

From ASI: El Anatsui 2006. Exhibition Catalogue. David Hunt
Publishing ^{my} October Gallery London

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.¹ '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.²

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,³ 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.⁴ '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'.⁵

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 scope of meaning associated with cloth is so wide I have not heard it more aptly and succinctly put than by Sonya Clark... that cloth is to the African what monuments are to Westerners. Indeed their capacity and application to commemorate events, issues, persons and objectives outside of themselves are so immense and fluid it even rubs off on other practices.⁶

Anatsui's bottle-top cloths certainly reference events, issues, persons and objectives outside of themselves, often in circuitous and unexpected ways. A literal example is the commemorative function served by the naming of both textile designs and liquor brands. 'Ecomog Gin', for example, is named after the regional military intervention forces which brought the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia to an end. The brandy called 'Ebeano' (meaning 'where we are now') references a popular electioneering slogan from the last political polls in Anatsui's home state. In a similar way, narrow strip cloths might be given names such as *takpekpe le Anloga* ('conference at Anloga'),⁷ be named after a personality or refer to an idea or historical event through specific design elements (as in the patterns of *Liar's Cloth* or the colours of *oyokoman Cloth*).⁸

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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

Considering that liquor was another commodity
traded by —————→

from ASI: El Anatsui 2006, exhibition catalogue, David Hunt Publishing my October Gallery London.

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 schnappa were being touted along the West African coast, and records from the 1810s suggest that a slave could be acquired in the Bight of Benin with 126 US gallons of the sugar-based spirit *aguardente*.⁴⁴ By 1885, gin had almost completely replaced cowries as currency in Lagos, and the mere possession of liquor had become emblematic of social status.⁴⁵ Spirits from distilleries specifically established in Liverpool to supply exports to Africa, and rum, a by-product of the Caribbean sugar plantations for which Africa had supplied the labour, were highly profitable for European traders, and to a large extent detrimental to the societies into which they were imported.

Anatsui's works gently alert us to the human histories and relationships behind the materials that surround us, interlacing object and metaphor like elements within a cloth. 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 (2004), a work that has toured internationally with the exhibition *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, spans an awesome eight metres. But while commemorative cloths and public monuments literally inscribe on the landscape or wearer a pre-determined narrative for shaping collective memory, Anatsui's works do quite the opposite, inviting counter-narratives and provoking dialectics. Thus what is so sumptuous and evocative to the eye is, at the same time, unforgiving and razor-sharp, and that which is so specifically historical, West African, and personal to Anatsui, has at the same time been profoundly immediate and universal in its impact on the audiences and curators of the international art world. While there are richly textured stories and histories to be traced in his materials and processes, the visuality of his works ultimately defies definition and demands a personal response. For despite the permanence and durability of the metal, the cloths are temporally and spatially ephemeral, taking on new life with every new space, reincarnated by artist, curator and audience, their infinitely variable folds and creases transforming, and transformed by, their changing settings around the world.

Born in 1944 in Ghana, El Anatsui studied Art Education at the University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, and went on to become Professor of Sculpture at the University of Nigeria at Nsukka, where he has lectured since 1975. His most recent solo exhibition, *Gawu*, toured England, Wales and Ireland before opening at the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art at the University of Florida in August 2005. He participated in the exhibition *Africa Remix*, which toured

2007. Since 1993 Anatsui has worked with the October Gallery, London, who have been instrumental in bringing his work to international attention. Collected by major institutions across the world, from the British Museum to the Centre Pompidou, and from the de Young Museum, San Francisco, to the museum Kunst palast, Düsseldorf, Anatsui is today recognised as one of the most original and compelling artists of his generation.

Polly Savage
London 2006

A version of this essay appeared in *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings*, Vol 5 No 1 (Spring 2005) pp. 173-175

⁴⁴Works by Anatsui in tropical hardwood include *Visa Quere* (1992), *Mammoth Crowd Series* (1993) and *Unfolding the Scroll of History* (1994). *Broken Pot Series* (1979) used fragments of ceramic pots, and large wooden mortars once used to pound grain formed the basis of *On their Fateful Journey Nowhere* (1995), *Adinsibili Stood Tall* (1995), *Tapper* (1995) and others. In *Peak Project* (1999), Anatsui created a series of cloths by sewing together the lids of evaporated milk tins, which were then arranged as small peaks. *Crumbling Wall* (2000) was built from punctured iron sheets, once used as cassava graters, while railway sleepers found in Cornwall, and made from West African hardwoods, were used to make *Aziza Passage* (2004), the gateway to the West Africa Tropical Biome in the Eden Project, Cornwall. *Akua's Surviving Children* (1996) utilised driftwood found on the shores of Denmark and iron nails produced in a Danish forge that once produced guns for export to West Africa, and *Waste-paper Bag* (2004) was made from discarded obituary-notice printing plates.

