

Reflections on El Anatsui: “An unwavering commitment to Africa”

Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi is a Nigerian sculptor and scholar whose personal knowledge of El Anatsui extends back more than twenty years. Nzewi met the master artist as a first-year student at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria Nsukka, where Anatsui, together with notable colleagues such as Uche Okeke, Chike Aniakor, Obiora Udechukwu, Chuka Amaefuna, and Ola Oloidi, had created one of the most prestigious art programs in Africa. Nzewi completed the program in 2001 with a bachelor's degree in fine and applied art. He went on to earn his PhD in contemporary African art from Emory University in Atlanta in 2013, after which he was named the first Curator of African Art at Dartmouth College's Hood Museum of Art. In 2017, he accepted the same position at the Cleveland Museum of Art. He has curated numerous international exhibitions and exhibited his own artwork widely around the globe.

*Below is the full text of an interview conducted via email in November and December 2017 between Dr. Nzewi and Art Conservator editor Timothy Cahill. An edited version of the interview was published in the Winter 2017 issue of Art Conservator, beside the cover feature on the Williamstown Art Conservation Center's treatment of Anatsui's *Hovor* (2005), owned by the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College.*

Timothy Cahill: *Please describe the circumstances of your first meeting with El Anatsui? What was your first impression of him as a man and an artist. How did your opinion of him develop as you came to know him? Were you aware of his growing international reputation, and were you intimidated or inspired by him?*

Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi: I commenced my art training at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria Nsukka, in 1997. The Nsukka arts program is one of the foremost in Africa due to individuals like El Anatsui, who have trained successive generations of art students. Some of these former students have become accomplished artists, operating in the international arena. Some others have found success as well-regarded art historians and curators. As an art professor, Anatsui was unassuming and somewhat restrained, although he had the occasional bursts of mirth at his own jokes. Interestingly, the first class I took with him was an advanced drawing class. That was in my second year, in 1998. Drawing was a huge part of the Nsukka arts program. Students took classes from the first year through the final year. These drawing classes were taught by different art professors. I became a sculpture major in my third year and took more classes with Anatsui, which ranged from studio practice to sculpture theory.

At the time I joined the Nsukka arts program, I was oblivious of Anatsui's celebrity. Although he had already established a massive international reputation and, as such, was [the] biggest draw at the arts program, he was yet to become the bonafide art world superstar that he is today. I would say that I was inspired by him to the extent that every sculpture student fancied himself/herself as a mini-Anatsui. In our time, his principal medium was wood, which he arranged into panels and made incisions and grooves on them with power machines. He would burn the grooves at times, and/or painted parts of the panels with acrylic colors. We all made our own versions of the wood panels. It was a badge of honor to imitate the master. Subsequently, some of us evolved our own visual vocabulary. Anatsui's influence

became even more pervasive after I'd graduated and has since infected the entire arts department, inasmuch as he is now retired.

What would you describe as the most important lessons you learned? How has he most directly influenced your studio practice? Your work as a curator and scholar?

I initially imitated his artistic style, as [did] most of my colleagues during our time at Nsukka. This is normal. Students tend to model themselves after their teachers until they find their own feet. His influence would become more conceptual or cerebral for me. Mr. Anatsui has shown deep commitment to his art since the late 1960s, after graduating from the University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana. His inventiveness and nimbleness, especially in the tireless search for visual eloquence, are gold standards every artist should aspire to. On a more personal level, I have been inspired by his tenacity, patience, longevity, fidelity to his craft, aesthetic philosophy, and for the fact that he grounds his work in the reality of his immediate material world, while communicating to a much wider audience. It was never about fame for Anatsui. Instead, it is a philosophical undertaking to speak through the platform his artistic practice offers. He is not much of a speaker, in that he talks less, but his work speaks earnestly and brilliantly. The most important lesson that I have learned from him is the political in his work—an unwavering commitment to Africa, which he addresses with clarity. This has had the more direct bearing on my work as a curator and scholar. I have conceived of my work to speak honestly about Africa's experiences; the complexities, challenges, weaknesses, but also potentials for greatness.

Did you ever work with him to create his "bottle-cap" sculptures? Have you watched them being made? Please offer your insights into the creation and production of these pieces.

El Anatsui began to make sculpture with discarded bottle-caps in the early 2000s, more likely from late 2002 or early 2003. At that point I had already graduated from college. However, the story goes that he had found sacks of bottle caps in one of his walks around the college town of Nsukka. He had them stay idle in his studio for a while as he contemplated what to do with them. This could have been while I was still a student. But what I do remember clearly was that he had introduced the work of the British artist Cornelia Parker to us. After one of his international trips in 1999, he had screened a video of Parker's work process. In that video, Parker was flattening detritus that bore vestiges of domestic experiences (which consisted of industrially manufactured metallic objects) with a steamroller. The video was about the making of Parker's critically acclaimed *Thirty Pieces of Silver* (1988), an installation that explored the objects' materiality. It was much later, in 2015, that I attempted to make some connection between Parker's work and Anatsui's approach with the bottle caps. But it is possible that Anatsui may have independently arrived at his own process of flattening the bottle caps and turning them into large metallic sheets.

