

Chika Stanley Ezema—Courtesy El Anatsui Studio

SEP 17, 2026

El Anatsui

Material alchemist

by Belinda Luscombe

EDITOR AT LARGE

El Anatsui is that very rare artist whose work transcends continental cultural boundaries. In 2024, he had works unveiled in 20 cities as far-flung geographically and culturally as Shanghai, London, Dubai, and Lagos. And the 82-year old Ghanaian artist's popularity is particularly robust in the U.S., where one of his quilt-like works went for $2.2 million at New York's Frieze art fair in May. El, as he likes to be called, is most famous for his colossal wall hangings made of tiny, linked-up pieces of metal, which on closer inspection turn out to be the screw tops or neck sleeves of bottles of alcohol or other drinks. Anatsui has often referred to the cycle of trade that brought so many of the caps to his environment: Africans were taken by force through Ghana to labor on the U.S. plantations to produce sugar and rum that was shipped to Europe, then sent to Africa. "The drink represented here by bottle caps links all three continents," he has noted. The esteem in which his work is held now joins them in another way.

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IS THE ART MARKET RUINING ART?

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Children of the sea

El Anatsui's driftwood sculptures hauntingly evoke those who suffered the Atlantic slave trade, writes **DAMION SEARLS**

Not many driftwood men become world famous, but these might have. I met them in the Louisiana Museum in Denmark, about an hour's train ride up the coast from Copenhagen, when I turned a corner in the North Wing. Twenty-eight figures were standing on a platform, not going anywhere but about to, or maybe taking a short break from what was clearly a gruelling journey. Each was a piece of scarred and seaworn driftwood, plus a head; even without arms and legs, something about their postures, their huddling together in groups or boldly striking out, the different directions the heads were facing, meant the whole ensemble created the unforgettable sense of a community buffeted by history and fate. The wall text told me that these were *Akua's Surviving Children* (1996), by the Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui.

He had been invited to Denmark for a residency commemorating the 200-year anniversary, in 1992, of Denmark's abolition of the slave trade between Ghana (then the Gold Coast) and the Danish West Indies. He was working at Hammermøllen in Hellebæk, about 16km north of the Louisiana and not far from Hamlet's Elsinore. Now a picturesque water mill and museum, Hammermøllen once made 'Dane guns', the low-quality muskets traded to African slavers, or sometimes manufactured in Africa from exported parts.

Walking along the coast, Anatsui found driftwood from Øresund, the strait separating Denmark from Sweden, which made him think of the victims of slavery who had been, in his words, 'Torn from their land source into wild, hostile sea, tossed about, eventually returning to land with experiences of their ordeal.' He walked for miles along the shore, collected more driftwood, scorched the pieces that would become the figures' heads – burning is a cleansing ritual still in use against curses – and made the nails to attach the black heads in the same Hammermøllen foundry that had once made the guns that subjugated Africa.

An 'Akua's child' (*Akua'ba*) is a wooden fertility doll inspired by a traditional Ghanaian story about a woman named Akua who couldn't conceive until she was told to carry and care for a wooden doll as if it were her child. El Anatsui's 'Akua's children' – now grown; now a clan of survivors from the transatlantic slave trade washed up from the sea – were first shown at the Images of Africa festival in Copenhagen. Three decades later, they have returned to the coastline where they were found.



Akua's Surviving Children, 1996, El Anatsui (b. 1944), wood and metal, dimensions variable. Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk

I had drifted to Denmark for the first time on my way back from a literature festival in the Faroe Islands, where I'd been invited because I am co-translating the great Faroese novel, Jens Pauli Heinesen's *Rekamaðurin*. Told in a funny, vivid, gripping voice, the book is about a man on the literal fringes of Faroese society, neither a farmer nor a fisherman, who walks the shore collecting what comes from the sea. He thinks of himself as a traditionalist, but actually he rejects social norms and values and is mean to his family and to women in general, and just generally delusional and toxic. In what little that has been written about the book in English, it is called *The Beachcomber* – the dictionary definition of *rekamaðurin* – but this is a terrible title, suggesting hippies, straw hats and marijuana in Malibu, not the windswept North Atlantic and a man adrift in the world. I decided the book should be called *The Driftwood Man*, and now it opens like this:

> Not many driftwood men become world famous. They comb the beaches, searching and searching for driftwood, flotsam, sea creatures washed ashore, or anything else they might find, and they lie awake at night for fear that the greatest discovery of their life might drift back out to Aldans Fjord with the current and no one there to salvage it. Now take Columbus and his glorious claim to fame – was that really anything to write home about? It's not like he could have missed bumping into America. Or what about Vasco da Gama, everyone knows Africa has to end somewhere, you just have to keep sailing long enough and know how to steer, what's so impressive about getting around the southern tip and landing in Malabar? Yet there they are in the annals of world history, while the feats of the driftwood men, no matter how great, never reach such heights.

Damion Searls translates Jon Fosse and many others, and is the author of a novel, Analog Days.

In the next issue: Brutalism in Côte d'Ivoire, how to throw a banquet in the Middle Ages, Austrian landscape painting, and the enigmatic art of Francisco de Zurbarán

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The 100 Best Artworks of the 21st Century

BY
The Editors of ARTnews, Art in America
March 5, 2025 8:00am

A global recession, a pandemic, 9/11, the Arab Spring, Brexit, the rise of Web 2.0, unrest in the face of economic stability, wars in Afghanistan, Ukraine, Gaza, and elsewhere: these were but a few of the many events that have defined the past 25 years, a period characterized by tumult and uncertainty. That all may explain why art appeared to change faster than ever all the while, with artists burning through styles and tendencies with each coming year.

With the 21st century now at the quarter point, we've taken the opportunity to pinpoint the greatest artworks of the past 25 years. Even though we set down some parameters for ourselves (**more on that here (https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/how-we-made-our-list-best-100-artworks-21st-century-1234734676/)**), it was no small task—one made more difficult by the restless creativity of artists during this period.

The joy of an epic list like this one is that it can't encapsulate everything: we know we've left some artworks off, simply because there was no shortage to choose from. We hope you'll discover some amazing pieces here, reflect on some that are much-loved already, and debate the merits of others. And moreover, we hope to learn of new artworks through the conversations we hope our list inspires.

Below, a look back at the greatest 100 artworks of the 21st century so far, as selected by the editors of *ARTnews* and *Art in America*.

This article features contributions from the following writers: Francesca Aton, Andy Battaglia, Daniel Cassady, Anne Doran, Sarah Douglas, Maximilíano Durón, Alex Greenberger, Harrison Jacobs, Tessa Solomon, and Emily Watlington.

43 El Anatsui, *Dusasa II*, 2007



El Anatsui: *Dusasa II*, 2007.

Photo : Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

El Anatsui has made an artistic practice out of stringing together thousands of metal bottle caps to form large, vibrant tapestries, and while he's repeated the format many times over, it never gets old. Anatsui's oeuvre reached new heights with this 24-foot-long sheet of caps, which was originally created for the central exhibition in the 2007 Venice Biennale. This work, like his others, cleverly references contemporary overconsumption in material resulting from that consumerism and is fashioned with gentle folds in a way that recalls traditional Ghanaian craft traditions, like kente cloth. But here, more so than in other works, Anatsui also makes clear that the strung-together caps nod specifically to his own community, whose many members help him make his grandly scaled art. The title, he has said, could be translated from the Ewe to "communal patchwork made by a team of townspeople." —*F.A.*

3 Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Studio)*, 2014



Kerry James Marshall: *Untitled (Studio)*, 2014.

Photo : Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Completed the year before Kerry James Marshall's midcareer retrospective at the Met, which went on to acquire this work, *Untitled (Studio)* exemplifies the noun referenced in the intentionally misspelled title of that show, "Mastry." There is mastery in the whole, and in all its glorious parts: the crisply modeled dog, the bouquet out of an old master painting, the drapery, the paintbrushes, that Tiepolo sky glimpsed through a window, the uncompleted canvas on an easel, passages of which, viewed up close, can read as pure abstraction. And that is to say nothing of its subject. Here, Marshall took on a scene that to date had mainly been the province of white artists: the studio. He stepped into the pantheon of Matisse, Courbet, and their ilk, inserting and asserting the Black artist as a protagonist in art history. It's the kind of painting that makes you say to yourself: OK, now he's just showing off! Shouldn't he be allowed to do just that? —*S.D.*

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Cover image:

El Anatsui

by William Kherbek • 21.08.2024

Spanning five decades, *Scottish Mission Book Depot Keta* at Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh, is the most significant exploration of the practice of the Ghanaian artist El Anatsui (b.1944) FIG.1 held in the United Kingdom to date. The exhibition brings together the artist's early works alongside his now signature large-scale sculptural wall hangings, a monumental example of which is installed on the façade of the gallery in the university's Old College quadrangle FIG.2. It shares its title with a new 13 metre-wide work made specifically for the gallery FIG.3, which recalls the Scottish Mission book depot in Keta that provided the artist's books and art materials as a child.

Now in his eighties, Anatsui came of age during a critical transitional period in the history of modern Ghana, and of West Africa more generally. The advance of decolonial independence, the rise of such intellectual movements as Négritude and Ghana's emergence as a centre of contemporary art are only a few of the developments that Anatsui has witnessed during his career. His works are as much records of this history as they are expressions of his formal and aesthetic concerns.

Anatsui has a deep and abiding interest in West African history, particularly the ways in which creative practice has informed the cultures that grew along the West coast before and after the depredations of colonialism. In October he will unveil a major site-specific commission at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which expands on his reconfiguration and reimagination of locally sourced materials. This interview, which took place in Edinburgh following the opening of *Scottish Mission Book Depot Keta* during Edinburgh Art Festival, offers a glimpse into the artist's depth of knowledge and the scope of his work, which remains as diverse as his influences.



Fig. 1 El Anatsui in his studio in Tema, Ghana, in 2024. (© El Anatsui; courtesy the artist; photograph Gus Sarkodee).

William Kherbek: Could you talk about the process behind preparing your show at Talbot Rice Gallery? How did you conceptualise it?

El Anatsui: It's an exhibition of my works already in Britain, rather than a fully comprehensive one. The selection has mostly been made by Talbot Rice, and they have tried to cover the range of my practice as much as possible FIG.4 FIG.5, starting with wooden relief works from the early 1990s FIG.6 FIG.7. The only thing that hasn't been included is the *Broken Pots* series.



Fig. 2 *TSIA TSIA - Searching for Connection*, by El Anatsui. 2013. Aluminium and copper wire, 8 panels, overall dimensions 15.6 by 25 m. (Courtesy the artist and Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh).

There's also a new work in the show, *Scottish Mission Book Depot Keta* FIG.8. It harks back to my childhood days, which I spent in the Presbyterian church mission house in Ghana. We would go and buy books from the Scottish Mission book depot in Keta, which was about 30 minutes away from where I lived. So, when I was invited for this exhibition in Edinburgh, it felt like coming full circle. After the First World War, the Scottish Mission was bought into Ghana – the Gold Coast then – by the United Kingdom, to take over institutions and churches established by the Germans and Swiss. They oversaw Presbyterian churches in Ghana, and some other parts of Africa as well. That's how I was introduced to Scotland.



Fig. 3 *Scottish Mission Book Depot Keta*, by El Anatsui. 2024. Aluminium and copper wire, 6.6 by 13 m. (Courtesy the artist and Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh; photograph Sally Jubb).

WK: One of the elements that's always been of interest to me is your work's relation to light: the use of reflective surfaces, the way that some of the materials engage with light in spaces, for example. I was wondering how this evolved. Was it something that emerged from using the materials themselves, as many of the commercial ones you found had these 'shiny' properties, such as the aluminium bottle tops FIG.9, or was making works that were 'internally illuminated' part of your aim from the start?



Fig. 4 *Royal Slumber*, by El Anatsui. 2023. Aluminium and copper wire, 3.5 by 4.7 m. (Courtesy the artist and Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh; photograph Sally Jubb).

EA: With the bottle caps, initially it wasn't what's on the coloured side, but the metal side. That's what I focused on. But what I discovered was whether it's the colour or metal side, all of them come with a shine, which is something intrinsic to the material – metal that refers to the colonial name of my country, the Gold Coast.



Fig. 5 *Dakawo*, by El Anatsui. 2023. Tropical hardwood, paint and copper wire, 250 by 383 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh; photograph Sally Jubb).

The scale was something that started small. One of the earliest metal works that I made was *Woman's Cloth* FIG.10. You can compare it to the sizes that I've been able to draw out from the

same material over the course of time. The largest was the Turbine Hall commission at Tate Modern, London, in 2023–24.

WK: I'm interested in hearing your thoughts on the compositional element of your works. As many of them are hung against walls FIG.11, I wonder how you view the relationship between sculptural composition and painterly composition. Is it something you're working against or something you're embracing?



Fig. 6 *Leopard's Paw-prints and Other Stories*, by El Anatsui. 1991. Tropical hardwoods and tempera, 287 by 292 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh; photograph Sally Jubb).

EA: What I do is to not bother about these classifications – sculpture, painting – but instead conflate all of them and work with them. Although, having said that, initially my thinking and operation was that of a sculptor – a sculptor working with form that was very free and loose, to the point that I could do anything with the initial idea. It was later on that I started paying attention to colour. Because I saw that the bottle caps came in many colours – yellows, blacks, reds – I got to think also like a painter. When I made the first piece, it hung in the middle of the studio, it wasn't on the wall, to emphasise the fact that I was thinking like a sculptor. In sculpture you think about the three-dimensional, and something that can be experienced in 360 degrees.

All these bodies of work involve time as well. Time in the sense that a free form doesn't replicate itself – for example, the creases that are created in the work won't be seen in any other iteration. If you meet the work again you'll see something different. The element of time, colour and form are all embedded in each work.

WK: And of course, the labour of salvaging the materials.

EA: So many things. The labels of the bottles all have a narrative.

You can learn about the sociology, commerce and politics that have facilitated them. These aren't from imported drinks, they're local and the distillers have their own brands, like Black Gold, First Lady or Ecomog. When the second Liberian Crisis (1999–2003) began, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) deployed the Economic Community of Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) to intervene, and so a drinks producer named their brand Ecomog. Each drink provides some political history and reveals approximately what was happening in the social environment when the drink was produced.

WK: Could you speak about the way your relationship with scale has evolved over the course of your career? The sheer weight of the consumption implicit in these works is inescapable. There's an infinity, but also a futility, inscribed in them – they could be seen as a bleak commentary or a kind of satire. Do you feel closer to either one of those interpretations?

EA: The scale has evolved naturally through understanding the material. You can see from the exhibition that as I continued working with the material, I was able to fine-tune the process, and was able to get it more structurally compact, allowing me to expand more and more. Since these caps are sourced from locally made drinks, we get our supplies from the local distillers. They have people who collect used bottles for re-use, from which they discard the caps and we're the beneficiaries of this process. It's not only us, there are other people who use them too – they cast household goods, such as aluminium pots and other utensils. We collect from the suppliers once a year, every December. This enables us to assess if there's an increase or decrease of drinking in the community. Statistics inadvertently became part of the practice.

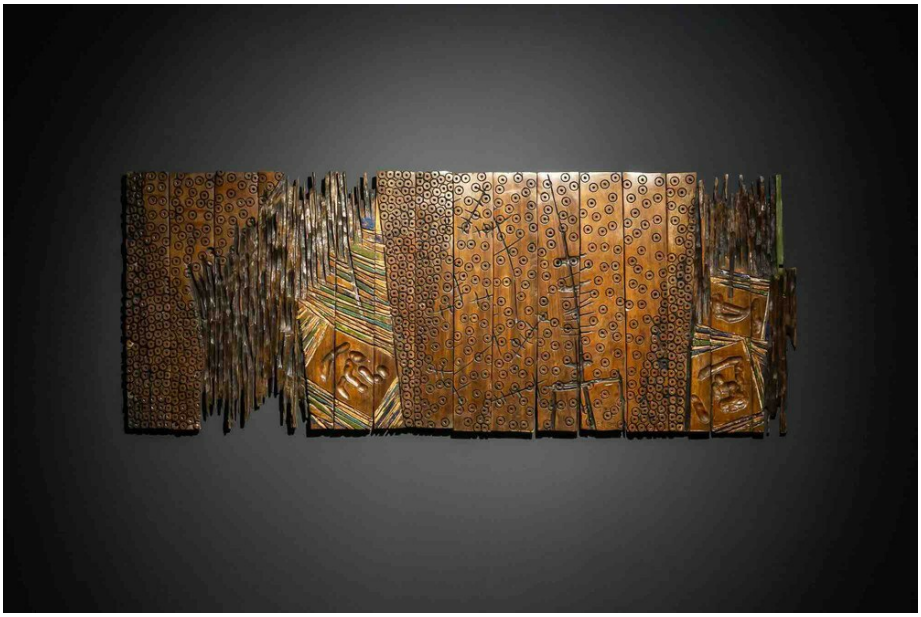


Fig. 7 *Untitled*, by El Anatsui. 1994. Painted and incised wooden planks, 61 by 159 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh;

photograph Sally Jubb).

WK: Could you talk about the ideas behind the commission for the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern?



Fig. 8 Detail of FIG.3.

EA: It was actually the third idea I had for that project. When I received the invitation, I immediately thought about planting sugar cane, to allude to the connection between plantations and Tate & Lyle. Although they didn't take part directly in the slave trade, they were beneficiaries of the infrastructures that the slave trade had set up.

Growing up in the Gold Coast, the only available sugar was from Tate & Lyle, so this was my first thought. But I was told that an artist had explored the idea of planting in the Tate Turbine Hall already. I thought about the transatlantic slave trade and how it created Tate & Lyle, Barclays – all of these big institutions that were the beneficiaries of it.

I was reminded of learning as a child about the thirty or forty castles built by Europeans on the coast of Ghana. They were used for the slave trade, as they would assemble the slaves and ship them from these castles. When I visited the most famous and biggest one at Cape Coast, I was struck by what I'd call a classic illustration of the idea of 'heaven' and 'hell'. There's an underground dungeon where the slaves were kept and there's a building directly on top of it, which was used as a church: heaven and hell. I wanted to replicate that at Tate – exactly the same size – but even the Turbine Hall couldn't take that scale. We spent quite some time thinking about and permuting the structure, but it just wasn't going to be effective.



Fig. 9 Detail of *Nane*, by El Anatsui. 2006. Aluminium and copper wire. (Courtesy the artist and Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh; photograph Sally Jubb).

I had to forget about that idea too. Instead, I thought about bottle caps and how they have a lot to say about the transatlantic slave trade. When I visited the Turbine Hall again, as I walked down the ramp, I was reminded of the descent into a dungeon. I thought the space looked like a ship and, since I work with large sheets of bottle caps, the connection to the sail emerged and then other ideas followed. The work connects elements from the transatlantic slave trade, the ships sails, the sea and the world.



Fig. 10 *Woman's Cloth*, by El Anatsui. 2001. Aluminium and copper wire, 287 by 292 cm. (British Museum, London; courtesy the artist and Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh; photograph Sally Jubb).

WK: How does the use of quotidian, explicitly commercial,

materials relate to your thoughts about how fine art is consumed or circulated?

EA: A good example would be the wooden tray, the first object that I worked with at the beginning of my career. The wooden trays are used in the market to display produce for sale. The first time I exhibited works that utilised these trays, there was an immediate rapport because people would see them every day in the markets and then they saw them as works of art on the wall. They could relate to them very easily, and so they connected with the works. Also, for the first time, regular people, not just the affluent, were able to collect because the materials were from everyday life, and therefore more accessible. The trays are featured in the exhibition at Talbot Rice Gallery, along with the print works shown upstairs, because just like the trays, prints and multiples are more accessible than one-offs. I've always regarded printmaking as the most democratic form of art. Multiples can get to more people, in the sense that the work is able to expand the demographics of the collector or consumer, just as the trays did.



Fig. 11 *Earth Struggling to Grow Roots and Leaves*, by El Anatsui. 2023. Aluminium and copper wire, 350 by 242 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh; photograph Sally Jubb).

WK: The local response was immediate?

EA: Yes, they embraced it. If I'd used media like plaster of Paris, as I did when I was at art school, there would've been a distance between the work and the audience. It was like going back to the beginnings of art, when artists drew on cave walls with the materials they had at hand. Art, I believe, is closer to the audience when it's sourced from the local environment and immediate circumstances.

WK: Europe has an intrinsically problematic relationship to African

art and artists. Often art from Africa is placed in a dismissive or patronising position – described as 'tribal', 'traditional' or 'folk' art, which is excluded from the supposedly sophisticated discourse surrounding 'high art' in Europe.

African modernism, for example, is often seen as explicitly rejecting tradition or disparaged as part of Cold War initiatives like the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF). I wonder what you make of the relationship of your work to the European discourses of contemporary art and art history. Do you find any of these frames of reference helpful in thinking about your ideas, or are they just more of the characteristic reductive approach to African art in Europe?

