

Art in America

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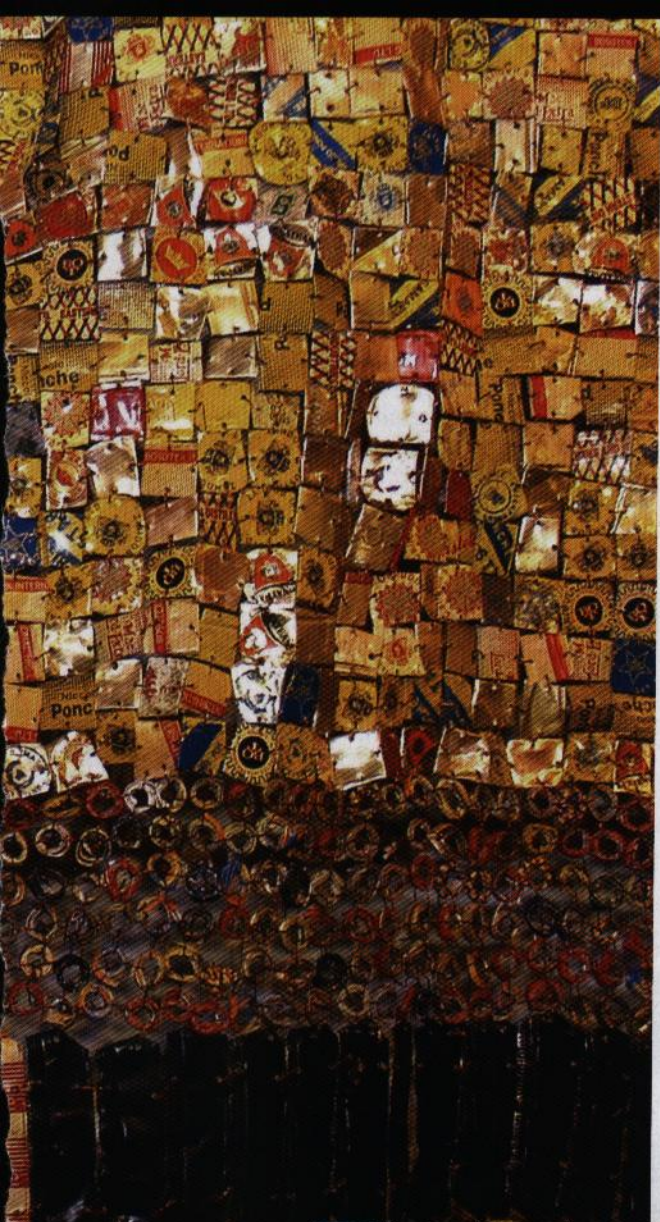
Full-Metal Fabrics

Nigerian-based artist El Anatsui, recently the subject of several U.S. exhibitions, makes visually rich, culturally resonant sculptures from cast-off aluminum bottle tops.

BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

The profile of contemporary African visual culture has certainly risen in the art world over the last few years, but a single medium—photography—has garnered most of the attention. While there are a number of African artists whose work can be found with some regularity on the international circuit (Congolese architectural fantasist Body Isek Kingelez, Cameroonian installation and video artist Pascale Marthine Tayou and medium-hopping artist Barthélémy Toguo, also from Cameroon, are three names that come to mind), it is the photographers, in particular the two great Malian portrait photographers Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé, whose work has become emblematic and widely exhibited. (A current exhibition at the International Center of Photography, “Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography,” promises to bring still more attention to the medium.)

One result of this imbalance of mediums is that some important African artists have remained relatively unseen by U.S. viewers. Among the most significant of these, perhaps, is El Anatsui, a Ghanaian-born, Nigerian-based sculptor who has been working and exhibiting since the mid-1970s. Happily, there have been several recent opportunities in this country to see examples of Anatsui’s new work—formally dazzling, labor-intensive reliefs and freestanding sculptures made from a variety of recycled materials. First came “El Anatsui: Gawu,” an exhibition at the Samuel P. Harn Museum in Gainesville, Fla., of seven large works that had previously toured five museums in the U.K. and Ireland. This was followed by Anatsui’s solo debut in New York, at Skoto Gallery in Chelsea. (In 1996, Skoto presented Anatsui in a two-person show with Sol LeWitt.) Three additional works were on extended view at the Contemporary African Art Gallery in Harlem. At the New York Scope Art Fair in March, Jack Shainman Gallery included a big Anatsui wall piece in their booth. On the West



Opposite and inset, El Anatsui: Many Came Back, 2005, aluminum (liquor-bottle tops) and copper wire, 84 by 109 inches. Newark Museum, N.J. Courtesy Skoto Gallery, New York.

