits—within a month or so—to three locations famed for their walls—Jerusalem, Berlin, and Notsie, which is an ancient walled city in Togo, prominent in the migration history of my people. After seeing these remnants of walls, or extant walls, I began to think again about walls as manmade objects to cordon off, sequester, or shut off others—ideas that I had explored in earlier works. Working with a format that was more open than before, I wanted to revisit the theme of transparency, which I think is what walls eventually end up having or provoking.

The space you are referring to was part of *Gli*'s presentation at the Brooklyn Museum. I found this interesting myself, because of how the curator and the installation team attempted to interpret the function of walls: they saw walls not as hiding or separating, but—because of the curiosity that they engender—as making what is behind them more visible. They can generate more transparency than opacity or provide a veil through which one sees—or filters—others.

I suspect that the space, a round-domed cupola, must also have contributed to what you describe as the serene or meditative nature of the installation. In Brooklyn, they used the height of the space effectively, giving the work a new, vertical orientation instead of the horizontal one preferred at the other venues. This played with the idea of imagination leaping over barriers and physically lifted one's gaze up, like the experience one has on entering a Gothic cathedral.

**RP:** *How did you go about making Uwa (2012)?*

**EA:** By rolling the loose linear elements that make up this piece, I felt at a particular point in the process that it had reached a kind of equilibrium. The resultant orb

**Gli (Wall)**, 2010. Aluminum bottle caps and rings and copper wire, view of work as installed at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2013.



TOP: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NY / BOTTOM: COURTESY BROOKLYN MUSEUM OF ART (BMA)

Right: **TSIATSIA — searching for connection**, 2013. Aluminum bottle caps, printing plates, roofing sheets, and copper wire, view of installation at the Royal Academy of Arts.

appeared to be simultaneously growing and disintegrating. On the one hand, there was something centrifugal and, on the other, something centripetal about it. For a long time, I have been interested in works with flexible, multiple, and ambiguous readings, works that can completely turn around in meaning. Our private or collective worlds appear to exhibit that appearance of developing and crumbling at the same time, or of not quite making sense.

**RP:** *I understand that you were particularly excited about your Parkett edition commission, Diaspora (2012). Could you tell me about that?*

**EA:** On a very light note, this is a play on the word “diaspora” as it concerns my circumstances. It is erroneously taken for granted that I have to be outside my continent to be so characterized, but that is only one dimension of it. In effect, I am in a diaspora. It is a word or concept that is hackneyed and gradually losing its meaning or edge. With dispersals, admixtures, and intermingling across the globe, it will soon be gone. And it will sound strange for one to claim the source of a specific place.

Probably my real excitement with this project is the opportunity it gave me to examine images of my work on a miniature scale after working mostly at a monumental scale. And it also enabled me to look at the possibilities of multiples, which I had started to think about. It was a kind of Lilliputian ideal/strategy with the potential of reaching and engaging a larger audience on more everyday terms. At the beginning of my career, I had worked on such domestic-scale pieces, which were able to engage with anybody, not only aficionados.

**RP:** *In a 2009 article in the New York Times, you were asked if you felt satisfied by your recent success. You're quoted as saying “My ambition is...to get better.” Could you explain?*

**EA:** I do not think I can go beyond that idea actually, as it encapsulates everything.

*Robert Preece is a Contributing Editor for Sculpture.*



Above: **Balkan**, 2012. Aluminum and copper wire, 260 x 320 cm. Below: **They finally broke the pot of wisdom**, 2011. Found aluminum and copper wire, approx. 11.33 x 22.5 ft.



TOP AND CENTER: JONATHAN GREET, COURTESY OCTOBER GALLERY, LONDON / BOTTOM: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NY



JUN 06 2014

HONG KONG NIGERIA

## MATERIAL WORLD: INTERVIEW WITH EL ANATSUI

BY MING LIN



The artist in front of his work *Affirmation* (2014), which was specially commissioned for the inaugural exhibition at Axel Vervoordt Gallery in Hong Kong this past May.

*Sustainability is a catch phrase in today's hyper-consumerist world. Similarly, terms such as recycling, re-using and up-cycling have been absorbed into both political and marketing rhetoric, to the point where their meaning seems even more obscure. With his scintillating textiles composed of bottle caps and other metal refuse, it is tempting to pin one of these coinages onto the work of Nigeria-based Ghanaian artist El Anatsui, but to do so would be to miss the point entirely. Selected as the inaugural artist to exhibit at Belgian gallery Axel Vervoordt's Hong Kong debut this past May, several specially commissioned pieces by Anatsui undulated from floor to ceiling, transforming the former office space on the fifteenth floor of the Entertainment Building in Central, into a small richly-hued arena. Rather than seeing each tapestry as an assemblage of disparate pieces, Anatsui urges*



*the viewer instead to acknowledge their human provenance; many hands have gone into its production both during and after the creation of the art object. Speaking to ArtAsiaPacific, the 70-year-old artist explains that matter has meaning only after people have interacted with it.*



**EL ANATSUI**, *Intimation*, 2014, aluminum and copper wire, 261 × 332 cm. Courtesy Axel Vervoordt Gallery, Hong Kong.

*What's really striking about your work is its use of recycled materials.*

It's not recycled.

*What do you mean?*

Well, I don't think I'm recycling, I'm repurposing—but actually I don't even think it's repurposing, it's just the use of material. I don't see the difference between my use of bottle caps and the use of wood. We have certain materials we call art materials and some that are not art materials, and if someone uses the latter then we say it's "recycling." But, I just don't like this title because there's something political about it.

*How did you first start working with these materials?*

By accident: I found them and then I sat with them for some time in the studio and then began to think about what to do with them and the idea came to start using them this way. I thought that if you put them together, then they have one voice and can say something useful. It was something that happened subconsciously. I wanted to work with materials that had been used, that people had put their hands on. After they have interacted with humans, materials have something else to offer. In fact I find it very difficult to work with materials that are straight from the source, it doesn't appeal to me. When working with materials that have such history, the process has some kind of connective energy: the energy of all the people who have interacted with them.



**EL ANATSUI**, *Revelation*, 2014, aluminum and copper wire, 302 × 307 cm. Courtesy Axel Vervoordt Gallery, Hong Kong.

*Your engagement with textiles was inspired by your father, is that correct?*

My father was a fisherman. During the fishing season he fished and during the non-fishing season he wove. But that wasn't what influenced me. Textiles didn't influence me, or rather, I wasn't interested in textile as a technique, but more as something that has meaning. My father wove and many of my brothers wove. But eventually what got me into textiles was thinking about "what textiles mean."

*Are there any other materials that you've come across lately that you are hoping to work with?*

I've worked with many used materials before. Originally I was working with wood that was timber fresh from the machine, but after some time, I stopped using this and started using wood from mortars. I worked with these for some time, I also used wood from windows, doors and other architectural supports.

*You've been based in Nigeria for many years. Would you be interested in working with materials from other places?*

Yes, any material from any part of the world interests me.

*"El Anatsui: Theory of Se"* is on view at Axel Vervoordt Gallery through August 12, 2014.

*Ming Lin is assistant editor at ArtAsiaPacific.*



# Full metal façade

May 24, 2013

By Jane Ure-Smith



El Anatsui with 'Tsiatsia – Searching for Connection' at the Royal Academy

London's Royal Academy has a new face for this year's Summer Exhibition: a vast metallic wall sculpture by the Ghanaian artist El Anatsui. Unveiled last Monday, it covers the façade above the entrance, replacing the grey stonework and rank of sculpted worthies with a 25-by-15-metre curtain – predominantly gold and silver but erupting in places into contrasting patterns and textures and dotted with red, blue and yellow geometric shapes.

"Tsiatsia – Searching for Connection" evokes the lustre of Byzantine mosaics and the luscious folds of Renaissance drapery, yet also the primary-colour clarity of a Mondrian or El Lissitzky painting. On Monday it shimmered quietly under a dull sky, in need of a burst of sunshine to set the reds and golds ablaze.

Over the past decade Anatsui, 68, has become increasingly well known for his large-scale bottle-top “tapestries”. Earlier in his career he worked with clay, wood and printers’ plates, but always in one medium at a time. The surprise of this piece is that it’s mixed media, with oval pieces of printers’ plates and bits of aluminium roofing sheets, as well as those trademark bottle-tops.

“Tsiatsia” has been 16 months in the making. In his studio in Nsukka, close to the campus of the University of Nigeria, where the artist taught for many years, 30 assistants have flattened thousands of bottle caps garnered from a local distillery and, using copper wire, “stitched” them together, first into small “blocks”, then later into the eight panels that make up the finished work, incorporating the printing plate and roofing sheet along the way.

In many ways, though, the work was only “made” last weekend when the RA’s team, under the artist’s direction, began fixing it to the wall. Two weeks ago, en route to London via Ghana, Anatsui told me over a throaty line from Lagos that he had little idea what the finished product would look like: in his studio there was no way to replicate the 15-metre drop of the RA façade. “I’ve been working on the floor – and on the floor you don’t quite have a feel for what you are doing,” he laughed.

“Tsiatsia” may be slightly smaller than “Broken Bridge II”, which currently graces New York’s High Line, but since 2007, when Anatsui stopped visitors to the Venice Biennale in their tracks with a hanging draped on the Palazzo Fortuny, his scale has become increasingly monumental. So a little guesswork is now a necessary part of the process.

These days, the RA makes increasing use of the courtyard as an additional gallery space. Damien Hirst and the Chapman Brothers have had works installed as part of previous Summer Exhibitions but, for many, the idea of asking an African artist to provide the grand entrance piece to what is generally thought of as a somewhat quaint and very British institution will be a surprise – which is precisely what curator Edith Devaney intended. “It emphasises the fact that anyone from anywhere in the world is invited and encouraged to submit work,” she says. “It’s a short-cut to saying, ‘We’ve always been international.’ We want people to understand that more.”

Anatsui is an adventurous artist. Throughout his career, he has experimented with new forms and materials, and behind the luxuriant folds of the bottle-top hangings or earlier wooden sculptures that he violently scored with a chainsaw, there is a message about colonial politics and Africa’s history. “I use medium and process to make a point,” he explains. “The most memorable ‘slashing’ I can think of is the Berlin conference of the 1880s where the continent was divided between the colonial powers. So when I am working with a process like slashing, I have in mind something which references the history of Africa. But I’m not going to show you a map. It’s abstract and medium-based.”

The youngest child in a large Ghanaian family, Anatsui was raised by his uncle, a Presbyterian minister, his mother having died when he was a baby. On graduating from high school he embarked on a fine arts degree at the Kumasi University of Science and Technology – to the dismay of his relatives, who expected him to do medicine or engineering. He emerged well-versed in European art history, but intent on creating a new kind of African art for the post-colonial era.

In 1975, he followed a former professor to the University of Nigeria, in Nsukka – and, without planning to, has stayed there ever since. But residencies abroad and worldwide commissions have kept him on the move. It is, he says, vital to his creativity. “It’s something to do with the mind travelling. If I stay maybe three months in Nsukka I see a change: the mind settles down. Then you need to move out again. Each time you come back with something of the other place.”



Anatsui was first prompted to work with bottle tops when he came upon a bag of them in the bush and took them back to his studio. “I kept looking at them, trying to figure out what they could be,” he says. “Eventually, I decided to flatten them out and secure them together into a sheet, but I didn’t quite get to the colour. If you see the first piece I did [“Woman’s Cloth” (2001), quickly acquired by the British Museum], my attention was just on form.”

In the 1990s, Anatsui had been making sculpture from wood panels, which (to the irritation of at least one gallerist, who insisted there must be a “right” way) he said could be arranged in any order. He’d arrived at the notion of “non-fixed form” and the bottle-top works enabled him to take the idea further. “It was a form of sculpture that would hang free and could be reshaped at any time.”

He continues to experiment. Recent works such as “Gli (Wall)” (2010) – on show currently in a retrospective of his work in Brooklyn – have seen him pack more and more formats (ways of folding the bottle-tops) into each sculpture. The RA commission has allowed him to play with other media and with colour – the bright roofing sheets take him beyond the limited palette of the bottle tops.

“I have been doing some trials,” he says. “I might now try to bring together three or four of these elements that I have worked with solely in the past to see what dialogue they can generate.” As usual, Anatsui is moving on. Catch his progress at the Summer Exhibition – if possible on a day with sunshine.

*The Summer Exhibition is at the Royal Academy from June 10 to August 18, [www.royalacademy.org.uk](http://www.royalacademy.org.uk)*

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# The Economist

**El Anatsui at the Royal Academy**

## Art-world alchemy

May 22nd 2013, 13:54 by E.B.



THE insistent groan of an industrial cherry-picker made for an odd siren song at the Royal Academy of Art over the weekend. Casual strollers wandered into the plaza, their curiosity piqued by the small army of construction workers unfurling and hanging a tapestry-like artwork across the façade of the RA's Burlington House. "It reminds me of Klimt," said one bystander to his friend.

Indeed, the piece—called "TSIATSIA – searching for a connection"—is luminous. Made especially for the RA and on view through August 18th, the 15 x 23 metre work is one of the largest ever created by El Anatsui, a contemporary artist based in Nigeria. In those fleeting moments when the sun emerges over London, the work looks as though it has been switched on. Yet closer inspection of the woven panels reveals that they are made entirely of rubbish. Sections that look like stones are made from used printing plates announcing births, deaths and weddings. Squares of vibrant colours come from



discarded roofing material. What glitters like gold from a distance is actually a chain-mail of flattened aluminium bottle-tops advertising cheap African liquor: Romatex, Castello, First Lady Brandy.

“It’s almost alchemical,” observed Elizabeth Lalouschek of October Gallery, which represents Mr Anatsui. “He transforms ordinary objects into something extraordinary.” This is what makes Mr Anatsui’s work remarkable, even shocking: that something so beautiful can be made from the junk most people throw away, each object carrying the weight of a past life. This play on materials can feel loaded with cultural commentary, yet Mr Anatsui, who was born in Ghana in 1944, dislikes being pigeon-holed as an “African artist”. “People are free to have their own ideas,” he explained.

Amid the mild anxiety of the artwork's two-day installation process—the droning cherry-pickers; the craned necks and folded arms of nervous gallerists and architects; the intrigued spectators, snapping photos on their phones—Mr Anatsui exuded a rare calm. A modest presence in jeans, trainers and a black windbreaker, he spent much of the time seated quietly on a chair in the middle of the plaza, occasionally taking pictures with his iPad. Ms Lalouschek was on hand to do his bidding, armed with a walkie-talkie. “Just push the material!” she told two men atop a cherry-picker. “Don’t worry, it’s strong.”



Mr Anatsui explained that his moment of fear came in the studio, when he was figuring out how the piece would work at this scale. Any concerns about the logistics of the installation evaporated Saturday morning, he said, when he saw two of the nine panels already up. He barely looked over when someone tripped over a swathe of the sculpted “fabric”, bending it out of shape. (“It’s really very robust,” reassured Gerard Houghton of the October Gallery.)

A glittering tapestry made from bottle-tops? It was this jolt of disbelief that made Mr Anatsui the darling of the 2007 Venice Biennale, when he draped the front of the Palazzo Fortuny with his first large-scale outdoor sculpture. “Every year [at the Biennale] the art world is talking about something. That year it was his piece,” recalled Edith Devaney of the Royal Academy. Since then Mr Anatsui’s rise has been meteoric, with large-scale outdoor installations in Berlin, Paris and New York (along the High Line), and a solo show now on at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Observing the crowd gathered at the RA, Zbyszek Plocki, an architect and old friend, slapped Mr Anatsui’s back. “You’ve grown up in the world, sweetheart,” he said and laughed.

The piece fronting the RA (“a dream come true,” said Ms Devaney) has been a year in the making, with not a few technical hurdles. The work itself arrived at the RA on Friday, the nine panels folded into unimpressive bundles weighing a surprisingly light 50 kilos each. “When I first saw it I thought ‘what is this?’” said a grizzled construction worker to Mr Anatsui. “But I really like it,” he added and shook the artist’s hand. Mr Anatsui smiled graciously.

After a Saturday spent hanging the piece, Sunday was devoted to creating a texture of ripples and folds. This, Mr Anatsui explained, adds an extra dimension to the work because the texture can never be replicated. “It’s like life,” he said, “it’s not a fixed thing, but a matter of trial and error. You don’t want a static form that stays flat. You want it to change each time.”

***"TSIATSIA — searching for connection"** will hang from the balustrade of Burlington House for the duration of the Royal Academy of Art's 245th Summer Exhibition, until August 18th 2013. The October Gallery in London is displaying two of El Anatsui's artworks as part of **"Masters of the Transvanguard"**, a new exhibition that runs from May 23rd to August 3rd 2013. El Anatsui was profiled in Intelligent Life magazine in Winter 2009.*



## SHOWS THAT MATTER: El Anatsui's Byzantine Bottle Cap Art at the Brooklyn Museum



Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery; Photo by Andrew McAllister, courtesy the Akron Art Museum

El Anatsui, "Gli (Wall)," 2010, aluminum and copper wire, installation at the Akron Art Museum

by Alanna Martinez

Published: February 11, 2013

**WHAT:** "Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui"

**WHEN:** February 8 – August 4

**WHERE:** Brooklyn Museum, Morris A. and Meyer Schapiro Wind and Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Gallery, 5th Floor, 200 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn

**WHY THIS SHOW MATTERS:** The Brooklyn Museum's 5th floor gallery is bedecked in monumental tapestries, draped asymmetrically from the walls and spilling onto the floors like carpets of shimmering multi-colored jewels and precious metals. To the unfamiliar, Ghanaian artist **El Anatsui's** sculptures may appear at first glance like opulent mosaics of Byzantine origin. But, upon further inspection, their repurposed, plastic, and commercial roots (actually comprised of bottle caps from a

distillery in Nsukka, milk tin lids, or wood strips) reveal the artwork's true intentions as layered commentary on cultural exchange, African crafts, and colonial consumerism.