EA: I think that the relationship between African art and Europe is something Europe should concern itself with. Terms like tribal art or folk art – these hierarchies are not something particular to Africa, as far as I know. Art is a product of the imagination, and that's always been universal. The notion of inserting hierarchies exists in all places that have been colonised: the tendency to look down on people, call them 'subjects' and consider anything they do as inferior. There's no measure for a phenomenon as complex as imagination, which can leap over borders and boundaries, visible or invisible, literal or conceptual. When commodification comes into play, the mechanisms of marketing and demarketing are set in motion.

As a good example, with the presence of the colonialists, locally produced high-quality alcoholic drinks were outlawed, prohibited, and characterised as 'illicit'. They were replaced by drinks brought in by the Imperialists. They had to play down what the local people made, in favour of their own product. This same model has been applied to other modes of culture. There's no 'centre' or 'periphery' now; there are many centres. There are as many centres in the world as there are cultures. Within as well as across these, art happens.

WK: The 'many centres' is certainly at play in the way contemporary art discourse is always looking for the 'next' thing: the next artist, the next Berlin, the next movement, the next hotspot, and so on.

EA: Commodification brings about the idea of being 'in fashion' or being 'of the moment'. Whereas if you look at the history of art, you'll see that it's not about the fashionable. It might be cyclical, but it's not about fashion. It's kind of cumulative – whatever was done in the past didn't come and go, it's still with us, and people still work in those modes. We invent and add to things.

There's also this idea of labelling as part of the process of commodification. To sell art, you need to categorise it: 'conceptual' or 'minimalist', and so on. In art school we learned about European

artists, modern art, Impressionism, Expressionism...

In Europe, art is presented in a way that follows a linear path: Impressionism, followed by Expressionism; one movement must replace the other. It's similar to the model used by the colonialists to replace local products with imports, which also created a hierarchy.

Meanwhile, when I looked at art from Africa, I noticed that different regions were creating works in styles similar to these movements. However, they were happening at the same time. These styles exist simultaneously across different spaces. There's no strict chronological order; it has more to do with spatiality and context, it's circular and cumulative. This observation led me to question the need for naming and categorising art just to validate it. I don't believe in that approach.

WK: The idea of giving 'art' or artistic movements a name seems to cut against the notion of a living, vital practice.

EA: I read a biography of Sundiata Keita, the founder of the ancient Mali Empire, and something in one of the pages struck me. I reread it and saw what I'd describe as a work of art. He lived in the early thirteenth century, was born into a royal family and was picked by an oracle to succeed his father as the king. When his father died, one his siblings usurped the throne. Sundiata and his mother were forced into exile and eventually hosted by another king in a town far away. While in exile there, Sundiata led his forces from victory to victory. As the hosting king didn't have a male heir, he offered to leave Sundiata the kingdom in his will.

Sundiata's half-brother, who had taken over, was a weak ruler and as a result the kingdom was under constant attack. So, people in the kingdom began searching for Sundiata, who was predicted to be their rightful king. After a long search, they found Sundiata and told him of their plight. He agreed to leave with them to try and help. His host king wasn't very happy to lose him, but there was nothing he could do. On the eve of his departure, Sundiata's mother died, and he decided he must bury her before leaving. He asked the hosting king for land to bury his mother, but the king told Sundiata that since he wasn't interested in inheriting his kingdom, he'd have to pay for the land.

Sundiata left in anger and returned hours later with a basket filled with bits of pottery, on top of which were guineafowl feathers and wisps of straw. He put the basket before the king and said, 'Very well king, here is the price of the land'. The king became even angrier and cried 'Sundiata, take this rubbish away. That isn't the price of the land!'. After Sundiata left, one of the king's advisers from Saudi Arabia said that he saw the great significance in what had been placed before him. The advisor deconstructed the meaning of Sundiata's action and went on to explain that it means

Sundiata will in turn wage war on the kingdom: the broken pots and wisps of straw will be the only recognisable fragments left of the town; there will be such ruin that guineafowl will come to take their dust baths there. After hearing this, the king understood. He not only gave Sundiata land, but also use of the calvary to rescue his people. Their victory and subsequent ones marked the beginning of the Mali Empire. I regard this work from the episode, which took place around 1230, as the first recorded work of what we now refer to as conceptual art.

WK: And the first misunderstanding of conceptual art…

EA: Growing up, I saw several similar modes of expression. There's every reason to believe that it's not particular to Sundiata and any culture, it's in all cultures – that people can express themselves without words, but by recontextualising things. Characterisations are too confining. As an artist, I should have the freedom to work outside of these and not to be restricted by whether it fits within a trend. I should be able to set my own trend, and recast a new form.

Edinburgh landmark transformed into 'epic' canvas for art show

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The El Anatsui Exhibition at Talbot Rice Gallery at University of Edinburgh *(Image: Maverick Photo Agency)*



By Craig Williams

July 1st, 2024

Ghanaian artist El Anatsui's exhibition at the University's Talbot Rice Gallery will feature a series of his iconic metal wall hangings crafted out of bottle tops alongside carved wooden reliefs and printed works on paper.

The exhibition will include a monumental 15-metre-wide outdoor wall hanging, *TSIATSIA – Searching for Connection*, that will cover the façade of the Old College Quadrangle.

El Anatsui's work, which reflects on cultural heritage and the impact of colonialism, has been the subject of major **international** museum exhibitions, including most recently in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in London.

Titled, *Scottish Mission Book Depot Keta,* the Talbot Rice Gallery exhibition is named after a Scottish missionary book depot that provided books and crayons to El Anatsui as a child and helped to influence his early artistic development.

The exhibition invites audiences to explore the rich and vibrant tapestry of his five-decade career, which began in the aftermath of the British colonial period in Ghana, and how he uses his art to engage with the complex legacies of colonialism in Africa.

Highlights include the debut of a new wall sculpture created specifically for Talbot Rice Gallery, alongside notable work *Woman's Cloth,* which is on loan from the British Museum.

One of Africa's most prominent artists, many of El Anatsui's artworks are created through the stitching-together of thousands of aluminum bottle tops, reclaimed from Ghanaian and Nigerian liquor bottling (and increasingly printing-press) industries.

The pictorial compositions reflect the complexity of stitching together cultural, national and ethnic ideas of belonging in the aftermath of colonialism in Africa. They carry the weaving traditions of El Anatsui's own heritage (his father was both a fisherman and master weaver of Kente cloth) and express the vulnerability of our natural world.



A series of monumental wall sculptures are on display at the University of Edinburgh *(Image: Maverick Photo Agency)*

Slipping mercurially between painting and sculpture, the artworks are shape-shifting forms installed differently every time they are shown. Giving them a life and evolution that reflects El Anatsui's active understanding of his artworks as living objects they become carriers of meaning: listening and evolving, reacting to whoever has them in their custody. Rippling with intensity, his unification of thousands of fragments of metal to create a metamorphic whole has become fundamental to our understanding of the sculptural object and its ability to evolve.

El Anatsui has a long and distinguished career as both sculptor and teacher – he taught at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka for nearly four decades.

In 2014, El Anatsui was made an Honorary Royal Academician and elected to the American Academy of **Arts** and Sciences. In 2015, he was awarded the Venice Biennale's highest honour, the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement.

Major solo exhibitions include Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, (2010); National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, Japan (2010); Akron Art Museum, Akron, Ohio (2012), which travelled to the Brooklyn Museum, New York and the Des Moines Art Center, Iowa (2013); Bass Museum of Art, Miami, Florida (2014); and Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, California (2015).

His work is held in prestigious public collections across the globe including: Centre Pompidou, Paris; Smithsonian Institution, Washington; Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanagawa, Japan among others.

While his work is exhibited in the Talbot Rice Gallery, Anatsui will be recognised with an Honorary Degree from the University of Edinburgh at this year's graduations.

Anatsui will visit Scotland's capital in July to receive the title of doctor honoris causa for his significant contributions to the art world.

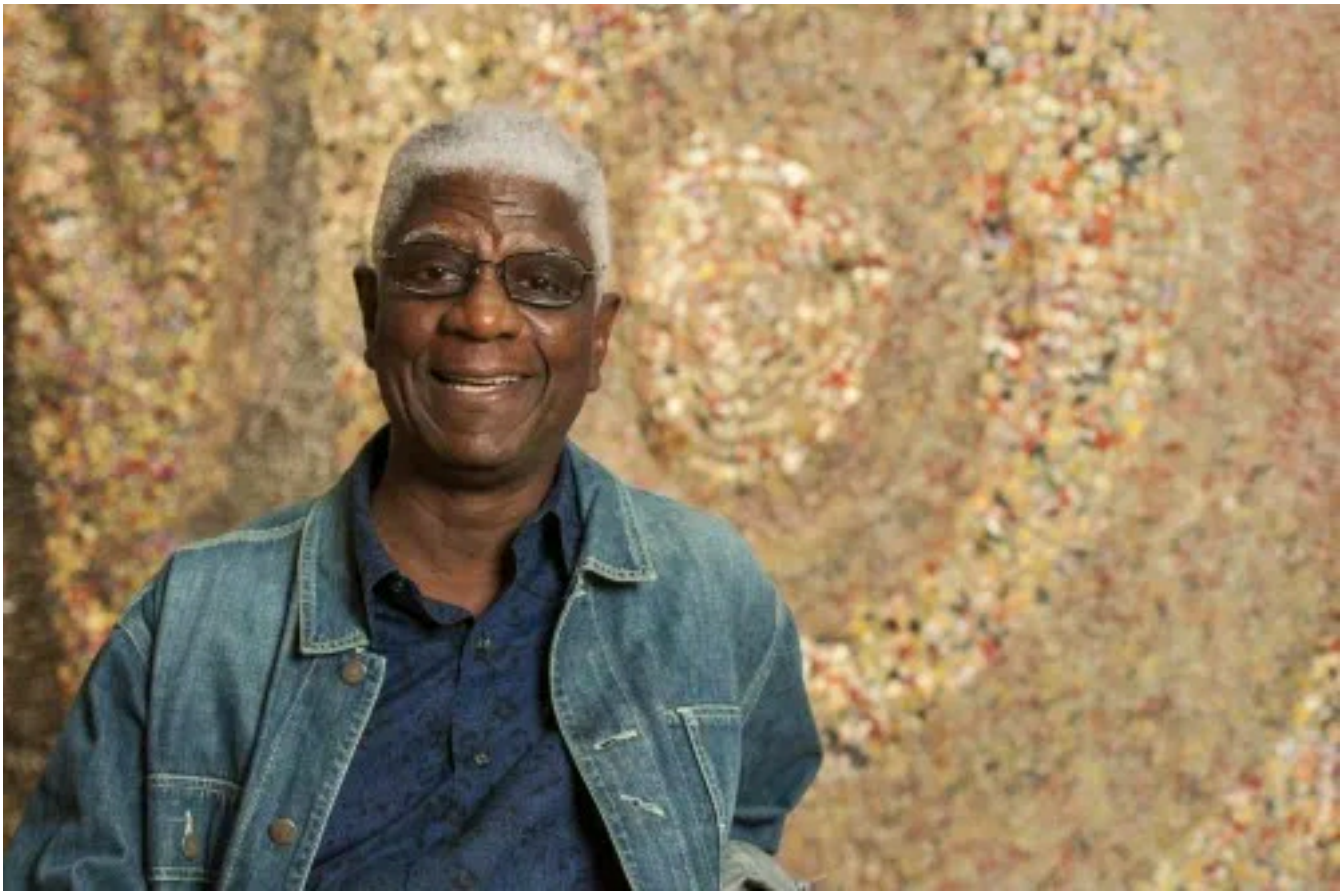
Tessa Giblin, curator of the exhibition and Director of Talbot Rice Gallery, said: "Working with El Anatsui on making this exhibition has been a once in a lifetime experience.

"Against the backdrop of Old College, El Anatsui's work – with its powerful commentary on history and heritage – will invite visitors to reflect on Scotland's, and indeed the University of Edinburgh's, own complex colonial legacies."

African BUSINESS

From trash to treasure: the extraordinary career of El Anatsui

Two exhibitions showcasing the work of 79-year old Ghanaian artist El Anatsui have opened in London, revealing the range and enduring relevance of one of Africa's most in-demand artists.



Over a career spanning an impressive four decades, the work of renowned Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui has graced the walls and floors of many prestigious art galleries around the world, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York to the Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha.

This autumn, two exhibitions showcasing El Anatsui's innovative work opened in London: in the October Gallery, which specialises in contemporary art; and in the Tate Modern's famous Turbine Hall. Yet unlike many of the other avant-garde works that grace these galleries, El Anatsui's masterpieces are no ordinary sculptures, nor paint on canvas.

Just as one man's trash can be another man's treasure, El Anatsui uses discarded and recycled items to bring his creative visions to life and give new meaning to jettisoned scrap. His more recent iconic installations, including his sculptures currently on display in the Tate Modern, have gained international fame for being created with aluminium bottle tops joined together by copper wire, among other recycled materials.

Dominating the vast, vertical space of the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, which rises 26 metres from ground level, is El Anatsui's largest work to date; the first act of *Behind the Red Moon*, which greets visitors as they enter the gallery. A unique exhibition in three acts, *Behind the Red Moon* invites art lovers to explore the story of thousands of alcohol bottle caps and repurposed objects that have been reshaped and reworked into three acts of abstract art that cascade from the ceiling like a waterfall, dancing and shimmering in the light.

"*Behind the Red Moon* takes its inspiration from the trans-Atlantic trade, from the histories of the enslaved peoples to the commodities they produced and the economies they helped to create," El Anatsui tells *African Business*. "The Turbine Hall is huge and to take advantage of this, I divided the space into three segments, so that a continuous story could be told."

Across the city in the October Gallery, near Russell Square, is *TimeSpace* – a solo exhibition of El Anatsui's works, unveiled during the Frieze London art events week. A representative of the October Gallery says that the *TimeSpace*

exhibition "explores the evolution of El Anatsui's work, his innovative and experimental approach to tools, processes and materials, and the ways in which he continues to take his work in new directions".

"The exhibition includes new bottle-top works as well as historical works created in wood, clay and on paper," says the artist. "Although I don't consciously think of a theme when I start a work, the bottle-top pieces in this exhibition reflect my response to the material. By allowing the mind to travel freely during the process ideas emerge; for instance, some of the completed works have titles such as *Earth Struggling to Grow Roots and Leaves* and *Clouds Gathering over the City.*"



A view of El Anatsui's *TimeSpace* at the October Gallery. (Image: October Gallery / Jonathan Greet)

An artist's response to colonialism

El Anatsui is one of the most renowned artists of his generation in Africa and around the world. His sought-after work sells for millions – which, according to *The New Yorker*, makes him the first black artist based in Africa to have his works valued at an international price standard. In 2012, his work *Prophet* sold for $2.3m at Christie's, 123% over the estimated price.

Yet to better understand El Anatsui's rise, we must first step back in time into his own history to understand his experimental approach to his works of art and what has shaped the inspiration behind his creation.

El Anatsui was born in 1944 in Anyako, in the Volta Region of Ghana, when it was still a British colony. It would remain so for several more years, under the name of the British Gold Coast, an epithet it had held since 1874, when the British declared the coastal area for themselves.

The Ghanaian independence movement, however, had been growing since before El Anatsui was born, and in 1957 the Gold Coast became the first sub-Saharan colony to become an independent nation, under President Kwame Nkrumah, who had led the fight for independence. El Anatsui grew up in a nation that was truly ahead of its time, as over the next decade 30 other African countries rightfully declared their own independence.

In 1964, when El Anatsui began his artistic studies, many African countries were experiencing a cultural renaissance born from decolonisation, and it is against this backdrop that he began his artistic career.

Cut off from his indigenous culture during his childhood and forced to follow a British art school curriculum, El Anatsui explains in an interview with *Art Africa* that a visit to the National Cultural Centre in Kumasi to observe local artists working in media ranging from bronze and brass to printed textiles fed his inspiration for exploratory art that did not conform to the limited categories imposed by Western art history.

Over a career spanning more than forty years, El Anatsui has used media including wooden pallets, milk-tin lids, and clay to bring his creative ideas to life. His earlier artwork forms part of the exhibition in TimeSpace, including the wooden wall piece *Solemn Crowd at Dawn* and clay sculptures from El Anatsui's *Venovize* series, both created in the 80s. These are displayed alongside some of his most recent works created this year, including *G6* and *Royal Slumber*, both of which are crafted from thousands of aluminium bottle tops from alcoholic drinks.

"I am interested in old objects, and I find that used items resonate with history," says the artist. "In Ghana, I discovered craftsman who were making wooden *apampa* food trays. I would direct them to produce trays for me with *adinkra* patterns, traditionally used on fabric. This is one example of blending tradition in different way to give it another life and another meaning.

Beauty representing pain

Speaking to *The Guardian*, El Anatsui states that alcohol, such as rum made in the Americas, was a key commodity used by Europeans in the transatlantic slave trade, to barter in exchange for enslaved African people. As he explains, the drink represented by the bottle cap explicitly links all three continents involved in this horrific enslavement of men, women, and children.

Perhaps more tacitly, the bottle caps, which are seals trapping the liquid inside the bottle, could be read as a grim metaphor for the horrific treatment of the stolen African people themselves, forcibly trapped as slaves and held thousands of miles from their homeland.

Walking through the *Behind the Red Moon* exhibition in the immense Turbine Hall and looking up at the immense hanging statues created from these shimmering metallic caps, it is difficult to understand how something that is seemingly so beautiful can represent so much generational pain and hurt.

Likewise, several of El Anatsui's older wall artworks displayed at TimeSpace are crafted from wood that has been torn apart and damaged by a chainsaw, which El Anatsui explains represents how the African continent was partitioned by European powers.

Yet it is precisely El Anatsui's creation of visual beauty from such unassuming materials that makes his work so breathtaking. By weaving together discarded and jettisoned objects, El Anatsui conveys a whole other meaning within his work, in the abstract language of art that needs no words. From the very first, he took charge of his artistic vision, rejecting any imposed limitations or restrictions placed on his creativity that dictated what art could, or should, be, challenging the preconception that art is something that is only done correctly in the West.

"Continents are linked by peoples' histories, for good and or bad," says El Anatsui. "A viewer can experience art as a way of storytelling, and perhaps rediscover identities through a uniquely physical encounter. This can prompt discussions that can change perceptions and perspectives."

El Anatsui's influence on the understanding of contemporary sculpture led to his being awarded the Golden Lion in 2015 at the 56th International Art Exhibition of the Biennale di Venezia, in recognition of his lifetime of achievement in the arts, not only recognising his renowned international success, but also his profound influence on subsequent generations of African artists. Earlier this year he was named as one of *Time*'s Top 100 influential people of 2023 and, at the age of 79, his star just keeps on rising.

El Anatsui's transcendental art and its enduring impact has ignited conversations, sparked reflections, and he has inspired artists and art lovers alike with his interpretation of what art is, and how it can educate.

His astounding career serves as a testament to the enduring power of his artistic vision and determination which will no doubt inspire the hearts and minds of generations of artists on the continent and around the world to come.

TimeSpace *will be displayed at the October Gallery, London until 13 January 2024 (entry free)*

Behind the Red Moon *will be displayed at the Tate Modern, London until 14 April 2024 (entry free)*

The New York Times

El Anatsui Builds Monumental Art From Daily Life

As his newest sculptures fill Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, the Ghanaian artist is returning to his roots and thinking about his legacy.



By Siddhartha Mitter

Reporting from Tema and Anyako, Ghana

Oct. 9, 2023

It's one of the great origin stories in contemporary art, a flash of instinct that would revolutionize a field. In 1998, El Anatsui was walking around Nsukka, Nigeria, and noticed a bag of aluminum bottle caps by the roadside.

Anatsui, then a professor at the University of Nigeria who was drawn to daily-life materials in his own art practice, took the bag to his studio. He began to play with the caps: folding them, slicing them in rounds and opening their cylindrical sides.

Working with assistants, he found a method. He punctured the metal bits in several places and linked them with copper wire. The compositional language rewarded scale: Soon individual works would enfold hundreds of thousands of these molecules. They would dance when hung on walls and cover entire buildings.

As they have awed viewers worldwide — at the Venice Biennale in 2007 or the Brooklyn Museum in 2013, for instance — Anatsui's bottle-cap confections have defied description and category. Is he sculpting, or weaving? Is this art modern, abstract, universal, African?

The answer to all of these is: Yes.

The New York Times



Anatsui's studio is filled with finished and in-progress works made from bottle caps, foil and wood. Credit...Clara Watt for The New York Times

This week, Anatsui's latest monumental work opens in the cavernous Turbine Hall at Tate Modern in London. Titled "Behind the Red Moon," it evokes the celestial and the maritime. Come down the entry ramp and an immense red-on-red sail with a central orb billows over your head. Its back unfurls in shades of yellow. At the far end, another sheet dips to the ground, dark like a looming shore. In between, panels of silvery diaphanous rings glitter in the light; they suggest human figures and come together to form a globe.

Twenty-five years after Anatsui's roadside intuition, his bottle-cap compositions still reward and elude. Grand but down-to-earth, they exude sensuousness and sweep, yet, on approach, grow prickly and particular. They invite close looking — for the sheer craft, but also for insights, in their weave of recirculated materials, about the world we live in. With its navigational theme and the fact that it is on view in London, "Behind the Red Moon," which Anatsui conceived working with the Tate curators Osei Bonsu and Dina Akhmadeeva, carries allusions to colonial trade and empire while operating through metaphor.

