

# intelligent life

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The  
Economist

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ART

## He's the tops

The art world is waking up to the brilliance of El Anatsui, who weaves beauty out of bottle tops. **PAULA WEIDEGER** meets him

EL ANATSUI, GREY-HAIRED and softly spoken, sat across from me on a black leather sofa in the lobby of a New York hotel. We had met to talk about his large and shimmering hangings. "I see myself as a person and an African," he began. And indeed he was born in Ghana and since 1975 has taught and sculpted at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He was quick to grasp what I was after when I asked a question but slow, sometimes very slow, to respond. The pauses between his words, between one sentence and the next, could be very long. It wasn't that he was worried about saying the wrong thing. Although he is a modest man, he appears solidly self-confident. His pauses seemed to exist to create spaces in which he could think. "Professionally," he finally added, "I see myself more as an artist in the world community of art." So he is. But the world community of art took rather a long time to confirm his view. Fortunately, he wasn't languishing.

Anatsui has "a huge reputation", according to Chika Okeke-Agulu, a former student of his, now an art historian at Princeton. "He is one of the best-known names in (and I mean in the inside world of) contemporary Nigerian art. He is one of the leading figures associated with Nsukka School...arguably the most influential art school in Nigeria." Lagos, an hour's flight from Nsukka, has long had its own flourishing gallery scene and with that, active collectors. The novelist Chinua Achebe and the Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka are among those who own Anatsui's work. The October Gallery in London has been showing his work since the mid-1990s. In 2006 the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York acquired one of his pieces for its African gallery. But it was only in 2007, aged 63, that Anatsui leapt into the heart of the wider art world. His springboard was the Venice

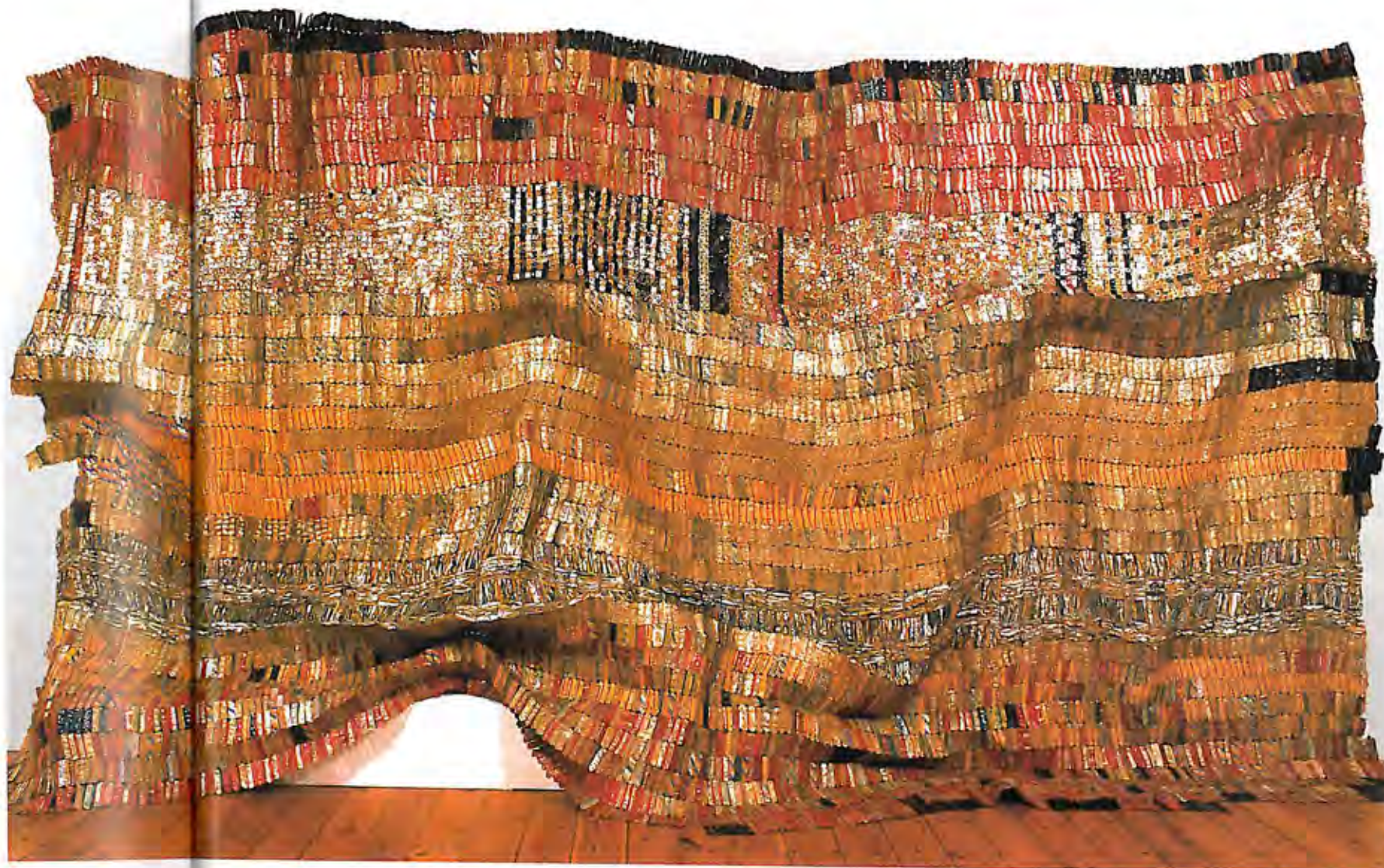
Biennale, where he had exhibited in 1990, without making much impact.