The ritual, almost regal, presence of these works comes in part from their association with kente cloth, a textile with a ceremonial role.

Coast, visitors to San Francisco's new de Young Museum encountered *Hovor II*, a large 2004 sculpture by Anatsui recently purchased by the museum and included in its opening exhibition.

A predecessor of the de Young piece, *Hovor* (2003), was on view in Gainesville. Like many of Anatsui's other recent pieces, this 19-by-17-foot work is an undulating, faceted metallic sheet made from thousands of aluminum liquor-bottle tops that have been individually flattened out, sometimes refolded and then sewn together with copper wire. In this case, the artist has used the strips of thin pliable aluminum that wrap around the stem of the bottles; other works also incorporate the circular sections of foil that seal the bottles' mouths.

The strips are each a little wider and longer than an adult's middle finger, and they are stitched together to form long horizontal bands running the length of the piece. In most of the bands, the strips are positioned vertically and sewn tightly together, but at three or four points, this structure is interrupted by more loosely assembled bands in which horizontal and vertical strips alternate in a kind of checker-

board pattern that is reminiscent of African kente cloth. Most of the strips are silvery or dull gold in color—the artist has evidently reversed them so that the inside surfaces are visible—but some, particularly in the looser disruptive bands, are red or multicolored.

At the Harn, *Hovor* half leaned and half hung on a freestanding wall in the middle of the circular gallery that housed the show. Its shimmering surface was deformed or, rather, reformed by long ripples and undulating folds. There is a lot of variability built into these works. The artist, or whoever is installing the work, can decide how tautly or loosely to stretch the metallic fabric. If hung loosely, the aluminum and copper wire structures buckle in places under their own weight, creating uneven surfaces that in turn affect the play of light across the units of aluminum. The artful interweaving of color and glancing light can make these essentially abstract works evoke pointillist landscapes, something that happened at Skoto in *Soleme II* (2005). Often, the artist pays attention to the shadows cast on the wall behind the piece. This was especially noticeable in the Skoto show, where a number of works featured netlike structures that allowed one to see through to the intricately patterned shadows underneath. Thus, no two installations of any one of these "cloths," as Anatsui calls them, are identical.

A paradoxical aspect central to Anatsui's work is that he creates his flexible structures out of metal. Of course, there are historical precedents for making fabrics out of metal, from the chain mail

After Kings, 2005, aluminum (liquor-bottle tops) and copper wire, 88 by 70 inches. Courtesy Skoto Gallery.





Hovor, 2003, aluminum and copper wire, 216 by 240 inches. Courtesy Harn Museum of Art, Gainesville, Fla.

of medieval warriors to the 1960s faceted dresses of designer Paco Rabane. This clothing connection was signaled by the title of the Harn show: in Ewe *ga* means metal and *wu* cloak.

The kind of garments Anatsui's works most frequently evoke are not antique body armor or mod-era novelty clothes but ceremonial robes. Despite the fact that they have been made with cheap, recycled materials, these works possess a visual richness comparable to a Gaudí mosaic or the background in a Klimt portrait and a sense of having been made with meticulous care. Clearly their fabrication requires a prodigious amount of work, much of which is accomplished by the assistants Anatsui employs in his studio in Nsukka, Nigeria.

The ritual, almost regal, presence of these works derives, in part, from their association with kente cloth, a woven fabric that plays a ceremonial role for the Asante and Ewe peoples of Ghana (the word "kente" is derived from *kenten*, which means basket). In an interview in the "Gawu" catalogue, Anatsui discusses the relation between his work and kente cloth. After recalling that both his father and his brothers wove such fabric (not the well-known kente of the Asante people, but the more muted kente of the Ewe people, the ethnic group to which Anatsui belongs), the artist speculates that cloth has been an unconscious influence on him, even in his earlier carved-wood wall sculptures (several of which were included in the Skoto show). "I have discovered only much later, looking back over what I've done over a particular period, that cloth has been a recurring theme or leitmotif, and it featured in so many dimensions." The colors and patterns of other works, such as *Adrinka Sasa* (2003), evoke *adrinka*, a traditional West African textile that uses printed rather than woven designs.