⁴⁵El Anatsui in an interview with Gerard Houghton in *El Anatsui Gawu*, Oriol Mostyn Gallery, 2003, p. 24.

⁴⁶Pillars of stacked pots, each of which represents a bereavement in the village.

⁴⁷Conversation with El Anatsui, 2005.

⁴⁸El Anatsui, *In the Making: Materials and Process*. Cape Town: Michael Stevenson Gallery, 2005.

⁴⁹El Anatsui, cited by Atta Kwami in 'Nsukka – A Place to Hide: Towards a Conversation with El Anatsui' in *El Anatsui Gawu*, Oriol Mostyn Gallery, 2003, p. 32.

⁵⁰Conversation with El Anatsui, 2005.

⁵¹The yellow and green stripes on the red ground of *oyokoman Cloth* reference an early eighteenth-century conflict between two factions within that lineage. See John Picton, 'Colonial Pretence and African Resistance or Subversion Subverted: Commemorative Textiles in Sub-Saharan Africa' in Okwui Enwezor (ed), *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945 – 1994*. Munich: Prestel, 2001.

⁵²The first record of European cloth being imported to Africa tells of Bendetto Dei, an agent of the Portinari firm in Florence, arriving in Timbuktu in 1469, where he sought to exchange Lombardian cloth for the gold of the Sudan. See Christopher B. Steiner, 'Another Image of Africa: Toward an Ethnohistory of European Cloth Marketed in West Africa, 1873 – 1960' in *Ethnohistory* Vol 32 No 2 (Spring 1985) p. 91.

⁵³David Eltis and Lawrence C. Jennings, 'Trade Between Western Africa and the Atlantic World in the Colonial Era' in *The American Historical Review* Vol 93 No 4 (October 1988) pp. 942 – 948.

⁵⁴See Picton (2001) and Steiner (1985).

⁵⁵Eltis and Jennings (1988) p. 943.

⁵⁶Susan Diduk 'European Alcohol, History and the State in Cameroon' in *African Studies Review* Vol 36 No 1 (April 1993) pp. 1 – 42.

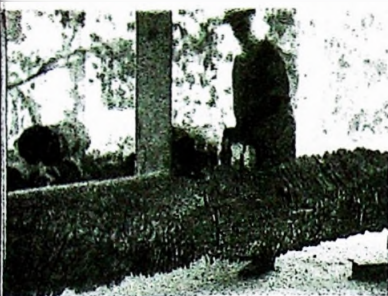


Photo: Miguel Rio Branco



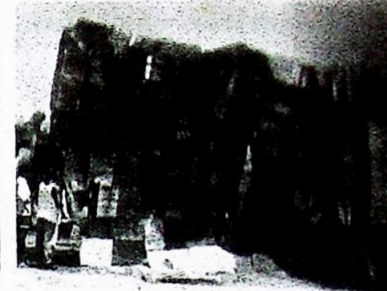
El Anatsui at his studio in Nsukka, 1997



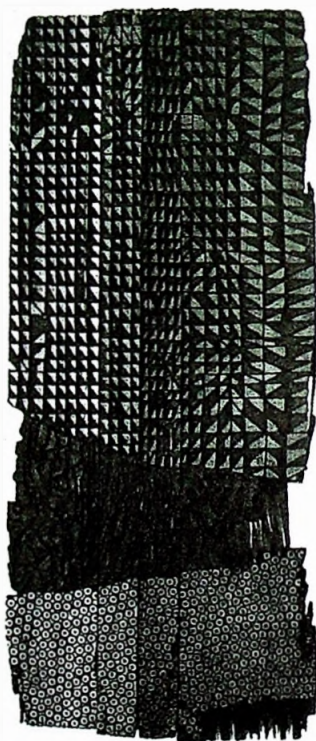
Photo: Craig Inglis



Photo: Lisa Binder



Ancient Wall (1999) Photo: El Anatsui



Leopard Cloth (1993)
Wood relief, mansonia,
camwood, opepe & oyili-oji
162 x 69 cm/64 x 27".
Photo: Andy Keate

KMcC: The artist Atta Kwami commented on the apotropaic shades of silver, gold and pewter in the liquor bottle tops. Was it your intention to embed an apotropaic meaning in the colour schemes of the cloths at all?

El: Kwami comes from a very strong painting pedigree and certainly his sensitivity to colour is considerable but this aside, metals and liquor in many cultures (especially African) have this association with the spiritual, with healing. Just think about the many ways a hand must open metal caps to pour out schnapps for prayers or libations.

KMcC: Have you enjoyed the shift in the process of making your sculpture, from the artist single-handedly working with power tools, to a workshop of up to fifteen hands that work on the labour-intensive construction of the large cloths?

El: Initially I found it problematic to work at a snail's pace, but now I'm very much at home with the shift from power tools where I relied on machines that at times could break

down. The process moves slowly and allows me to do more thinking than making. I have more time and space to step back and contemplate work as it unfolds.

