

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.

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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



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

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

conversation on ecology and not just passive observers.

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



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

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

As El Anatsui combines traditional crafts from Ghana to Nigeria with contemporary art practices, his emphasis on hybridity informs his choice to bring different aesthetic possibilities to each sculpture. His commentary on ecology comes largely from his experience of collecting liquor bottle caps and cassava branches to bring back to his studio. Rather than approaching colonialism through a linear chronology, he couches it between the Atlantic Slave Trade of the past and the current unequal labor and market relations in West Africa. His tapestries and objects woven

together signify that the current postcolonial and post-industrial moment cannot be understood without taking a critical look at the past. Breweries are tied to both ecological issues and an industrial history of slavery.

In an



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)

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

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.