For the Princeton University art historian Chika Okeke-Agulu — an Anatsui expert who helped organize a major 2019 Munich retrospective — Anatsui has done nothing less than reinvent sculpture.

The New York Times

“When you look at these gossamer structures in space, monumental in scale yet so fragile, that paradoxical invocation of power and poetry, it’s hard to find equivalents,” Okeke-Agulu said. “It’s a completely new proposition.”



Anatsui installing “Behind the Red Moon” in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern on Oct. 6.Credit...Kemka Ajoku for The New York Times

The New York Times



At the far end of the hall, a metallic sheet dips to the ground. Credit...Kemka Ajoku for The New York Times

The New York Times

IN LATE AUGUST, I met Anatsui in the new studio he has built in Tema, the port city near Accra, Ghana's capital. Born and raised in Ghana, Anatsui spent 45 years in Nigeria before returning two years ago.

Tema is a utilitarian place, a planned city with a container terminal, oil refinery and aluminum smelter. Anatsui's studio sits near the main highway, neighboring low-slung warehouses, the truck yard for a cement company and a home-goods superstore. When I arrived, Anatsui, 79, was working with 10 assistants on new works.

Even a small Anatsui piece fetches hundreds of thousands of dollars; his metal works were among the first pieces of African contemporary art to clear the million-dollar bar, setting key market benchmarks and building value for cohorts of young artists behind him.

The proceeds sustain a whole economy. Anatsui's materials are inexpensive, but he requires huge quantities. The work is immensely labor-intensive and now straddles two countries. Between Ghana and his larger studio in Nigeria, he employs nearly 100 people.

I watched Anatsui review sections of bottle-cap weave laid on the floor of a hexagonal atelier. Two assistants worked at a small table puncturing aluminum pieces with wood awls — the tedious fundamental labor.

The sections on the floor shimmered in gold, silver, purple, yellow. Some were streaked with contrasting colors and forms; others had multiple layers.
Image

The New York Times



Many of Anatsui's pieces look like billowing, woven sculpture from afar, but up close reveal a mosaic of recirculated found materials. Credit...Clara Watt for The New York Times

More developed pieces hung on the studio walls. As we considered a jagged rectangle composition about 10 feet wide, made of deep reds and softer pinks with an irregular gold central field, I asked Anatsui how he knew a work was finished.

"It has to hang on the wall a certain time and undergo scrutiny and reflection," he said. He asked me to interpret the piece: "Can you see anything?"

I hesitated. "When people ask that, you will start to think there is something there," he said. The work was entirely abstract. "There is nothing there."

Anatsui, whom everyone calls "Prof," is soft-spoken and witty. The more analytic the point, the more likely he will offset it with a chuckle or wry smile.

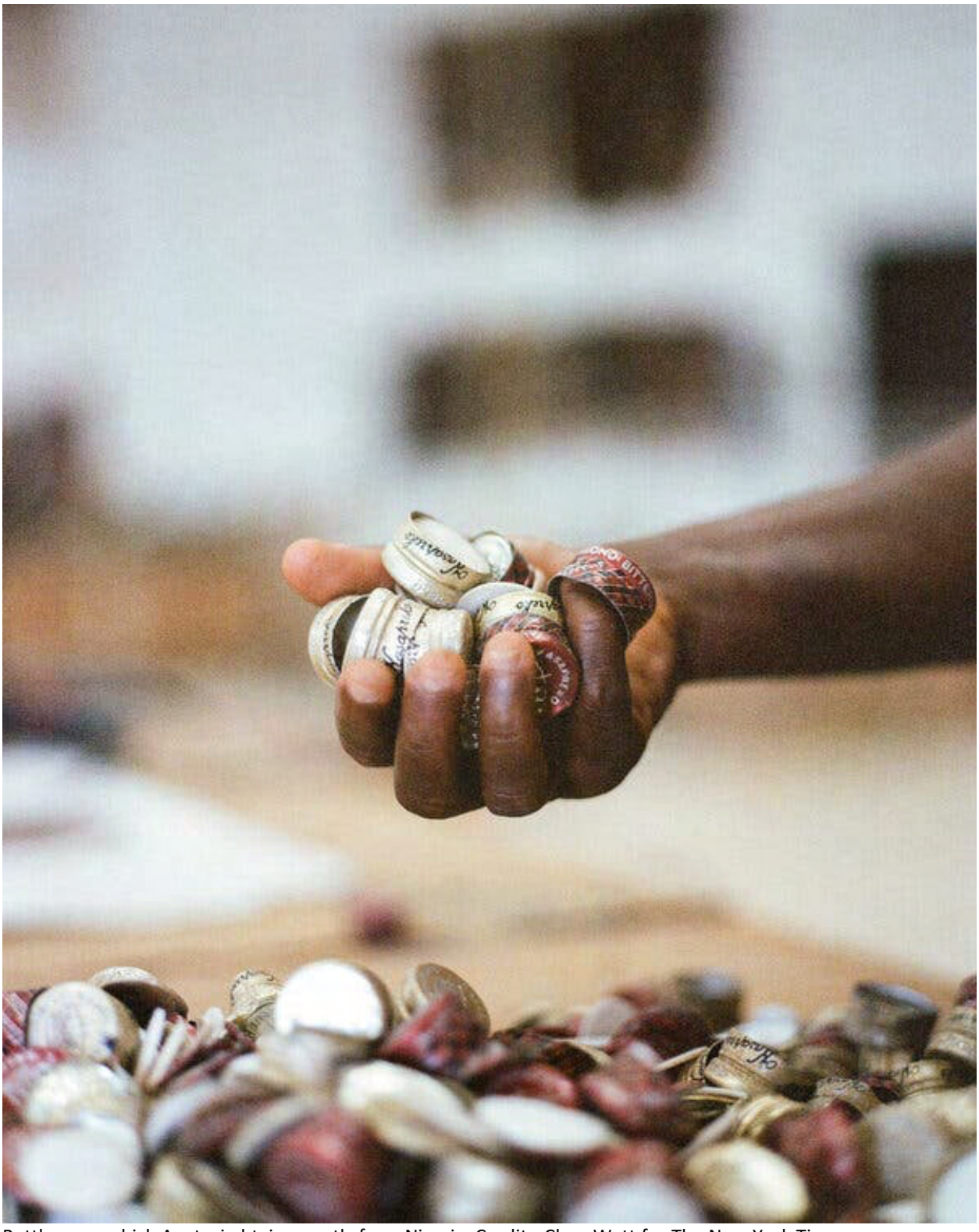
His art comes pre-loaded with meaning. Sorted into crates and sacks in the studio, the caps and foils — from alcohol, other drinks, medicines — suggest a kind of material sociology of daily life, consumption and commerce. He still obtains them mostly in Nigeria but is building his Ghana circuits; minor local differences in products and tastes could ramify through his artwork into new colors and patterns.

In societies where adaptive reuse is the norm, Anatsui rejects the premise of trash. Consider the foil buffet trays at weddings or funerals, he said, which can be smelted back into cooking pots. “We are not working with waste material, because there are other people who use them for other things,” he said. Art is one option in the cycle.



Wood mortars piled outside Anatsui’s studio in Tema. Credit...Clara Watt for The New York Times

The New York Times



Bottle caps, which Anatsui obtains mostly from Nigeria. Credit...Clara Watt for The New York Times

He is keenly conscious of his own work's industrial organization — particularly now that its supply chain crosses countries. The Nsukka studio produces works up to the point where his eye and touch are needed. Folded into crates, they are shipped by DHL to Tema, from where the finished pieces head out into the world.

In designing the Turbine Hall work, Anatsui said, he had in mind the trans-Atlantic triangular trade in enslaved people and plantation commodities — particularly sugar, which built the wealth of Henry Tate, the museum's 19th-century patron. In a sense, he said, Nsukka to Tema to London "replicates a triangle in the way the whole work comes about."

But he keeps a space now at Tema port, to generate fresh ideas near the docks and vessels. The setting, he said, "offers new challenges and opportunities to me as an artist."

THEY MISS HIM in Nsukka.

"You can say that again," said Chijioke Onuora, a former student of Anatsui who is now a fine art professor at the University of Nigeria.

Anatsui arrived there in 1975 and became a fixture for 45 years. He impressed students with his nontraditional assignments, and by "doing the kind of art that was a little weird to us," said Onuora, who studied with him in the early 1980s. "He would tell us to find something common and experiment with ways to make it into interesting sculptures."

Image



"Two Hands and Two Feet" (1991) Credit...Ben Stansall/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

The New York Times



“Second Wave” (2019), an installation created for the facade of Haus der Kunst in Munich. Credit...Laetitia Vancon for The New York Times

Nsukka, in eastern Nigeria, was no ordinary college town. After the Biafran war ended in 1970, it attracted intellectuals, notably the novelist Chinua Achebe. The painter and sculptor Uche Okeke oriented the university’s art program toward “natural synthesis,” his term for modern art that drew on local and traditional aesthetics and knowledge.

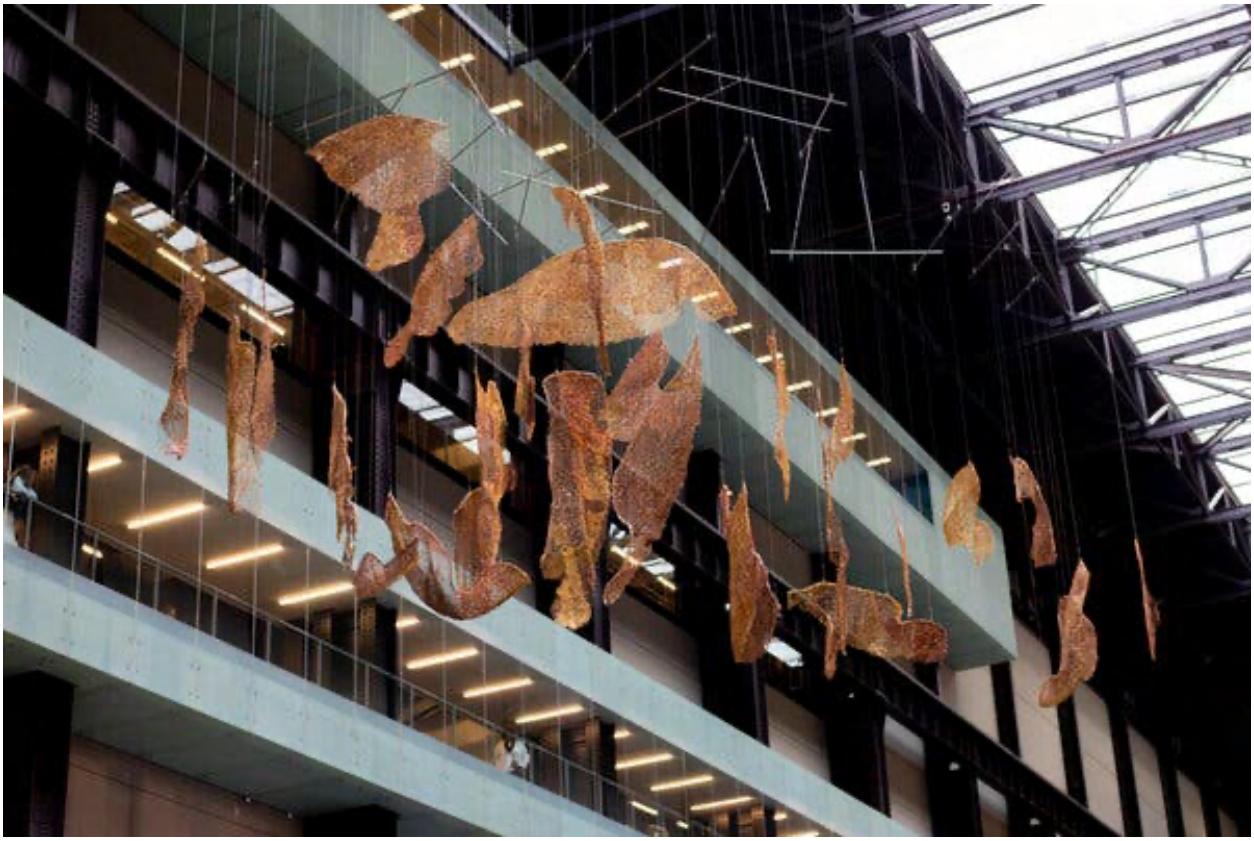
At a time when writers and artists around Africa craved ways to ally their colonially shaped training and study in the Western tradition with the local cultures it disparaged or ignored, Nsukka offered a community and institutional home.

Anatsui had trained conventionally, at a university in Ghana. But in the early 1970s, while teaching in Winneba, a coastal town west of Accra, he began working on round wooden trays that were common in markets there, and into which he began burning his adaptations of Adinkra symbols, which express social concepts and proverbs.

When Anatsui joined the faculty in Nsukka, his art grew to encompass many media — wood, ceramics, printmaking. He created wood pieces lined up like xylophone keys that could be shown in many sequences, which earned him notice abroad — including the 1990 Venice Biennale. He broke and reassembled ceramic vessels. He made art from local practical objects, including wood mortars and iron cassava graters.

Thanks to Anatsui, Onuora said, “it dawned on everybody that anything at all could be used to make a sculptural statement.”
Image

The New York Times



A mobile hanging in the Turbine Hall assumes the shape of a globe when viewed from some angles. Credit...Kemka Ajoku for The New York Times

Anatsui's international visibility, which grew in the 1990s before the bottle-cap works turbocharged it, offered ballast against the vagaries of Nigeria — the years of dictatorship and economic crisis that pushed many peers and students to emigrate. Nevertheless, Anatsui told me, he bought land in Ghana as early as 1999, sensing the time would come.

In Nsukka, Onuora said, the view was that Anatsui might never have left, were it not for escalating insecurity in the region, notably kidnappings for ransom.

But when I asked Anatsui what motivated his decision, he emphasized the importance of change, and the duties of age. "As an artist, you need to have a variety of experiences," he said. "And growing old, you need to establish something at home. "

THE NEXT DAY, I met Anatsui on the Accra-Tema highway, well before dawn to beat the traffic. We were headed to Anyako — his ancestral town, where he was born, on a lagoon peninsula near the border with Togo.

Anatsui is investing. In Tema, a huge studio extension, two-thirds the size of a football field, is nearly complete. It will have areas for wood sculpture — which Anatsui never stopped doing — and metal, ceramics, even a sound studio.

The New York Times



Anatsui’s assistants help to assemble his pieces, puncturing metal pieces with awls. Credit...Clara Watt for The New York Times

The New York Times



A recent art school graduate assisting Anatsui with a new work in Tema. Credit...Clara Watt for The New York Times

But in Anyako his mission is personal. Even as a child, he told me, he was rarely there, because he was raised by an uncle who was a pastor in other towns. He did not know much about home, he said, but was always soothed by the breeze on the lagoon.

Now he shows up — to the weddings, the funerals, the naming ceremonies. He has purchased land next to a nephew's home — Anatsui himself is a lifelong bachelor — and intends to build a cultural center. The lagoon is overfished, unemployment is soaring; culture, he said, should bring value.

"Before long I'll be living here," he said. "It's not good to just come and live in the world and go, and not leave any contribution."

At the waterside we entered long wood canoes and crossed the lagoon. Returning, we had the wind at our backs. The boatmen roped the canoes together, then raised a mast — a Y-shape arrangement of two branches — and a sail made from flour sacks.

Nothing was wasted. The perfect sculpture billowed us home.



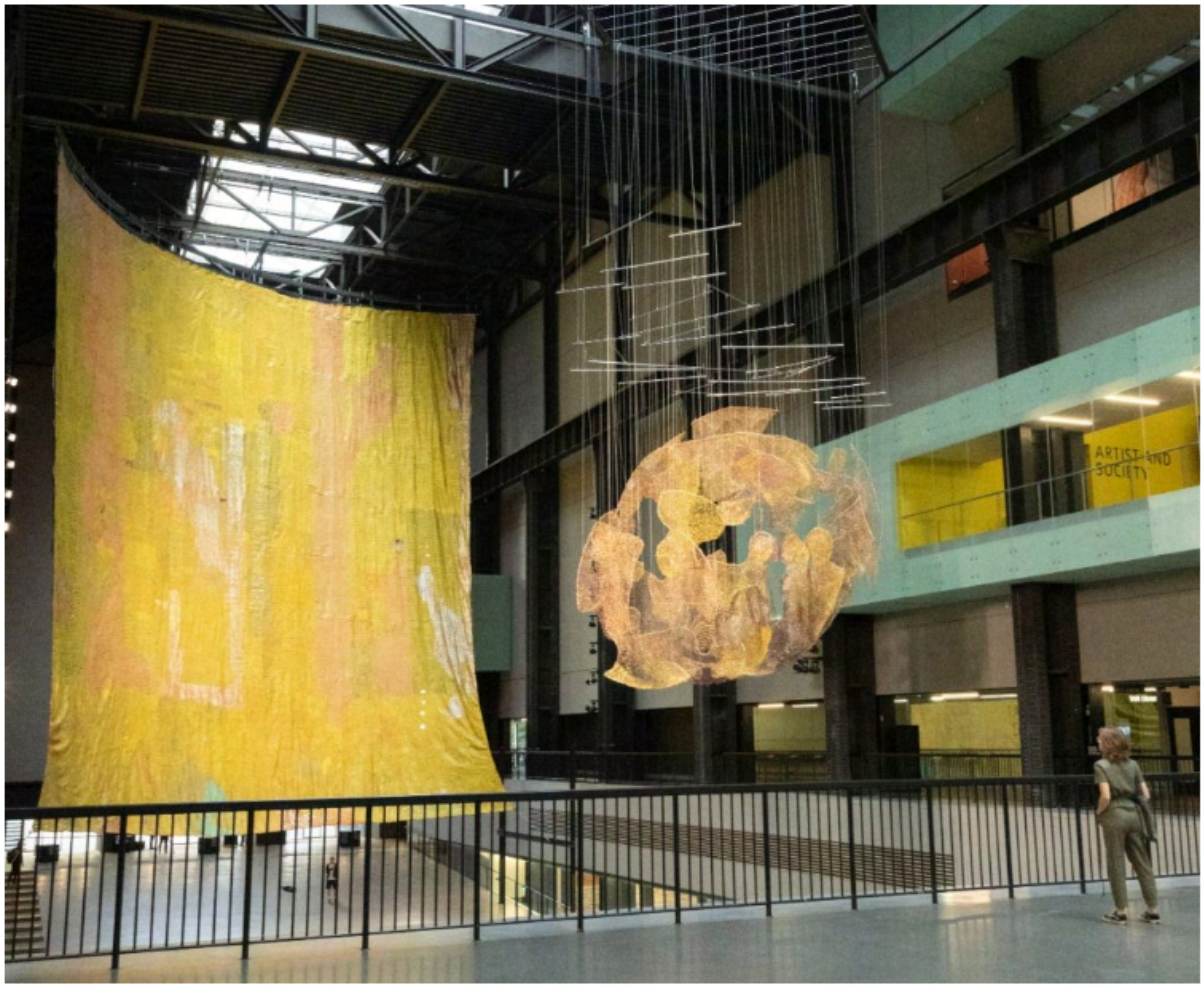
When asked how he knew a work was finished, Anatsui said: "It has to hang on the wall a certain time and undergo scrutiny and reflection." Credit...Kemka Ajoku for The New York Times

On View

El Anatsui's Towering Site-Specific Installation Is Unveiled At Tate Modern—See It Here

The London museum's director noted the "remarkable ambition" of the artist's monumental work.

Jo Lawson-Tancred, October 10, 2023



Hyundai Commission: El Anatsui: Behind the Red Moon installation view at Tate Modern. Photo: Lucy Green, © Tate.

A spectacular site-specific installation by the Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui has been unveiled at Tate Modern in London, becoming the latest in an impressive array of solo museum shows opening across the capital in time for Frieze week. The latest Turbine Hall commission, *Behind the Red Moon* is the artist's largest ever indoor artwork.

Based between Ghana and Nigeria, the 79-year-old artist has become a globally recognized star for his monumental textile-style sculptural hangings made of used bottle caps, which he began in the late 1990s. These ubiquitous objects recycled from the real world inevitably represent consumption and waste, but also provide a way for Anatsui to refer to geopolitics and how commodities are shipped to Africa via a network of age-old colonial trade routes. Like all his work, this latest installation amazes with its sheer scale while also inviting viewers to delight in its myriad details.

Divided into three parts, the visitor encounters the first piece *The Red Moon* as they enter the museum. Its rich red rendition of a "blood moon," only visible during a total lunar eclipse, appears to billow like a sail in the wind. After this comes *The World*, in which ethereal forms intended to evoke human figures—or perhaps, spirits—swirl around each other in a sphere. Finally, is a breathtaking work called *The Wall*, a sheet of black metal cloth that cascades and ripples from a staggering height. The eye is guided across its vast expanse by a smattering of shimmering patterns, and viewers who venture behind will be met by a multi-colored mosaic on the reverse.