The show includes 30 site-specific artworks made of reclaimed metal and wood, 12 of which are his most recent creations. Anatsui's practice is rooted in his completely unique and invented medium, a fusion of found object art and meticulous craft labor. The combination results in the mutable sculptural forms that comprise this exhibition – his first solo museum show in New York (he shows often with Jack Shainman Gallery). In addition, the flexible and transformable nature of the pieces, which dictates that there is no one way to display an individual work, give the pieces adaptable vitality. They contain multitudes.



Courtesy the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery; Photo by Andrew McAllister, courtesy Akron Art Museum



Courtesy the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery; Photo by Andrew McAllister, courtesy Akron Art Museum



# Art in America

## African Baroque: The Sculpture of El Anatsui

by *david ebony* 04/29/13

Arguably Africa's most important and influential contemporary artist, El Anatsui is the subject of a spectacular retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum (through Aug. 4), his first New York museum solo. To coincide with "Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui," Icarus Films recently released the hourlong documentary "Fold, Crumple, Crush: The Art of El Anatsui" on DVD. Directed by Susan Vogel, the founding director of New York's Museum for African Art, the film lacks much in the way of insight into the artist's private life. However, it provides a useful complement to the museum show and helps explicate the artist's studio practice as well as the technical intricacies and conceptual nuances of his work.



**VIEW SLIDESHOW** El Anatsui, *Earth's Skin*, 2009, aluminum and copper wire, 177 by 394 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo Joe Levack, courtesy Akron Art Museum. ; "Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui," installation view. ;

The Ghanaian-born, Nigeria-based artist, 69, has been showing since the mid-1980s, starting with monumental abstracted figurative works in stone and concrete, often commissions for public spaces in Ghana and Nigeria, which are discussed in the film but absent from the museum exhibition. He hit his stride in the early 1990s with a series of modular abstract wood reliefs, which he began to show internationally. These medium-size, multi-panel wall-hung pieces are carved with elaborate patterns of geometric shapes, sometimes augmented with passages of colorful painted lines. Several strong examples are on view in the Brooklyn show, including *Conspirators* (1997), in which fragments of scrawled faces and figures appear interspersed among the geometric forms.

Today, Anatsui is best known for enormous wall reliefs in metal, featuring a kind of glittering chainmail fabric made of thousands of found liquor bottle caps, tin can lids and other detritus, connected by bits of copper wire. He garnered worldwide acclaim for these sumptuous works with a major installation at the 2007 Venice Biennale exhibition curated by Robert Storr.

Although predominantly silver or gold, some areas of these compositions contain passages of color in refined geometric patterns that correspond to traditional West African kente cloth. The expansive, opulent surfaces also relate to Color Field painting, à la Kenneth Noland and Jules

Olitski, and to certain forms of lyrical abstraction. In the type of metal used, specifically pieces from discarded liquor bottles, many critics have recognized in Anatsui's work a wry statement about social conditions such as joblessness and alcoholism in West Africa, as well as environmental concerns.

This group of works is the focus of the exhibition as well as the film. El Anatsui arranges the metallic material in enormous compositions that cover the walls and sometimes spill onto the floor. Certain pieces in the current show, such as *Red Block*, from the Eli Broad collection, and *Black Block*, recently acquired by the Brooklyn Museum (both 2010), appear as gathered, billowing curtains protruding from the wall and cascading to the floor. Despite the simplicity of the ingredients, these two imposing monochrome pieces impart an almost architectonic sense of scale and structure, as well as an exhilarating Baroque theatricality.

It takes a village to make these works. As evident in the film, El Anatsui employs some 25 craftsmen from Nsukka, Nigeria, his hometown. (In the documentary, at least, no women appear in the studio.) The film reveals in detail the labor-intensive technique of cutting and pounding the metal bits, punching holes in the pieces and fixing them together in long strips or small patches in a variety of colors and patterns. Assistants and commentators describe the painstaking process on film. Painter and writer Alexi Worth, visiting Anatsui in Africa, accompanies him to a sprawling junk depot, where the artist buys the raw materials for his work and discusses his method of recycling refuse into fine art.

Back at the studio, he creates his vast compositions on the floor, calling for various types of the metallic mesh to be pieced together by the assistants. Despite a rather laid-back stance, the artist acts as a film director, reconfiguring the compositions until he gets the right look.

In each of the various venues, Anatsui installs the works differently, suggesting that the works are in a state of flux, which, in the artist's view, has broad implications. In the exhibition's catalogue, he says, "I believe that human life is not something which is cut and dried. It is something which is constantly in a state of change. So many years ago I was a toddler, and now I am old and gray-haired. If things were not so, I would have remained a toddler, and I want my artworks to replicate that experience."

*"Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui" was organized by the Akron Art Museum, where it debuted June 17-Oct. 7, 2012. Fold, Crumple, Crush: The Art of El Anatsui, 53 minutes, 2011, directed by Susan Vogel, was released by Icarus Films on DVD and VOD on Apr. 9.*



# ARTFORUM

March 2013

## El Anatsui

JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY

By now the story of El Anatsui is famous: In 1995, a Ghanaian artist in his fifties who lives in Nigeria, in an off-the-beaten-track town called Nsukka, has his first one-man show with a London gallery. Over the next fifteen-plus years, he shows extensively, in galleries, museums, and international exhibitions—New York, Osaka, Paris, Berlin, Milan, Mumbai, Moscow—including a triumphant appearance in the 2007 Venice Biennale. His work comes to hang in public collections running from the British Museum in London to New York's Museum of Modern Art. It's something of a fairy tale, and, as such, predictably misleading: As Susan Vogel writes in her recent book on the artist, Nsukka gave Anatsui a more cosmopolitan base than parochial Westerners might imagine. Before his global recognition, not only was he well established in Nigeria and a professor at the national university, but he traveled quite widely, through artist's residency programs in Europe, the United States, and Brazil. He had also begun to exhibit outside Africa, if sporadically, as far back as 1969; the Studio Museum in Harlem can claim the credit of first showing him in New York, in a 1990 group exhibition, part of which traveled to the Venice Biennale that same year, making the 2007 Biennale Anatsui's second. Even so, it's an unlikely and remarkable career path.

Part of the story's glamour, surely, has to do with the humility of Anatsui's current medium (he has worked in several others): the flexible aluminum caps that wrap the tops of liquor bottles, their inner sides dull gray, their exteriors usually a bright metallic, often with a printed logo or slogan advertising the bottles' contents. Linking thousands of these elements at a time with copper wire, Anatsui fashions them into wall hangings of mural scale and bigger: A work currently installed outdoors along Chelsea's High Line in New York is 157 feet across. The fact that these very large, very grand objects are made up of very small, very ordinary ones gives them an immediate populist appeal—they are works about which a wide audience finds it easy to say "wow." This has led to a certain snootiness about them in some parts of the art world, a response that seems to me entirely wrong.

What came across most strongly to me while looking at this recent show was the extraordinary range of effects and atmospheres that Anatsui is able to achieve through a method I could and did describe above in one sentence. As with my fairy-tale version of his career, that sentence doesn't do him justice: He is startlingly resourceful in the changes he rings on his method, isolating different parts of the bottle caps into sets of units with very different characters, composing and combining these units into larger blocks, shifting in color and scale. Anatsui embodies the artist who invents a technique, a vocabulary—an



El Anatsui, *They Finally Broke the Pot of Wisdom*, 2011, copper wire, found aluminum, 15' 6" x 23'.

art form, really—and then spends years trying out what he can say with it. The classic case is Jackson Pollock, of whose paintings *Lucifer* and *Enchanted Forest*, both 1947, Kirk Varnedoe once wrote, "The list of their crucial dissimilarities—palette; ground; dilution and mix of mediums; speed; structure; density—is so imposing that it virtually belies, even within this one year, the notion of any common strategy that could be called a style or method." Yet everyone thinks they know what Pollock did: He dripped.

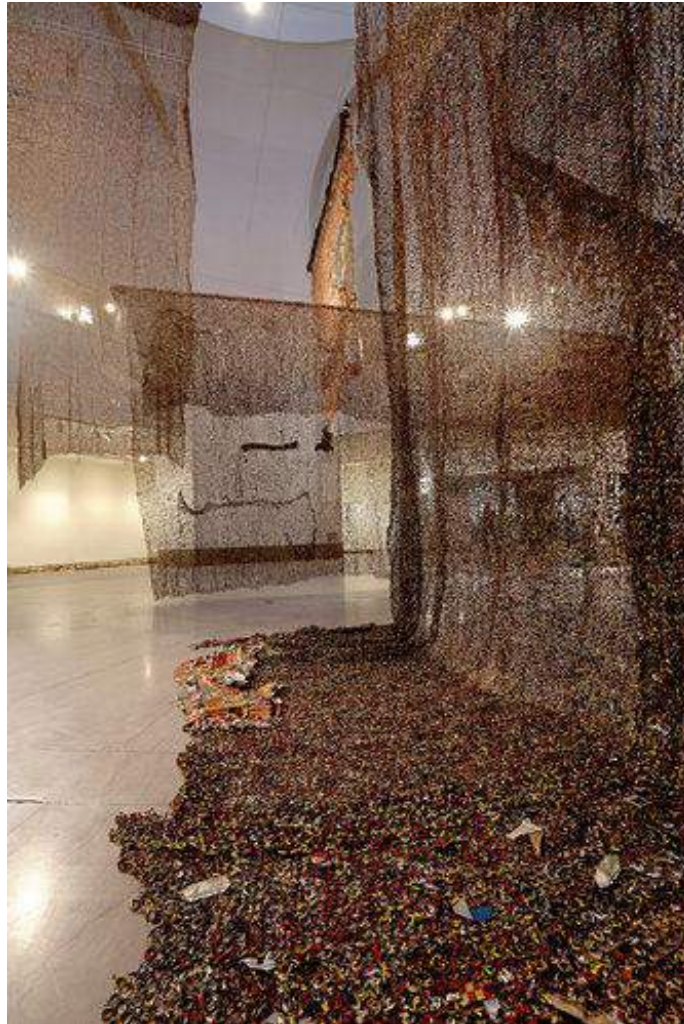
And so it is with Anatsui, whose works in this show ran from the dense, compact *3 by 5*, 2012, a flat, abstract, red-and-gold curtain speckled with little patches of pattern at its outer edges, to *They Finally Broke the Pot of Wisdom*, 2011, a twenty-three-foot-wide silver sheet, hanging in loose folds, with at its center an amorphous shape that might perhaps be the pot of the title. *Awakened*, 2012, lets multicolored streamers drape from wall to floor, while *Visionary*, 2012, is a more or less circumscribed shape that nonetheless is internally divided into a literally dazzling array of surfaces and designs. Having begun to make his metal hangings about a dozen years ago, Anatsui shows absolutely no sign of running out of ideas for new ones.

—David Frankel

# The New York Times

ART REVIEW

## A Ghanaian Artist Goes Big 'Gravity and Grace,' by El Anatsui, at Brooklyn Museum



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

Bottle caps were used to help make "Gli," a work by the Ghanaian artist El Anatsui.

By KAREN ROSENBERG

Published: February 28, 2013

Lately the supersizing of galleries, and of the artworks therein, has been taken as a sign that the art world is losing touch with everything human. That need not be the case, as you can see in "Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui," the artist's sumptuous midcareer survey at the Brooklyn Museum.



Mr. Anatsui's wall hangings, majestic as they are, do not use scale as a cudgel. That's true even of high-profile works like his mural at the [High Line](#) and of the wall-spanning, rotunda-filling examples in the Brooklyn show. Only after you have marveled at their intricacy and versatility does the vastness hit you. It helps to know ([as many people do, now that Mr. Anatsui is a global star](#)) that these peaked, shimmering fields are made from folded, twisted and linked liquor-bottle caps, at studios in Ghana and Nigeria, and that they have as much to do with post-colonial poverty and strife as they do with opulence.

These are formidable works, to be sure. But the intimidation factor is undercut by the artist's signature material — a porous, voluminous, reflective, infinitely malleable, quicksilver cloth — and his open, collaborative approach to working with it.

Organized by Ellen Rudolph for the Akron Art Museum and installed in Brooklyn by Kevin Dumouchelle, "[Gravity and Grace](#)" works on multiple levels. Its texts are pitched at the general public, but it has plenty to offer the professionals and connoisseurs who may have seen Mr. Anatsui's works at the Venice Biennale or on regular visits to the [Jack Shainman Gallery](#) in Chelsea.

One of those offerings is a rare look at Mr. Anatsui's early sculptures, smaller wood reliefs that are the genesis of the giant wall hangings (even if they don't immediately look like it). Composed of parallel lengths of incised wood, they resemble picket fences but can be arranged in different formations; generally Mr. Anatsui leaves them open to interpretation by the curators who install them, as he does with his metal works.

Here too are floor sculptures made from the lids of tins of evaporated milk, wired together into a glittery fabric. Made on the verge of Mr. Anatsui's breakthrough with the liquor bottle tops, they show how perilously close he came to standard Post-Minimal "installationism" (multiplying a single common object without really transforming it).

He could do (and has done) more with the liquor bottle caps and wrappers, which he stumbled on one day outside a distillery in Nsukka, Nigeria; the aluminum foil could be rolled into tubes, or folded into rosettes, or left in the round and crushed like soda cans. Those small pieces could be assembled into a chain, or a basket weave, or any number of other patterns. And unlike the milk-tin lids, the bottle tops come in different colors, mainly red, gold, black and yellow — a limited palette but one rich enough to evoke Byzantine mosaics and Klimt paintings.

In one of several excerpts from a 2011 documentary by [Susan Vogel](#), which are scattered throughout the exhibition, Mr. Anatsui pieces together a wall hanging from sheets of material brought to him by studio assistants. (They do the tedious work, the flattening and twisting and linking.) It's a collaborative process — "the artist is not a dictator," he has said — but there is no mistaking the painterly level of control as he requests specific colors and textures.

Mr. Anatsui's installation process is even more flexible, which is crucial to his art's unassuming grandeur; curators may ruffle the surfaces of the wall hangings as they please, smoothing old wrinkles or developing new ones. You may fall in love with a piece in one show and not even recognize it on its next outing; a photograph of "Earth's Skin" taken in Akron looked nothing like the version in Brooklyn.

The point is that each of his works, however macro in scale, reveals itself as a series of micro-events. All along the nearly 33-foot-long expanse of the gloriously resplendent "Earth's Skin" (2009), for instance, are folds and puckers and dents and gaps and little spikes of copper wire, details that pull you in close right away and keep you there.

You might, on occasion, wonder whether these works even need to be so big. Mr. Anatsui seems to be wondering too; the latest pieces here (from 2010) are smaller, as were the more recent works in his [winter show at Shainman](#). They look less like friezes and tapestries, but accrue richness in other ways: through the bustlelike draping of "Red Block" and "Black Block," or the ombre shadings of "Amemo (Mask of Humankind)."

I hope that Mr. Anatsui keeps working large, though, because he is not your typical trophy maker. Light, limber and accommodating, his art takes advantage of an expanded art world without making you feel small.

*"Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui" runs through Aug. 4 at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, at Prospect Park; (718)638-5000, [brooklynmuseum.org](http://brooklynmuseum.org).*

A version of this review appeared in print on March 1, 2013, on page C26 of the New York edition with the headline: A Ghanaian Artist Goes Big.



# The New York Times

ART IN REVIEW

## El Anatsui: 'Pot of Wisdom'



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

A work from "Pot of Wisdom," EL Anatsui's show at Jack Shainman Gallery. Pieces are made from discarded items.

By ROBERTA SMITH

Published: January 11, 2013

*Jack Shainman Gallery  
513 West 20<sup>th</sup> Street, Chelsea  
Through Jan. 19*

Making art with an eccentric material has its benefits and liabilities. It can indicate that an artist is thinking outside the box, but it can also become restrictive, a box in itself. That problem seems some way off for [El Anatsui](#). For the past dozen years Mr. Anatsui, who lives and works in Nigeria, has made an international name for himself by fashioning shimmering tapestries from the discarded foil and wire of liquor-bottle tops and wrappers.

His third solo show at [Jack Shainman](#) is his best yet. It confirms that while sticking with his signature material, Mr. Anatsui is departing more frequently from the grid structure that used to dominate or underlie most of his pieces. This has enabled him to expand his compositional vocabulary and his spatial effects considerably, and he has underscored these changes with a broader palette of colors.

The resulting works are often smaller — less dependent on expansive scale and overwhelming resplendence to make an impression — as well as more diverse. In addition most are much more complicated pictorially and therefore function more like images, or paintings, than in his previous work. Sometimes there are suggestions of topographical maps, as in “Basin,” where scattered blues seem to drain out of a field of golds and reds toward a blue, riverlike line.

The wonderfully dissonant “Visionary” has so many different patterns and colors that it resembles a crazy quilt. “Seed,” a radiantly yellow work, includes contrasting elements in red and black that suggest both gestation and of roots. “Ink Stain,” a splash of blue on gold, is perhaps a bit too literal, but still lovely. At nearly every turn the sense of Mr. Anatsui opening up his art is unmistakable and thrilling.

A version of this review appeared in print on January 11, 2013, on page C37 of the New York edition with the headline: El Anatsui: ‘Pot of Wisdom’.



## El Anatsui

Jack Shainman

Nigeria-based Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui is a master of repurposed materials, creating objects of heroic beauty from unlikely sources. Equipped with a keen eye for the overlooked, he transforms bits of found wood, clay, and wire into armies of totemic figures, sheaths of rippling armor for building facades, or densely patterned curtains of woven metal.