The process of making the sculptures also relates to kente cloth, which is woven in long 4- to 8-inch-wide strips that are subsequently cut into smaller pieces and sewn together to form a single, patterned cloth. Anatsui's "cloths" are made in 3- to 4-inch-wide sections that stretch up to 12 or 15 feet in length. These sections can be split into smaller units as needed. The separate sections are assembled into the final works according to the artist's instructions. Anatsui acknowledges the input of his assistants, noting that the "variety, which is needed at this scale" comes from "the style and the feel of each individual hand." Indeed, if one looks closely at these works, there is a lot of variety in the way the small aluminum units are flattened, folded and twisted, both within single pieces and from one work to another.

Another feature that becomes noticeable upon close inspection is the appearance of distillers' names and logos. For his work, Anatsui uses local Nigerian brands of whiskey, rum, vodka, brandy and other potent libations with names such as Chairman, Dark Sailor, King Solomon, Makossa, 007 and Top Squad. There's one liquor marketed under the name "Ecomog" after the multilateral (though largely Nigerian) armed force established in 1990 to intervene in the Liberian civil war.

Anatsui's "cloth" series began about six years ago when the artist found a large bag of liquor tops that had been thrown away in the bush. For him, the bottle caps became interesting not only for their physical adaptability and the evocation of local culture but also because of their historical resonance. As he explains in an artist's statement for the Skoto show, they "encapsulate the essence

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El Anatsui

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of the alcoholic drinks which were brought to Africa by Europeans as trade items at the time of the earliest contact between the two peoples.”

The “cloths” made from liquor-bottle tops weren’t the first works that Anatsui made from recycled materials. At the Harn also was *Peak Project* (1999), a dozen or so 2- or 3-foot-high pointy cones made from tin-can tops. The tops, which come from cans of evaporated milk, are held together by lengths of copper wire looped through small holes punched into the tin. A larger piece, *Crumbling Wall* (2000), is an over-12-foot-high, 17-foot-long, 2-foot-thick barrier made from densely perforated sheets of rusted metal. What appears to be a section of some dilapidated, shot-up fortress is in fact partly an homage to a Nigerian culinary tradition. These repeatedly punctured metal sheets are typically used to make *gari*, the grated cassava flour or porridge that is a West African staple.

Anatsui is well aware that all these works—the liquor-top cloths, the *Peak Project* cones and *Crumbling Wall*—have to do with food and drink. But the specific original functions of his materials seem to matter less to him than the basic fact that they derive from the everyday world around him. For Anatsui, who avoids conventional art materials, the source of his material is crucial. Toward the end of the “Gawu” catalogue he observes:

Art grows out of each particular situation and I believe that artists are better off working with whatever their environment throws up. I think that’s what has been happening in Africa for a long time, in fact not only in Africa but the whole world, except that maybe in the West they might have developed these ‘professional’ materials. But I don’t think that working with such prescribed

The original functions of Anatsui’s materials seem to matter less to him than the fact that they derive from his immediate everyday world.

materials would be very interesting to me—industrially produced colors for painting. I believe that color is inherent in everything, and it’s possible to get color from around you, and that you’re better off picking something which relates to your circumstances and your environment than going to buy a ready-made color.