"Anatsui is one of the most distinctive artists today. His highly innovative approach to sculpture and his unique choice of materials are instantly recognizable." said Tate Modern's new director Karin Hindsbo at the press conference on Monday, October 9. "He has responded to [the Turbine Hall] with remarkable ambition. His three extensive abstract compositions made from countless metal bottle tops and fragments dramatically cut through this huge space and transform it anew."

Each year, Tate's Turbine Hall commission makes use of its vast post-industrial, hangar-like entrance to stage large-scale sculptural works, and Anatsui's will remain on display through April 14, 2024.

Check out more photos of the installation below.



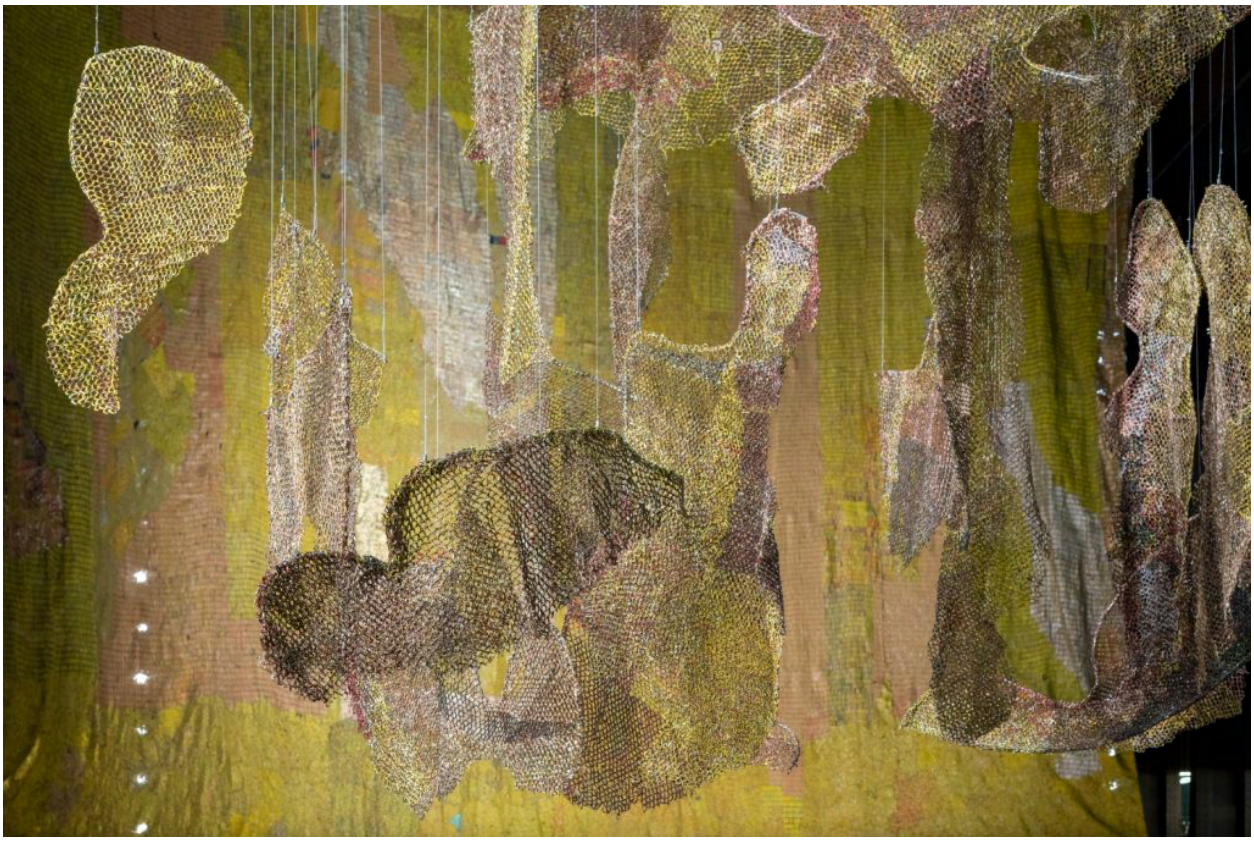
Hyundai Commission: El Anatsui: Behind the Red Moon installation view at Tate Modern. Photo: Lucy Green, © Tate.



Hyundai Commission: El Anatsui: Behind the Red Moon installation view at Tate Modern. Photo: Joe Humphreys, © Tate.



Hyundai Commission: El Anatsui: Behind the Red Moon installation view at Tate Modern. Photo: Joe Humphreys, © Tate.



Hyundai Commission: El Anatsui: Behind the Red Moon installation view at Tate Modern. Photo: Joe Humphreys, © Tate.



Hyundai Commission: El Anatsui: Behind the Red Moon installation view at Tate Modern. Photo: Lucy Green, © Tate.



Hyundai Commission: El Anatsui: Behind the Red Moon installation view at Tate Modern. Photo: Lucy Green, © Tate.

El Anatsui



Courtesy of El Anatsui, October Gallery and Jack Shainman Gallery

BY CHIKA OKEKE-AGULU
APRIL 13, 2023 6:32 AM EDT

El Anatsui is one of the most impactful artists of our time. As a sculptor, he shows an incomparable capacity to experiment with his materials, medium, and process. El collects diverse materials, puts them aside in his studio for years, and then returns to them intermittently, until he figures out the right language for inventing completely new sculptural forms. The breathtaking combination of experimental rigor and inspired vision turns such unassuming materials as printer's plates or liquor-bottle caps into the magnificent constructions and compositions displayed around the world,

from a recent solo show in Seoul to his upcoming commission at London's Tate Modern.

Less public, but just as important, is El's unflinching generosity of spirit. As his career grew, so has his remarkable propensity to support not just other artists but also individuals, families, and institutions in his community in Nsukka and across Nigeria. And he does all this without fanfare, as if it is only but a life mission. That, for me, is the mark of greatness.

Okeke-Agulu is an artist, critic, and art historian at Princeton and the author of El Anatsui: The Reinvention of Sculpture

THE NEW YORKER

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**

January 11, 2021



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 Organiza 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 *quiiite*"—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."

In 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.

In 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 Oguibe, 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."

When 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. ♦

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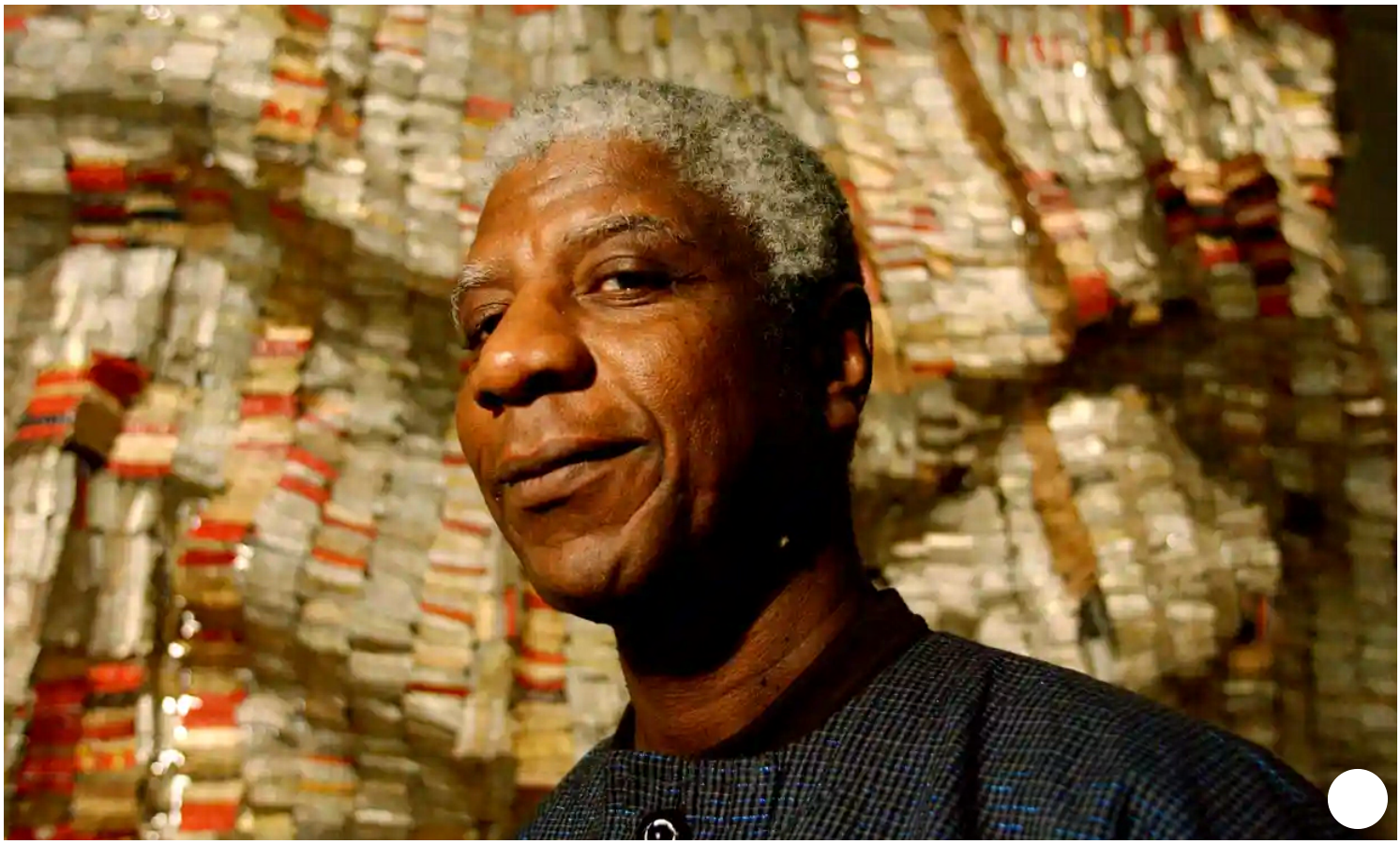
The Guardian

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

The Ghanian 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



It 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.

ARTFORUM

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*

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HYPERALLERGIC

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 Ghanian 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 Ghanian 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 coppers 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 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

artnet news

On View

Ghana s Buzzed-About Venice Biennale Pavilion Is a lear irst te in the ountry s Bid to Become a Global Art Destination

The knockout avilion, which includes work by ohn Akomfrah and Ibrahim Mahama, a ears to be art of a bigger lan.

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.

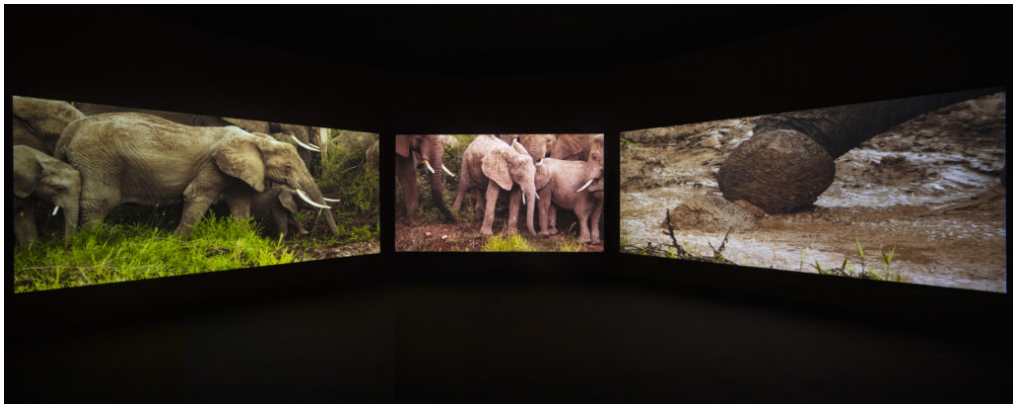
One could spend hours in the pavilion, whose sand-colored walls are made with soil imported from Ghana. Each of the six artists chosen by Oforiatta Ayim (with input from legendary curator Okwui Enwezor, who served as an advisor on the project until his death in March) has an older or younger counterpart 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: TIZIA A ABI/A P/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 ohn 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.



elicia Abban s self- ortraits at Ghana s avilion. Photo: ulia al erin.

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.

ARTFORUM

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.

The New York Times

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 usesd 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.

El Anatsui: Triumphant Scale

Through July 28 at the Haus der Kunst, Munich; hausderkunst.de.

THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

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.



Anatsui's "Womb of Time."
Credit Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

"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 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.

The Nigerian Expression

Art & Culture, Featured Stories

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)

El Anatsui

Midas moderne



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

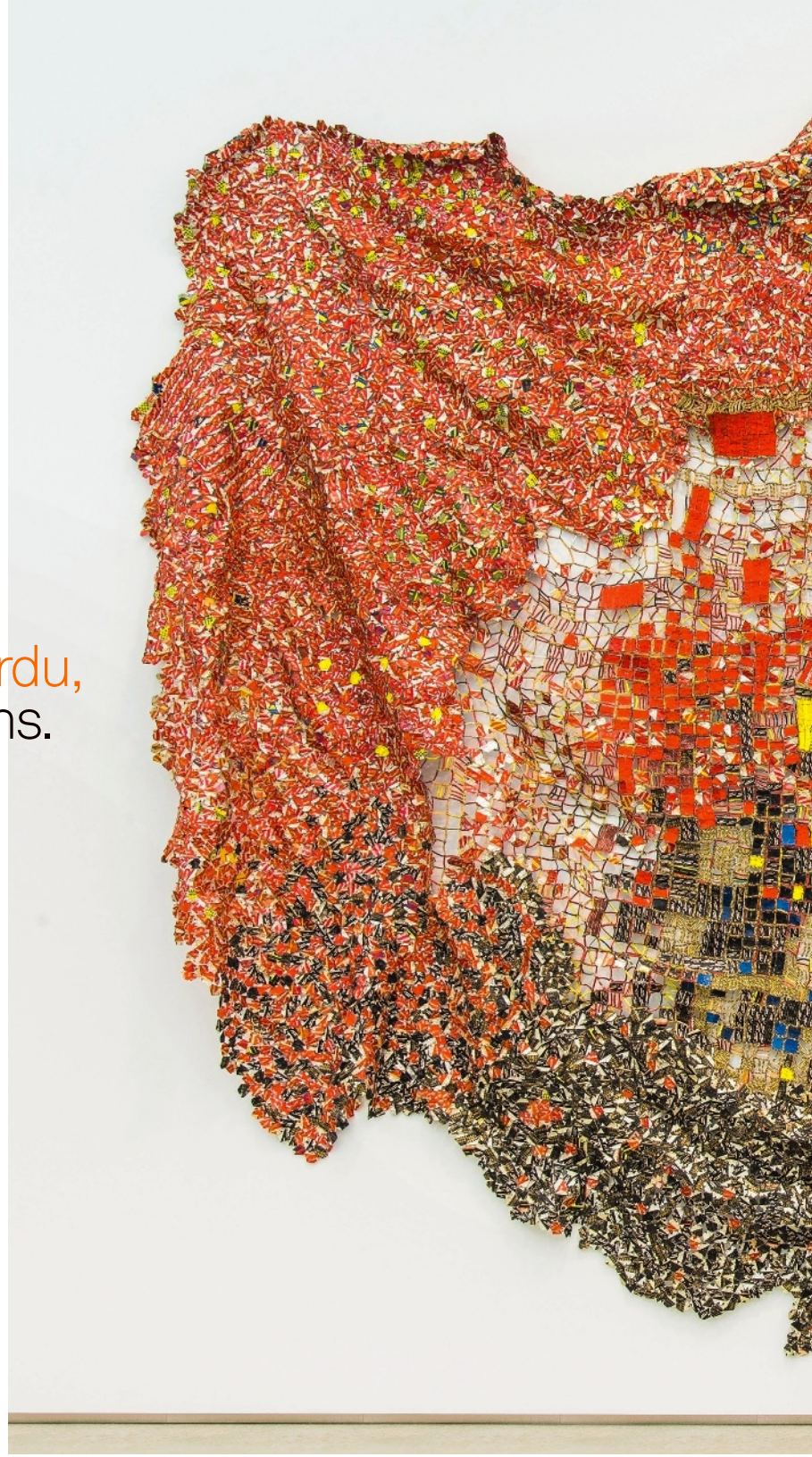


El Anatsui à son studio au Nigeria, 2009
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK.

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'imaginaire 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 nigérians 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,

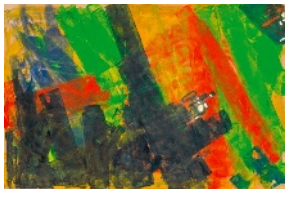
Page de gauche
El Anatsui
à Chaumont-sur-Loire,
et montage de
l'exposition, 2015
©E. SANDER ET ©DR.

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 XXIe 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

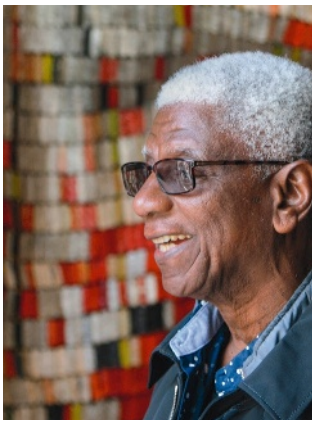
★★★ « EL ANATSUI : MEYINA », The Prince Claus Fund Gallery, Herengracht 603, Amsterdam, 31 20 344 9160, www.princeclausfund.org du 24 novembre au 28 avril.

★★★ ARTS & NATURE 2017, Domaine de Chaumont-sur-Loire, 41150 Chaumont-sur-Loire, 02 54 20 99 22, www.domaine-chaumont.fr du 1er 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
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frieze



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 *Imbroglio* (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

Cotter, Holland. *The New York Times*, 10 February 2013: AR1, illustrated.

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.

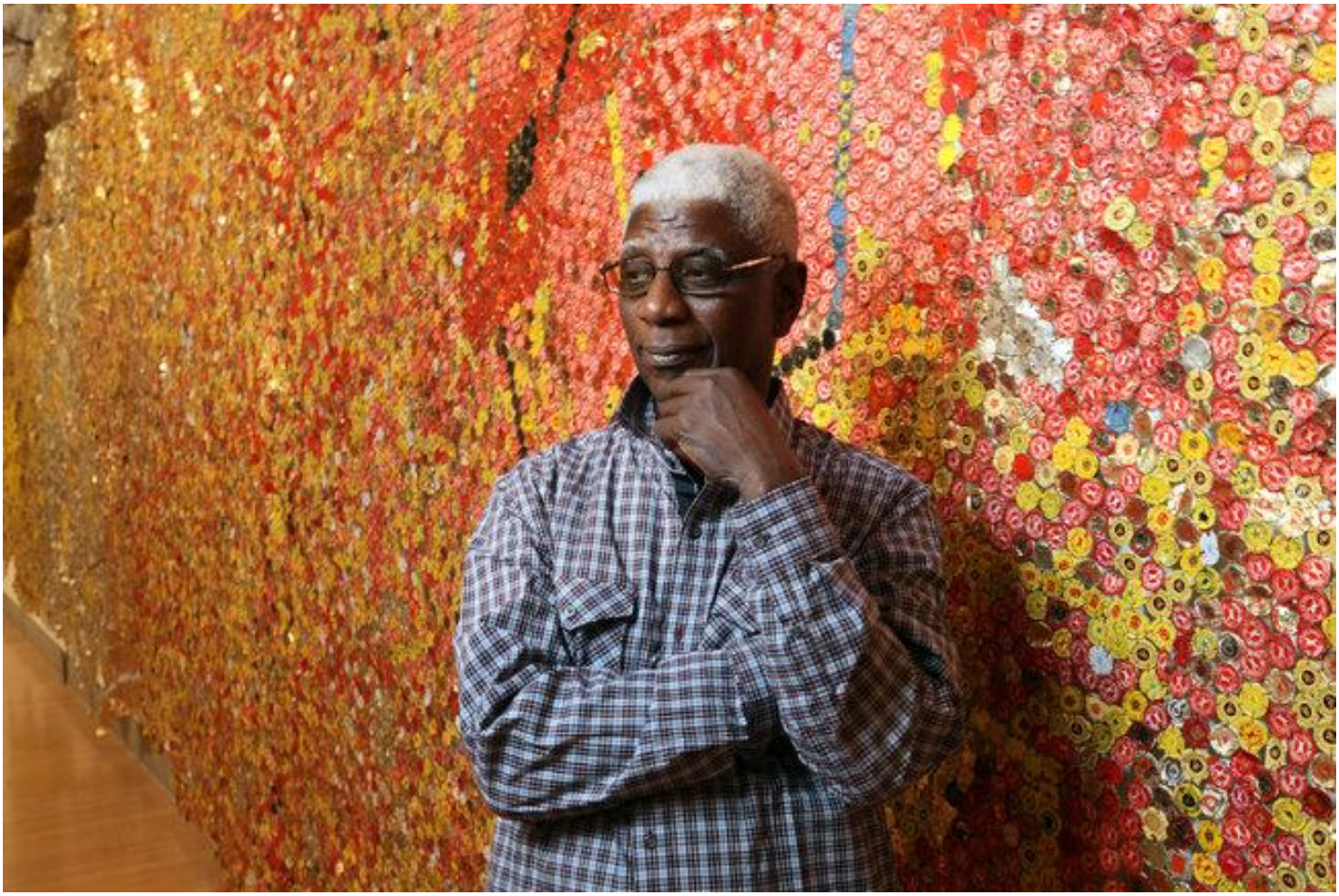
Cotter, Holland. *The New York Times*, 10 February 2013: AR1, illustrated.