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 materials 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 freedom and restriction means that there are inputs from the workshop. So work develops organically and in most cases in unpredictable ways.

KMcC: So the assistants are in a sense an additional part of the material?

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: Your work from the *The Missing Peace: Artists Consider the Dalai Lama* exhibit that opened at The Fowler Museum, Los Angeles, June 2006, shows an emphatic shape in the centre of the cloth, with a suggestion of figure and ground I've not seen in the other cloths that incorporate more of an overall design. Is this a new development in the cloths?

El: *The Missing Peace* work (which I entitled *Dzesi*) came about with thoughts about the zero sign, O – which can mean a lot or nothing. And I think is a kind of harking to Adinkra symbols I had worked with earlier. There is this one which is characterised as the king of these signs, which consists of several concentric circles. New textures develop out of the way we



Photo: Martin Barlow, Oriol Mostyn Gallery



Photo: El Anatsui



Photo: El Anatsui

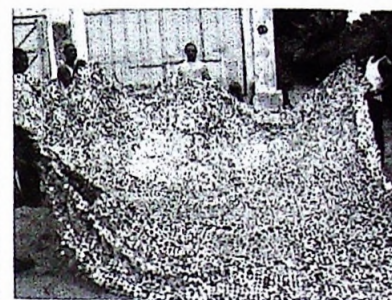


Photo: El Anatsui



Photo: Lisa Binder

manipulate the material and I think it was possible to arrive at a design like this one because we have developed a stitch which has a lot of flexibility about it, and therefore could be used specifically to configure freer and more organic forms than hitherto.

KMcC: In one of the new works we have here in New York, I see areas of flattened, folded strips that are latticed together in a loose grid, allowing more light to come through.

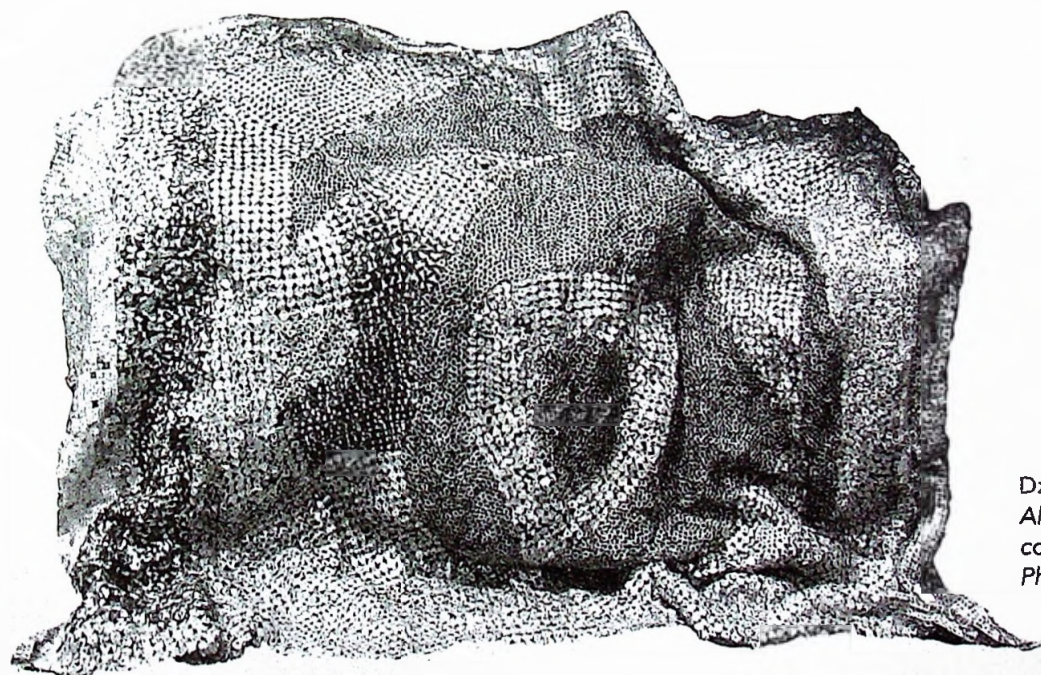
El: Yes, these are realised from the rings from around the neck of the bottle. I believe that is the G8. This is the assistants' name for the particular pattern; they have this penchant for devising code names for different patterns, textures and stitches. I believe they were working off this pattern at the time of the Scottish summit. The codes are very useful and handy and make communication easier when work is underway.

KMcC: Can you comment on your use of the term *nomadic aesthetic* when describing these cloths?

El: I think the *nomadic aesthetic* developed as a result of the need to address a certain problem; to create works 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 considerable sizes but can contract, 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 time by other parties apart from the artist. In essence then, this aesthetic is about fluidity of ideas and impermanence of form, indeterminacy.

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.



Dzesa I (2006)
Aluminium and
copper wire.
Photo: Lisa Binder