El Anatsui
2006
In 1979, October Gallery developed the concept of the transvangarde, a planetary avant-garde that extended beyond eurocentric boundaries into all the world’s oceans and continents. El Anatsui has helped us, in fact, refine the idea of the transvangarde through his work. Using materials, biospheric and technical, from his environment, this innovative artist speaks through and beyond his culture, inventing new forms in a dramatic, vibrant way, causing the marvellous to occur. And it is the marvellous that propels thought... that this artist makes such extraordinary creations, so dazzling to our eyes, from the humble bottle top! But these are not any old bottle tops; they are tough ones from gin, whiskey, hard liquor, 40-proof. Anatsui flattens them, bends them, twists them, pierces them with copper and, in effect, transforms what would be rejected into something of great worth, an alchemical ‘gold’. Now collected by major museums and institutions around the world, his ‘cloths’ hang in the British Museum, London; the Centre Pompidou, Paris; the museum kunst palast, Düsseldorf; the de Young Museum, San Francisco. This exhibition celebrates El Anatsui’s sustained, unique contribution to art.

As a pioneer of the transvangarde, the October Gallery has searched out and exhibited the work of outstanding artists from around the world. Located in a three-storey Victorian building in the heart of Bloomsbury, the Gallery also hosts talks on science and art, poetry readings, performances and other cultural events. In 1993, Elisabeth Lalouschek, Artistic Director, spotted Anatsui’s powerful use of the chainsaw to carve tropical hardwood. The Gallery hosted his first UK solo show in 1995, and in 1998 published the first book on the artist, A Sculpted History of Africa, in collaboration with Saffron Books. The Gallery continues to champion his work and promote his extraordinary vision.

Chili Hawes
Director, October Gallery
October 2006
El Anatsui was invited to undertake a residency at the Sanatbarne Centre for Visual Arts at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, in 2005. For this project artistinated Out There, El Anatsui produced Sculptures (pictured left).


On Their Fateful Journey (2006)


This installation was commissioned by the October Gallery for the first major touring exhibition of contemporary African Art in Japan. An inside story: African Art of Our Time was curated by Yuko Kaseguchi, and toured to venues across Japan, including the Setagaya Art Museum in Tokyo.

In 1996, Gawu Maal at the Royal Festival Hall. Anatsui suggested that Man’s Cloth should be hung relatively flat, while Woman’s Cloth should be hung to show more intense creasing. As a curator, Lalouche described how to make the potential of the clot to hang as a series of sculptural folds and creases, or to stretch out tautly, making the patterns and textures in the cloth more legible.

During his numerous exhibitions, the artist and his assistants were invited to work on a bottle-top cloth throughout the course of his concerts, which coincided with the triumphant raising of the finished work to jubilant applause.

During the spring of 2005, the team of Ground Force from the BBC produced Anatsui’s Monument, a temporary African Garden in the forefront of the British Museum. As part of the africa05 festival. With the appearance of El Anatsui with Baaba Maal at the Royal Festival Hall. The renowned Senegalese musician invited the artist and his assistants to work on a traditional bottle-top cloth throughout the course of his concerts, which coincided with the triumphant raising of the finished work to jubilant applause.

Erosion’s Peak Project, made from 297 x 374 cm/117 x 147", and 287 x 290cm/113 x 115”, Collection of the British Museum.

These bottle-top cloths were the first to be shown outside Nigeria, and were exhibited at the October Gallery, before being purchased by the British Museum with the help of the National Art Collection Fund. When installing the exhibition at the October Gallery, El Anatsui suggested that Man’s Cloth should be hung relatively flat, while Woman’s Cloth should be hung to show more intense creasing. As a curator, Lalouche described how to make the potential of the clot to hang as a series of sculptural folds and creases, or to stretch out tautly, making the patterns and textures in the cloth more legible.

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El: The large cloths? KMcC: Have you enjoyed the shift from power tools where I relied on very much at home with the shift to a workshop of up to 15 hands that work on the labour-intensive construction of tools, to a workshop of up to 15 hands that work on the labour-intensive construction of tools? El: Initially I found it problematic to work at a small pace, but now I'm very much at home with the shift from power tools where I relied very much at home with the shift to a workshop of up to 15 hands that work on the labour-intensive construction of tools, to a workshop of up to 15 hands that work on the labour-intensive construction of tools. 