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.



Cotter, Holland. *The New York Times*, 10 February 2013: AR1, illustrated.

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 theHigh 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.

Cotter, Holland. *The New York Times*, 10 February 2013: AR1, illustrated.

Enwezor, Okwui, Robert Storr and Chika Okeke-Agulu. "El Anatsui." *Parkett*, no. 19 (2012): 34–69, illustrated.

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.

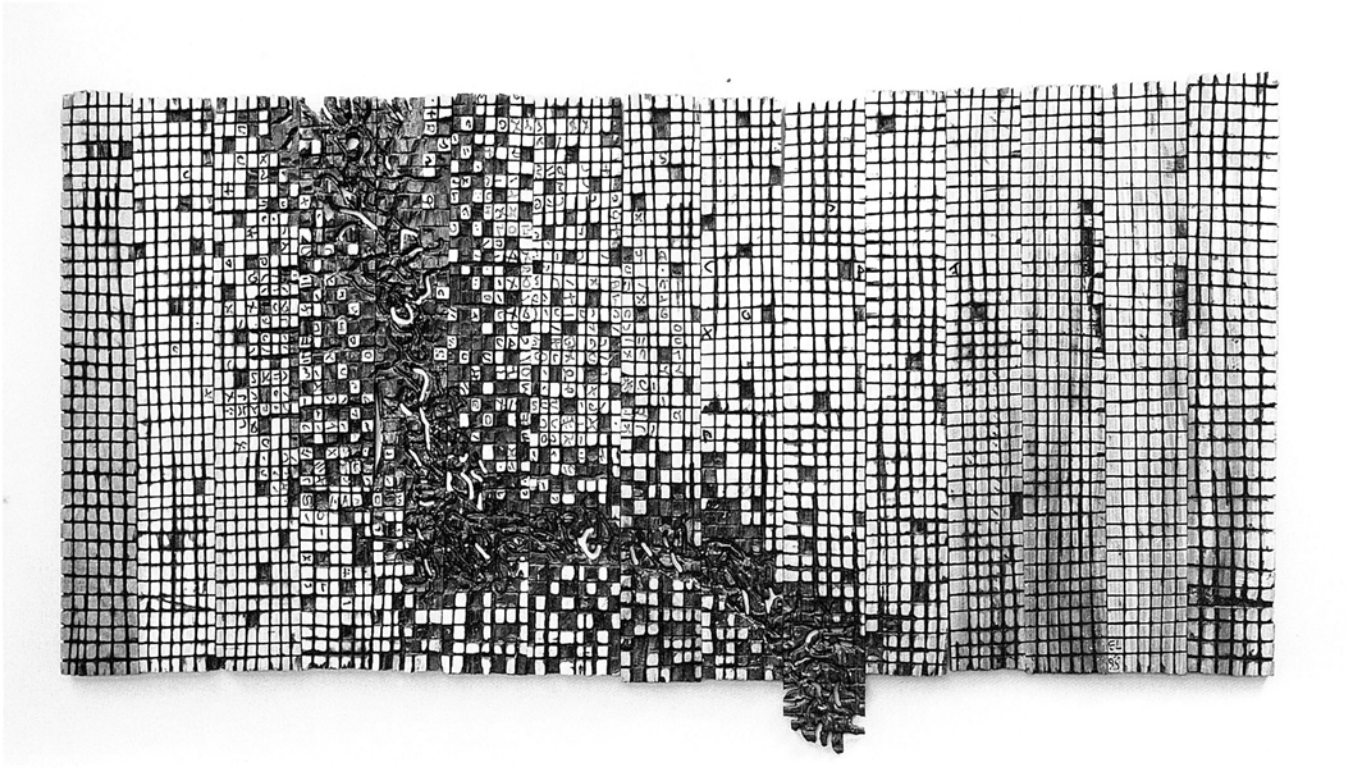
Reserved, wry, and philosophical, Anatsui is contemporary in every way. He creates his art in the tense boundary between tradition and modernity, medium and process. From one project to the next, his practice represents the search for sculptural solutions sensitive to prevailing idioms. He stringently emphasizes the primacy of process over compositional predetermination, 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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EL ANATSUI, GOAT SKIN BAG, 1979, ceramic, manganese, 18 1/2 x 11" / ZIEGENFELL-TASCHE, Keramik, Mangan, 47 x 28 cm. (PHOTO: KELECHI AMADI-OBI)



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.

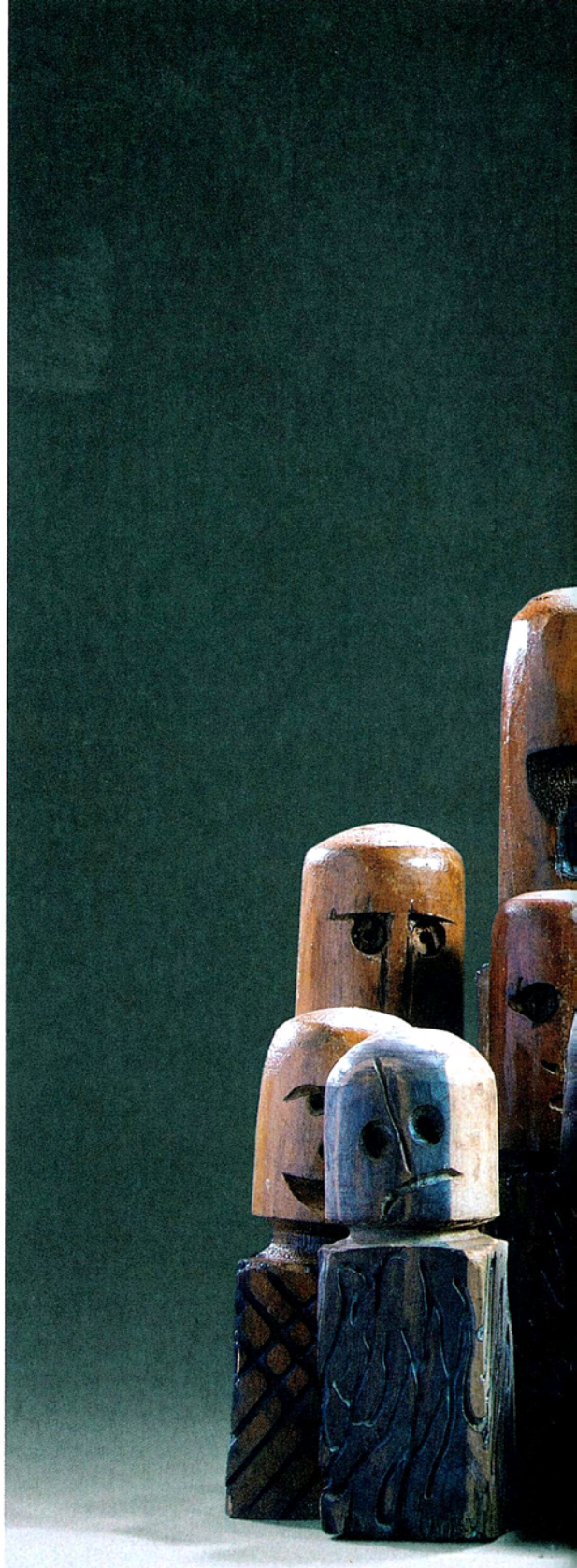
While the result of a final piece rests inexorably upon its materiality, its conceptual language flows from an entirely different structuring device, which equally determines the "mark" that the

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 predesigned, 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.

Ambition

ROBERT STORR

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 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 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

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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 Keïta 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 facetted 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



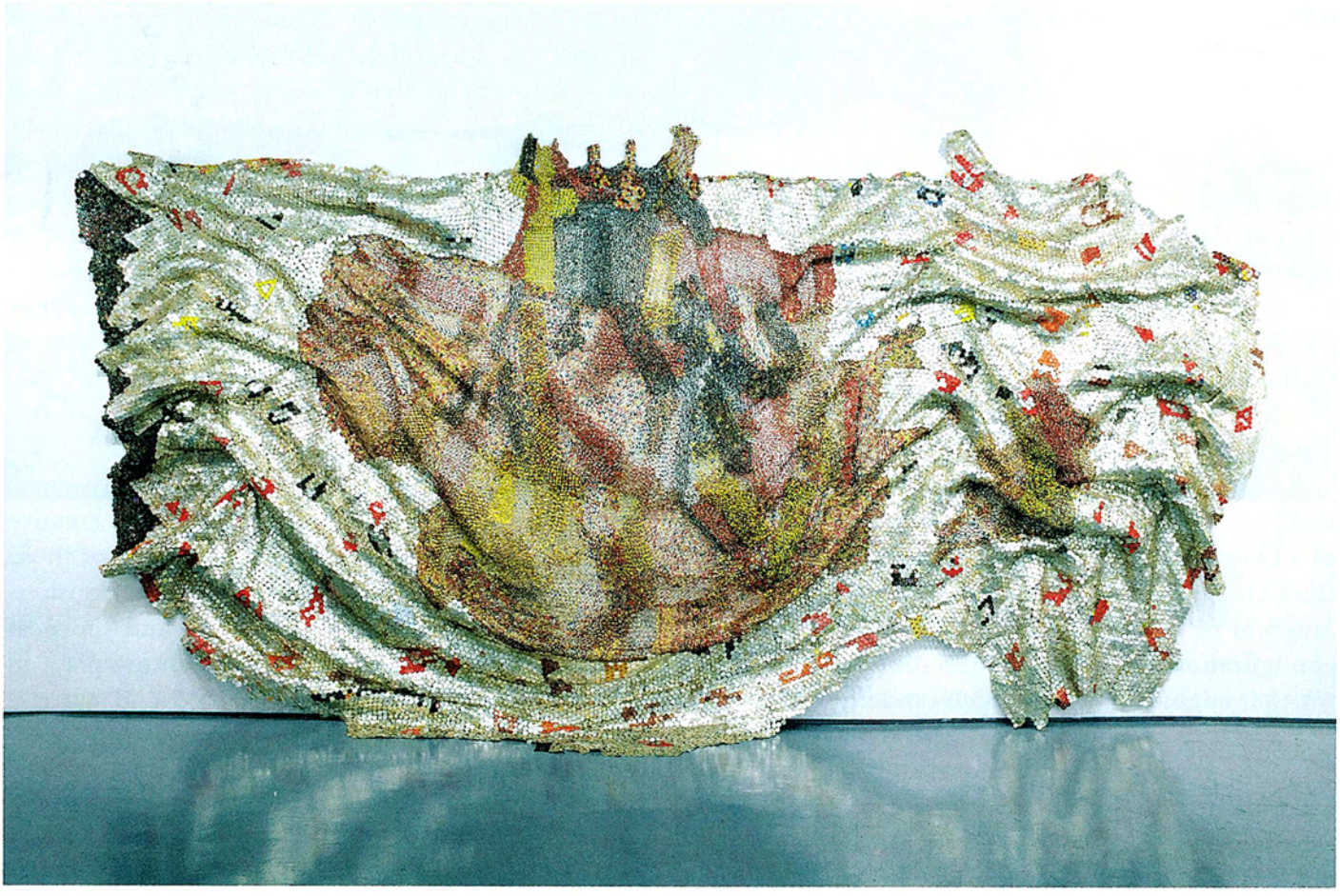
EL ANATSUI, THEY FINALLY BROKE THE POT OF WISDOM, 2011, detail, aluminum bottle tops, copper wire, 185 $^{3}/_{4}$ x 276" / ENDLICH ZERBRACHEN SIE DEN TOPF DER WEISHEIT, Detail, Aluminium-Kronkorken, Kupferdraht, 472 x 701 cm.

now?" to which the musician answers, "Son, in the old days we couldn't get Coke bottle tops."[1] 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, ultimately, 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 $^{3}/_{4}$ x 276" / ENDLICH ZERBRACHEN SIE DEN TOPF DER WEISHEIT, Aluminium-Kronkorken, Kupferdraht, 472 x 701 cm.

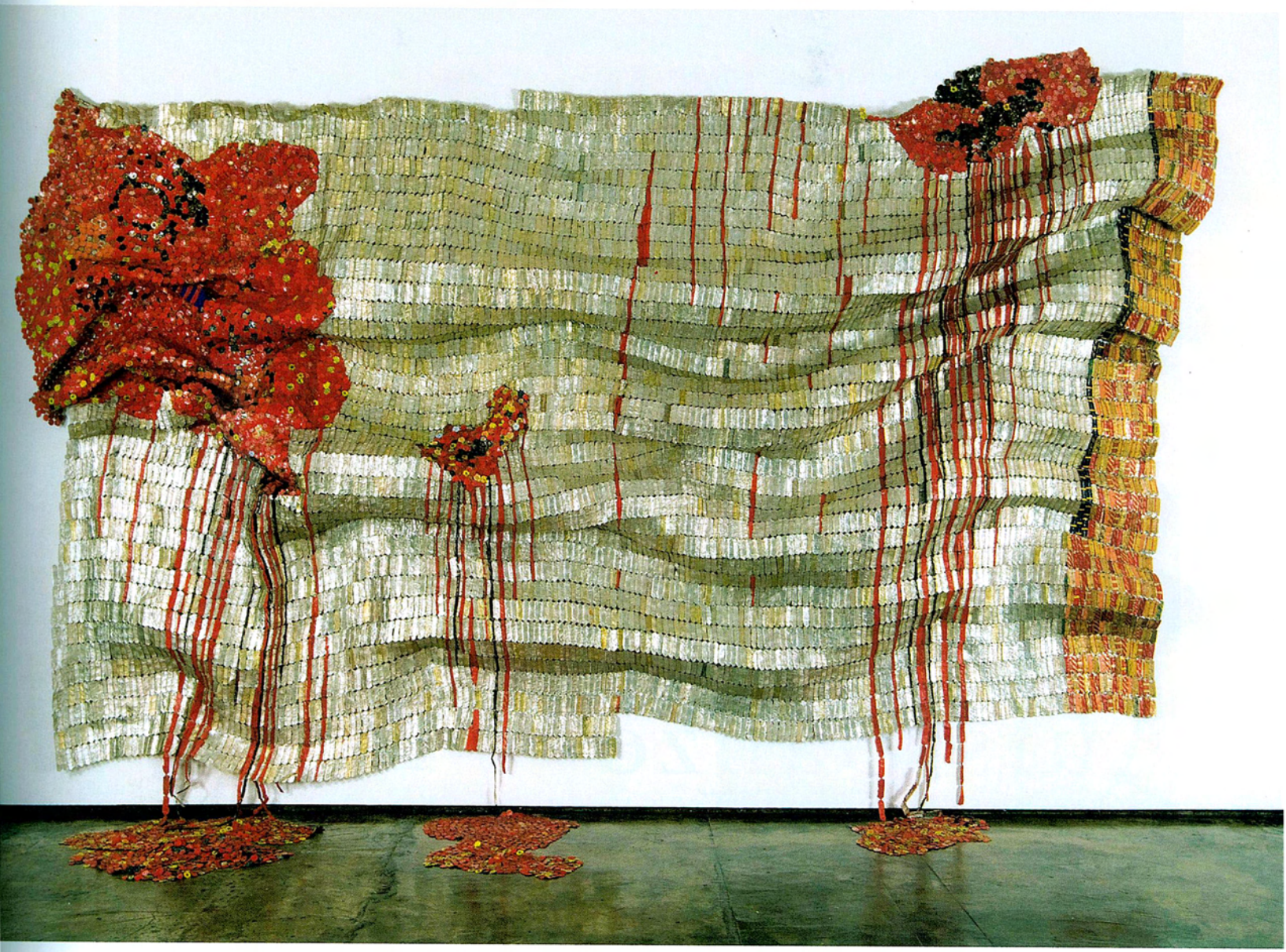


tion and reward examination. Among the most obvious are the draped color-field paintings made by the Washington-based artist Sam Gilliam during the late 1960s and into the 1970s, and more recent assemblage paintings by David Hammons also come to mind. That both these artists are African American is relevant at least in the measure that neither has yet been accorded full recognition by formalist or neoformalist 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 $^{3}/_{4}$" / BLUTENDE TAKARI II, Aluminium, Kupferdraht, 394 x 576 cm.

El Anatsui's Metamorphic Sculptures



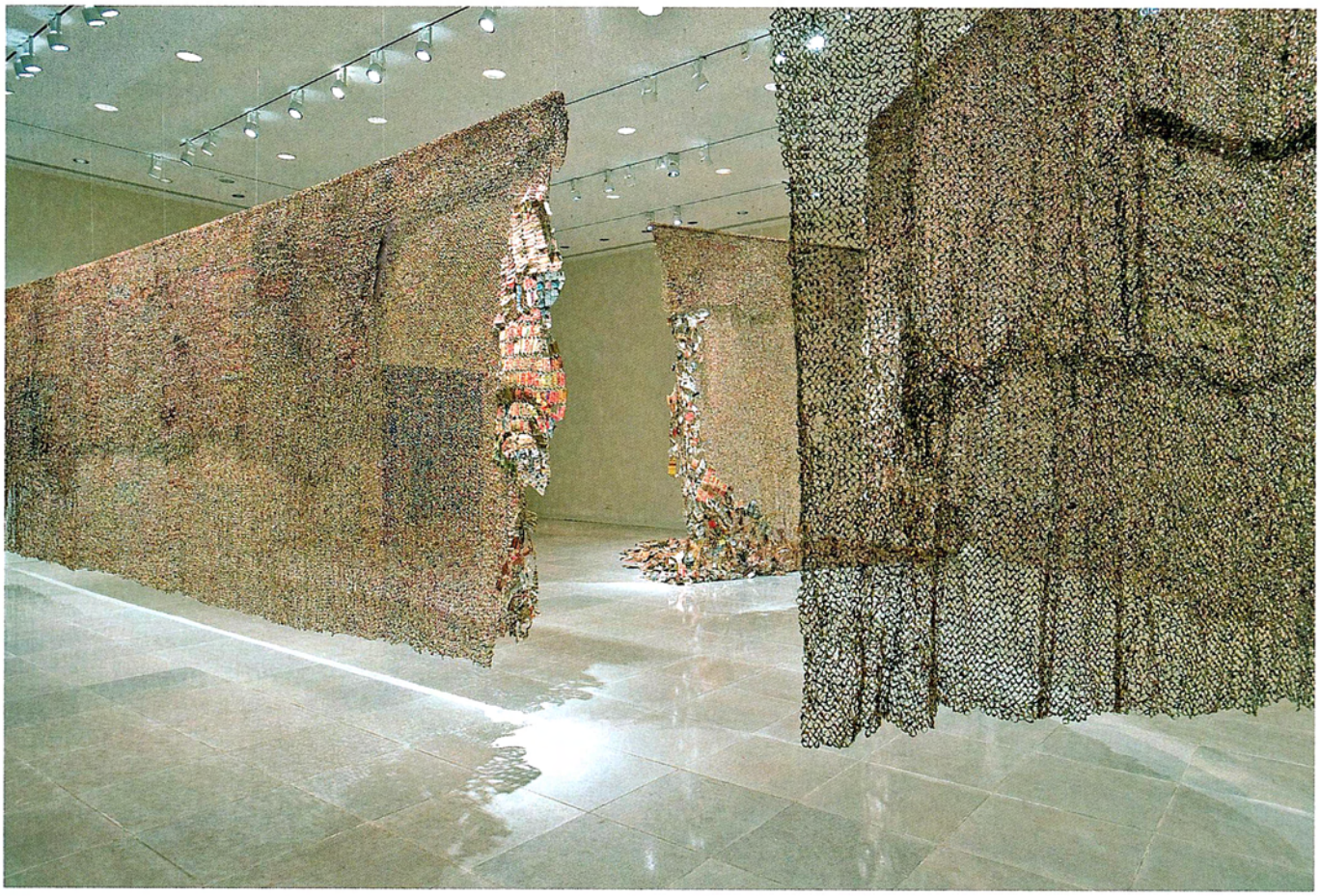
CHIKA OKEKE-AGULU

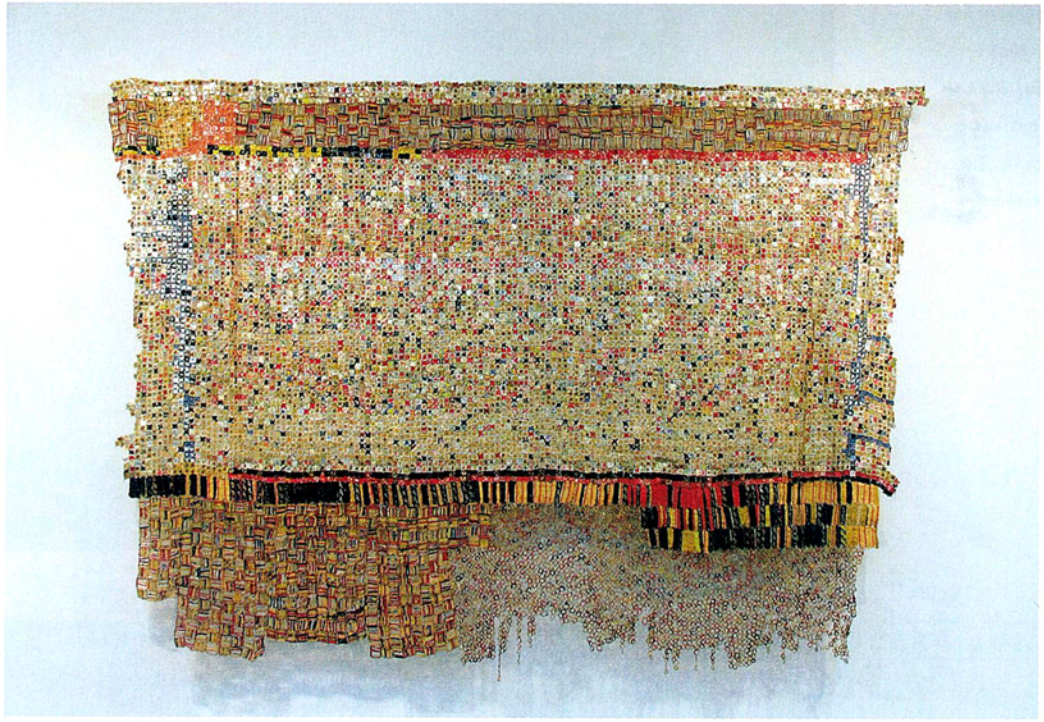
One thing that distresses and bewilders curators and collectors of El Anatsui's sculpture is the burden the artist places on them to make important decisions about the work's installation. Puzzling as it might seem, his apparent *laissez-faire* attitude toward the process of presenting his monumental 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.[1] Our awareness of this intriguing connection between the formal and conceptual in his work completely changes the meaning

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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)







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.