I had the opportunity to visit Anatsui's studio more recently during a trip to Nigeria, in the summer of 2015. I was in Nsukka to attend a conference in honor of Anatsui and his friend and former colleague, Obiora Udechukwu. At the end of the conference, some of us went to his studio and were opportune to

witness his studio process. Typically, he works with studio assistants whom he supervises together with his studio manager, Uche Onyishi, a former student and art professor. There is a system in place that governs the creative process. It is a division of labor that easily imitates artisanal practices around Africa. It begins with flattening piles of bottle caps and twisting some of them into a variety of forms by studio assistants working in groups. The resulting flattened or twisted bottle caps are organized as piles on the basis of similarly looking forms or colors. They are then stitched together to create smaller sheets ensemble. The stage is then set for a variety of arrangements, combination, and recombination, to create the much larger cascading forms under the supervision of Anatsui, who continues to fiddle with the forms until he arrives at his perfect aesthetic object. In other words, the aesthetic object goes through various episodes of forming and reforming to come to being.

Would you describe your relationship with the artist now as primarily professional or as a friendship?

The element of reverence still governs my relationship with him, but it is not necessarily because of his renown. It has more to do with the fact that he is my former teacher and also an elder. In Africa, we treat our elders with deference. It is also the case that Anatsui is my father's contemporary. Both were born the same year, 1944. So I see him and I think of my father and accord him the respect that is due to him.

*What strikes you as the most salient element of *Hovor at the Hood*? What do you think the average American viewer misses or overlooks, or needs to know to fully appreciate El Anatsui's art?*

The Hood piece was part of the international traveling *Gawu* exhibition in 2003–2007. The exhibition commenced in the United Kingdom in 2003, where it had traveled to several venues starting with the Oriol Mostyn Gallery, Llandundo, Wales. In the United States, *Gawu* traveled to many institutions, including the UCLA's Fowler Museum, Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art, and the Hood Museum. It was Anatsui's first solo museum exhibition in the United States. More importantly, it was the first exhibition totally dedicated to his metal sculptures and included most of the early examples. As such, it was a sort of coming out parade which formally marked a new direction in his practice. This was before he took the art world by storm at the 2007 Venice Biennale. The fact that the Hood's piece was from that exhibition makes it particularly significant. Of those lot, it is one of the biggest. It is also very compact, unlike the more recent pieces that hover between solidity and precarity at least in the way they are aesthetically configured. One of the things that needs to be disabused for the average American viewer of Anatsui's work is the gut attempt to connect it to the Kente cloth, Ghana's most popular cultural avatar. I know that many specialists and non-specialists alike have been guilty of reading the Kente into Anatsui's work, which is rather reductive. The metal sculptures offer much more as culturally- and politically-fraught objects.

There is an obvious tension in El Anatsui's work between the sculptures' monumental and aesthetically-pleasing presence and their trenchant commentary on issues ranging from Africa's colonial past to disparities of wealth/poverty to environmental degradation and reclamation. As a scholar and curator, could you offer your thoughts on the complexity and multivalence of his work? And on the importance of his work on contemporary African art generally?

Undoubtedly, Anatsui's work operates on several levels. One immediately responds to the undeniable elegance and beauty. The shimmering cadence and sheer materiality of the hanging sculptures invoke that sense of wonder about how abject detritus can be so transformed. It is this transformation which holds the viewer's imagination hostage. But more importantly, it is Anatsui's ability to address existential questions that people can easily relate to which makes his work particularly powerful. Through his work, he addresses the continued impact of European colonialism in shaping the African collective psych. When he began exploring bottle caps in the beginning, he made allusions to how illicit goods, as gifts or items of exchange, marked Africa's initial relationship with Europe, at least on the West African Coast. Anatsui's enduring interest in illuminating Africa's history is a hallmark of his long and illustrious career. As someone who came of age in Africa's independence decade of the 1960s, he witnessed and was part of the fervor of Pan-Africanism in Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana. His Pan-Africanist orientation has not wavered in spite of the fact that with time he became critical of the state of affairs around the continent, more especially in Ghana, his country of birth, and in Nigeria, which has been his home since 1975. In addition to addressing environmental concerns, his work examines the compelling force of contemporary globalization in ordering modern life and the role of commodity economy in shaping our value system.

I have long considered Anatsui's metal sculpture through the prism of recycling, a socio-economic and increasingly cultural phenomenon in Africa. For some time now, Africa has served as a dump, a burial ground of some sort for industrially manufactured goods at the throes of death. These rejects, from electronic waste, engines, tires, to thrift store clothes (popularly called second-hand clothes), are given a new stab at life in Africa. In the repurpose economy, their previous lives either as luxurious or pedestrian goods are not important for the artisans who turn them into a wide range of consumer products, including kitchenware, sandals, slippers, etc. Similarly, African artists source these objects of modern life and quotidian experience from the environment. And, just like the artisans, they transform them into art. They give the objects new lease of life as first-class luxurious goods, re-introduce them into the global art circuits, and some ultimately end up in major art institutions and collections in the West. It is a fascinating ecosystem.

One can thus say that through his art, Anatsui embraces the pulse of a continent. Yet, on another note, "accumulation," which best describes his metal sculptures, reflects a fundamental aesthetic stratagem in African art, past and present. The tendency when discussing the role of African art in modern art is to focus on its thick conceptualism, especially in reducing form to essence. Yet the aesthetic of accumulation and [the] material significance of assemblage are characteristics of the kind of African art that reinvigorated modern art in the early part of the twentieth century. Contemporary African artists such as Anatsui draw upon these inherent aspects of African cultural production in creating art that responds to our current milieu.