Robert Storr, dean of the Yale Art School and director of the biennale, invited Anatsui to show two pieces in the Arsenale. Like all his current work, they were large hangings made of thousands of pieces of shimmering metal, stitched together with copper wire. They are astonishingly beautiful and not like anything done before. Some think of them as tapestries; Anatsui calls them sheets. It is common to hear them compared to Byzantine mosaics, but the differences are greater than the similarities.

Anatsui's art is abstract. Colour, shape and light tell his story. In some pieces there are hundreds of dancing colours, while others are dominated by broad swathes of silver or gold or red. Unlike mosaics, these works are flexible; hanging free, they ripple as if they were cloth.

Anatsui was the hit of that biennale. Of the pieces in the Arsenale, one was bought by Kansas City's Nelson-Atkins Museum, the other for the Contemporary Collection of the Met. But his most talked-about work was a commission from the Belgian collector Axel Verwoerd for the Artempo installation at Palazzo Fortuny. "Fresh and Fading Memories, Part I-IV" was draped across the façade of this moody Gothic palace (*picture overleaf*). Wire fastenings were undone to let light into the upper floors – adding to the loveliness of the piece, making the sumptuous fabric look ripped. Interest in Anatsui has been building ever since.

In October 2008 at Sotheby's contemporary art sale in London, an Anatsui tapestry sold for \$610,000, a world auction record for his work. (According to art-world gossip, one of his works has sold in the Middle East for over a million dollars. Verwoerd sold the Artempo piece, but will not disclose its price.) "Three Continents", a dazzling 2.4 metres by 4.5 hanging, the outline of which resembles a Mercator projection, is priced at \$700,000 at New York's Jack Shainman gallery. (Several pieces by Anatsui will be included in Bonham's contemporary art auction in New York on February 24th.) Commissions keep coming, including



one for a 12 metres by 3.6 piece to hang in the atrium of the Bill and Melinda Gates campus in Seattle.

"El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote to You About Africa", his first major retrospective, will open at the Royal Ontario Museum in October 2010. In February 2011 it reaches New York as the inaugural exhibition at the Museum for African Art now under construction on upper Fifth Avenue. As well as organising the retrospective, the mfaa has co-produced a 53-minute documentary, "Fold Crumple Crush: The Art of El Anatsui" by Susan Vogel, director of Columbia University Global Centres: Africa. It's an engaging, informative and sensitive look at his way of life and of working.

In the film we see Anatsui at his local internet shop, doing his e-mail. We watch the rusty red earth kick up behind him as he heads for the shed of a seamstress who will sew packaging for him. And he takes us to the spot where he first came upon a bag of the bottle tops that are now central to his work.

Many African artists prefer to work with materials found near to hand. But just why were there thousands of bottle tops on Anatsui's doorstep? The answer has to do with recycling. Drinkers return empty gin and whisky bottles to their local distiller,

where they are refilled and given new caps. There is a keen market for the cast-offs. Melted down, they are transformed into cooking pots. Thirst being what it is, Anatsui has no trouble buying what he needs.

Some 20 men work on the hangings. They sit on the floor or hunch over tables in a large, open-plan studio. The round tops are cut out, the remaining aluminium is made into strips. Each element is pounded flat and pierced. Round ones are threaded together with round ones, strips with strips. Anatsui tells his crew what colour combinations he wants. These are then put together in sections, or units as he calls them. A unit might be two feet square or smaller.

"Working with the rings that hold the caps – that is very, very slow," Anatsui says. "A few inches in a day. But when you work with the shaft of the cap that is very fast, because the basic unit is big." Although he used to make preparatory drawings for his wood sculpture, he does no drawings for these pieces. "Now, I place things on the floor and move them around," he says. "When I like where it is, it gets linked up. There are a lot of permutations all along the route."