The recent works in "Pot of Wisdom" were constructed from chains of hammered liquor-bottle-cap links, stitched together into shimmering tableaux that sag against the walls like ancient tapestries. *Topos* (2012) is shot through with holes, and its scalloped contours evoke the burned edges of parchment paper, while *Basin* (2012), which throbs with muddy blotches of color, is knit loosely like a fisherman's net. Many works are vaguely cartographical, though the geography they seem to chart eludes recognition. In *Enlightened* (2012), blocks of solid pigment floating in a cool sea conjure the familiar layout of continents, without ever quite becoming them. And in *Ink Stain* (2012), a central beige form is dappled with subtle variations in tone—the inevitable result of the multicolored bottle-caps that make up its surface—while a hint of bold blue seeps in from one side.



El Anatsui, *Seed*, 2012, found aluminum and copper wire, 100" x 110".



El Anatsui, *Ink Stain*, 2012, found aluminum and copper wire, 100" x 110".

Much of Anatsui's output draws on Africa's colonial and post-colonial heritage, in both its use of materials discarded during the process of cultural exchange—in this case, the tops of imported liquor bottles—and in its patterns and colors. In the vibrant *Seed* (2012), a nest of crosshatched yellows suggests a buzzing beehive, and *Visionary* (2012), with its checks, pinwheels, and candy stripes, might have been stitched from 100 scarves of kente cloth.

Installed in the gallery's foyer on a short, wire pedestal, *Uwa* (2012) was the only work not exhibited on the wall. This knot of long metal filaments coiled into one another like a messy rubber-band ball evokes the nervous system of a globe, arteries and all. A number of the work's elemental threads have escaped from the churning maelstrom and are

sewn into something resembling Pangaea on the floor. Whether *Uwa* exists in a state of genesis or degeneration—whirling productively inward, or expending itself outward in a mighty sigh—is unclear, but it conjures the energy of becoming, and the inevitability of destruction, in one poetic tangle.

Around the corner on a tree-lined stretch of the High Line, High Line Art has organized a concurrent offering by the artist—his largest outdoor installation to date. Titled *Broken Bridge II* and slated to remain through the summer, the work quilts flattened tin and mirrors into a reflective landscape on the side of a wall. As with many of Anatsui's sculptures, which are not confined to their own physical properties but can be manipulated somewhat to suit their contexts, *Broken Bridge II* is a product of its environment, recording the changing of seasons, the faces of passersby, the residue of wind or water. What endures, though its original form might not, is a purely abstract vocabulary of color and texture—the surging map of a living world.

—Emily Nathan

# The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

## Reflections

By HOLLAND COTTER, KEN JOHNSON, KAREN ROSENBERG and ROBERTA SMITH

Published: January 3, 2013

With New Year's hoopla behind us, we begin to turn a corner on the season of long nights and short days. But there's still a good stretch of darkness ahead, and New York City museums have their lights on bright.

Illumination has been a subject and condition of art since prehistoric painters at the Lascaux caves positioned their images to catch the rays of the sun at winter solstice. Great classical cultures across the globe spun visions of the universe around the presence of solar and lunar deities. To designers of stained-glass church windows in medieval Europe light was divine benevolence in sensible form. To the Muslim creators of lusterware in the Arab world radiance as a decorative property helped bind together the widely dispersed faithful.

Painted dawns and sunsets carried spiritual, political and personal messages for Romantic landscape artists in America and Europe. Light was scientific data to the French Impressionists, the raw material of an optical sublime. In our own era, when art has no center or has centers everywhere, light as a medium has atomized into countless forms and meanings, from fluorescent tubes and video screens to glittering magpie-eye scraps and painted rainbows.

With the prospect of considerable midwinter indoor time still to come, four art critics for The New York Times recently fanned out into museums in search of art that captured light, or referred to it, or generated it. **HOLLAND COTTER**





The Metropolitan Museum of Art  
"Between Earth and Heaven," by El Anatsui.

## **‘BETWEEN EARTH AND HEAVEN’ BY EL ANATSUI, METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART**

Born in Ghana in 1944 but long a part-time resident of Nigeria, Mr. Anatsui has for years made sculptures from castoff materials he finds around him: evaporated-milk cans, worn-down wooden mortars, discarded printing plates and, over the past several years, aluminum liquor bottle caps produced by Nigerian distilleries.

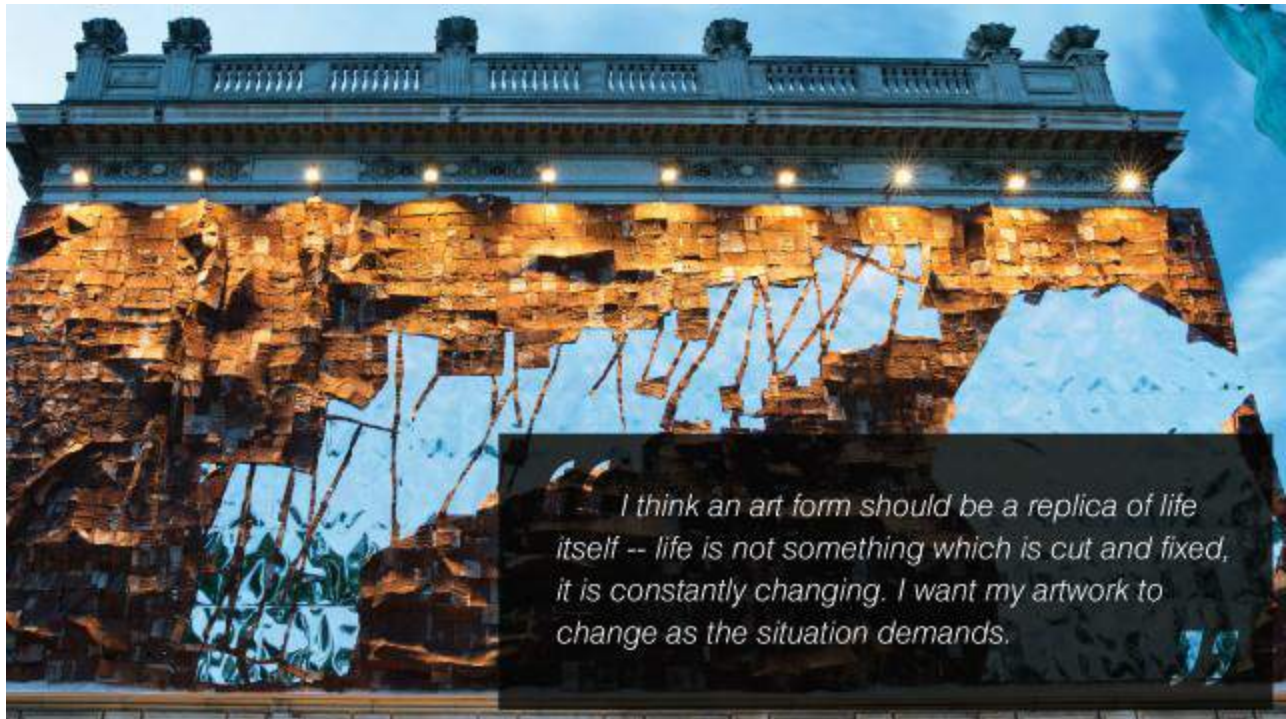
Employing a small army of assistants he gathers thousands of these bottle tops and has them sorted by color, hammered into flat circles or strips and sewn together with copper wire into panel-like sheets. When enough sheets have been formed, he arranges them himself, like pieces of puzzles, into large, sometimes mural-size units to be hung in supple, draped, cascading swags on a wall, as in the 2006 piece [“Between Earth and Heaven,”](#) on view in the African galleries at the Met.

His stitching-together technique is similar to that found in traditional West African strip weaving, specifically in the making of Ghanaian kente cloth. The big physical difference is that Mr. Anatsui’s fabric, being metallic, glints and shimmers with reflected light. The effect is like the display of a great ceremonial textile that still carries the marks of sources in popular culture.

Up close the colonial-sounding brand names of the original bottled spirits — Bull, Bakassi, Concord, Chairman, Chelsea, Canon, Dark Sailor — can still be seen printed on the flattened bottle tops. But those names are now subsumed into an African incandescence. So much for dark continents. **HOLLAND COTTER**



## HUMAN TO HERO



# Ghanian artist who transforms bottle tops into masterpieces

From **Lianne Turner**, CNN  
November 26, 2012

**(CNN)** -- It was a shimmering metal wall hanging fashioned from thousands of bottle tops that won El Anatsui international acclaim.

During the Venice Biennale in 2007 the Ghanaian sculptor transformed the facade of a museum by draping one of his exquisite metal tapestries over the top of it, causing a sensation in the art world.

Today, he is hot property, collected by the world's major museums and selling his rippling metal installations that nod to indigenous art for hundreds of thousands of dollars.

His latest work goes on display this week at New York's High Line, an elevated park built on an old freight rail line in Manhattan.



"Broken Bridge II" will be his largest installation yet -- a 37-foot-high sculpture made of recycled pressed tin and mirrors woven together with copper wire.

"The idea of the mirrors is to bring in the landmarks of New York ... to celebrate the achievements of where the work is," he said. The Empire State Building is one building reflected in the sculpture.

El Anatsui is known for his interest in indigenous art and use of materials that he finds locally -- like the whiskey bottle caps that he uses for his tapestries -- and he puts it down to his upbringing which was cut off from traditional Ghanaian culture.

He was born in the small town of Anyako in the Volta region of Ghana during British rule. The youngest of 32 children (on his father's side), his mother died when he was a baby and he was brought up in a Presbyterian Mission House by his uncle, a Presbyterian Minister.

"When you're living in a Mission House, you have everything there, you don't need to go out and therefore you don't know too much about indigenous society ... I was kind of isolated from it," he said.

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Even as a boy, he knew he wanted to be an artist: "I had a kind of calling." He went on to study Fine Arts at the University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, then an "unimaginable" thing to do.

At that time, only a few years after Ghana achieved independence from the UK in 1957, the post-colonial hangover meant El Anatsui studied a British-style curriculum, only covering European art.

He felt strongly that he wanted to know something about his own indigenous culture.

"Having been estranged from it and exposed to art being produced in Europe and Asia, I was wondering why we didn't have art as well," he said.

He remembers coming across a national cultural center in Kumasi and there began to discover Ghana's "very interesting art forms." They included "adrinka," a series of ideograms or graphic symbols that represent aphorisms.

It reminded El Anatsui of the European quest in science during the Renaissance to use symbols to represent abstract concepts.

The similarity gave him "quite a shock," and was the catalyst for his exploration of his native culture -- and his attempts to, as he puts it, "indigenize my consciousness."

He started using materials from his local environment, recyclables like the bottle caps. "A lot of people call them waste, but to me they are not waste ...There are people who collect these things, smash them and make them into utensils like big cooking pots," he said.

The bottle tops in his flowing, shimmering installations also have a deeper meaning.

He says they are meant to act as a reminder that African slaves were exchanged for European liquor during the transatlantic slave trade. While the fluidity of the sculptures are meant to reflect the unsteady relationship between Europe, Africa and America.

Despite the deep affinity El Anatsui has for homegrown African culture, he resists being called an African artist.

"I don't know any (artist) who wants to be geographically categorized only. Artists want to be known only as artists," he says.

He says that when the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York first acquired his art, it was for their African Galleries and only later for their Modern and Contemporary Art Galleries.

This "raises so many questions as to what precisely I am -- am I an African artist or an artist?" he asks, adding it is high time museums "revisited their categorizations." He adds: "An artist in India is the same as an artist in Africa, Ghana, Japan or America."

Another thing he doesn't want to be prescriptive about is how his work is hung in galleries.

He sends his work out with no instructions leaving it up to the curators to decide how to install it. At first they are confused but eventually they discover "they themselves are also artists," he says.

"It's a versatile form. I think an art form should be a replica of life itself -- life is not something which is cut and fixed - it is constantly changing."





# The New York Times

INSIDE ART

## Tin drapery for High Line



Erik Lasalle, Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

El Anatsui's "Broken Bridge," shown installed in Paris, will be on display at the High Line later this year.

By CAROL VOGEL

Published: July 26, 2012

The High Line attracts nearly four million visitors a year, and it had 500,000 last month alone. It has become a phenomenon, not simply as a place to walk above the dense city streets and enjoy views of the Hudson River, but also as a serious art destination. Year by year its arts programming grows. Now it includes films and performances as well as projects by fine artists.

A star in the fall lineup will be a site-specific installation by El Anatsui. This artist, who was born in Ghana and lives in Nigeria, is known for his shimmering, almost painterly tapestries fashioned from discarded bottle caps that are woven together with copper wire. On an outdoor wall adjacent to the park, between 21st and 22nd Streets, he will be creating "Broken Bridge," a monumental drapery made from pressed tin and mirrors.

"He hasn't shown here much except in galleries," said Cecilia Alemani, the curator and director of High Line Art. "We're particularly excited because this piece is slightly different than others he has made in the past, since it includes mirrors that will reflect the surrounding landscape."

"Broken Bridge," his first outdoor installation in the United States, is to be installed in early October and be on view through the spring of 2013.

## El Anatsui Wraps Entire Building Façade for Paris Triennial

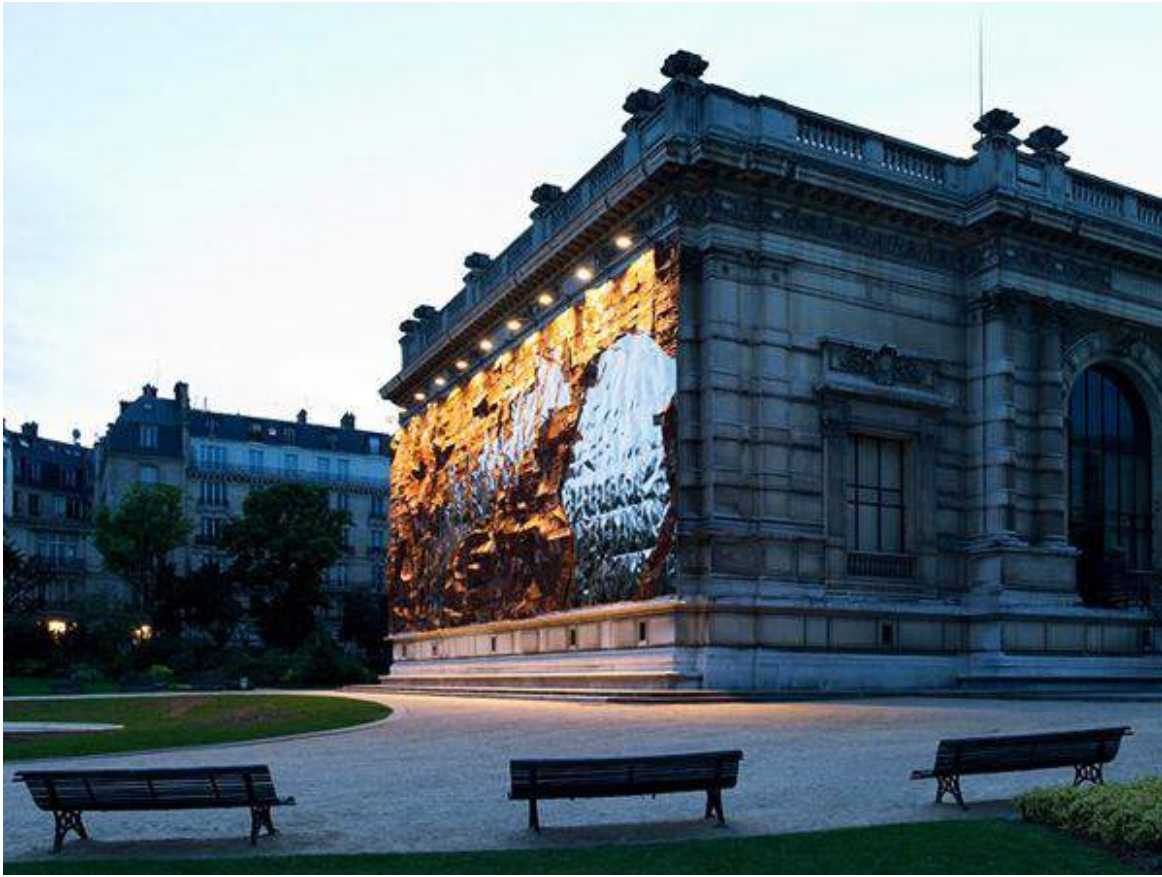


As part of the third **Paris Triennial**, which opened in April and continues through late August, the Ghanaian, Nigeria-based sculptor **El Anatsui** — known for his rippling, quilt-like wall pieces made of aluminum tied together with copper wire — has wrapped an entire outer wall of the Galliera at the **Musée de la Mode de la Ville de Paris** in just such a metallic cloak marked with shiny and reflective patches.





The installation, “Broken Bridge” (2012), is one of two pieces that the leading African artist contributed to the sprawling exhibition, whose theme this year is “Intense Proximity.” Anatsui’s other featured work, “Tiled Flower Garden” (2012), is a large floor piece installed at the newly renovated Palais de Tokyo.



The two Parisian installations are part of a big year of Anatsui, whose retrospective of large-scale pieces “Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui,” has just opened at the **Akron Art Museum**, where it continues through October 7, by which time he will have opened an exhibition of new works at his New York gallery, **Jack Shainman**.