There’s something profoundly provocative in Anatsui’s suggestion that the notion of making art only from “art” materials is an aberration of Western culture. Of course, the last half century has seen many European and North American artists turn to the everyday stuff around them, from the Nouveaux Réalistes to the Post-Minimalists to video-game-inspired young artists of today. At this point, artists who restrict themselves to traditional materials may even be in a minority in the West. But despite the popularity of this mode of art-making, it’s hard to think of many found-object artists who have achieved work as intricately made, culturally resonant and visually sumptuous as El Anatsui’s. □

“El Anatsui: Gawu,” curated by Susan Cooksey was seen at the Samuel P. Harn Museum, Gainesville [Aug. 16-Oct. 16, 2005]. *“Dawuda: Recent Sculptures of El Anatsui”* was on view at Skoko Gallery, New York [Oct. 27, 2005-Jan. 21, 2006], and the Contemporary African Art Gallery, New York [Oct. 26, 2005-Apr. 30, 2006]. A catalogue of *“El Anatsui: Gawu”* published by the Oriol Mostyn Gallery, Llandudno, Wales, includes essays by Sylvester Okwunodu Ogburne and Alta Kawaii and an interview with the artist by Gerard Houghton.

Wenda Gu

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by something rather more scientifically precise? Haven’t those animal-behavior guys actually learned to interpret lion “speech,” in both its voiced and body-language forms, with a high degree of accuracy? And, yeah, so translation in the final analysis is imperfect. What isn’t?

In the catalogue, Gu dismisses such thinking—and the workaday business of understanding another worldview—as mere “practical” translation, as opposed to the ideal goal of catching all the refined nuances and subtleties of “cultural” language. He is particularly indignant that the “sensory sound” of Tang poetry—its rhythms, tones and syntactical richness—are reduced to mere literal “meaning” in another tongue. His indictment makes no allowance for the fact that poetic refinement is largely a question of the translator’s skill and sensitivity (or—at the receiving end—the reader’s command of both languages), as anyone knows who compares, say, C.K. Scott Moncrief’s translation of Proust to its tone-deaf successors. Bynner worked from the transliterations of his collaborator, Kiang Kang-Hu, and his treatment of the Tang originals is often described as “free.” But, as English poetry, his work is exemplary.

In any case, it is a little hard to see how Gu’s project demonstrates anything at all about verbal translation, given that—unlike a good-faith translator—he introduces intentional distortions into the linguistic process. All that toying with characters, all that phonetic flimflammy, clearly violates the standard protocols of translation. Gu’s language game shows simply that bad translations produce bad literary effects. Who would have guessed?

There is, however, a sense in which *Forest* succeeds as cultural critique. After all, in social practice, many transnational deformations are intentional, and some are misguided. Was there, for example, ever a greater cultural mistranslation than Mao’s imposition of Western industrial-age

The carved stone slabs of *Forest*, each weighing 1.3 tons, are laid flat as if toppled or “dead,” creating a work of haunting sculptural power.

Marxism on an Asian nation of farmers, shopkeepers and traders previously steeped for centuries in Confucianism and Buddhism? More benignly today, McDonald’s, when advertising its Big Macs in China, makes no effort to accommodate the traditional Chinese diet or communal dining habits. The difference is the point, the appeal, the liberation.

If *Forest* proves anything, it is that some translations—or cultural hybrids—are better than others. This will no doubt become even clearer to Western viewers when Gu completes his next batch of 50 steles, this time keyed to passages from Shakespeare. Here again, wordplay will be visually and experientially subordinate to a physicality evocative of a fallen Stonehenge. Hopefully, once the new project is on view, critical emphasis will then shift where it truly belongs—not on the work’s muddled theorizing but on its haunting installation format and undeniable sculptural power. □

“Translating Visuality—Wenda Gu: Forest of Stone Steles, Translation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry” was on view at the OCT Contemporary Art Terminal, Shenzhen, Guangdong Province, China [Nov. 1-28, 2005], and will appear at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y. [Jan. 30-Mar. 18, 2007]. It is accompanied by a 352-page catalogue, in Chinese and English, with essays by Gu and six international curators and scholars. Multiple projects will be included in a solo show at the Elaine J. Jacob Gallery, Wayne State University, Detroit [Sept. 15-Nov. 3, 2006], and Gu will present a site-specific installation at the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, N.H. [summer 2007]. A one-person show is also planned for the CAS Gallery, Kean University, Union, N.J. [fall 2007]. Gu will contribute works to the two-part exhibition “Brimming Books in Contemporary Chinese Art” at the China Institute, New York [Sept. 28-Nov. 11, 2006, and Dec. 13, 2006-Feb. 24, 2007], as well as “Art On or About China” at the Asia Society, New York [fall 2007].