

El Anatsui. Triumphant Scale

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El Anatsui, *Gravity and Grace*, 2010, Collection of the artist Nsukka, Nigeria

El Anatsui is one of the most important contemporary artists of his generation. The Kunstmuseum Bern is mounting the largest exhibition of the work of the Ghanaian artist so far. His sculptures upend traditional categories and reflect the (post-)colonial relationship between Europe, Africa and the New World. The exhibition focuses on the monumentality of El Anatsui's work and encompasses every media in the artist's prodigious fifty-year career.

'We are proud and happy to be able show this truly splendid exhibition. El Anatsui's art leaves no one untouched, and we look forward to the engagement and the encounters that will take place at the Kunstmuseum Bern.'

Nina Zimmer, Director, Kunstmuseum Bern – Zentrum Paul Klee

About the artist

El Anatsui's art began developing in the 1960s in parallel with the gradual liberation of the African countries from the colonial powers. Of central importance to him at that time was the question of what 'African contemporary art' could be after those decades of colonial rule. What did he want to create – having been appointed as teacher at the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka as early as 1975 – from the craft traditions and the different artistic visions? Even today he continues to develop that initial impulse, along with formal concerns, in his extensive and fascinating work that includes themes such as the approach towards history and natural resources.

El Anatsui's works present us with the poetic and aesthetic power of art. His ideas, produced in the creative environment of the university town of Nsukka (Nigeria), are marked by a love of experiment and aesthetic research. His art is characterised by a critical search for alternative models of artistic production. He holds the opinion that art is capable of engaging with the complex processes of history, memory, time and the formation of society. The titles of his works are accordingly suggestive: 'Chambers of Memory' or 'Invitation to History' refer to the artist's continuing reflections on the effects of colonial and postcolonial global powers on the cultures of Africa, on history and memory, philosophy and politics. This essential critical engagement is further reinforced by the material nature of the works.

'I have experimented with quite a few materials. I also work with material that has witnessed and encountered a lot of touch and human use (...) and these kinds of material and work have more charge than material/work that I have done with machines. Art grows out of each particular situation, and I believe that artists are better off working with whatever their environment throws up.' El Anatsui

About the exhibition

With this exhibition the Kunstmuseum Bern is paying tribute to El Anatsui's artistic vision, his long-term commitment to formal innovation, his artistic influence as a professor in Nsukka on generations of West African artists and his status as an important voice in contemporary international art.

The 'bottle cap' works made of found caps of spirits bottles form the core of the exhibition. Their monumental size is overwhelming, and their jewel-like details fascinating on closer inspection. The cutting, flattening, crushing, rolling, folding and combination of thousands of these bottle caps reveals the diversity of the material and works as a metaphor for the collaborations of human communities. The works embody contrasts, in that they are made of rigid metal and yet fall softly like woven cloths, they occupy the space almost aggressively and yet are as filigree as a paper-cutting. They recall precious fabrics and in the end look like monumental architecture. With the folds that El Anatsui or his assistants have made with nails in the background along with the construction team, he supports the textile character of these hanging sculptures. Even though the composition of the modules is precisely thought through, in the end all the works remain open art works, since there are unlimited ways in which they can be hung in an exhibition.

'With El Anatsui's works we experience the dignified power of beauty and poetry. And yet at the same time they also tell us something about the history of African countries shaking off colonialism and finding their way to their cultural legacy. El Anatsui provides a unique vision of this history by radically relying on the universal comprehensibility of art. His use of abstract formal language is incredibly powerful and inspiring, and his art has nothing of the cerebral quality familiar to us from the concrete, constructivist or minimal tradition. Instead it draws all of its strength from its uncompromising engagement with the material – in this case used bottle caps from spirits bottles.'

Kathleen Bühler, Curator, Kunstmuseum Bern

The metal fabrics are a logistical challenge: formats of 5 metres by 10 and more are not rare. In order to produce these monumental works El Anatsui employs up to forty people in his workshop in Nsukka. The artist first has them make smaller rectangles in individual colours, which he then puts together. He records all of the steps on camera. He then rearranges the photographs on the computer. In this way he could be said to produce analogue compositions from digital collages.

Aside from the monumental three-dimensional works the exhibition also includes early plates, sculptures and relief works in wood, ceramic sculptures and a large variety of drawings, sketches and prints from the mid-1970s until the present day. The works show El Anatsui's experiments and research with regard to an aesthetic of fragmentation and destabilisation as well as the continuity of his work and his life-long preoccupation with theories of abstraction. They clearly reveal the devotion with which the artist constantly rethinks the structures and compositions underlying his work.

Kunstmuseum Bern cordially invites you to join the media preview of the exhibition *El Anatsui. Triumphant Scale* with curator Kathleen Bühler and in the presence of El Anatsui (**tbc**) on Wednesday, **11 March 2020** at **11 a.m.** at Kunstmuseum Bern. Registrations by mail at press@kunstmuseumbern.ch are welcome.

Further individual appointments are possible on request.

Accompanying programme and audioguide

The exhibition is accompanied by a rich programme of events which looks amongst other things at the diverse interrelationships that Switzerland and Bern have had with (post) colonial Africa, and the contemporary treatment of reused materials.

An audioguide in three languages (G, E, F) is available for the exhibition, which will guide visitors to selected works in the exhibition. For the first time the Kunstmuseum Bern is also providing an audioguide in dialect for children between the ages of 6 and 12. It is spoken by the journalist and singer Ueli Schmezer.

Curators

Okwui Enwezoe and Chika Okeke-Agulu **in collaboration with**
Kathleen Bühler, Curator at Kunstmuseum Bern

A collaboration of Kunstmuseum Bern, Haus der Kunst, Munich, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, and Guggenheim Museum Bilbao.

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You can download press images as well as further information on the Kunstmuseum Bern [media webpage](#).

Contact

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