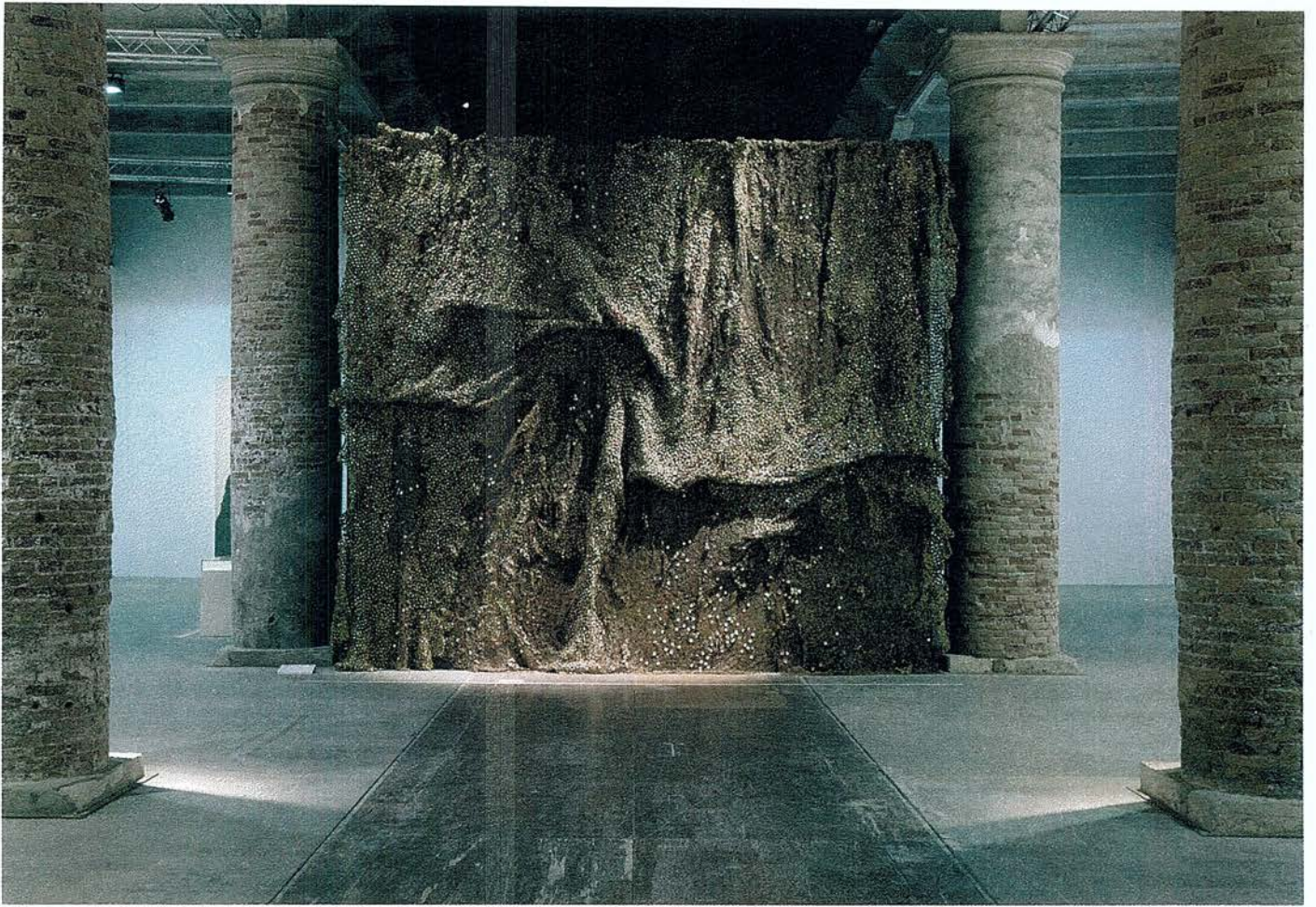
— Benjamin Sutton

(Photos by Erik Lasalle. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

Defining  
Contemporary  
Art—25 years  
in 200 pivotal  
artworks









El Anatsui

*Dusasa I and II*

Found aluminium, copper wire

2 parts, 731 x 914 cm and 546 x 655 cm

## ● Okwui Enwezor

At the 2007 Venice Biennale, El Anatsui presented *Dusasa I and II*, a pair of sculptures shown in the Arsenale as part of the international exhibition. This was not the only venue in Venice where the sculptor's large-scale work was on view that summer; a mammoth piece draped across the facade of the Palazzo Fortuny completed a trifecta of sculptures whose grandness was unmatched by any other artwork in the city. But it was in the Arsenale that his work was notably given pride of place, positioned as it was between two brick columns at the end of a lengthy walk down the enfilade of galleries, soaring first to the ceiling and then falling horizontally in a cascade of crinkled, scrunched folds that shifted from shimmering gold to hardened vermillion.

Approaching the paired works, the viewer saw *Dusasa I* wrapped around the columns, which also served as its supporting structure, in an ungainly sweep of folds and tucks. One immediately had the impression of billowing movement in the sculpture, of its dazzling hues heaving. Rising several metres high and spreading more than nine metres across, the sculpture either arrested viewers on the spot or beckoned for closer inspection – in which case what may have appeared from a distance like a tapestry, pieced together from panels of the most intricate Kente weaving, revealed itself to be flattened pieces of aluminium (in fact, thousands of liquor-bottle caps) held together with copper wire. The tendrils had been pieced together in blocks of colour, forming the flat panels used to compose the whole. The final finished sculpture can be installed on the floor, hung on the wall or draped over an armature.

Against the flamboyance of *Dusasa I*, Anatsui conceived *Dusasa II* as a subtle counterpoint, both in its compositional format and its chromatic field. The differences in the units that make up *Dusasa I* and *Dusasa II* are key. While the first work is formed out of flattened rectangles, *Dusasa II* is made up entirely of discs, thousands of round caps that appear like distant galaxies, almost like pinched stars or tinkling gold coins. *Dusasa II* is also different in its more subdued topographical shape. Rather than flowing out like a river of molten

lava as *Dusasa I* does, its muted, almost monochromatic surface is very much in keeping with this restraint. Its spatial orientation moves towards the centre of the piece, with horizontal creases fanning out into swathes to join vertical lines that flow down like rivulets.

Anatsui's formal control belies the radical sensibility that has long shaped his experiments in sculptural formats. Like other major sculptors who have experimented with new formats to test the limits and possibilities of sculptural plasticity – Richard Serra and Anish Kapoor come to mind – Anatsui generates new plastic possibilities each time he shifts from one material to another; witness his wood sculptures created with a chainsaw or his 1970s ceramic series *Broken Pots*, each of which is structured via ideas of negation and fragmentation. What often appears a formalist approach in Anatsui's work is most likely arrived at through a series of conscious detours or his openness to chance. At the centre of his practice is the use of fragmentation as a language to resist the limitations that

any one method may impose on his formal choices. While an immediate reading of the use of bottle caps may be redolent of the view of recycling in Africa – what I will call the *Tokunbo*<sup>1</sup> effect of readapted obsolescence – Anatsui first saw them as raw material that could be harnessed to powerful aesthetic effect. The miracle of what he has achieved with them in the last decade is that the lowly material looks nothing like what it is. And its evident sculptural qualities are precisely what Anatsui was interested in, rather than an impulse to redeem the discards of commodity culture. The sculptures do suggest the possibility of being paintings or tapestry; a kind of colour-field abstraction pervades the works, and some viewers have even suggested Gustav Klimt as an influence. Despite this ascribed painterliness, however, Anatsui never thinks of these works in terms of painting, but as objects – in short, as sculpture. Even comparing them to tapestry is anathema to his formal intentions.





## At the Clark, Social Commentary Made Beautiful

By KAREN WILKIN

*Williamstown, Mass.*

What more unlikely combination than the most genial of the Impressionists, a pair of hip German photographers, an African superstar sculptor, and the Berkshire hills? Yet the current offerings at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, amid the rolling landscape here, include works by Camille Pissarro, photographs by Candida Höfer and Thomas Struth, and "tapestries" by El Anatsui. Don't assume a sympathetic connection between Impressionism and the rural setting; "Pissarro's People," organized by Richard R. Brettell for the Clark and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, concentrates not on landscapes but on Pissarro's less-known images of family and friends, rural laborers, servants, crowds at street markets, and occasionally his own features. Since subject matter seems to have dictated choice, the result is the proverbial mixed bag, albeit an engaging and informative one, with rewarding high points that offset any lesser inclusions.

The exhibition aims at presenting an unfamiliar side of Pissarro and also investigating his social philosophy and politics, as revealed by his images of people. Much is made of Pissarro's "outsider" status among his fellow Impressionists, as a Sephardic Jew born in 1830 to French parents on a Danish island in the Caribbean; (he died in Paris in 1903). Much is made, too, of his lifelong embrace of anarchism, and his friendships with radical political writers and theorists. We are encouraged to keep social theory in mind and think about images of domestic servants and rural workers in terms of the dignity of labor, the necessity of rest, and Pissarro's hope that one day everyone's time would be divided between productive work and restorative leisure. Views of bustling markets are not demonstrations of incipient capitalism, we learn, but rather of healthy exchange; Pissarro, we are reminded, sold his work, providing everything from commissioned paintings to multiple prints, at different prices, for different buyers.

It's all thought-provoking and undoubtedly true—a series of tough-minded drawings, titled "Turpitudes Sociales" (social disgraces), were made as political instruction for two of his nieces—but the best works claim our attention for their aesthetic merit, not their political subtexts. Among them are affectionately observed images of Pissarro's wife and his children at various ages, including a touching group of a favorite daughter, whom he drew and painted repeatedly, ending with a wrenching lithograph of her on her death bed, age 11. Generally, the works on paper are more relaxed and more powerful than the paintings. A splendid pastel drawing of a peasant woman lying in the grass, c. 1880, has more vitality and visual weight than an 1882 canvas of the same subject. A group of rural markets, painted on paper, and related lithographs, made in the 1880s and '90s, are notably vigorous, with their all-over expanses of densely packed figures.

Many works bear witness to Pissarro's close connections with his peers—there's a superb lithograph of Paul Cézanne in a strange hat—and with younger painters, such as Paul Gauguin, and Georges Seurat, for whom he seems to have been colleague, mentor and student, in what was usually a fruitful exchange, with the possible exception of some stiff, pointillist-inflected works whose red-blue-yellow palette makes you wish Pissarro hadn't paid attention to Seurat's advice.

The most potent works in the show are the self-portraits, early and late, recording Pissarro's dispassionate scrutiny of his distinctive features, half hidden by his long patriarchal beard. In the last, painted the year of his death with dense, urgent stabs of pigment, he gazes steadily from behind glasses, white beard set off by a black coat and soft black hat. Behind him, a glimpse of Paris through a window. This fierce little painting is almost alone worth the trip to Williamstown.



'Delta' (2010) by El Anatsui. *Courtesy El Anatsui/Jack Shainman Gallery*

Which is not to disparage the Clark's other summer exhibitions, organized by the museum itself. "Spaces: Photographs by Candida Höfer and Thomas Struth" presents two very different, austere inquiries into the nature of public space and what we do there. Ms. Höfer's often elaborately decorated interiors—here libraries and research centers—are eerily unpopulated; we are made to focus on the geometry of the room and the particulars of its furnishings, so that the images become meditations on time, as much as on the character of place. Excerpts from Mr. Struth's series showing people in museums have special resonance, installed in close proximity to the Clark's permanent collection. We have passed through corridors hung with Géricaults and Corots en route to Mr. Struth's series about visitors in front of Velázquez's "Las Meninas," in the Prado. We view images of the viewers of a work of art (images that are themselves works of art), replicating, at several removes, the action that captured Mr. Struth's attention in the first place. As we ponder these layers of reality we realize that in at least one of Mr. Struth's crowds, no one looks at Velázquez's masterwork.

Up the hill, three of the Ghanaian-born, Nigerian-based El Anatsui's metal tapestries enhance the galleries of the Clark's Stone Hill Center, designed by Tadao Ando. Laboriously linked together from the metal bands on liquor bottles, the supple, richly colored sheets evoke the brilliant patterns of traditional kente cloth, with a nod at colonialism, waste, recycling and other highly charged issues. Draped elegantly against the walls of Mr. Ando's well-proportioned galleries, El Anatsui's tapestries look beautiful. Period. We can read about the politics later.

*Ms. Wilkin writes about art for the Journal.*



## Community Fabric: El Anatsui at the Clark

by Leigh Anne Miller 07/21/11

The Ghanaian artist El Anatsui, who has lived, worked and taught sculpture in Nigeria since the mid-'70s, has shown his shimmering metallic tapestries all over the world. A small but luminous show of recent work is on view this summer and fall at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Museum in Williamstown, Mass. In a conversation with the art historian Chika Okeke-Agulu printed in the exhibition catalogue, Anatsui discusses how his sculptures made from liquor bottle tops address African history: "The currency of drink happened to be used in paying for slaves which were brought to the Americas, where they produced the raw materials for more drink, which went back into Europe and then came back into Africa. So I think drink has a lot to do with the link between the three continents, that historical fact."



Delta, 2010. found aluminum and copper wire. 15 ft. 3 in. x 11 ft. 3 in. Private collection. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY.; Intermittent Signals, 2009. found aluminum and copper wire. 11 ft. x 35 ft. The Broad Art Foundation, Santa Monica. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY.

Before Anatsui began turning recycled liquor bottle tops into hanging textiles, he worked mostly with wood and clay. Initially, the wood had a round, irregular shape, like the trays market women used to display their wares. "When I finished school, my idea was that I should work with something that is indigenous to my locality," Anatsui explained as we wandered around Stone Hill, the Clark's Tadao Ando-designed annex that houses Anatsui's exhibition. "I discovered this intriguing body of signs and symbols that are printed onto fabric. Each of them is an encapsulation of an aphorism or a wise saying, some proverb. I would take the symbols and engrave them on the [wood from the] trees. I was using pyrography, using a hot rod to make imprints on wood. So that was how I started." After working with engraved wood trays, Anatsui moved on to clay. His "Broken Pots" series looked at destruction as a prerequisite for regeneration, "like how a seed has to rot before it sprouts." These are not included in the current showing.

Anatsui came back to wood, this time carving large hunks with a chainsaw. "I worked with that for probably the longest stretch, 10 to 15 years. When they are mounted, you see them as a unit. But you are able to change their sequence. If you bought it you can ignore the sequence and do it your own way. So the idea of work that changes in format, and then in meaning, was hinted at in this stage."

Anatsui has worked out of a large, busy studio in Nsukka since the mid-'90s. He typically employs 20–30 assistants who comb through bags of recycled African liquor bottle tops, attaching the flattened and folded metal bits with twists of copper wire. "They are not artists. I just get regular people and teach them how to work," Anatsui said. "Some have done two years, some up to four. These are young chaps who have finished high school and are studying for university exams. The competition is very tight, so they study for a few years, they stay with me and keep taking the exams."

The recently opened Stone Hill has two main gallery spaces, each flooded with natural light. One houses a single work, *Intermittent Signals* (2009). Thirty-five feet long, it stretches from midway along the gallery's wall around a corner, pulling away, then sagging and bucking till the end droops onto the wood floor.

Anatsui works with a surprising lack of site-specificity, and is not involved in installation. "I normally give the leeway or the freedom to the people to install it how they like; there is nothing specific about it. I want to have the element of surprise."

The other two pieces in the show—*Strips of the Earth's Skin* (2008) and *Delta* (2010)—have a greater sense of movement. There are no open windows at Stone Hill, yet it feels like they are fluttering in a non-existent breeze. *Strips of the Earth's Skin* looks less like a tapestry and more like bits of frayed fabric drying on a clothesline. A mostly silver section weaves through the hanging swaths of red and yellow, anchoring them in place.

By contrast, *Delta* is a flaglike hanging that falls almost to the floor. It's divided vertically into two main sections: a rippled, heavily textured pattern made up of thousands of tiny squares and whorls on the right, and a silvery background on the left, which is cut with diagonal strips and, in the upper left corner, a patch that looks like the worn-out knee of an old pair of pants.

It seems impossible that the interlocking patterns that structure these pieces aren't planned or sketched out in advance. But Anatsui works intuitively, flattening and folding the malleable bottle tops into patches that look like chevrons or madras or vintage gum wrappers. "It's like doing a painting on a light scale. There's time to stop and say, bring me some yellow," he said. "Because of the slow nature of progress, I don't need to make preparatory drawings." It's certainly a far cry from working with a chainsaw.

A touring retrospective, "El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote to You About Africa," is on view this fall at the Denver Art Museum, Sept. 2–Dec. 1.



# ARTFORUM

## El Anatsui

DAVIS MUSEUM AND CULTURAL CENTER, WELLESLEY COLLEGE  
106 Central Street  
March 30–June 26



El Anatsui, *Akua's Surviving Children*, 1996, wood and metal, dimensions variable.

Ghanaian-born, Nigeria-based El Anatsui's vast aluminous sheets of flattened, fastened liquor-bottle caps have become so recognizable that it may be surprising to recall they soared to super-visibility just two Venice Biennales ago. Binding mass commercial cast-offs into sensuous, spangled wholes, their hand-recycled textures and kentelike designs variegated Venetian patinas (and the Arsenale's own maritime-industrial past) with the heterogeneous material histories of modern West Africa. Filling two floors of Rafael Moneo's sunny cubic gallery, the US debut of Anatsui's seminal touring retrospective dives deep past the artist's culturally representative status and other ambassadorial shallows to illuminate four decades of rich, manifold graphic and sculptural work.

Lineages and legacies preoccupy throughout. Resembling unearthed caches or hatcheries, ceramic and manganese sculptures like the cranial *Chambers of Memory*, 1977, and wriggly sprawl *Imbroglia*, 1979, fuse artifactual with organic forms. In *Akua's Surviving Children*, 1996, a meditation on the Danish slave trade, singed driftwood logs become a jaggy procession of young and grown, uncannily lifelike though sea-tumbled and faceless. This poetics of salvage articulates tacit forms of community in the present, too, convened by labor or consumption. Wiring together milk-tin lids into gleaming, huddling pyramids, *Peak Project*, 1999, implies the common household reuse of the emptied tins themselves. With a wooden mortar used for palm-oil extraction as its torso, *Adinsibuli Stood Tall*, 1995, resurrects a pummeled workstation.