KMcC: Do you assemble every tiny element of the cloth, every bottle top and shaft, before instructing the assistants to begin sewing? Or do you allow some creative input from the workshop? El: I will say the process is a very fluid and open one. I do not produce drawings because I want the material to lead me on, not to follow the dictates of any sketch. I could for instance ask the assistant to pick any colour and work with it, or I could impose some restrictions. I could ask for a particular texture or stitch at a point. There are so many variables. Certainly the alternating stitches. I believe they were working with earlier. There is this penchant for devising code names or styles of each assistant. It is a kind of instruction the assistants to begin sewing. Or do you allow some creative input from the workshop? El: They are more a part of the process; they are not all the time just hands. Working this way, I have got to understand both the material and the different touches or styles of each assistant. It is like conducting an orchestra of musicians each with peculiar performing skill.

KMcC: Do you do your own part of the process? El: Yes, these are realised from the rings from around the neck of the bottle. I believe that is the G8. 

KMcC: When describing these cloths? El: Yes, these are realised from the rings from around the neck of the bottle. I believe that is the G8. I entitled Dzesi (2006) came about when describing these cloths? El: I think the nomadic aesthetic developed as a result of the need to move and address a certain problem; to create work that are packing, storage and transportation efficient or friendly. It applies to work that I have done but more especially to what I'm doing now, which always comes in and like a nomad, I can move around. However, I find that the idea is not only about being able to move them, but also that each time they are moved, they have to be configured afresh, most of the idea is not only about being able to move them, but also that each time they are moved, they have to be configured afresh, most of the time by other parties apart from the artist. In essence then, this aesthetic is about fluidity of ideas and impermanence of form, indeterminacy, as well giving others the freedom, or better still, the authority to try their hands at forming what the artist has provided as a starting point, a datum. Though most will try to adhere to the original format, indeed I have seen very engaging results achieved by some collectors who exercised this freedom.
Using anything from chainsaws and welding torches to intricate and meditative stitching in copper wire, El Anatsui has, over the forty years of his artistic career, cast a satirical eye over a spectrum of social, political and historical issues, becoming a leading light of contemporary sculpture in the process. Embracing a wildly diverse vocabulary of media, he has worked with materials ranging from tropical hardwood and broken ceramic pots to grain mortars and evaporated milk tin lids, from cassava graters and railway sleepers to driftwood, iron nails and obituary notice printing plates. ‘Art grows out of each particular situation,’ he observed in an interview in 2004, … 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 colours for painting. I believe that colour is inherent in everything, and it’s possible to get colour 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 colour.

It was in the environment around his studio in Nsukka, Nigeria, that Anatsui went searching one day in the late 1990s for a pot monument, but instead came across a large bag of discarded liquor-bottle tops. When local distilleries in Nigeria recycle each other’s bottles, the aluminum screw caps associated with each brand are discarded in the process. For several months, the caps remained untouched in his studio until the idea came to him to flatten and stitch them together with copper wire. Once the process had begun, he realised that the result resembled a real fabric, and that the colours and alternating stripes of the caps echoed those of West African narrow-strip textiles. ‘In effect,’ he says, ‘the process was subverting the stereotype of metal as a stiff, rigid medium and rather showing it as a soft, pliable, almost sensuous material capable of attaining immense dimensions and being adapted to specific spaces.’

Over the years, Anatsui has returned often to the reservoir of imagery, technology and metaphor afforded by textiles. Having lived and worked in Nigeria and Ghana, home to some of the most diverse and vibrant traditions of textile production in the world, he is conscious that the signifying capacity of cloth is particularly potent in West Africa, as he explains:

The choice of cloth as a medium itself resonates with the history of contact between Europe, Africa and the Americas. As early as 1469, textiles were traded in West Africa by Europeans seeking to acquire first gold, then slaves. Imported silk and cotton cloths were unravelled for reuse by Ewe and Asante weavers who valued in particular the vibrant reds that could not be attained using local dyes. By the 1680s, despite thriving indigenous textile production, cloth constituted over fifty percent of European imports into West Africa, and records suggest that a slave could be purchased in the Bight of Benin with just three to four measures of cloth. In the years that followed, as a result of Dutch attempts to undercut Indonesian batik production, ‘European wax’ resist printed and ‘fancy’ or roller-printed cotton fabrics found a thriving market on the Gold Coast. Specifically designed and produced in the mills of the Netherlands and northern England to appeal to the demands and aesthetics of their clientele, the cloths often emulated West African textile designs or featured historical events, or current political figures.
Considering that liquor was another major commodity traded by Europeans for slaves, Anatsui’s bottle-tops take on deeper resonance with histories of international points of contact. From as early as the eighteenth century, bottles of schnapps were being touted along the shores of Denmark and iron nails produced in a Danish forge that once produced cannon. Yet his works are too fluid, too temporal and personal to be described as commemorative or monumental in Sonya Clark’s sense. There is certainly a monumentality of scale, with all its accompanying impact – Sasa Mostyn Gallery, 2003, p. 24.

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Blama (2006), aluminium and copper wire, 370 x 550 cm/146 x 217"
Between Earth & Heaven (2006), aluminium and copper wire, 230 x 320 cm/91 x 126”

Healer (2006), aluminium and copper wire, 210 x 305 cm/83 x 120”
Dzodze (2006), aluminium and copper wire, 215 x 335 cm/85 x 132"

Takpulpe (2006), aluminium and copper wire, 240 x 340 cm/95 x 134"
Paths to the Okro Farm (2006), aluminium and copper wire, 213 x 345 cm/84 x 136”

Nukae? (2006), aluminium and copper wire, 280 x 400 cm/110 x 158", variable installation
Nane (2006), aluminium and copper wire, 270 x 380 cm/106 x 150"
El Anatsui – Biography

Education
1969 Postgraduate Diploma in Art Education, University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana.
1965 -69 BA (Hons) in Fine Art, University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana.

Teaching
1998 Head of Department, Fine and Applied Arts (UNN).  
1982 - 96 Senior Lecturer, Fine and Applied Arts Department (UNN).
1975 - 82 Lecturer, Fine and Applied Arts Department (UNN).  
1975 -79 Lecturer, Art Education Department, Specialist Training College (now University of Winneba), Winneba, Ghana.

Selected person exhibitions
2004 One: The Independent, Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art, Liverpool, UK.
2004 Asia Triennial, Manchester, UK.
2003 Out There, Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts, Norwich, UK.
2002 A Sculpture of Time, East Gallery, Liverpool, UK.
2002 One: The Independent, Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art, Liverpool, UK.
2001 The Missing Peace: Artists Consider the Dalai Lama, UCLA
2001 Transforma, October Gallery, London, UK.
1999 The Sculpture of Time, East Gallery, Liverpool, UK.
1998 Triennale der Kleinplastik, Stuttgart, Germany.
1995 AKA '95, Bona Gallery, Enugu and Didi Museum, Lagos, Nigeria.
1995 A Sculpture of Time, East Gallery, Liverpool, UK.
1994 Images of Africa, Torpedohallen, Copenhagen, Denmark.
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Selected Public Collections

African Studies Gallery, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria.
Akron Art Museum, Akron, Ohio, USA.
Asele Institute, Nimo, Nigeria.
The British Museum, London, UK.
The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC, USA.
Centre Pompidou, Paris, France.
Clark International Art Collection, Somerset, UK.
de Young Museum, San Francisco, USA.
Eden Project, Cornwall, UK.
French Cultural Centre, Lagos, Nigeria.
Ghanaian Embassy, Copenhagen, Denmark.
The Hammermill Collection, Hellebaek, Helsingør, Denmark.
Hood Museum of Art, Hanover, New Hampshire, USA.
International Peoples’ College, Helsingør, Denmark.
Iwalewa-Haus, University of Bayreuth, Bayreuth, Germany.
Jordan National Gallery of Arts, Amman, Jordan.
Misaoni, Milan, Italy.
Musée Ariana, Geneva, Switzerland.
museum kunst palast, Düsseldorf, Germany.
Museum of Art, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, USA.
The National Gallery of Contemporary Art, Lagos, Nigeria.
The National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC, USA.
Osaka Foundation of Culture, Osaka, Japan.
Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, Gainesville, Florida, USA.
Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan.
The World Bank Art Collection, Washington DC, USA.