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AFRICAN MODERN & CONTEMPORARY ART

The Triumphant Scale of El Anatsui's Art

BY SOTHEBY'S | APR 1, 2019

Curated by Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu, with the assistance of Damian Lentini, curator at Haus der Kunst, El Anatsui: Triumphant Scale is the largest survey exhibition of the artist's 50-year career to date. Here, Dr Lentini discusses the importance of the African artist.

El Anatsui: *Triumphant Scale* is the biggest solo exhibition of an artist from the African continent, but this exhibition does not frame him as a contemporary African artist, but rather a contemporary global artist. Not only is he one of the most important African artists, he is also one of the most important living contemporary artists working today. Although his works were seen in Venice in 2007 and more recently at the Palazzo Fortuny, this exhibition shows that audiences have only scratched the surface so far.



EL ANATSUI'S *DUSASA II* AND *MAN'S CLOTH*

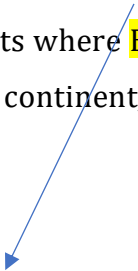
The starting point of the exhibition is *Man's Cloth*, the first work that El Anatsui ever did using **bottlecaps**. This work was first shown in 2001 at the October Gallery in London, then promptly bought by the British Museum. It's a deliberate red herring that the exhibition begins with three major works, designed to have people assume they have seen the highlights of the show and then prove that they couldn't be more wrong.



Haus der Kunst

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One of the first works acquired by a major museum collector of contemporary art – the Centre Pompidou – was *Sasa*, from 2004. It was part of a phenomenally important exhibition called 'Africa Remix' that toured around Europe. This was one of the early moments where El Anatsui's work, as well as work by several other artists from the African continent, was exhibited as important global contemporary art.



At the beginning of my project was fascinated by the culture differences between Nigeria and London. For instance, methods of sustainable materials in my opinion are more in Lagos, Nigeria due to overpopulation people of lower incomes have to be able to adapt and sustain themselves. In addition, even the way rubbish is regarded in rural parts of Lagos is completely different from England. Putting things in perspective and what is acceptable to build in a space in one country and not the other. For example, I could build a sculpture out of rubbish on a beach and could be kept there without me having to have rights to be living there.



DR DAMIAN LENTINI AND HANNAH O'LEARY IN FRONT OF EL ANATSUI'S SASA

El Anatsui's works are never complacent when he finishes them. They **change** **incredibly with every hand and every installation** and not just because of their

space. When the work *The Beginning and The End* was shown at

Highly adaptable and not confined to one space or ideology. Constantly moving.

This is why I chose to make my sculpture in a mountain slope shape because it had a direct connection and relationship with its surroundings. Making my work easily identifiable and understandable to my audience. I wanted to bridge quite clear communication between my audience and my sculpture and the environment.

the Palazzo Fortuny in Venice, it was hung in a dark room and almost looked like theatre curtains from a distance. It begins with circular elements which impart an organic quality to the work, but dissipates towards the end. El Anatsui has said that he likes the idea that we have an 'organic beginning and we have something that looks almost like an urban grid at the end'.

Naturally produced, the ideas flow without restraint. This applies to my work because my work was naturally formed by what I visualised already being there(leaf box).

When I chose to make my work I wanted them to juxtapose their environment but juxtapose was actually the wrong word. I wanted an unfamiliar texture to what it was originally but by doing this I formed samples that appeared organic but were not made from anything raw or grown from the ground or even sustainable. Some of the pieces (graphite looking rock in sketchbook) even look like artefacts which is what I was exploring at the start with the 800 stolen Benin artefacts but as I developed my ideas started to form around movement which lead me to think about immigration and how protectionist methods are used in the UK and America (The Wall for Mexicans) and other regions of the world to stop immigrants coming in but without them countries essentially can't flourish.



EL ANATSUI, *THE BEGINNING AND THE END*

Black Block is in the collection of the Brooklyn Museum of New York. When you approach this monochrome work, all these colours, plays of light and emphasis on light open themselves up in the work. It went from something that had a sense of

The idea of an illusion of space. I considered creating a space that did not exist using light and colours to represent the space. Not physical just visual.

gravity, and was actually quite heavy when it was hanging on the wall to something that looks like it's floating, like a wonderful suspended moment. This is wonderful work because it shows the real variety of these metal elements. It is not just about cutting things up and combining them together. It is about bringing together the different shapes and colour combinations.

EL ANATSUI, *ZEBRA CROSSING 2*. ESTIMATE £550,000-750,000.

El Anatsui was interviewed by the Haus der Kunst magazine, and the journalist said: "You have been working with metal for almost twenty years now, have you ever reached a point where you think, 'I've done it all' - you know, the novelty has worn off, it's done?". He laughed and said to the journalist: "You are very funny. When someone speaks to a painter, do you ask them about their long use of oils and various colours on the palette? Do you think you are done?".

This is how he thinks regarding his metal elements. These are not ready-mades and are not talked about in terms of recycling. It is about using what is at hand and the artist certainly has used these metal elements to play with form, colour, tone and contrast in ways that a painter would.



EL ANATSUI, *RISING SEA*

Rising Sea is a **site-specific work** that El Anatsui created for Haus der Kunst, it encapsulates everything about the exhibition. Someone said “It’s Friedrich, it is *The Monk by the Sea*, it is the sublime!”, referring to Caspar David Friedrich's solitary figure, looking at immensity of the universe. It is perfectly **tailored** to the **space** and measures **14 metres wide and 8 metres high**. It is a work which, from a distance, resembles a **monochromatic wall**, but once you approach, it opens itself up in terms of **details and space**. One gets the sense of **rising sea levels, rising temperatures – it poses lingering questions of environmental concerns.** →

Icebergs melting? The imitation of an iceberg in my sculpture melting?

This work is impossible to photograph, even by a professional photographer. It's one that you really have to see. El Anatsui's work is something that you have to experience.

El Anatsui: Triumphant Scale is on view at **Haus der Kunst, Munich**, until 28 July 2019 and will later travel to **MATHAF: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha; Kunstmuseum Bern; and Guggenheim Bilbao**. Okwui Enwezor, curator of *El Anatsui: Triumphant Scale* and director of *Haus der Kunst* from 2011 to 2018, passed away aged 55 on 15 March. *El Anatsui: Triumphant Scale*, provides a fitting legacy to the memory of a man to whom the entire field of contemporary art and art history owes so much.