Collaborative work hours might be mistaken for alchemy in the nine marvelously varied, jangly yet billowing bottle-cap sculptures here, ranging from tiled to netlike in structure, diagrammatic to metaphoric in legibility, per sun-struck *Oasis*, 2008, splashed by bluish white, or baggy *Stressed World*, 2011. To be displayed however installers wish—like the artist's inscribed, interchangeably paneled wooden wall tablets—they exemplify, and far from monopolize, the synergetic beauty and myriad longevities of Anatsui's work.

— Chinnie Ding

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**EL**

*ANATSUI*

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*BY DREW HINSHAW, PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREA BERGART*







El Anatsui's studio squats a good toss back from the dusty shoulder of a Nigerian country road typical for this part of the interior. It's the kind of winding, upland drive where trucks topple over pretty often, and women walking on the margins of the highway announce the outskirts of each passing town. The road weaves from Enugu, the last airport of any girth this far east, up palm-leaf-lined foothills into Cameroon. The largest of the towns that border it is Nsukka, a quiet university campus ringed by an intersection or two's worth in food stalls and secondhand-clothing booths. There is a small amount of activity on the campus, which houses a sculpture garden, a hotel, a restaurant, and one day, a stadium. But beyond that, the town suggests the sort of place that drifts into being like an extra lane on the motorway, then dissipates into roadside brush. One of the last nonresidential buildings on that road is Anatsui's. The last, by my reckoning, is a bar.

From the population of unemployed young men in Nsukka, the Ghanaian sculptor Anatsui hires between five and forty studio hands at any given time. They come and go under his employment, twisting thousands of bottle caps into resplendent tapestries. There are worse, but certainly less monotonous ways to earn a living. (Next time you see an El Anatsui, imagine making one.) And yet, for all its monotony, the handiwork of their chafed knuckles has blown wide the boundaries of contemporary art, starred in all the right cover shoots, and come back postmarked from the world's exotic destinations: Italy, Australia, Brazil, Japan, the United States.

Enter Anatsui, "El." "Prof." The enigmatic boss breezes through here roughly three times a week to coach his workers, to teach them new methods of hammering, twisting, bashing, mangling, gouging, and bending bottle caps. He describes himself as their "coordinator," the factory foreman in charge of "quality control," but at times he seems as distant from his work as we, his foreign visitors. That remove becomes increasingly comical, almost laugh-out-loud ironic — he is a funny man. His facial features slide wryly to one side like an emoticon with a backslash in it. He chuckles for mysterious reasons, and pursues a life that is, for a world-renowned art hero, delightfully mundane. His daily schedule revolves around fixed events like lunch (1 p.m.), or his nap (2 p.m.), which he enjoys in the same modest walkup where he's lived for 33 years. Equally timeworn, equally modest are his friends in Nsukka's Senior Staff Club, who gather nightly to play checkers and drink beer. Surrounded by such voluble professor types, El tends to be friendly, but shy. Sometimes, he gets high.

**“The hand for me is the most important tool that someone can work with, the most meaningful, and the most sensitive”**

This, the scholars tell us, is a great African First, the first contemporary African artist in the Met's permanent collection, among the first to blossom beyond the African art circuit — yet one of the few to stay in Africa, to situate his art and career not in juxtaposition to the West, but in detachment from it. For Westerners, Anatsui's geographic distance, the inaccessibility of his Nsukka base, and the general fog of a far-off culture feeds into his ironic distance. *Time* magazine's Richard Lacayo sees him as the continent's first postmodern hipster, a passable judgment.

And yet, behind his dispassionate charm, this professor on the verge of retirement feels something more like a last; a human conclusion on Africa's first half-century in nationhood. He is not young: Ghana was the British colony Gold Coast when he was born; the nearest multimillion-person megacity, Lagos, was a slumbering, swamp-side port of 300,000. He and his Senior Staff Club colleagues have endured social, political, economic, and cultural change on a scale that few north of the Sahara can comprehend. They have witnessed a continent lurch from under- to overpopulation, seen spacious cities fill to their perimeters with trash, traffic, and job seekers. As teenagers, they chucked off colonialism. As adults, they laid low under an all-too-revolving cast of dictators and quick-lived democracies, many of each brought down in the night by soldiers. Shortly after El arrived for art training at a university named after Ghana's president, the president was exiled, and his Afro-centric curriculum was scrapped for something more British and bland. The intelligentsia, including many artists, protested by leaving for Europe and America.



Needless to say, the museums and art colleges were neglected. This state of flux went on for decades. “We are,” El says of his generation, “products of that transition period.”

Maybe, Anatsui gives himself too little credit, however. Strolling through campus, Prof seems as unencumbered by his epoch as a product of it. He’s followed his own path, and that compulsive desire to go, see, and make use of the unexamined carries a whiff of regenerative, refreshing innocence. Consider, for example, his decision to come here.

“Colonialism denigrated everything that was indigenous,” he says. “When I finished school, the literature on African art, on contemporary art, was very few and far in between. The few that you would see would feature artists mostly from Nigeria.”

So he went to Nigeria.

The world has places, even very poor places, that seem to magically lure out artists from their woodwork, but Nsukka might just be the most improbable of them all: The local university broke ground here because the land was cheap, and in its own hilly, humble way, gorgeous. El’s elderly pals remind me that this is “the heart of Igbo-land,” a geographical appellation that brings to mind mostly mournful associations. Some of them speak economically about it, over their checkers and beer, about the civil war, the brief hope of an Igbo state, the way England and Russia helped Nigeria’s army starve Igbos into submission. A lot of people died here, and not a lot of things-to-do came back, so checkers is understandably popular. Tonight’s tournament stops when the power fails — their generator revs into action, then promptly sputters and dies.

It is, I suspect, a landscape historically shaped to encourage resignation, and yet El arrived here in 1975, in the wake of misery with an energy that is not only defiant, but to an outsider, illogical. Remarkably, he was not alone. The Nsukka Group was here — provocative Nigerian men with their eyes on modernity, who dabbled in the centuries-old craft of Igbo women’s body painting and transferred it to internationally recognized mediums, like watercolors. El admires their ways, but prefers a brush of a different sort: the chainsaw. He likes its “violence, the deliberateness, the arbitrariness.”

“The thing about the chainsaw is it’s not sensitive to the fine grain of wood,” he says. “It’s just making a line and that’s it.”

Chainsaw in hand, El has a metaphor in mind. In the mid-’70s, Africans of virtually every nation were coping, publicly and internally, with some of human history’s most arbitrarily drawn lines: the borders bequeathed to this new Africa by colonialism. More than features on a map, questions over borders weighed heavily on the minds of the era’s thinkers. In the flashpoints of history — during the midnight coups and the midday riots — and in the soft, subtle moments of the average day, Africans like El of all stations were making complicated choices about how to view one another, as members of a nation, Ghana, or an ethnic minority, Ewe. The process was both literally and psychologically violent, and predicated on lines that, aesthetically, were eerily, inexplicably, inhumanly straight.

“It’s clear in so many instances that they used a ruler,” El says.

But if he has every artistic license for a blistering critique of Europe’s border fetish, it’s not enough for him — he’d rather not merely replicate the stiff brutality of colonialism in his art. Instead, he humanizes the chainsaw’s work, hewing wood panels with clumsy, veering lines that on second glance look nothing at all like African borders.

“It’s directed by the hand,” he says of his chainsaw technique. “And the hand for me is the most important tool that someone can work with, the most meaningful, and the most sensitive.”

Here’s the thing about El: When he talks about “the hand,” it’s entirely unclear whose hands he means. Certainly not his own — he tends to wash that pair of responsibility and leave important decisions, like how to hang his art, in someone else’s. His wood panels, for instance, hang from left to right, but follow no order.

“I put numbers behind each strip of wood, but that’s just a starting point,” he says. “It’s not the end. You could even decide to wipe the numbers off, and figure out your own way of relating the individual pieces.”

“But there is this fear,” he continues, “that the artist is making a fixed work, that he is a dictator, that he dictates all the decisions and you shouldn’t contribute to it. But I say, no, you are free to use this. I’m giving you loose data. Do whatever you want with it.”



El Anatsui

*Dusasa II*

2008

Found aluminum and copper wire

240 x 240 x 6 inches

COURTESY OF JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK





“I believe that when hands touch things, then they leave a charge — an electric charge. So you can imagine there are so many charges on all those things”

Above:  
El Anatsui  
*Bleeding Takari II*  
2007  
Aluminum and copper wire  
155 x 227 inches  
COURTESY OF JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

What curators tend to do with his “loose data,” however, is balk, fret, panic, despair, and place multiple undoubtedly expensive phone calls to Nsukka wondering how it all fits together. They are uncomfortable with Anatsui’s hip indifference, trained to “contribute” nothing, and deeper than that, “they are afraid,” he laments. But one can understand their trepidation. The wood panels come with numbers, sure, but begin arbitrarily with numbers like twenty, raising various questions about the missing one through nineteen. His tapestries come with even less, aside from their plastic wrapping and a vague sense that such things are meant to be hung. Occasionally, the studio manager packs a thread spool — sometimes, these things need sewing.

Frequently, he finds his work tagged under the shorthand heading “textile,” perhaps because rarely in Western circuits has a sculptor been so *laissez-faire* about how his sculptures are to be hung and exhibited. As a result, the wry, aging art professor has a tough time convincing otherwise receptive audiences what his art is, exactly. “Sculpture,” he explains, “that has textile connotations.”

But from the misery he causes curators, the professor extracts two themes. First, he believes in approaching life with an improvisational spirit that is equally West African and contemporary. “I think I have developed an unconscious interest in works that are able to be transmuted, changed, even in subtle, subtle ways,” he says. “It’s important to me because life is not a fixed denominator. It is something that is constantly changing by the minute, by the hour. I want my artwork to have that characteristic.”

Second, he believes in sculpture that brings together the contributions of seemingly unrelated individuals — not just the curator who decided to hang the tapestry “hotdog” rather than “hamburger” style, but the waitress who once popped open a jug of Black Gold liquor in a certain forceful way, or the distillery worker who smushed said cap to the bottom of some bag. Their interconnected efforts are a part of the story Anatsui tells.

“I believe that when hands touch things, then they leave a charge,” he says. “An electric charge. So you can imagine there are so many charges on all those things. They come with a lot of electric energy.”

Back in the studio, most of the staff’s “electric energy” has been channeled into jovial pre-lunch foolery.







Their “coordinator” is out sick, and in his absence we are all futzing around with his tapestries. These things are a delight to play with, to pick up, to warp, to violently throw down — they are more sturdy than museum ethics would lead you to believe. This elastic buoyancy of the art, if largely unrecognized in our visual culture, seems intentional and important; the way the silver caps tug and pull at each other approximates nothing so much as the interaction of individuals in a glimmering metropolis. Once in a while, for kicks, Anatsui’s studio hands take the tapestries out to play. They twist, toss, and balance them in silly ways, or at least they do when foreigners come to watch them work.

The longer I stay here, observing the studio assistants unsupervised, the more I start to see their role in this art as central. This bottle cap drudgery is monotonous and repetitive, but in its own labor-intensive way, it’s expressive. “It’s like a mantra,” Anatsui says, and even if he is doing what all small-scale employers do — embellishing the glory of his underling’s busywork — their toil is certainly the most transformative step in his process. The bartenders and curators contribute, Anatsui coordinates, but it’s here, in the studio, under the physical force of their thumb-tips, that the work is reborn from refuse to artful relics; from undifferentiated mass garbage to specifically bent bottle caps that reflect the unique hand mannerisms of the studio worker who shaped them.

“They all have their special touches,” Anatsui says.

The seven studio hands I spoke to on an ordinary Tuesday described their labor as “managing,” which is what young Nigerian men call most forms of employment around these rural doldrums. They talk of better lives. In the sunlit corner of Anatsui’s studio, an unmarried man chats idly about entering politics, “to be a hero,” while Moses, a soft-spoken guy banging bottle caps with a hammer, wonders aloud how he could buy a digital camera to open an instant photo booth — a mildly artistic venture. When I tell Ayonuday Ifeanyi,

29, how far this artwork will travel, that sculptures like the one he’s stitching have draped European landmarks and New York City galleries, his laughter turns into a disarming wheeze, a hiss.

He takes a second to retrieve his breath.

It’s nighttime, and the professor and I are back at his apartment. The power is out — it’s been shaky ever since that checkers game — and Prof is speaking softly over the glow of an emergency lantern, addressing the peculiarities of his craft: Did you know that there are over 80 brands of liquor in southeast Nigeria alone? Amazing. Anatsui alludes to a number, which, when multiplied by the 80-something, will estimate the bottles and lives wasted on hooch.

“People always refer to what I do as recycling, and I say, no, no, no, no, ... I’m not recycling anything. I’m transforming them into different dimensions, into spiritual props”



Mathematically, his tapestries depict a staggering quantity of cruelty. The jangling, roped-up bottle caps are, in their metallic aesthetics, entirely unsentimental. When one considers the joblessness and despair they represent, they become almost hilariously tragic. I ask El if his work is laughing at, along with, or despite that cruelty. Is he an optimist? Pessimist?

“I’m looking at things in a more sophisticated way,” he says. “Metaphorically, I’m working with the lifting of the spirits.”

A beat later he goes in for the clarification. “The bottle caps, for instance. They are now things that you are going to respect. You’re not going to use them to cover drink; you’re going to now contemplate them. The down-trodden are now presented as very useful and important.”

He continues. “People always refer to what I do as recycling, and I say, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. I’m not recycling anything. I’m transforming them into different dimensions, into spiritual props. I bring them back to human beings again.”

We’re drifting deep into the sort of nebulous metaphysical art-speak that unnerves me, away from the bread-and-butter sociology I’m comfortable with, so I ask Prof if he’s encouraging a transformation in society.

“A transformation of mundane things into more respected and more, you know, revered,” he replies. “I think this is the crazy thing — you

can’t do that in society. Society has to have its rungs, from the lowly to the highly. You can’t have all of it up there.”

He pauses. “So maybe I’m just fantasizing.”

Just then, the lights flare on and a gigantic electric hum jogs Nsukka back to life.



# Nka

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## CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ART

EL ANATSUI  
ROGER BALLEEN  
LOULOU CHERINET  
MESCHAC GABA  
SIMON GUSH  
KIRA LYNN HARRIS  
FRED HOLLAND  
STEVE McQUEEN  
WANGECHI MUTU  
CHRIS OFILI  
GEORGE OSODI  
OUSMANE SEMBÈNE  
YINKA SHONIBARE MBE  
CULLEN WASHINGTON





## EL ANATSUI

Jack Shainman Gallery,  
New York

February 10–March 13, 2010

In the past decade or so, the Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui has focused on exploring the possibilities of stitched “cloth” made from recycled liquor-bottle caps. Any engagement with this work, which is usually large and hung on walls, is bound to fall almost immediately into a series of metaphorical substitutions. The “meaning” of the pieces is deferred, and the viewer’s first reaction is to locate visual cognates. Standing in front of recent Anatsui “sculptures” (as he calls them), one is reminded of other materials: woven cloth, printed cloth, chain mail, mosaic, brick facade, architectural integuments, tapestry, pointillist paintings, fin de siècle Viennese art, road maps, atlases, animal hides, and so on. The sculptures are changing from one thing to the other swiftly and smoothly.

The spectacular recent exhibition at the Jack Shainman Gallery came hard on the heels of a similar show,

*Zebra Crossing*, at the same venue two years ago. In that time, Anatsui’s considerable reputation has grown—he has had shows at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African Art, and his works have been acquired by the Metropolitan Museum, among others—and he is now undoubtedly an international art star of the first rank. For this reason the discussion of his work is now also tied up with his “overnight” success. There seem to be two critical camps where Anatsui is concerned: those who recognize that this success has been decades in the making—Anatsui has been exhibiting actively since the early 1970s—and contextualize the recent work as part of a coherent oeuvre, and those whose interest is almost exclusively in the sensational metal pieces he has made since 1999, who limit their interest to the Anatsui the world “discovered” following the presentation of *Dusasa I* and *Dusasa II* at the Venice Biennale in 2007.

Although the latter view can hardly be credited, it would perhaps to be churlish to overlook its one vital insight: that these recent works do mark a significant shift of direction in Anatsui’s artistic practice. The shift is not in technique per se, since the “repair and remix” approach has been integral to his work through the years; nor is it simply a matter of me-

dia, as the move from wood to clay to metal can be seen as a kind of natural progression, a continuing elaboration of the project of sourcing his artistic materials from his immediate environment and favoring discarded or overlooked material over expensive ones. Rather, the shift is a matter of aesthetics.

One of the most suggestive ironies of the recent work is that these materials—the mass-produced detritus of consumption in an industrialized context—are arguably cheaper and less inherently valuable than, say, wood or earth, which at least have the argument of “authenticity” in their favor. Discarded foil is simply trash. Yet the works in this exhibition, pieces like *Intermittent Signals*, *Depletion*, and *Anonymous Creature*, are beautiful, and their beauty cannot easily be gainsaid or elided.

*Beauty* is a term that causes some critical discomfort, with good reason, but the concept is very much at issue here. By transforming the ersatz luxury of glittering gold-colored bottle-neck wrappers and silvery bottle caps into a quite different kind of luxury, Anatsui manages to pull off what is probably the most impressive visual coup of his career, given the chasm between raw material and finished product. That the genuine grandeur of the art pieces stems from precisely



El Anatsui, *Aww*, 2009. Aluminum and copper wire, 198 × 300 in. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York





*Depletion*, 2009. Aluminum and copper wire, 150 × 372 in. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

the same optics and substances as the sham grandeur of the bottle caps is of no disadvantage. At a distance, all the viewer sees is a sublime and beautiful work. Close up, the source material is obvious, but even this does not spoil the effect, as the caps and foils have been worked into repeating modules that have been intricately and expertly joined with copper wire.