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 panhuman, high-artistic ability?[2)]

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 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."[3)] 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.[4]

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, Massachusetts, 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.



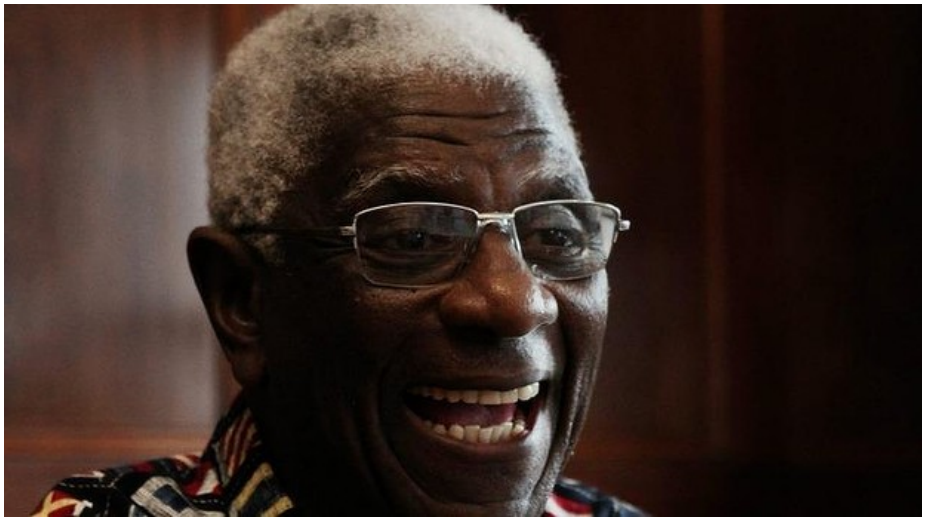
EL ANATSUI, INTERMITTENT SIGNALS, 2009, aluminum bottle tops, copper wire, 131 1/2 x 493" / UNTERBROCHENE SIGNALE, Aluminium-Flaschenverschlüsse, Kupferdraht, 334, 1252 cm.

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.



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

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.



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

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

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



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

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.

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*

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 byUche 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."

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 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)

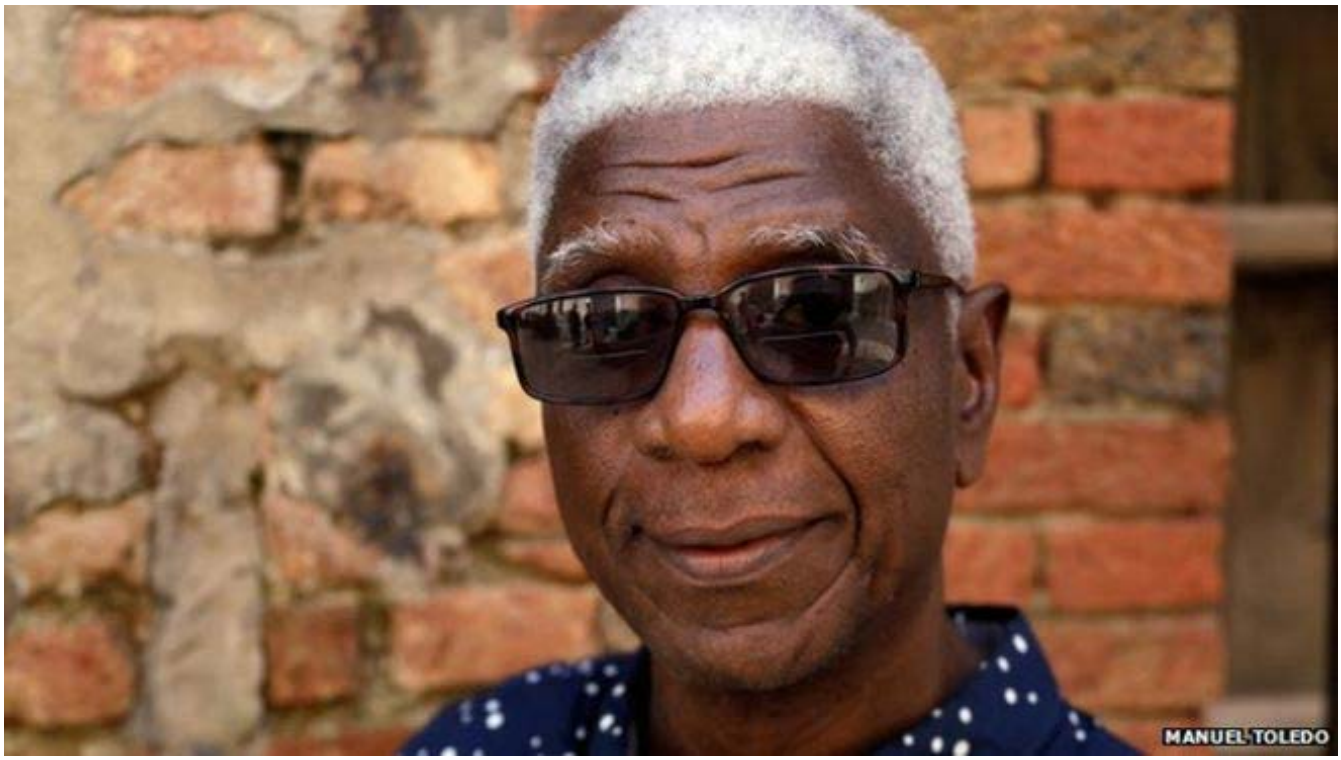


"Commercial Avenue" (2014) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

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.

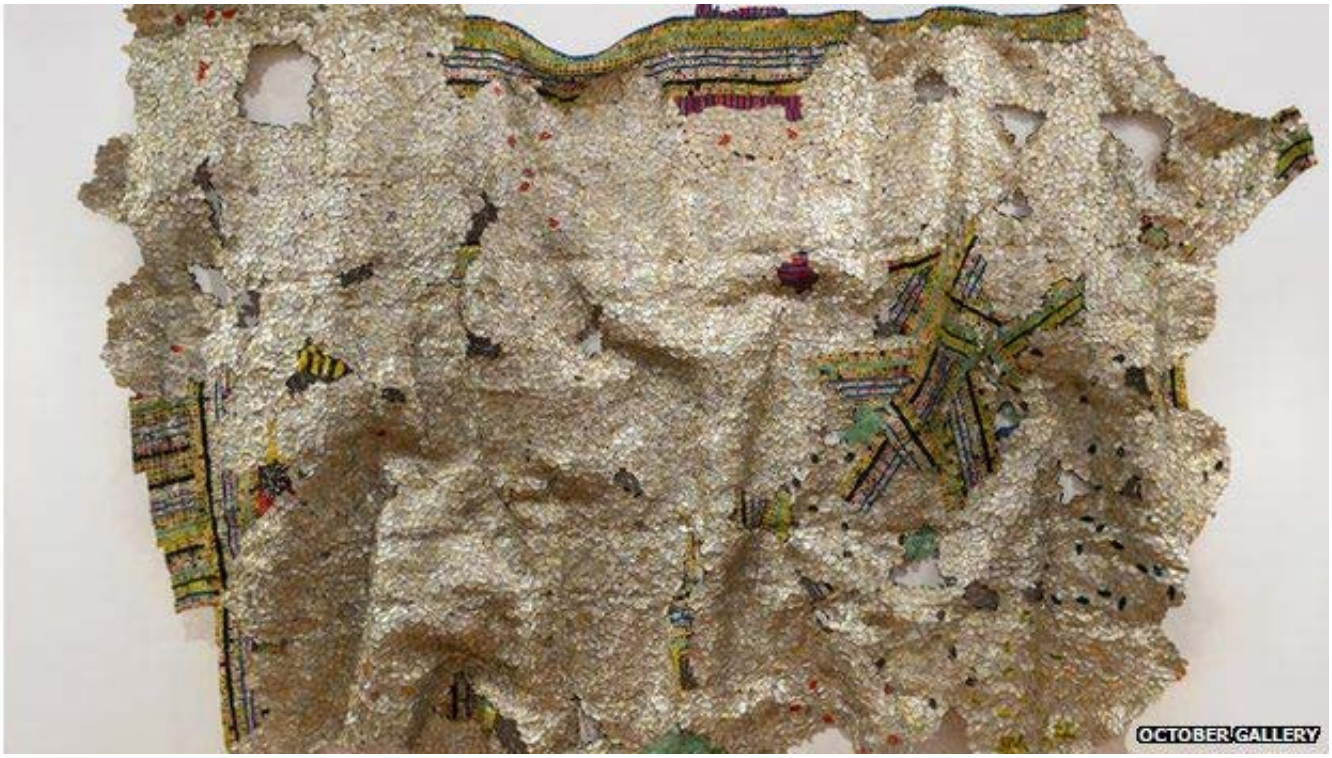
'Not recycled'

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."

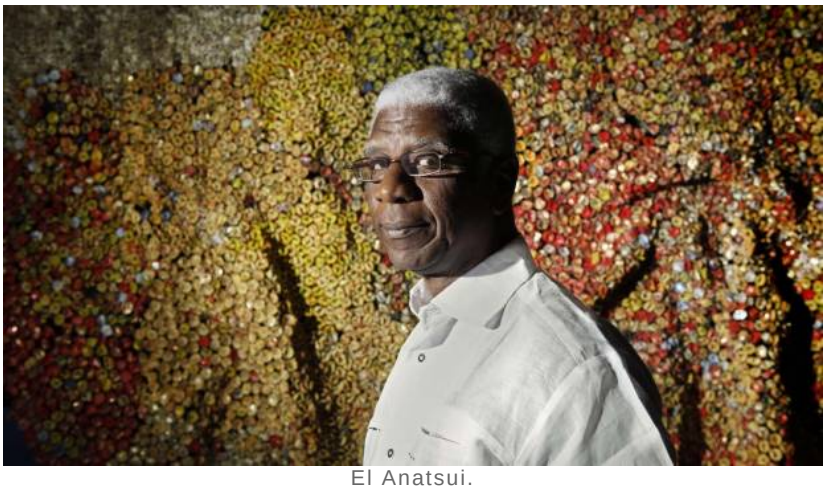
El Anatsui's works

Venice Biennale

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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'sJack 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.

Material Splendor

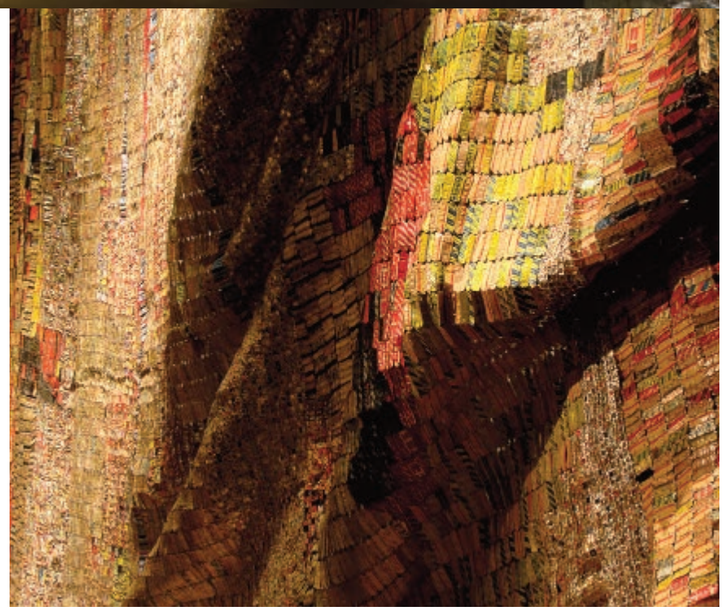
A Conversation with

El Anatsui

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

COURTESY OCTOBER GALLERY, LONDON





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

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).



***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





the work's loosely attached elements. As opposed to the museum's regionally based collection, I wanted my work to engage with more global and contemporary issues. Like most of my pieces, which are very labor intensive, *Ozone layer* was fabricated in Nsukka with my assistants. The installation process called for some ingenuity, which the team provided by taking the segments up, folded zigzag and laid on a long ladder, and then attaching them by unraveling them from "up downwards," occasionally lifting them up to create folds as they descended. In previous projects, we always moved from "down upwards" or lifted the whole sheet up at one go. We learn from different approaches, and this, in turn, helps us to determine what to pay attention to in subsequent fabrication processes.



***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.

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



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.



artasiapacific

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.

Lin, Ming. "Material World: Interview with El Anatsui." *Art Asia Pacific*, 6 June 2014. Online: http://artasiapacific.com/Blog/MaterialWorldInterviewWithElAnatsui



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.

Lin, Ming. "Material World: Interview with El Anatsui." *Art Asia Pacific*, 6 June 2014. Online: http://artasiapacific.com/Blog/MaterialWorldInterviewWithElAnatsui

FT
FINANCIAL TIMES

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.

Ure-Smith, Jane. "Full metal façade." *Financial Times*, 24 May 2013. <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/8d0c4e86-c2f4-11e2-bbbd-00144feab7de.html>.

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."

Ure-Smith, Jane. "Full metal façade." *Financial Times*, 24 May 2013. <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/8d0c4e86-c2f4-11e2-bbbd-00144feab7de.html>.

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

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Ure-Smith, Jane. “Full metal façade.” *Financial Times*, 24 May 2013. <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/8d0c4e86-c2f4-11e2-bbbd-00144feab7de.html>.

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

E. B. "El Anatsui at the Royal Academy: Art-world alchemy." *The Economist*, 22 May 2013. Online. <http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2013/05/el-anatsui-royal-academy>.

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.”



E. B. “El Anatsui at the Royal Academy: Art-world alchemy.” *The Economist*, 22 May 2013. Online. <http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2013/05/el-anatsui-royal-academy>.

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 Transvangarde"****, a new exhibition that runs from May 23rd to August 3rd 2013. El Anatsui was profiled in* Intelligent Life *magazine in Winter 2009.*

E. B. “El Anatsui at the Royal Academy: Art-world alchemy.” *The Economist*, 22 May 2013. Online. <http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2013/05/el-anatsui-royal-academy>.

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

Ebony, David. “African Baroque: The Sculpture of El Anatsui” (exhibition review). *Art in America*, 29 April 2013.
http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/news/2013-04-29/african-baroque-the-sculpture-of-el-anatsui/

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 Anatusi 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.*

Ebony, David. “African Baroque: The Sculpture of El Anatsui” (exhibition review). *Art in America*, 29 April 2013.
http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/news/2013-04-29/african-baroque-the-sculpture-of-el-anatsui/

Frankel, David. "Review: El Anatsui, Jack Shainman Gallery," *Artforum International*. March 2013: p. 273, illustrated.

ARTFORUM
March 2013



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

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 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.

Rosenberg, Karen. “A Ghanaian Artist Goes Big” (Brooklyn Museum exhibition review). *The New York Times*, 28 February 2013: C26, illustrated.

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.

Rosenberg, Karen. "A Ghanaian Artist Goes Big" (Brooklyn Museum exhibition review). *The New York Times*, 28 February 2013: C26, illustrated.

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.

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.

Rosenberg, Karen. "A Ghanaian Artist Goes Big" (Brooklyn Museum exhibition review). *The New York Times*, 28 February 2013: C26, illustrated.

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 20th 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, *Ink Stain*, 2012, found aluminum and copper wire, 100" x 110".



El Anatsui, *Seed*, 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**

Cotter, Holland, Ken Jonson, Karen Rosenberg and Roberta Smith. "Reflections". *The New York Times*, Weekend Arts: C23, C26, illustrated.



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**

Cotter, Holland, Ken Jonson, Karen Rosenberg and Roberta Smith. “Reflections”. *The New York Times*, Weekend Arts: C23, C26, illustrated.

El Anatsui: Pot of Wisdom

Jack Shainman Gallery, New York
December 14, 2012–January 19, 2013

reviewed by Susan Mullin Vogel

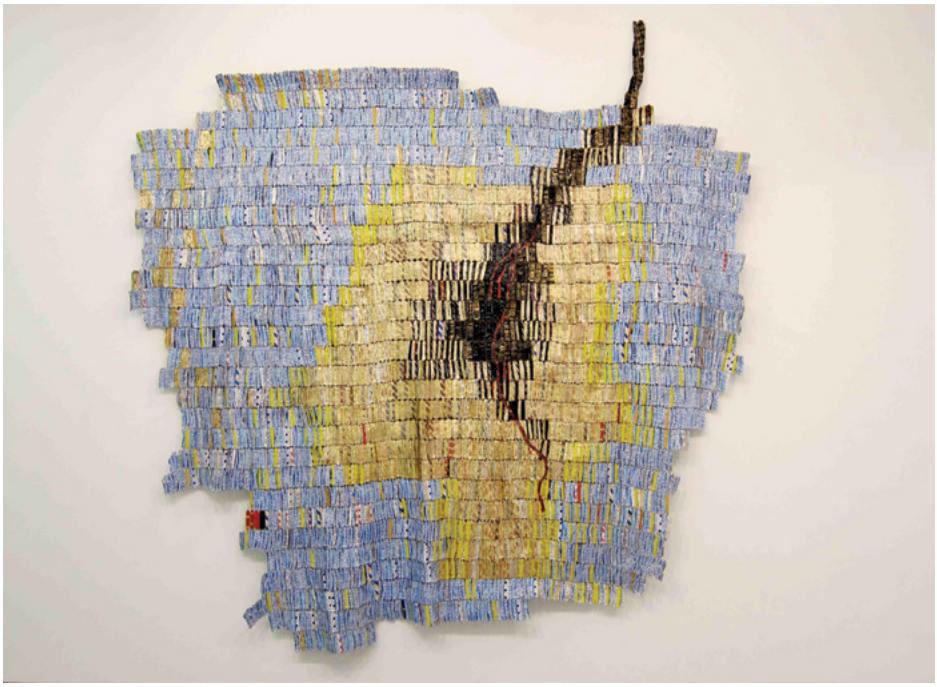
El Anatsui's brilliant exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea was full of surprises. By now that should no longer surprise us but here we found the artist taking another sharp turn. Entering the white-walled gallery one discovered a painterly sensibility and a new color palette in modest sized artworks hanging quite flat against the wall. In contrast to the oversize billowing sheets that had become Anatsui's signature, he showed intimate works that definitively abandoned the flowing rectangular textile model in favor of rounded and irregular contours almost like unstretched paintings—a radical leap with the same old bottle tops.[1]

With two large retrospective exhibitions currently touring American museums,[2] it is interesting to consider why this gallery exhibition of a dozen metal sheets dated 2012 is so revelatory.[3] A solo exhibition in a gallery can show the heartbeat of creativity like nothing else—the artist pouring out ideas in a compressed period. Anatsui's metal sheets have evolved extraordinarily swiftly as he has brought fresh approaches to their meaning, style, scale, material, or concept every single year. All Anatsui's gallery shows but especially the three recent ones in a scant six years at Shainman Gallery allow us to watch his stream of invention in real time.