As the tapestry takes shape it begins to look like a giant jigsaw. But there is no pre-existing image. Even the artist may not know exactly what he's looking for >

"When I like where it is, it gets linked up"  
"Fading Cloth" (2005), a typically shimmering piece by El Anatsui

"I am a nomad" and brought up in Ghana, Anatsui has taught at art school in Nsukka, Nigeria, since 1975



PORTRAIT GRANT DELIN

OCTOBER GALLERY





> until it comes into existence on the studio floor.

"Fold Crumple Crush" will have its premiere at de Young Museum in San Francisco on February 13th. "El Anatsui", says Professor Vogel, "is the first black African artist continuing to live in Africa who is making work of a grandeur and depth that is going to last."

Anatsui knew he wanted to be an artist as a boy, but had no path to follow. "In my family", he says, "there were creative people like my father, my brother. Some were poets, others composed lyrics for dance groups, but there were no artists the way I am." He wasn't daunted. "I had a feeling that art was something I was going to enjoy. To enjoy is the most important thing." Towards the end of a rigorous secondary-school education, his enjoyment was interrupted by a phone call that brought a severe emotional shock.

Anatsui found out that the woman who had raised him and whom he believed was his mother was in fact a cousin. His birth mother had died when he was one. The revelation surely played some part in his decision to give himself a new name. Emanuel, the first of his given names, became El. For the rest, no one will say. Anatsui does not wish to have the subject discussed, which of course only adds to its psychological weight.

He has never married. A long-time colleague believes that in more than three decades, no member of his family has ever visited him at Nsukka. But he seems comfortable with strangers and has spent decades in lively exchanges with his students. He travels widely: "I am a nomad. Home is a psychological state, not a physical place. You carry it with you."

El Anatsui will soon retire from teaching. He is building a house on a bluff overlooking the campus, and will spend part of the year there, part in Ghana. He has already begun scouting Accra distilleries for bottle tops. "I am very much involved with the sheets," he says. "There is so much variety, there are so many new ways of handling it - new textures, new relations." ■

## THE PLAYLIST

## Built to last

David Hepworth, founder of several music magazines including "The Word", on the tunes he has loved this year

I'm the very worst person to ask what I've been listening to this year. I find the shuffle button on an iPod dissolves chronology. That seems only right. What is new anyway? Even allegedly cutting-edge contemporary music uses the body parts of songs ancient and modern. The best tunes still arrive unbidden from all sorts of people and places, providing us with new ways of listening and planting itches that we can never quite scratch. Which is why we play them so often.

**JAMES MCMURTRY HURRICANE PARTY**

Son of the novelist Larry, McMurtry has made a string of clever, ornery rock records that fans of Neil Young and Tom Waits would do well to attend to. This one features the line of the year: "I don't want another drink/I only want that last one again".

**THE DUCKWORTH LEWIS METHOD JIGGERY POKERY**

Two Irishmen, Neil Hannon and Thomas Walsh, make a funny, pointed, affectionate pop record about a single moment in cricket history: the ball with which Shane Warne bamboozled Mike Gatting in 1993. Howzat?

**MULATU ASTATKE & THE HELIOCENTRICS CHA CHA**

He is the Duke Ellington of Ethiopian jazz. They are a London funk outfit with an iron hand on the groove. Together they've made the record I've played more than any other this year.

**MOUNT ANALOG FEATURING KARL BLAU THAT'S HOW I GOT TO MEMPHIS**

This song, steeped in the emotional geography of country music, was written aeons ago by the Nashville legend Tom T. Hall. He can never have imagined how minty-fresh it would come up in this jazzy-indie treatment.

**THE DOOBIE BROTHERS LISTEN TO THE MUSIC (DJ MALIBU MIX)**

Somebody had the inspired idea of letting dance DJs loose on a collection of what you might call Hawaiian shirt music from the 70s (America, Maria Muldaur, George Benson, etc). It's airy, guilt-free and goes to show there's nothing pure about pop.

**SPEECH DEBELLE THE KEY**

If you travel on the top deck of a London bus you get plugged in to the constantly changing music of London speech. You also pick up some interesting information about how people live their lives. At its best, Debelle's Mercury prize-winning album is that journey set to music.

**THE UNTHANKS BECAUSE HE WAS A BONNY LAD**

There isn't much contemporary English folk music that you could accuse of being sexy. But there's something about the way these Northumbrian female voices describe a flirtation that puts you right at the bus stop with them.

**JESSE WINCHESTER STEP BY STEP**

Some of the best things about "The Wire" are the montages that close each season. The first one goes out to this 30-year-old tune about failed saints. It works like you wouldn't believe and proves that all great records eventually have their moment.

All songs can be downloaded from iTunes or 7Digital. "Step by Step" only as part of an album.