

Wednesday, December 8

El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote to You about Africa



El Anatsui, Plot A Plan III, 2007. Aluminum and copper wire, 73 x 97 in.

Photo courtesy: Jack Shainman Gallery.

El Anatsui: *When I Last Wrote to You about Africa*, a major retrospective of the internationally renowned artist El Anatsui, will make its U.S. premiere March 30, 2011 at the Davis Museum and Cultural Center at Wellesley College.

The Ghanaian-born El Anatsui, now based in Nigeria, is widely known for his magnificent large-scale shimmering sculptures made from thousands of discarded liquor-bottle tops. Approximately 60 works from the artist's four-decade career, including not only these recent works, but also earlier sculptures in wood, ceramic and metal, as well as rarely seen paintings and drawings, will be presented on two floors of the Davis, in the upper-most Tanner and Jobson Galleries and the lower level Chandler and Bronfman Galleries through June 26.

“We are honored to have the opportunity to exhibit the extraordinary work of El Anatsui at the Davis and are delighted to anticipate the artist's visit to Wellesley College,” said Lisa Fischman, the Ruth Gordon Shapiro '37 Director of the museum. “As is true of all masterworks, El Anatsui's objects are enormously complex: they are layered with innumerable surprises and make themselves available to viewers in multiple ways. All of the works, but perhaps the large-scale wall pieces and floor installations most particularly, seduce through their beauty, and encourage wonderment in the artist's use of cast-off materials and labor-intensive methods. They draw equally on traditional idioms and contemporary art practices to investigate new approaches to African art; and they resonate materially and symbolically with the cultural and historical conditions of West Africa.

“The work is simultaneously aesthetically enthralling and charged with cultural critique, and it is this combination that so distinguishes El Anatsui,” continues Fischman.” The presentation of this retrospective exhibition is particularly meaningful on the Wellesley College

campus, where it dovetails with the internationalism of the student body and the curricular ingenuity of the faculty. My hope is that El Anatsui's work will inspire the community on campus, as well as draw visitors from throughout Boston and New England."

The retrospective is organized by the Museum for African Art (MfAA), New York City, and curated by MfAA Associate Curator Lisa Binder. It will be one of the inaugural exhibitions in the MfAA's new building, which opens in fall 2011.



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About the Exhibition

While much of El Anatsui's sculpture makes use of found objects, the artist has stated that the work is less about recycling or salvaging than about seeking meaning in the ways materials can be transformed to make statements about history, culture, and individual and collective memory.

In the 1970s, El Anatsui began to manipulate broken ceramic fragments. With their allusions to ancient Nok terracotta sculptures and West African myths about the earth and their cultural references to the use of clay, the ceramic works piece together shattered ideas and histories. His wooden sculptures from this period are created by chopping, carving, burning and etching signs and symbols that reference various cultures and languages from across the globe.

The 1990s marked a crucial shift from working with hand tools to carving with a power saw, which enabled the artist to cut through blocks of wood, leaving a jagged surface. In some compositions these dramatic incisions stand for the scars left by the European colonial encounter with Africa.

In his most recent metal wall sculptures, El Anatsui assembles thousands of Nigerian liquor-bottle tops into moving patterns of stunning visual impact, transforming this simple material into large shimmering forms.

The colors and patterns in El Anatsui's gestural acrylic paintings and ink drawings, made at various points during his career and exhibited outside of Nigeria for the first time, resonate

with his work in other materials. These vibrant and beautiful works subtly unify the retrospective, referencing the artist's larger themes and revealing much about his process.



El Anatsui, *Akua's Surviving Children*, 1996. Wood and metal, dimensions variable.

Photo courtesy: The October Gallery.

About the Artist

El Anatsui was born in Ghana in 1944. He earned a bachelor's degree in sculpture and a postgraduate diploma in art education from the University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana. From 1975 to 2010, he was professor of sculpture at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

El Anatsui's work has appeared in group exhibitions at the Fowler Museum of Cultural History, UCLA; the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington, DC; and in the celebrated exhibition "Africa Remix," which opened in 2005 in Düsseldorf and traveled to London, Paris, Tokyo, Stockholm and Johannesburg. His work has also been included in numerous biennial exhibitions, including in Venice (1990 and 2007), Havana (1994), Johannesburg (1995), Gwangju (2004) and Sharjah (2009), as well as in Prospect.1 New Orleans (2008). "Gawu," a solo show of metal sculptures, traveled throughout Europe, North America and Asia from 2004 to 2008. In 2008, El Anatsui received the Visionaries Artist Award from the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City. In 2009, he was also a laureate of the Prince Claus Award.

His work is collected by institutions internationally, including the British Museum, London; Centre Pompidou, Paris; the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art, New York City; the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh; the Denver Art Museum, Denver; the Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City; and the de Young Museum, San Francisco.

A richly illustrated catalogue, "El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote to You about Africa," with contributions by Kwame Anthony Appiah, the Laurance S. Rockefeller University professor of philosophy at Princeton; Lisa Binder, associate curator at the Museum for African Art, New York; Olu Oguibe, professor of art and art history at the University of Connecticut; Chika Okeke-Agulu, assistant professor art and archaeology at Princeton; and Robert Storr, dean of the Yale School of Art, accompanies the exhibition.

“El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote to You about Africa” is organized by the Museum for African Art, New York, and has been supported, in part, by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. The presentation at the Davis is supported by the Wellesley College Friends of Art and the Kathryn Wasserman Davis '28 Fund for World Cultures and Leadership. The catalogue has been published with the assistance of the Getty Foundation.