The labor in the pieces is intense and time consuming. Anatsui employs a small army of assistants, and this places the sculptures in the class of markers of wealth, like tapestries and rugs, in which the value comes, at least in part, from the sheer number of man-hours sunk into the creation of the object. To look at the thirty-five-foot span of *Intermittent Signals* is to consider, however briefly, that blisters must have ensued from its manufacture (to evoke that word in the sense of things “made by hand”) in Nsukka, Nigeria, where Anatsui lives; perhaps this persistent trace of manual labor is part of what keeps the sculptures from being merely decorative.

The semiological significance of work done by many hands is not lost on Anatsui—indeed, few of the resonances viewers find in his work are ever lost on him, as befits a man who is both a maker of and a thinker about art—thus in works like *Duvor* (which is not in the Shainman show), the title, meaning “communal cloth,” anticipates one set of possible readings: cloth made by a team, and made to be enjoyed by many viewers. Anat-

sui’s “nomad aesthetic” (as he calls it) remains fundamental, and in the recent work he continues his practice of leaving decisions about installation to the gallery owner or curator. The pieces in the Shainman show were hung in Anatsui’s absence by gallery co-owner Claude Simard, and, it must be noted, at no disadvantage to them. As usual, horizontal folds, which give the “cloth” a deceptively heavy appearance, are favored over vertical ones. None of the pieces is hung flat, although *Bukpa Old Town* and *Bukpa New Town*, a pair of 2009 sculptures that with their red and black striations on shimmering fields look like ordnance maps, are not extensively folded.

These works seem to be part of an expansion of Anatsui’s artistic vision beyond evocations of the *adinkra* and *kente* cloth to which critics have tied him. *Anonymous Creature* is, like the *Bukpa* pieces, unclothlike, alternately looking like a pelt and a continental map. That the woven aspect of the pieces, along with their connections to traditional Ghanaian fabric, has hitherto been so emphasized in the literature perhaps says more about curatorial thinking in the United States and the United Kingdom—which is keen to establish a clear narrative between “classical” African art and contemporary African artistic practice—than about Anatsui’s own priorities. As he said in an interview at the Metropolitan Museum in 2008, he will persist with this particular line of exploration

until another avenue opens up. Judging from his past work, that new line might well have curators scrambling for a convenient “African” narrative. Anatsui himself is more interested in “playing”—he often uses this word in discussing his practice—and seems eager to have curators and gallery owners participate in this play with him. The work, he has said, “shouldn’t have a determinate form.” This introduction of chance and variability into sculpture might well be seen, in the future, as one of Anatsui’s most important contributions to the field.

Anatsui’s works typically have descriptive titles, in keeping with his open artistic ethos. His titles are there not to tell us what to think but, rather, to open up the doors of perception to the inevitable massing of metaphors. Everything is welcome, the artist seems to be saying, both the high and the low, the obvious and the hidden, the temporal pleasure of alcohol and the spiritual majesty of monumental forms. He invites multivalence. The “meaning” is in this onrush of visual cognates, and the viewer cannot but sense in these latest masterpieces the way the work of many hands can reach out and excite many minds.

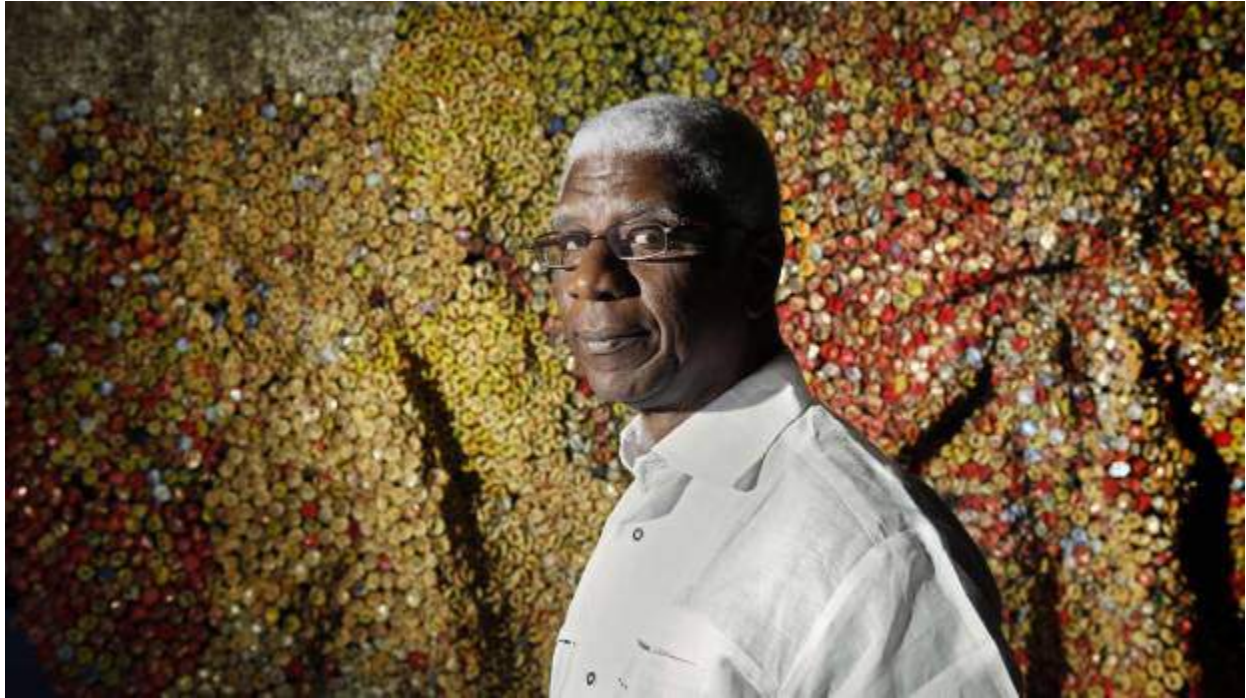
*Yemi Onafuwa is a doctoral candidate at Columbia University, where he studies both sixteenth-century Flemish visual culture and contemporary African art.*

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## El Anatsui's shimmering echoes of a painful past

*Saturday October 2, 2010 - James Adams, Toronto*



Ghanaian visual artist El Anatsui and his work at Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum. —The Globe and Mail

El Anatsui thinks it's apt that Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum is the premiere venue for a major retrospective of his work that will be touring North America over the next three years.

Toronto, after all, was the first city the Ghana-born artist "came to when I travelled out of Africa for the first time," he recalled during an interview earlier this week. That was in the summer of 1978, when, as a 34-year-old aspiring sculptor and lecturer in the department of fine and applied arts at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, he attended the 10th International Sculpture Conference at York University.

The Toronto premiere – it is Anatsui's first solo show in Canada, and features 60 pieces in various media – is something of a coup for the ROM. The retrospective, subtitled *When I Last Wrote to You About Africa*, was originally scheduled to open this year in the new Museum for African Art on Manhattan's Fifth Avenue. But because that space is still under construction, the debut slot was offered to the ROM, where the museum's Institute for Contemporary Culture had earlier expressed interest in being part of the Anatsui tour.

Now 66, Anatsui has been a practising artist for more than four decades, much of that as a well-known figure among the cognoscenti of contemporary African art. But his international profile has heightened considerably in the past eight years, thanks to his audacious foray into





shimmering, highly colourful metallic tapestries, which he makes from liquor-bottle caps and sleeves linked by copper wire.

Trained as a sculptor, Anatsui had long used “common” materials in his work, including wood, ceramics, even discarded lids from tins of evaporated milk. But the chance discovery in 2002 of a large bag of discarded caps for bottles of whisky, schnapps, rum, gin and

vodka – while Anatsui was walking near the southern Nigerian university – triggered what proved to be a fruitful, not to mention provocative, string of associations.

As Anatsui has noted, alcohol was one of the first commodities “brought by [European traders] to exchange for goods in Africa.” Later, rum became a staple of the transatlantic slave trade – produced in the Caribbean from cane cut by slaves, bottled in England, shipped to Africa.

Assembling the hangings is laborious. Anatsui uses several studio assistants to flatten thousands of aluminum caps and bottle sleeves – red, yellow, white, silver, brown, blue – which are then placed on the floor for Anatsui to arrange into one or more compositions. The resulting work can be large – a 2009 hanging, *Three Continents*, on view at the ROM, is almost five metres long and 2.5 metres wide – but surprisingly curtain-ish in weight and amazingly malleable.

Anatsui acknowledges that “the colour of the bottle caps happens to be the colour of certain fabrics common to my part of the world ... But I’m not interested in fabric per se. It’s the format or the form of the cloth: that it’s free, that you can put it on a wall, squeeze it into a small ball, drape it on the floor, anything.

“When I initially started working on these,” he laughs, “my favourite way of photographing them was to put them on hedges, like cloth drying.”

Western eyes will “read” elements of Arte Povera, Frank Stella, Robert Rauschenberg, Donald Judd, even Gustav Klimt into Anatsui’s constructions. Anatsui, who has travelled extensively in Europe and the United States, readily acknowledges “the visual similarity.” He stresses, however, that the congruence is very much “a matter of coincidence. My intention was born in Africa; I am going on a path completely without reference [to Western antecedents or influences].

“It has,” he adds, “something to do with my belief that life is not a cut-and-dried phenomenon, that it’s something which is constantly in a state of flux, that my search has been toward a form that captures this.”

*El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote to You About Africa* opens today and continues through Jan. 2. The ROM has purchased, for its permanent collection, *Straying Continents*, a new Anatsui wall piece that measures 12 by five metres. It will be unveiled today. [www.rom.on.ca](http://www.rom.on.ca); 416-586-8000.

The New York Times

# Swagger and Sideburns: Bad Boys in Galleries



Above, El Anatsui's "Intermittent Signals" at the Jack Shainman Gallery;

LIBRADO ROMERO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Judging from a number of overbearing, obstreperous and generally large works by male artists that command gallery space right now, it seems to be bad-boy week on the New York art scene. Isn't every week, you ask? Maybe, but some are more emphatically so than others.

**ROBERTA SMITH**

**ART**

It's hard to say exactly what qualifies an artist for "bad boy" status. Is it a matter of social swagger and conspicuous display? Extroverted self-indulgence and a tendency to revel in unholy messiness? A penchant for extra-large sinister-looking objects that are the sculptural equivalent of long sideburns? All this and more, certainly, awaits your scrutiny in a few of these shows, which exemplify different stages of bad-boyiness: beginner (there's still time to turn back), over the top and over the hill. Others give hints of a change of tune or even redemption. They adopt the scale but not the macho; they add parodying overtones or elegiac undercurrents; or they exercise restraint, delicately explore touch and even broach maturity.

## El Anatsui

If anything, the Ghanaian-born artist El Anatsui, now based in Nigeria, would seem to be the anti-bad boy. At 66, after all, he is surely a bit beyond the age limit. And the shimmering tapestries he makes from the discarded foil of liquor-bottle tops and bottleneck wrappers have a gender-neutral dignity that suggests a kind of antidote to bad boyism. But these works — the latest of which are up to 35 feet long and form a resplendent exhibition at the Jack Shainman Gallery (513 West 20th Street, Chelsea) — have their own subtle form of swagger, as if Mr. Anatsui were showing the youngsters a viable alternative. The pieces are blithely indifferent to

Western distinctions between high and low, and art and craft, and their implicitly subversive stance is amplified by exuberance and scale. Their ravishing patterns are achieved by simply folding the foils into different shapes and mixing or matching within the palette of silver, gold, black, yellow and red, and seem to accrue without plan. Looking almost more repaired than made, the works evoke lace but also chain mail; quilts but also animal hides; garments but also mosaic, not to mention the rich ceremonial cloths of numerous cultures. Their drapes and folds have a voluptuous sculptural presence, but also an

undeniably glamorous bravado. And up close, the brand names of the liquors come into focus — First Lady Brandy, Old Man Deluxe Whiskey and several kinds of ponche, an eggnog-like punch — creating an atmosphere of revelry, excess and dubious behavior.





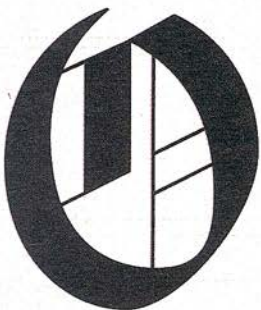
MEET  
THE AFRICAN  
ARTIST  
WHO USES  
'EMPTIES' TO  
REINVENT  
SCULPTURE.  
**El Anatsui**  
AND A  
THOUSAND  
BOTTLES  
OF RUM ON  
THE WALL.

BY ALEXI WORTH  
PORTRAIT BY JODI BIEBER



**Man of the cloth**  
The artist El Anatsui (in front of a work in progress at his studio in Nsukka, Nigeria) flattens bottle caps to create glistening sculptures that resemble fabric.





**ONE DAY 10 YEARS AGO** in the countryside of southern Nigeria, a slim middle-aged man drove past a bag of garbage. Garbage is not an unusual sight in West Africa; village roads are often lined with a parallel hillock of trash — dusty bottles, spoiled food, tin cans, car parts — out of which small trees sometimes grow. But this solitary bag looked promising. It was a quiet, sunny late afternoon in the dry season. The man stopped the car and walked over to look inside.

A decade later, the contents of that bag have toured the world from Wales to Arizona and come to rest, transformed but recognizable, in some of the world's most famous museums. Next year they will arrive in New York to be celebrated as part of the opening of the dramatically transformed Museum for African Art, in its new home on upper Fifth Avenue. They will be a centerpiece of the museum's reopening exhibition — and, more than that, a proof of the growing prominence of contemporary African art on the world stage. It's possible that they may join the short list, along with Duchamp's bicycle wheel, Rauschenberg's bed and Koons's basketballs, of masterpiece detritus: once mundane objects that permanently transform our expectations about what art is, and where it comes from.

The one thing least transformed by that accidental discovery is the man himself, a West African artist who goes by the name of El Anatsui. At the Nigerian university where he has taught for three decades, Anatsui is known simply as "Prof" — a quiet, white-haired, bachelor member of the Senior Faculty Club, where he can be found most evenings playing checkers. As a puzzled but admiring Nigerian art dealer put it, "He's almost a kind of messiah for us. ... But in person, there's nothing, absolutely nothing, remarkable about him."

Nor was there anything especially remarkable inside the bag Anatsui found. Discarded by a local distillery, it held thousands of aluminum screw-tops from bottles of whiskey, rum and gin, bearing names like Flying Horse, Castello, Bakassi, Liquor Headmaster, Ecomog and Dark Sailor. For a few months, the bag sat untouched in Anatsui's studio, while the artist continued to work on the abstract wood sculptures that had made him, in his mid-50s, among the most widely recognized African artists. At his own unhurried pace, Anatsui began experimenting with the bottle tops — cutting and folding their pliable metal into flat swatches, and then stitching these together with copper wire. The result, as it grew, began to resemble fabric, a coarse, jangly metal cloth.

On first seeing one of these cloths a few years later in London, Kwame Anthony Appiah experienced "one of the great artistic epiphanies of my life." Appiah, a Princeton University philosopher and art collector, remembers "a vast cascading piece of cloth, glistening in red and gold, draped more than 20 feet high, and just as wide. I confess I was completely delighted." Appiah was also puzzled; like many viewers, he assumed "El Anatsui" was an Arabic name, and hence that the artist was North African. But in fact, Anatsui is a fellow Ghanaian, and the intricate, narrow-banded compositions of Anatsui's first cloths were recognizable variations of kente cloth, the emblematic fabric of Ghana. The works' Africanness was specific and emphatic but also complicated. A rich tradition was honored in poor materials, and those materials — the flattened bottle caps, with their legible brand names — suggested other connections as well: to global consumerism and, more obliquely, to slavery's economics, of which liquor was a key part. An elegant emulsion of history and craft, Post-Minimal form and Pop recycling, Anatsui's work left Appiah feeling "enraptured."

Two years later in Venice, where Anatsui's wall hangings appeared as part of the 2007 Biennale, Gary Tinterow, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's curator of Modern art, felt equally smitten. "I was blown away," Tinterow remembers. Curators often profess admiration, but in this case



Tinterow picked up his cellphone — there, in the exhibition hall — and put in a call to his assistant in New York. The Met set about purchasing an Anatsui that day — following in the footsteps of the British Museum in London, the Pompidou Center in Paris and the Met's own African department, which had purchased a smaller cloth sculpture the year before.

For many visitors to Venice, the mosaic-like beauty of Anatsui's glittering sculptures made them an unquestioned highlight of, and in some ways an antidote to, much of the rest of the Biennale. As Susan Vogel, a professor of African art at Columbia University, remembers, Anatsui's work was "the last thing you saw in the Arsenale. And it was so different from everything else. Not only in materials and scale, but in *beauty*. It was the only thing that wasn't pessimistic. ... You trudge past images of ruin, and you arrive at uplift, at resolution."

Robert Storr, the director of the 2007 Biennale, had deliberately set out to give Anatsui "pride of place." More important, he hoped to tip him out of the orbit of strictly African exhibitions. In retrospect, that process had already begun, thanks to "Gawu," a traveling Anatsui exhibition that began its tour of eight international venues in 2003. There were also shows at London's October Gallery and at two modest places in New York: Skoto Gallery and David Krut Projects. But Venice, for most observers, was the break-out moment. A follow-up solo show last January, at New York's Jack Shainman Gallery, confirmed the depth — not to mention the commercial implications — of Anatsui's appeal. As Shainman recalls, "Even the people doing the electrical were freaking out over the work." At the end of the year, a Sotheby's auction catalog featured a wraparound reproduction of an Anatsui, folded around a Gerhard Richter. It was impossible to miss the implication: Anatsui had joined the big leagues.

