

From Trash to Treasure:

The Art Of El Anatsui

By Annie Buckley

SINCE THE START of the 20th century, artists have been exploring “found” or discarded materials—and even elementary schoolchildren have crafted dolls and dioramas from recycled stuff. Transforming old into gold is not a new phenomenon, but El Anatsui has certainly raised the bar for this particular art. The African contemporary artist’s sumptuous, monumental sculptures and tapestries are made exclusively from cast-off remains—essentially, trash. Yet his works are characterized by shimmering gilded waves, studded by metallic bursts of color. It seems impossible that objects this rich would have such humble beginnings, but that is the genius of Anatsui.

The celebrated artist and teacher has kept a studio in Nigeria since 1975, when he moved from his native Ghana to teach at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. As a professor and artist, Anatsui has influenced countless younger African artists and, in more recent years, contemporary artists worldwide. His big break came by way of invitation into the 1990 Venice Biennale, but it wasn’t until the 2007 rendition of that exhibition that the artist’s star began its sharp rise. Anatsui’s works have been included in numerous museum and gallery exhibitions worldwide and his solo show, “Gawu,” recently toured for two years throughout Europe, Asia and North America.

However gorgeous his pyramids



Versatility

of darkly glistening tin and sheets of rolling color, the beauty of Anatsui’s work runs deeper than the lavish surfaces initially imply. While the West attempts to shift the tenor of its longstanding romance with consumption—embracing hybrid cars and “green” products—Africa continues to suffer the effects of a steady stream of foreign products arriving on the continent. Rather than bemoan the widespread accumulation of trash and unnecessary stuff, Anatsui mines the piles of refuse, using discarded liquor labels, milk tins, and other detritus to sculpt his work. Tapestries are made by meticulously flattening tossed-off bottle tops and wrappers into brightly colored raw material that the artist carefully sews together with wire. Found wood is piled and painted with whimsical patterns. Used aluminum printing plates are woven into a telling form—a giant trash bag.

Anatsui’s process points to the relationship between socio-political, economic and environmental concerns in an increasingly interdependent global community, while his works’ poignant and undeniable beauty has roots in both contemporary Western art and African textiles. With its harmonic melding of intellect, emotion and sheer visual power, it’s no surprise that the work has gained widespread acclaim. Anatsui has said that artists are products of their environment—and he reflects a powerful and optimistic Africa.

Stop by the artist’s website to view his work: www.elanatsui.com

Annie Buckley is a writer, editor, and artist based in Los Angeles. Her writing about contemporary art appears regularly on Artforum.com and in Glass Quarterly, Craft, and Yoga Journal magazines. She is the editor-in-chief of Artweek.