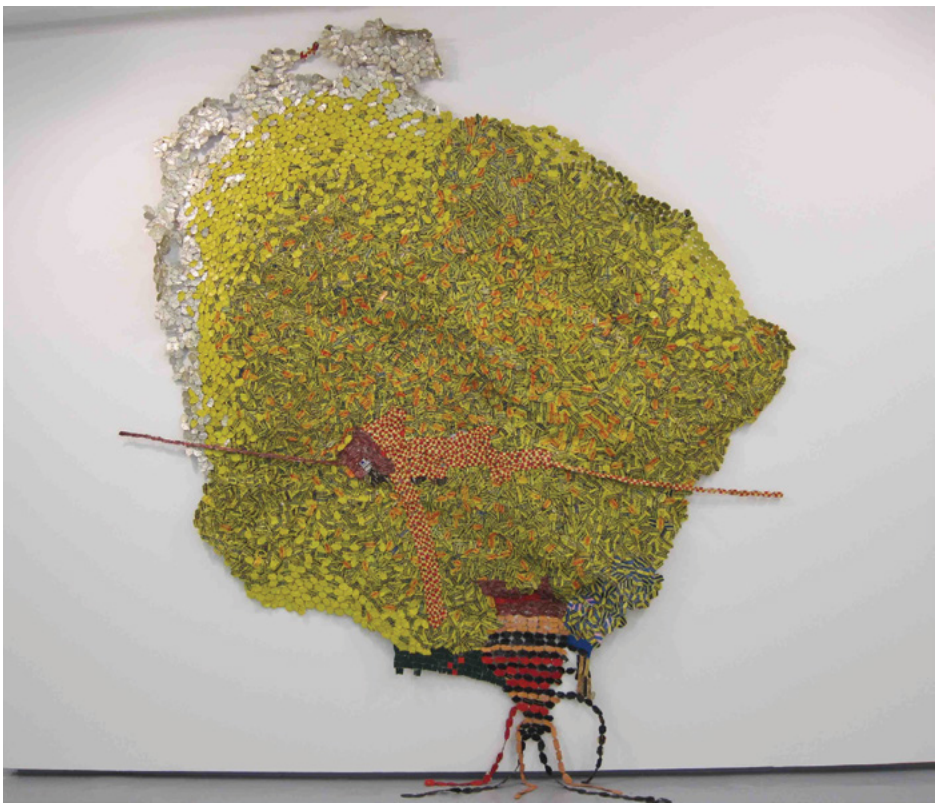
In "Pot of Wisdom," for the first time, he has decided to favor the graphic over the volumetric. Anatsui has always insisted he is a sculptor and the volumes and craters of his undulating sheets have been fundamental to the concept and impact of works that he calls "a marriage of painting and sculpture." But the graphic design has always been at least partially obscured by the sculptural folds and contours of his draped hangings.

Virtually all Anatsui's metal sheets till now have been continuous designs: fields and stripes of color or texture that extended more or less evenly to the edges—like textiles. They often contained incidents of roughly equal importance placed near the edges.[4] In this exhibition, innovative compositions had a central complex activity that dominated a more-or-less plain ground—like pictures. The focal interest made these sheets feel like paintings, even images though they remained essentially abstract like most of Anatsui's art.

Here we saw Anatsui's first small works of great concentration, a result of their tight pictorial interest. Five years ago he said the bottle



1 El Anatsui
Enlightened (2012)
Bottle tops and copper wire. 110 x 103 inches.
PHOTO: SUSAN M. VOGEL.



2 El Anatsui
Seed (2012)
Bottle tops and copper wire. 110 x 100 inches
PHOTO: COURTESY JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY



3 El Anatsui, *Topos* (left) 135 x 120 inches, and *Basin*, (right) 134 x 160 inches; both 2012, found aluminum and copper wire.
PHOTO: COURTESY JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY

top sheets were most effective if they were large because "in a small scale, they invariably tend to look domestic."[5] I believe the continuous, textile-like designs uncomfortably recalled household cloths when they were created in those familiar sizes. Where his wall-size hangings envelop the viewer and become the atmosphere, the architecture, and the object all at once, the intimate ones in "Pot of Wisdom" are discrete objects of contemplation with complex subjects.[6]

The sublimely beautiful *Enlightened* (Fig. 1) has a soft gold form centered on a field of blue. A sinuous black line snakes down into its heart, widening and seeping into the surrounding gold. Its subject is ambiguous, an inky pool overlaid with blood-red tendrils. This composition reappears in the expansive, lacy *Basin* (Figs. 3–4), where a blurry dark line, built up with painterly layering, moves in from the top through its transparent structural material. This important artwork, made with a mysterious mass of stringy elements, had a powerful emotional charge as it swam across the Gallery wall like a great sting ray, its dark poisoned tail rooted deep in the body.

The complex *Topos* (Figs. 3, 5) at first barely resembled an Anatsui. Its crisp, pale, graphic sheet has holes outlined in unfamiliar, muted colors, some linked to the edges of the piece by straight colored lines. *Topos* and *Basin* (among others) echo two themes prominent in Anatsui's wood wall hangings of the 1990s. Mapping has long held his interest for its graphic potential and its meanings, which he connects to colonialism and control. Additionally, the darkened rims of *Topos'* holes and the four colored areas on its perimeter made it look like a sheet that has been singed or burned. Disintegration is a theme similarly expressed in his wood wall reliefs by spreading burns that resemble the dark intrusions in *Basin* and *Enlightened*, and by holes burned or cut with a chainsaw—like the holes in *Topos*.

Anatsui's painterly approach is made possible by his development of newly subtle colors, even pastels created by sorting the bottle tops according to brand. They used to be sorted broadly by color—a top of red with a white logo, for example, was tossed in with the reds, but now separated from the others, it affords him zones of pink and the possibility of shading. He can now modulate color to portray depth as in *Seed* (Fig. 2), which appeared to bulge forward though it hung nearly flat.

In counterpoint to the almost two-dimensional hangings, "Pot of Wisdom" included one arresting sculpture in the round. Suspended low over the floor, *Uwa* (World) (Fig. 6) was made with strings of crumpled bottle caps wound up into a knotty ball. Strange and evocative, in a thought-provoking way, it echoed the theme of breaking and decay with fragments trailing behind it like a disintegrating meteor. Like most artists, Anatsui works in series, making several related pieces as he works through an idea; we can only hope *Uwa* and many others in this show will beget new series.

Susan Mullin Vogel is an independent curator, film maker, and author. Her most recent works are the film Fold Crumple Crush: The Art of El Anatsui *(Icarus Films), and* El Anatsui: Art and Life *(Prestel, 2012). She is currently curating a major exhibition presenting Saharan*

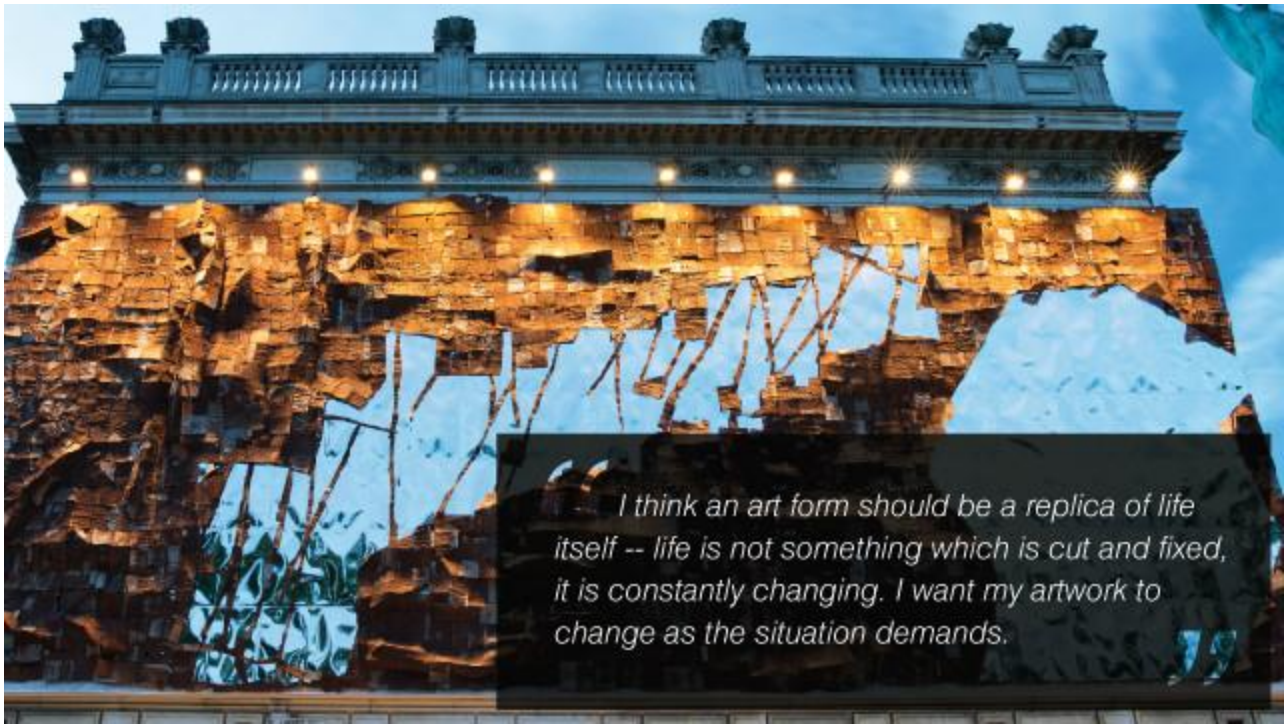


4 El Anatsui, *Basin* (2012), detail.
PHOTO: SUSAN M. VOGEL.

5 El Anatsui, *Topos* (2012) detail.
PHOTO: SUSAN M. VOGEL.



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 Ghanian 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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"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.

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.

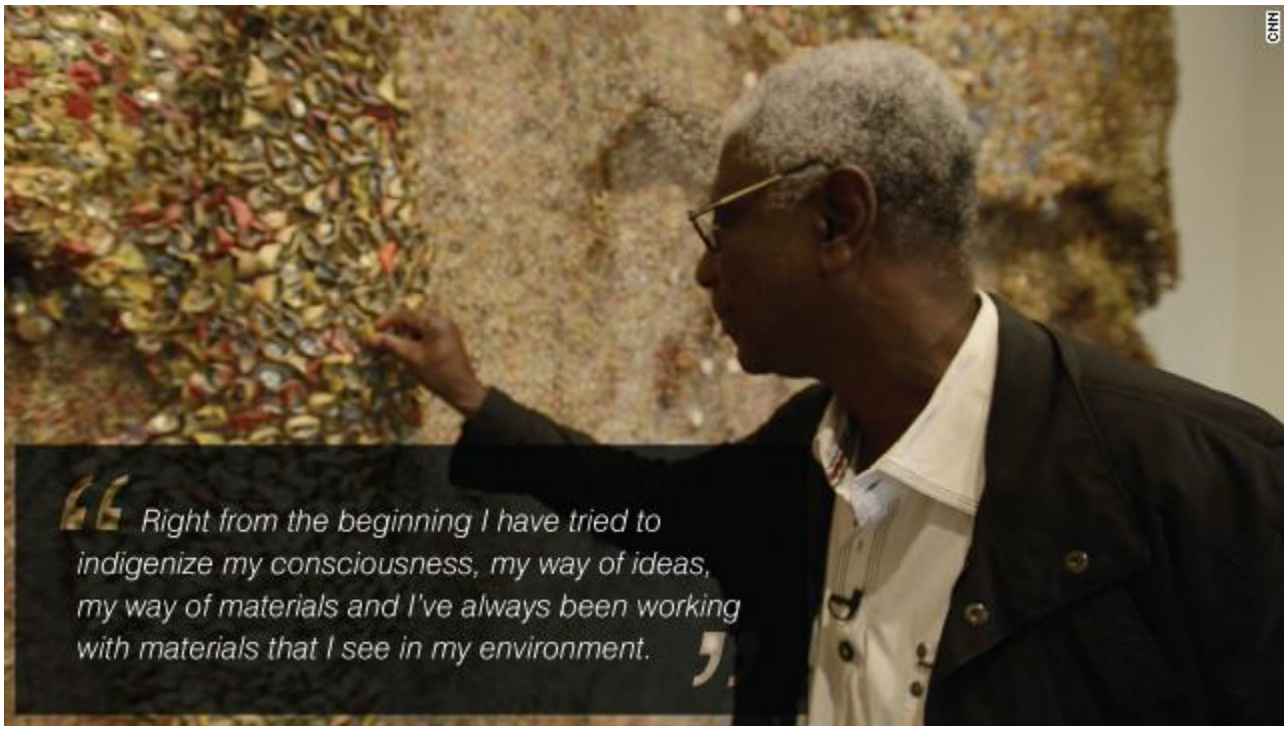
He says that when the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York first acquired his art, it was for their African Galleries and only later for their Modern and Contemporary Art Galleries.

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.

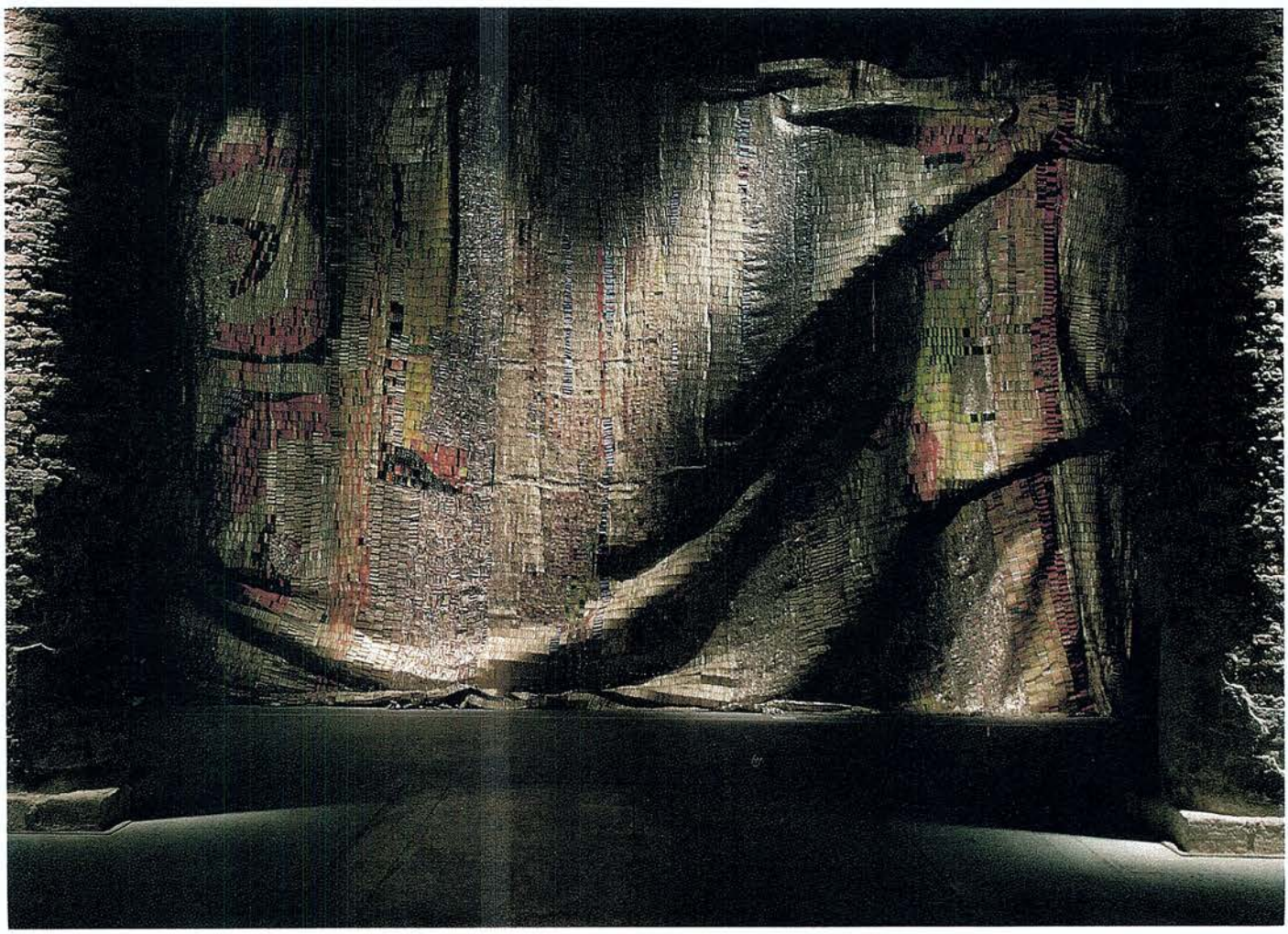
A star in the fall lineup will be a site-specific installation by El Anatsui. This artist, who was born in Ghana and lives in Nigeria, is known for his shimmering, almost painterly tapestries fashioned from discarded bottle caps that are woven together with copper wire. On an outdoor wall adjacent to 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.

Uanning 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*[1] 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.

Art in America INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

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.

Miller, Leigh Anne. “Community Fabric: El Anatsui at the Clark” (exhibition review). *Art in America*. 21 July 2011. Web. 21 July 2011. <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/news/2011-07-21/el-anatsui-clark-musem/>.

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.

Miller, Leigh Anne. “Community Fabric: El Anatsui at the Clark” (exhibition review). *Art in America*. 21 July 2011. Web. 21 July 2011. <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/news/2011-07-21/el-anatsui-clark-musem/>.

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 *Imbroglio*, 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

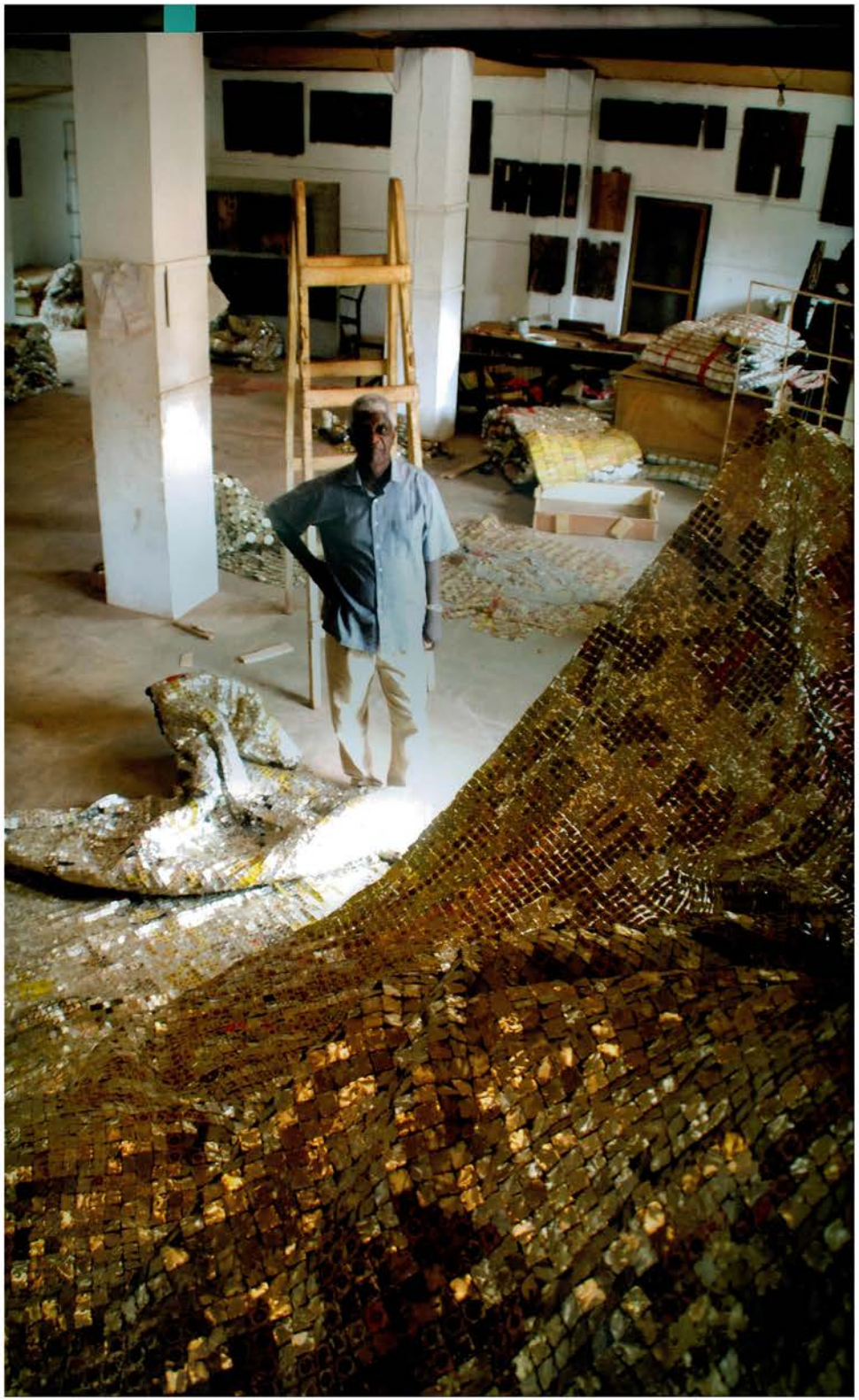
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Ding, Chinnie. ~~"~~Critic's Pick—El Anatsui" (Davis Museum and Cultural Center exhibition review). *Artforum* (July 2011): illustrated.

whitewall
CONTEMPORARY ART AND LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE WINTER 2010

EL ANATSUI

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



Above:
El Anatsui
Bleeding Takari II
2007
Aluminum and copper wire
155 x 227 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"

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 the 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. 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.