Of course, in a sense, Anatsui had been in the big leagues for decades: he had exhibited on five continents, been reviewed extensively and even participated in a previous Venice Biennale, in 1990. But his work then remained subtly marginalized, paid a kind of respectful attention that was not entirely different from lip service. Skoto Aghahowa, whose New York gallery showed Anatsui back in 1996, has watched his current ascent with pleasure, but speaks about the condescension of well-meaning Westerners with a sigh. "They get so focused on, 'How do you pronounce his name? How many wives does he have? He's from Ghana? Oh, my husband and I went to Ghana; we really love Ghana!'" Only a few African artists have moved out of this atmosphere of benighted sympathy, and of these, the best known — Yinka Shonibare, for instance — tend to have made their homes and careers in the West. Among major contemporary artists, Anatsui is exceptional not only in being African but in being an African who has remained in Africa. A Ghanaian among Nigerians, he is a different, quieter kind of exile.

**ANATSUI WAS BORN IN 1944**, in what was then still the British colony of the Gold Coast — the youngest, he says, of his father's 32 children. His





**Behind the curtain** From left: Anatsui encourages museums and galleries to drape wall hangings like “Dusasa II” as they wish; an untitled early work of clay and molten glass, circa 1979, drew on the artist’s research into indigenous traditions; Anatsui employs more than a dozen assistants to cut and fold the aluminum bottle caps into blocks.

mother died when he was young, so he grew up in the mission house of his uncle, a Presbyterian minister. At art school, in a country that had just achieved its independence, the curriculum was almost entirely Western: only in his last year did he realize that he felt restless, and began looking for “something that had more relationship to me, as someone growing up in an African country.” After graduation, Anatsui got a job teaching art and began studying African ideographs. In Ghana, the most common of these appear on cloths worn at funerals and are called *adinkra*. For his first mature body of work, Anatsui bought wooden food trays from local markets and burned or carved versions of *adinkra* symbols onto them. The effect was a kind of abstract painting, but one in which every element — not just the graphic patterns but the material as well — was adamantly local.

One of the *adinkra* symbols, *sankofa*, is an image of a bird turning back toward its tail; its meaning is sometimes translated as “return and retrieve,” or “go back and pick.” To Anatsui and his peers, *sankofa* symbolized their effort to find useful traditions — from their own region, from elsewhere in Africa and even from the West. The critic and artist Olu Oguibe would later paraphrase *sankofa* as “sitting square on your own tree while picking whatever is good from others.” In Nigeria, a charismatic older artist named Uche Okeke was promoting a similar kind of open-minded traditionalism, usually referred to as “Natural Synthesis.” In 1975, Anatsui was invited to come teach with Okeke at the rural campus of the University of Nigeria in Nsukka.

By this time, in the second decade of independence, the political situation in West Africa was becoming less stable. Anatsui’s next body of work, a series of broken, partially mended clay pots, reflected this precariousness while also drawing on his continuing research into indigenous traditions. “We de Patcham,” a reconstituted ceramic globe, took its title from a fatalist pidgin aphorism, “We dey patch am e dey leak,” meaning “It leaks even as we struggle to mend it.” Most of Anatsui’s broken pots, though, suggested an underlying optimism, based on clay’s capacity for reuse. “When a pot breaks,” Anatsui has said, “it’s not the end of its useful life.” To Anatsui, breakage was above all “a condition for new growth.”

At the end of the 1970s, Anatsui’s growing prominence led to invitations to travel — first to a sculpture conference in Toronto, where he saw contemporary Western art in the flesh for the first time (a Louise Nevelson sculpture), and then to a residency in rural Cummington, Mass., where he had an accidental epiphany: while using a chain saw to cut some wood, he was struck by the saw’s sheer, unconstrained power. “It’s so easy, so fast, it has a tendency to get ... expansive.” He began to associate chain saw cuts with certain kinds of lines on a map — the long, straight borders into which Western powers divvied up Africa in the 19th century, for instance.

Anatsui wasn’t interested in making overtly political work — “taking

sides,” as he puts it. But his sense of the chain saw’s metaphorical weight led him to return to working in wood. Over the next two decades, photographs of Anatsui at work in a visor and protective clothing, holding a heavy saw, would complement the abstract delicacy of his symbol-ornamented planks and stumps. This combination of power-tool machismo, scholarly symbology and organic material was a potent mix, but in retrospect, the work’s variety can also seem discomfiting: Anatsui veered from gridlike abstractions to pictographs and even topical figuration. A piece called “Visa Queue,” from 1992, with its winding line of diminutive figures, is a carved cartoon about the travails of refugees or immigrants — or even of newly itinerant artists, unused to the hassles of travel.

African critics, who knew and championed Anatsui’s work first, tend to emphasize its continuity. The wood, clay and metal cloth works are all “part and parcel,” says the Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor, of his lifelong “experimentation with materials — materials that are meaningful in the context of the local culture.” In the West, however, there is a divide between the earlier work, which can seem heavy-handed in its Africanness, and the new sculptures, which are more spectacular and, at the same time, subtler. An apparent fusion of Klimt and Christo, Seurat and Tuttle, Anatsui’s wall hangings recall disparate Modernist sweet spots without quite settling into any familiar category.

Their most peculiar feature is that they are physically unfixed: Anatsui insists that his hangings be draped rather than hung flat, but he doesn’t insist on draping them himself, and in fact is perfectly happy to have galleries or museums do so. He has preferences — horizontal ripples are better than vertical ones — but he doesn’t regard any particular arrangement as final. Naturally, professional curators are disconcerted by this freedom; Anatsui has little patience with their scruples. “Museum people are trained not to be creative,” Anatsui complains. “I find that very frustrating.” To Storr, the provisional, shifting shape of Anatsui’s art is one of the keys to its originality. In the catalog to the coming Museum for African Art retrospective, Storr argues that Anatsui’s work “is fundamentally anti-monumental: it does not stand its ground. ... Rather it takes the shape of circumstances and so epitomizes contingency.” For Storr, that is no minor innovation: Anatsui “opens a new chapter in the history of sculpture.” It’s possible that the appetite for “contingency” that Storr praises is particularly African. Lisa Binder, the curator in charge of the Anatsui exhibition, points out that “traditional African objects, unlike European paintings and sculpture, are often highly adaptable, designed to be reused.” Anatsui’s work brings this adaptable, unfixed quality into sculptural practice — as jazz brought an African “unfixedness” into Western music.

Anatsui’s studio, a small warehouse near the Nsukka campus, is now a virtual factory: instead of waiting to find discarded bottle caps, he buys them in bulk from neighboring distilleries. More than a dozen assistants, young men in their 20s, work six days a week cutting and folding the aluminum pieces, and then joining these into blocks. When he feels ready, Anatsui has them laid out on the cement floor and begins to compose a new sculpture. If he is happy with the results, the blocks are wired together and the finished work is folded up like a blanket. If he is not satisfied, he simply says, “Pick them up.”

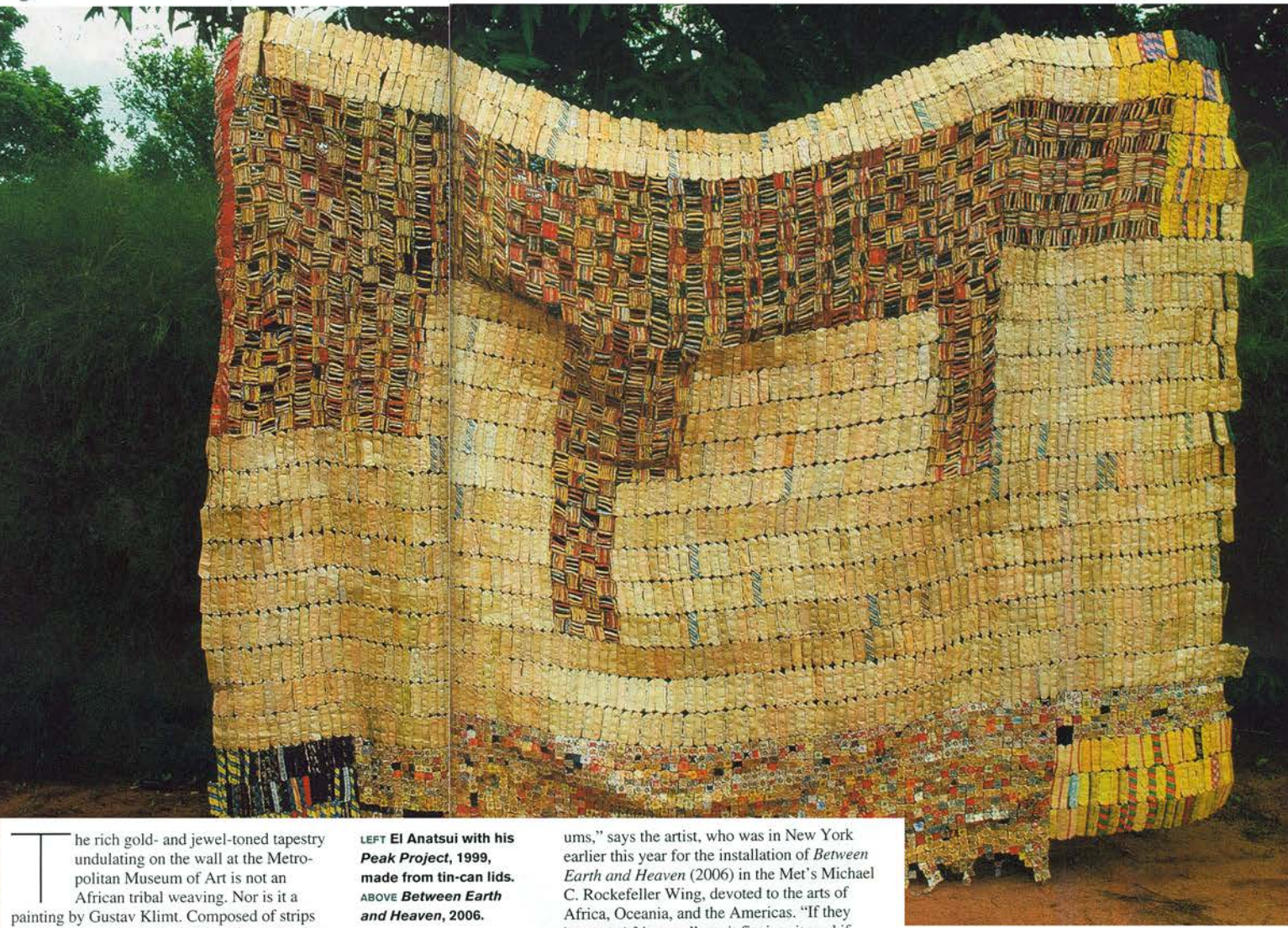
On a recent afternoon, I drove with Anatsui and Susan Vogel, who is filming a documentary about him, from the crowded studio back to the quiet, grassy hill where he happened upon the first bag of bottle tops. At the site where he had found them, there was a scattering of colored aluminum — crushed and dusty but probably, Anatsui agreed, remnants of the original bag. We stood at the spot, talking about his long career. Anatsui is an almost preternaturally calm man, reserved and modest, but also firm in his views. At one point, Vogel asked whether Anatsui felt satisfied by his recent success. There was a pause. “Oh, no,” Anatsui answered. “My ambition is ... to get better.” He spoke briefly about artists he admires: Antony Gormley, Anish Kapoor, James Turrell. “I’m not there yet.” He continued with a faint smile, “I know there’s more room up there.” ■



# The New Razzle-Dazzle

BY BARBARA POLLACK

Using bright-colored caps and golden bands from discarded liquor bottles, African sculptor **El Anatsui** weaves rich 'gem'-encrusted tapestries



The rich gold- and jewel-toned tapestry undulating on the wall at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is not an African tribal weaving. Nor is it a painting by Gustav Klimt. Composed of strips of metal stitched together with copper wire, the piece most resembles a bolt of kente cloth, native to Ghana, whose weavings symbolically unite history, philosophy, literature, morality, religion, political thought, and esthetics. The tapestry is actually a work by Africa's leading sculptor, El Anatsui, a master at meshing indigenous influences and contemporary materials and ideas.

"My work fits into a variety of categories in most muse-

**LEFT** El Anatsui with his *Peak Project*, 1999, made from tin-can lids. **ABOVE** *Between Earth and Heaven*, 2006.

ums," says the artist, who was in New York earlier this year for the installation of *Between Earth and Heaven* (2006) in the Met's Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, devoted to the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. "If they have an African gallery, it fits into it, and if they have a contemporary wing, it fits there also." But Anatsui is particularly happy at the Met, where his work is surrounded by traditional ritual and ceremonial objects. "It's like the past is facing the present, and it shows that art creation didn't ever come to a stop in Africa," he says.

Barbara Pollack is a contributing editor of ARTnews.



*Erosion*, 1992, one of the artist's most famous wood works, is nearly ten feet tall.

BELOW The seemingly endless line in *Visa Queue*, 1992, alludes to migration and globalization.



Met curator Alisa LaGamma, who chose the sculpture for the museum, recalls, "I was just dazzled by the beauty of the work. I thought it would be a very lovely and eloquent bridge between the kinds of historical works from Africa already in our collection and a lot of the contemporary innovations that have developed in response to those forms."

Indeed, Anatsui's career parallels the growing appreciation for contemporary African art over the past 20 years, even before artists like Ike Ude and Odili Donald Odita put that continent on the art map.

Born in Anyako, Ghana, in 1944, and today based in Nsukka, Nigeria, the tall, affable bachelor has had his work shown worldwide, most notably last summer at the Venice Biennale. There he hung *Dusuasa I* and *Dusuasa II* (both 2007), 20-by-30-foot tapestries that rippled like jewel-encrusted robes, between the classical columns of the Arsenale, and *Fresh and Fading Memories* (2007) was installed on the exterior of the Palazzo Fortuny on the Grand Canal. All of these shimmering pieces were made from the artist's favorite material: metal seals covering the caps of liquor bottles. As Robert Storr, the Biennale's artistic director, comments in the exhibition's catalogue, "El Anatsui demonstrates that the smallest bits of scrap metal can map fields of colour and texture as lovely as a painting by Georges Seurat."

Beyond their sheer beauty, the pieces reflect the artist's personal history as well as the legacy of slavery and colonialism. Anatsui was 13 years old when Ghana achieved independence in 1957. As a child, he navigated both traditional and colonial worlds. While he watched his father and brothers weave kente cloth as part of their Ewe heritage, Anatsui was being educated in a British-modeled system that paid scant attention to indigenous traditions.

He studied at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, Ghana, earning a B.A. in art and a postgraduate degree in art education. As a student, he was exposed primarily to European painting, but he spent much of his free time at the National Cultural Centre in Kumasi, which offered workshops in traditional crafts. Between 1969 and 1975, he lectured at a teacher-training college in Winneba, where he was fascinated by the wood carvings he saw in the local markets. The techniques used to make the carvings, including burning motifs into wood with a hot knife, turned up in his earliest works.

In 1975 Anatsui was appointed to teach in the department of fine and applied arts at the University of Nigeria Nsukka, where he continues today as a professor of sculpture. The department was headed by Uche Okeke, an influential artist who argued against formal British training in favor of a "natural synthesis" of indigenous elements with topical issues. Anatsui adopted the phrase *sankofa*, a Ghanaian term meaning "go back and pick," to describe this process of reclaiming one's roots in the act of making art. For the next decade he worked

primarily in ceramics, making pieces inspired by objects he saw in Nigeria's museums. Then, in 1980, he was awarded a residency at the Cumington Community of Arts in Massachusetts, and he turned back to wood, this time using a chain saw and hot irons to fashion wall hangings made from multiple panels.

"The idea of trying a new medium brings fresh challenges," Anatsui says. "I feel that each medium has its own language and changes the way that you want to express things." So, too,



do new places. "Art doesn't grow in a vacuum," he adds. "When you leave your normal domicile and travel, a lot of times your feeling for your original home grows stronger; the distance can make you reach new levels of empathy or feeling for it, so having distance from my usual terrain provided an influx of ideas."

Perhaps his most famous work from the late 1980s and early '90s addresses the erosion of cultural values. Created for the international artists' workshop Arte Amazonas in Brazil, and later exhibited at the Modern Art Museum in Rio de Janeiro,

**ABOVE** The softly draped tapestry *Dusuasa II*, 2007, hung between the classical columns of the Arsenale at last summer's Venice Biennale.

1990, and then in the first presentation of African art at the Venice Biennale the following summer. As Grace Stanislaus, curator of both exhibitions, who met Anatsui in Nigeria in 1988, explains, "He had a cosmopolitanism and cleverness and an understanding of art and art history that was very compelling."

His exhibition record reflects both these qualities and the increased receptivity worldwide to art coming from places other than the United States and Europe.

The artist offers this quick summary of his early career de-





**ABOVE** In *Bleeding Takari II*, 2007, "blood," coursing over liquor-bottle bands, pools on the floor.

velopment. "First I exhibited in Ghana, at my school, then in Accra in the big city, then I moved to Nigeria, showing at my university before exhibiting in Lagos, which eventually led to exhibiting in group shows outside of Africa." Starting in 1995 he began to have solo shows at October Gallery in London, which continues to represent him, and in 1996, he began showing in New York, at the Contemporary African Art Gallery and at Skoto Gallery, and in 2005 at David Krut. Since last year he has been represented in New York by Jack Shainman Gallery.

As the '90s progressed, Anatsui's sculptures became increasingly complex, involving collections of carved wood posts or panels. Some of these refer to migration and globalization.

*Visa Queue* (1992), for example, consists of carved blocks of native Nigerian woods assembled into a seemingly endless line of miniature figures awaiting their fate. In *The Ancestors Converged Again* (1995), faces are carved into the tops of 23 branches and poles cut from a variety of trees, then hung as a group of ragtag figures across a gallery wall. Other works, like his '90s "Ancient Cloth Series," com-



posed of wood slats, evoke textiles. His pieces now sell for between \$100,000 and \$500,000.

It was in 1999, in the bush outside Nsukka, that Anatsui came upon a garbage bag filled with the kind of metal seals found on liquor bottles in Africa: red, green, black, and yellow labels printed on gold- or silver-colored backing. This material, which the artist sometimes crushes into circles resembling bottle caps or cuts into half-inch strips, inspired his recent, much-acclaimed sculptures. Found objects, such as tins from evaporated milk, old metal graters, and discarded printing plates, have also turned up in his work, conveying the spirit

and survival strategies of Africa, a place where citizens recycle materials out of necessity, not choice.

"I saw the bottle caps as relating to the history of Africa in the sense that when the earliest group of Europeans came to trade, they brought along rum originally from the West Indies that then went to Europe and finally to Africa as three legs of the triangular trip," explains Anatsui. "The drink caps that I use are not made in Europe; they are all made in Nigeria, but they symbolize bringing together the histories of these two continents."

Often the names of Nigerian liquor brands can be spotted in the weave of the artist's constructions—brands with names like *Dark Sailor* or *King Solomon* resonate with the history of slavery. (A more recent brand, *Ecomog*, is named for the West African armed forces established in 1990 to intervene in the Liberian civil war.) Anatsui says he is not making these works simply to condemn colonialism or to comment on recent controversies in African history. He acknowledges with a smile, "I speak English; I don't know if I would have spoken English if that era had not occurred."

Most recently, he is celebrating the opening of "El Anatsui: Gawu" on view through September 2, at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C., the final stop of the exhibition's U.S. tour. In the catalogue Anatsui explains that the "ga" in "Gawu" alludes to the use of metal and that "wu" is a term for a cloak; together the words describe the seven works in the exhibition. In the sculpture *Versatility* (2006), the liquor brand names are prominently displayed, but the pattern is reminiscent of the motifs in traditional cloths, such as *kente* and *adinkra* (which is used for funeral rites). *Crumbling Wall* (2000) transforms the graters used to prepare *gari*, the West African grain made from cassava flour, into a sagging architectural structure composed of rusted metal. As with all of Anatsui's works, including his early wood wall reliefs, location affects how the pieces are hung, says Christine Mullen Kreamer, curator at the National Museum of African Art. "Each work comes with incredibly detailed instructions." Tall works may hang in a high-ceilinged room or be spread out on the floor in a gallery of lesser height.

"I still insist that they not be mounted flat," he says. "I want to show the softness, because this transgresses the stereotype of metal as a rigid medium." On the other hand, after a decade of having critics identify his work with *kente* cloth, Anatsui resists the analogy as being too formulaic. "The bottle caps tend to replicate the colors of *kente* cloth," he says, "but when I work, I think more about sculpture than those issues."

Nevertheless, color is a key factor in his works, as in *Bleeding Takari II* (2007), a 20-foot-wide wall relief shown last winter at Shainman. With its large splotches of red against a silver background and its lengths of red metal strips pooling onto the floor, the work looks as if it is spilling blood.

Anatsui is satisfied that his current medium perfectly conveys his ideas. Referring to the *Dususa* works he made for Venice, which are now owned by the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, he explains: "*Sasa* means 'difference,' or something made of different portions. The word literally comes from textiles, like when you have a sheet that's made from patchwork. But for me, it also celebrates the beauty of people coming together as one." Pointing out that the maps of Europe and Africa both look like patchwork quilts, he concludes, "We have more in common than we think."





## Full-Metal Fabrics

*Nigerian-based artist El Anatsui, recently the subject of several U.S. exhibitions, makes visually rich, culturally resonant sculptures from cast-off aluminum bottle tops.*

**BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN**

**T**he profile of contemporary African visual culture has certainly risen in the art world over the last few years, but a single medium—photography—has garnered most of the attention. While there are a number of African artists whose work can be found with some regularity on the international circuit (Congolese architectural fantasist Body Isek Kingelez, Cameroonian installation and video artist Pascale Marthine Tayou and medium-hopping artist Barthélémy Toguo, also from Cameroon, are three names that come to mind), it is the photographers, in particular the two great Malian portrait photographers Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé, whose work has become emblematic and widely exhibited. (A current exhibition at the International Center of Photography, "Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography," promises to bring still more attention to the medium.)

One result of this imbalance of mediums is that some important African artists have remained relatively unseen by U.S. viewers. Among the most significant of these, perhaps, is El Anatsui, a Ghanaian-born, Nigerian-based sculptor who has been working and exhibiting since the mid-1970s. Happily, there have been several recent opportunities in this country to see examples of Anatsui's new work—formally dazzling, labor-intensive reliefs and freestanding sculptures made from a variety of recycled materials. First came "El Anatsui: Gawu," an exhibition at the Samuel P. Harn Museum in Gainesville, Fla., of seven large works that had previously toured five museums in the U.K. and Ireland. This was followed by Anatsui's solo debut in New York, at Skoto Gallery in Chelsea. (In 1996, Skoto presented Anatsui in a two-person show with Sol LeWitt.) Three additional works were on extended view at the Contemporary African Art Gallery in Harlem. At the New York Scope Art Fair in March, Jack Shainman Gallery included a big Anatsui wall piece in their booth. On the West

*Opposite and inset, El Anatsui: Many Came Back, 2005, aluminum (liquor-bottle tops) and copper wire, 84 by 109 inches. Newark Museum, N.J. Courtesy Skoto Gallery, New York.*



**The ritual, almost regal, presence of these works comes in part from their association with kente cloth, a textile with a ceremonial role.**

Coast, visitors to San Francisco's new de Young Museum encountered *Hovor II*, a large 2004 sculpture by Anatsui recently purchased by the museum and included in its opening exhibition.

A predecessor of the de Young piece, *Hovor* (2003), was on view in Gainesville. Like many of Anatsui's other recent pieces, this 19-by-17-foot work is an undulating, faceted metallic sheet made from thousands of aluminum liquor-bottle tops that have been individually flattened out, sometimes refolded and then sewn together with copper wire. In this case, the artist has used the strips of thin pliable aluminum that wrap around the stem of the bottles; other works also incorporate the circular sections of foil that seal the bottles' mouths.

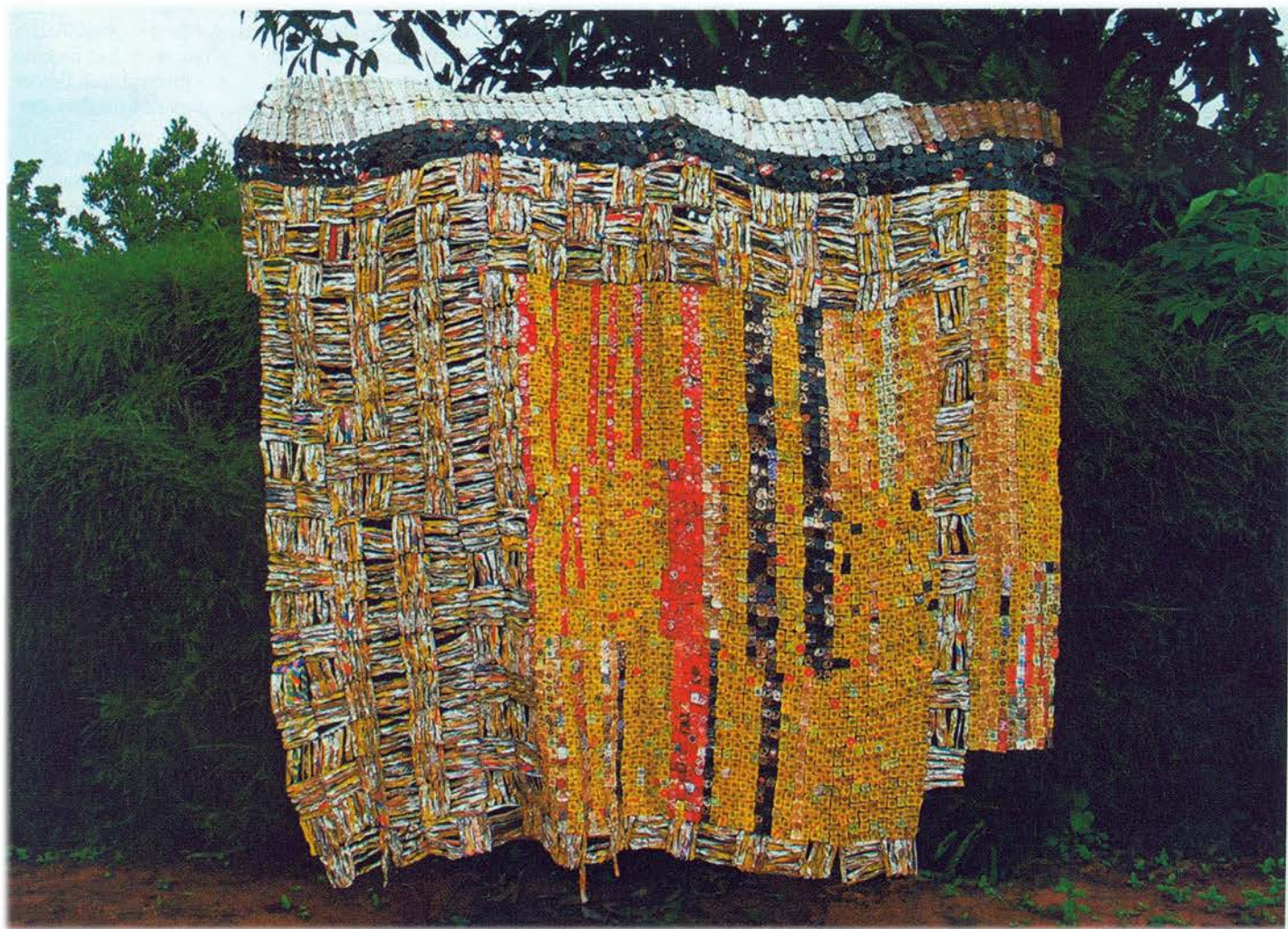
The strips are each a little wider and longer than an adult's middle finger, and they are stitched together to form long horizontal bands running the length of the piece. In most of the bands, the strips are positioned vertically and sewn tightly together, but at three or four points, this structure is interrupted by more loosely assembled bands in which horizontal and vertical strips alternate in a kind of checker-

board pattern that is reminiscent of African kente cloth. Most of the strips are silvery or dull gold in color—the artist has evidently reversed them so that the inside surfaces are visible—but some, particularly in the looser disruptive bands, are red or multicolored.

At the Harn, *Hovor* half leaned and half hung on a freestanding wall in the middle of the circular gallery that housed the show. Its shimmering surface was deformed or, rather, reformed by long ripples and undulating folds. There is a lot of variability built into these works. The artist, or whoever is installing the work, can decide how tautly or loosely to stretch the metallic fabric. If hung loosely, the aluminum and copper wire structures buckle in places under their own weight, creating uneven surfaces that in turn affect the play of light across the units of aluminum. The artful interweaving of color and glancing light can make these essentially abstract works evoke pointillist landscapes, something that happened at Skoto in *Soleme II* (2005). Often, the artist pays attention to the shadows cast on the wall behind the piece. This was especially noticeable in the Skoto show, where a number of works featured netlike structures that allowed one to see through to the intricately patterned shadows underneath. Thus, no two installations of any one of these "cloths," as Anatsui calls them, are identical.

**A** paradoxical aspect central to Anatsui's work is that he creates his flexible structures out of metal. Of course, there are historical precedents for making fabrics out of metal, from the chain mail

*After Kings*, 2005, aluminum (liquor-bottle tops) and copper wire, 88 by 70 inches. Courtesy Skoto Gallery.







*Hovor*, 2003, aluminum and copper wire, 216 by 240 inches. Courtesy Harn Museum of Art, Gainesville, Fla.

of medieval warriors to the 1960s faceted dresses of designer Paco Rabane. This clothing connection was signaled by the title of the Harn show: in Ewe *ga* means metal and *wu* cloak.

The kind of garments Anatsui's works most frequently evoke are not antique body armor or mod-era novelty clothes but ceremonial robes. Despite the fact that they have been made with cheap, recycled materials, these works possess a visual richness comparable to a Gaudi mosaic or the background in a Klimt portrait and a sense of having been made with meticulous care. Clearly their fabrication requires a prodigious amount of work, much of which is accomplished by the assistants Anatsui employs in his studio in Nsukka, Nigeria.

The ritual, almost regal, presence of these works derives, in part, from their association with kente cloth, a woven fabric that plays a ceremonial role for the Asante and Ewe peoples of Ghana (the word "kente" is derived from *kenten*, which means basket). In an interview in the "Gawu" catalogue, Anatsui discusses the relation between his work and kente cloth. After recalling that both his father and his brothers wove such fabric (not the well-known kente of the Asante people, but the more muted kente of the Ewe people, the ethnic group to which Anatsui belongs), the artist speculates that cloth has been an unconscious influence on him, even in his earlier carved-wood wall sculptures (several of which were included in the Skoto show). "I have discovered only much later, looking back over what I've done over a particular period, that cloth has been a recurring theme or leitmotif, and it featured in so many dimensions." The colors and patterns of other works, such as *Adrinka Sasa* (2003), evoke *adrinka*, a traditional West African textile that uses printed rather than woven designs.

The process of making the sculptures also relates to kente cloth, which is woven in long 4- to 8-inch-wide strips that are subsequently cut into smaller pieces and sewn together to form a single, patterned cloth. Anatsui's "cloths" are made in 3- to 4-inch-wide sections that stretch up to 12 or 15 feet in length. These sections can be split into smaller units as needed. The separate sections are assembled into the final works according to the artist's instructions. Anatsui acknowledges the input of his assistants, noting that the "variety, which is needed at this scale" comes from "the style and the feel of each individual hand." Indeed, if one looks closely at these works, there is a lot of variety in the way the small aluminum units are flattened, folded and twisted, both within single pieces and from one work to another.

Another feature that becomes noticeable upon close inspection is the appearance of distillers' names and logos. For his work, Anatsui uses local Nigerian brands of whiskey, rum, vodka, brandy and other potent libations with names such as Chairman, Dark Sailor, King Solomon, Makossa, 007 and Top Squad. There's one liquor marketed under the name "Ecomog" after the multilateral (though largely Nigerian) armed force established in 1990 to intervene in the Liberian civil war.

Anatsui's "cloth" series began about six years ago when the artist found a large bag of liquor tops that had been thrown away in the bush. For him, the bottle caps became interesting not only for their physical adaptability and the evocation of local culture but also because of their historical resonance. As he explains in an artist's statement for the Skoto show, they "encapsulate the essence  
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of the alcoholic drinks which were brought to Africa by Europeans as trade items at the time of the earliest contact between the two peoples."

The "cloths" made from liquor-bottle tops weren't the first works that Anatsui made from recycled materials. At the Harn also was *Peak Project* (1999), a dozen or so 2- or 3-foot-high pointy cones made from tin-can tops. The tops, which come from cans of evaporated milk, are held together by lengths of copper wire looped through small holes punched into the tin. A larger piece, *Crumbling Wall* (2000), is an over-12-foot-high, 17-foot-long, 2-foot-thick barrier made from densely perforated sheets of rusted metal. What appears to be a section of some dilapidated, shot-up fortress is in fact partly an homage to a Nigerian culinary tradition. These repeatedly punctured metal sheets are typically used to make *gari*, the grated cassava flour or porridge that is a West African staple.

Anatsui is well aware that all these works—the liquor-top cloths, the *Peak Project* cones and *Crumbling Wall*—have to do with food and drink. But the specific original functions of his materials seem to matter less to him than the basic fact that they derive from the everyday world around him. For Anatsui, who avoids conventional art materials, the source of his material is crucial. Toward the end of the "Gawu" catalogue he observes:

Art grows out of each particular situation and I believe that artists are better off working with whatever their environment throws up. I think that's what has been happening in Africa for a long time, in fact not only in Africa but the whole world, except that maybe in the West they might have developed these 'professional' materials. But I don't think that working with such prescribed

**The original functions of Anatsui's materials seem to matter less to him than the fact that they derive from his immediate everyday world.**

materials would be very interesting to me—industrially produced colors for painting. I believe that color is inherent in everything, and it's possible to get color from around you, and that you're better off picking something which relates to your circumstances and your environment than going to buy a ready-made color.

There's something profoundly provocative in Anatsui's suggestion that the notion of making art only from "art" materials is an aberration of Western culture. Of course, the last half century has seen many European and North American artists turn to the everyday stuff around them, from the Nouveaux Réalistes to the Post-Minimalists to video-game-inspired young artists of today. At this point, artists who restrict themselves to traditional materials may even be in a minority in the West. But despite the popularity of this mode of art-making, it's hard to think of many found-object artists who have achieved work as intricately made, culturally resonant and visually sumptuous as El Anatsui's. □

*"El Anatsui: Gawu," curated by Susan Cooksey, was seen at the Samuel P. Harn Museum, Gainesville (Aug. 16-Oct. 16, 2005). "Danufo: Recent Sculptures of El Anatsui" was on view at Skoto Gallery, New York (Oct. 27, 2005-Jan. 21, 2006), and the Contemporary African Art Gallery, New York (Oct. 26, 2005-Apr. 30, 2006). A catalogue of "El Anatsui: Gawu" published by the Oriol Mostyn Gallery, Llandudno, Wales, includes essays by Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie and Atta Kivami and an interview with the artist by Gerard Houghton.*