EL ANATSUI

Jack Shainman Gallery, New York
February 10–March 13, 2010

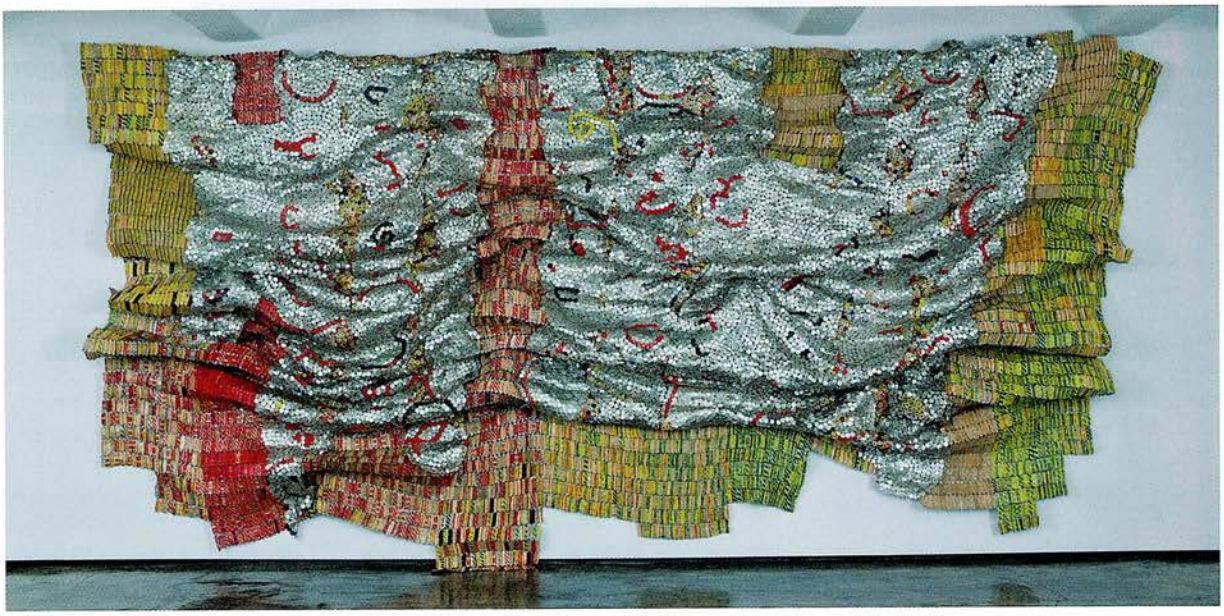
In the past decade or so, the Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui has focused on exploring the possibilities of stitched "cloth" made from recycled liquor-bottle caps. Any engagement with this work, which is usually large and hung on walls, is bound to fall almost immediately into a series of metaphorical substitutions. 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 media, 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 bottleneck 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, *Awu*, 2009. Aluminum and copper wire, 198 × 300 in. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

© 2010 by Nka Publications



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. Anatsui'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.

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CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER
THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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 Nssuka, 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.”

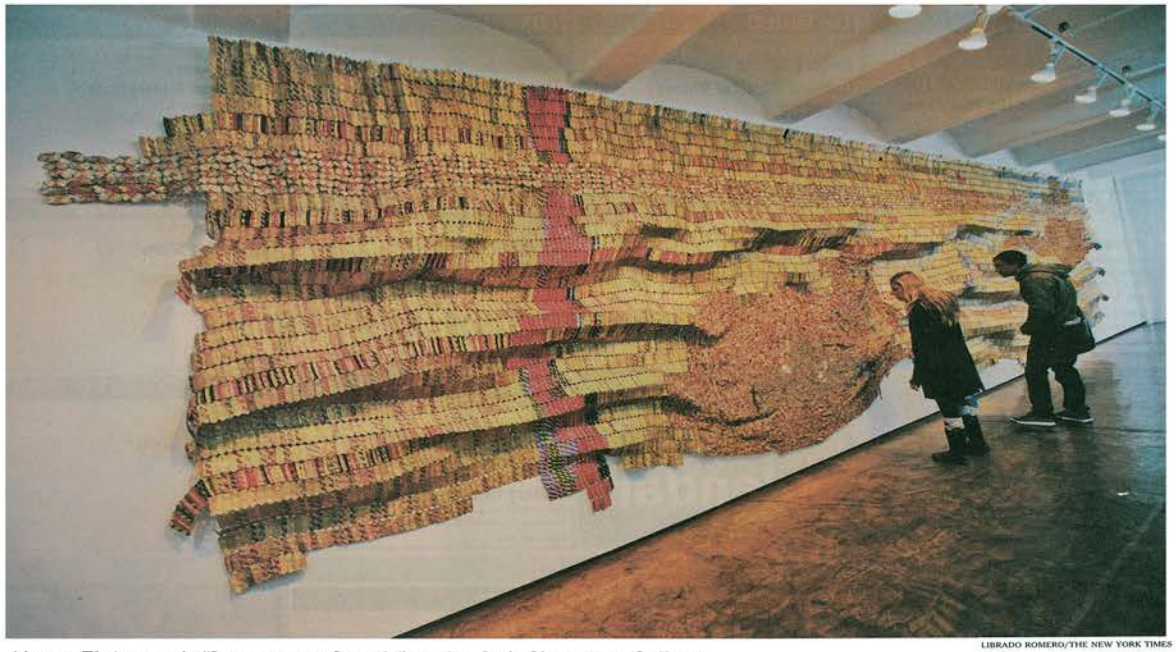
Western eyes will “read” elements of Arte Povera, Frank Stella, Robert Rauschenberg, Donald Judd, even Gustav Klimt into Anatsui’s constructions. Anatsui, who has travelled extensively in Europe and the United States, readily acknowledges “the visual similarity.” He stresses, however, that the congruence 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; 416-586-8000.

The New York Times

Swagger and Sideburns: Bad Boys in Galleries



LIBRADO ROMERO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Above, El Anatsui's "Intermittent Signals" at the Jack Shainman Gallery;

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-boyness: 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 ruination, 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.

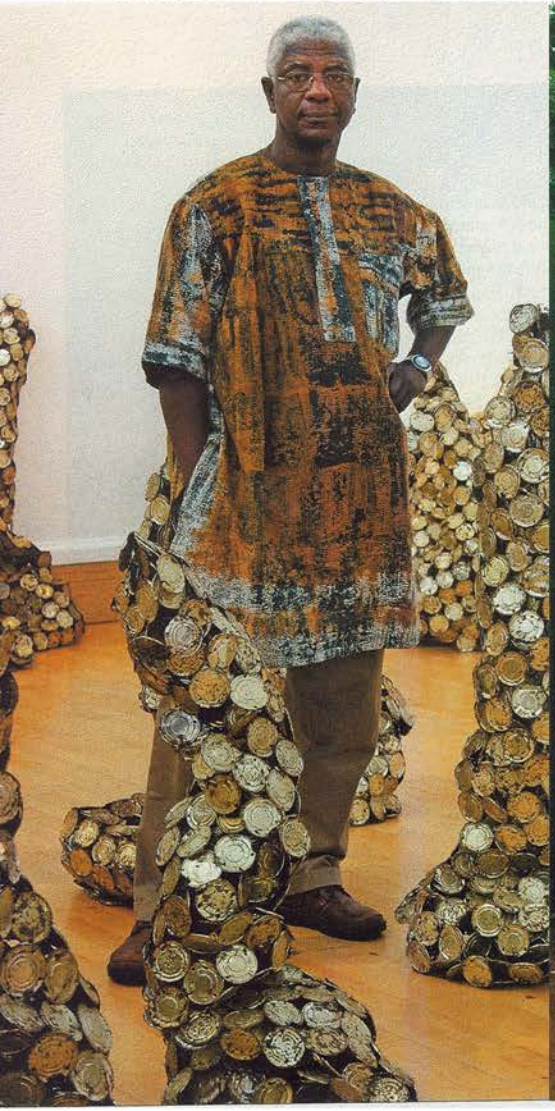
Anatsui's studio, a small warehouse near the Nsukka campus, is now a virtual factory: instead of waiting to find discarded bottle caps, he buys them in bulk from neighboring distilleries. More than a dozen assistants, young men in their 20s, work six days a week cutting and folding the aluminum pieces, 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





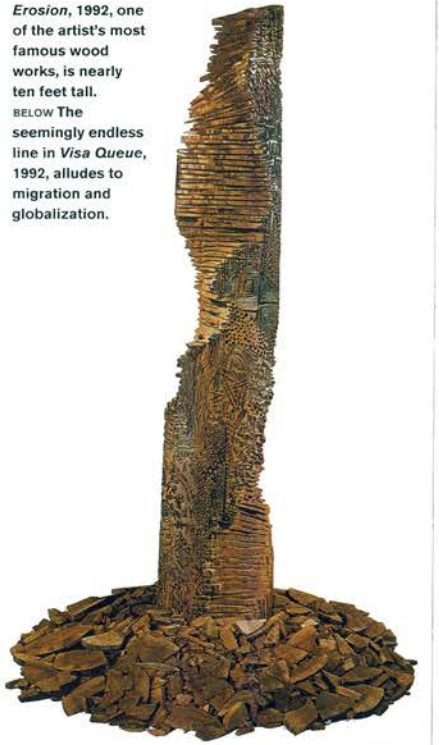


LEFT **El Anatsui with his *Peak Project*, 1999, made from tin-can lids.** ABOVE ***Between Earth and Heaven*, 2006.**

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.

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 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 distance from my usual terrain provided an influx of ideas."



ABOVE **The softly draped tapestry *Dusuasa II*, 2007, hung between the classical columns of the Arsenale at last summer's Venice Biennale.**

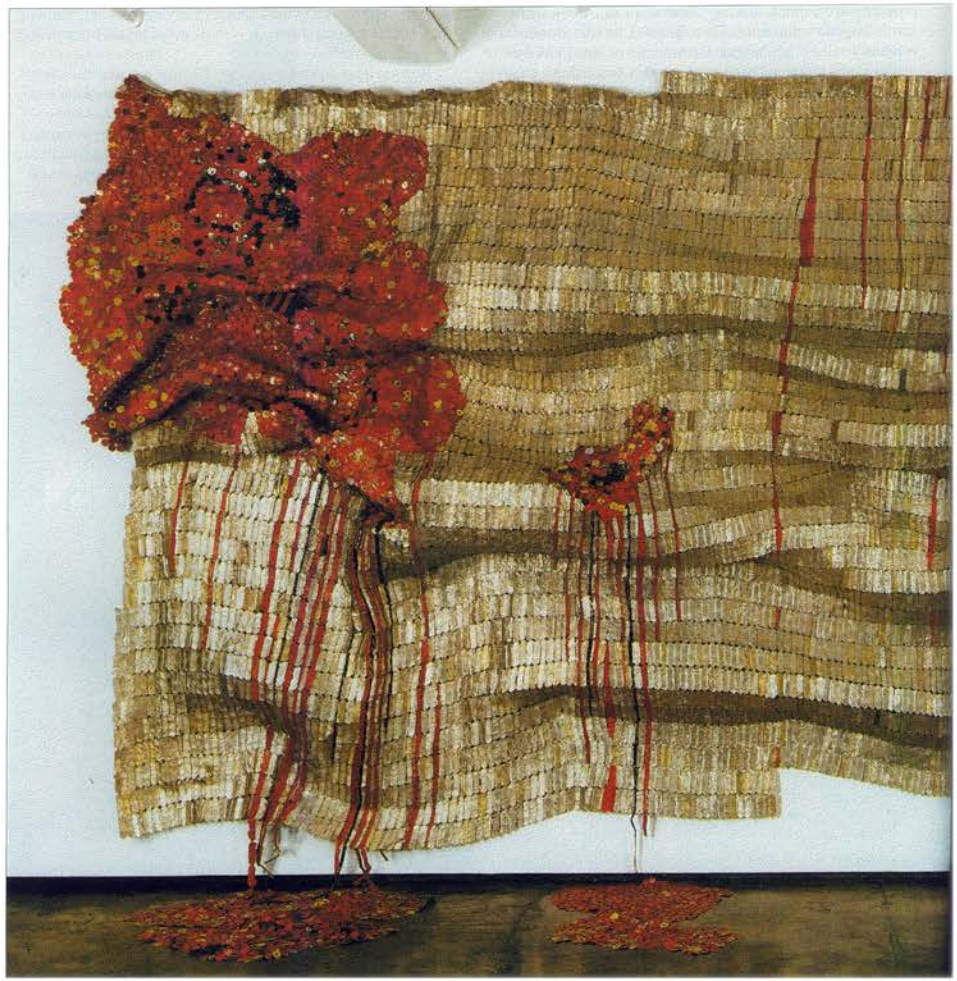
Perhaps his most famous work from the late 1980s and early '90s addresses the erosion of cultural values. Created for the international artists' workshop Arte Amazonas in Brazil, and later exhibited at the Modern Art Museum in Rio de Janeiro, *Erosion* (1992) is a wood column nearly ten feet tall, standing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

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-





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.

ABOVE In *Bleeding Takari II*, 2007, "blood," coursing over liquor-bottle bands, pools on the floor.

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," 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 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."

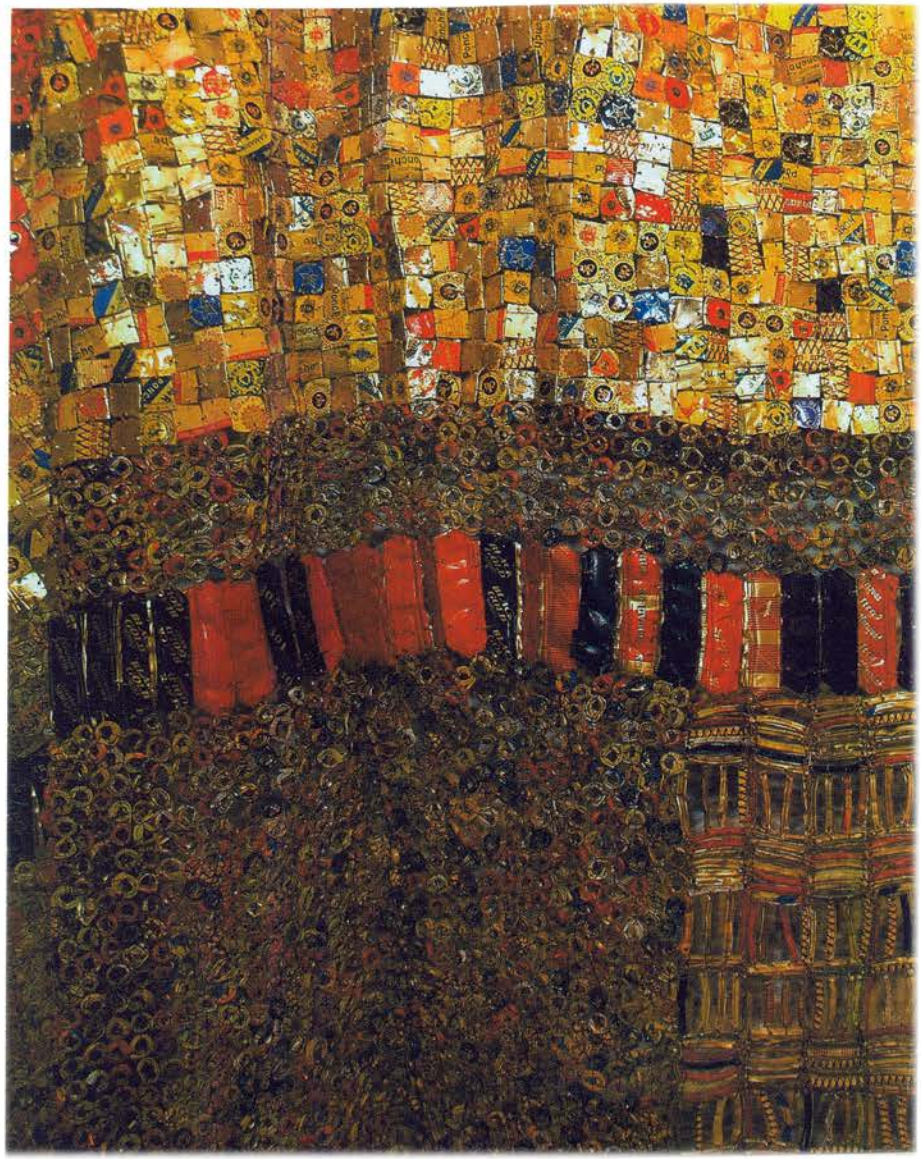
Most recently, he is celebrating the opening of "El Anatsui: Gawu" on view through September 2, at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C., the final stop of the exhibition's U.S. tour. In the catalogue Anatsui explains that the "ga" in "Gawu" alludes to the use 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 *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 the maps of Europe and Africa both look like patchwork quilts, he concludes, "We have more in common than we think." ■

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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

The 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.

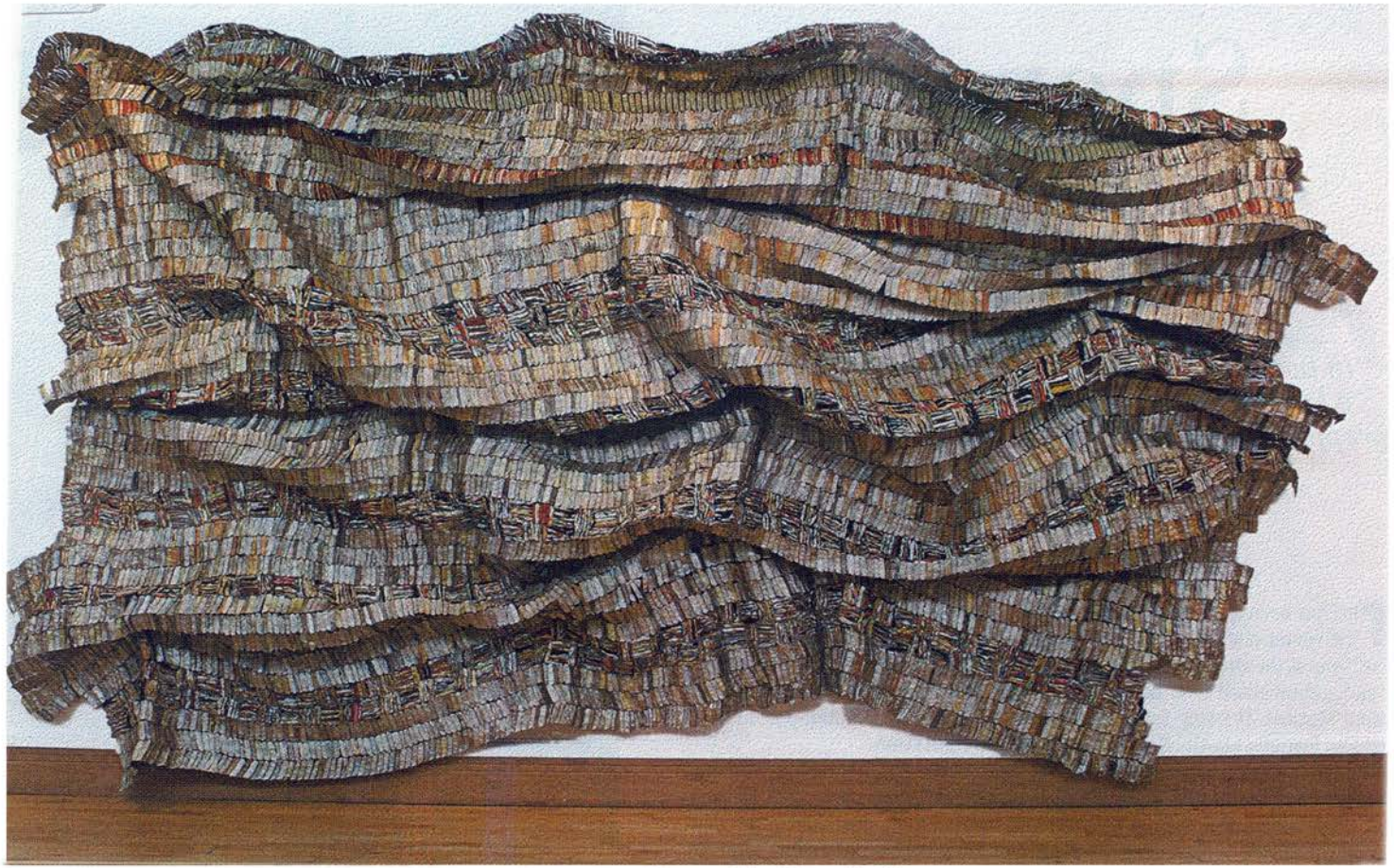
The strips are each a little wider and longer than an adult's middle finger, and they are stitched together to form long horizontal bands running the length of the piece. In most of the bands, the strips are positioned vertically and sewn tightly together, but at three or four points, this structure is interrupted by more loosely assembled bands in which horizontal and vertical strips alternate in a kind of checkerboard 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 Gaudí 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

continued on page 200

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 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.

The original functions of Anatsui's materials seem to matter less to him than the fact that they derive from his immediate everyday world.

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]. "Danudo: 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 Oriel Mostyn Gallery, Llandudno, Wales, includes essays by Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie and Atta Kwami and an interview with the artist by Gerard Houghton.