

la Biennale di Venezia

52. Esposizione
Internazionale
d'Arte

think
with the
senses
feel
with the
mind
art in the present tense

Marsilio



El Anatsui

Habits of seeing bedevil almost every discussion of contemporary art coming from outside the Western context, yet it is unsurprising that people will say that something unfamiliar to them looks like something they already know. It is normal to want to assimilate the new by finding similarities to the old. The difficulties begin when it is further assumed that the abiding differences between the unfamiliar and the familiar are of secondary rather than primary importance, and that what is new to the viewer must actually post-date what they know and therefore in some fashion derive from it. Within any given cultural situation this discrepancy between creation and recognition can result in profound misunderstandings and between cultures it can prove even more fraught with misapprehensions. Some years ago in a New York gallery the work of the Ghanaian El Anatsui was juxtaposed to that of the American Sol LeWitt, the artistic premise being rooted in their shared interest in geometric pattern. Without further information it would be easy – but erroneous – to suppose that there was in fact some kind of common aesthetic between them, or, at the extreme, that the elder – LeWitt – might somehow have influenced the younger artist El Anatsui. Known in art historical terms as pseudomorphism, such comparisons based solely on superficial visual resemblances often prevent viewers from posing questions they should be asking about what is right before their eyes, in effect blinding them with pre-conception. But as 'New York Times' critic Holland Cotter wrote, while 'LeWitt's work emerges from Minimalism and Conceptualism [...] El Anatsui's sculptures are steeped in African culture and are rich in historical references'. Thus while the partially modular construction of El Anatsui's meticulously pieced together wall hangings are dazzlingly complex in ways that LeWitt might have appreciated, the ready-made characteristics of El Anatsui's chosen means – discarded metal tags and packaging materials – are specific to the everyday world of contemporary Africa in the way that the detritus in Rauschenberg's combines was specific to New York of the 1950s. Moreover the shifting patterns of these hangings deviate in important ways from LeWitt's systems based grid aesthetic even as they depart from anything that might pseudomorphically be misconstrued as traditional African craft.

The simple truth is El Anatsui is an artist inventing and evolving his own language. If Western minimalism and African craft appear to meet in the fluctuating intricacies of his work, so be it. What we see once we have taken our eyes off that mirage is a scintillating universe that is far richer in sensation and aesthetic resonance than anything we may initially think we see.

—RS

Robert Preece: When I was in Barcelona reviewing the 'Africas' exhibition (2001), I was particularly captured by your piece *Visa Queue*. For me, it's one of those artworks that stays in your life – it provided an emotive, artistic representation of West African emigration to Europe, as resonant as the documentaries we see of people walking across the Sahara and risking their lives to cross the Strait from Morocco to Spain and into the EU. You created a lyrical line of massed figures, a nondescript mass. Why did you choose such a small scale for this work? Why did you want the viewer to be so uncomfortably monumental in comparison?

El Anatsui: Scale here takes on an inflective dimension – a dimension of significance. A friend related to me what his father-in-law told him when he went to inform him that he was migrating to a 'greener pasture'. 'The lazy man says his own home is not good enough'. Migration, especially for economic reasons, produces these desperate situations in which people are ready to be subjected to all forms of dehumanisation. Situations that not only process them into a roughly-hewn homogenous mass, but also miniaturise their stature. The figures, in assorted natural wood colours, are faceless, more like statistical data bound together by a dark gloomy fate. I have experienced real visa queues in the 1980s and 1990s in Lagos, Nigeria, which were awfully long, where people were goaded along barricaded paths. But *Visa Queue* is about any situation in which people are constrained by circumstances to compete in long queues – and this happens everywhere in the world. Everybody is reduced to the same height scale, and at times identification by assigned numbers suggests the idea of statistics.

—Excerpt from Robert Preece, *Out of West Africa: a conversation with El Anatsui*, in 'Sculpture', 25, 6, July-August 2006, pp. 34-39.

El Anatsui. Born in Anyako, Ghana, in 1944. Lives and works in Nsukka, Nigeria.
www.elanatsui.com

Solo exhibitions
2006 *Nyekor*, Spazio Rossana Orlandi, Milan, Italy.
2003 *Gawu*, Oriol Mostyn Gallery, Llandudno, Wales, UK; traveled to: Model Arts & Niland Gallery, Sligo, Ireland; October Gallery, London, UK; Djanogly Gallery, University of

Nottingham, UK; Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, Gainesville, USA; Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, USA; Fowler Museum, UCLA, Los Angeles, USA.
1991 *Old and New*, The National Museum, Lagos, Nigeria.

Group exhibitions
2006 *DAK'Art Biennale*, Dakar, Senegal.
2004 *Africa Remix*, Museum Kunst Palast, Düsseldorf, Germany; traveled to: Hayward Gallery, London, UK;

Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France; Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan; Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden.

2004 *Gwangju Biennale*, Gwangju, South Korea.

Publications
Robert Preece, *Out of West Africa: a conversation with El Anatsui*, in 'Sculpture', 25, 6, July-August 2006, pp. 34-39.

Raphael Rubinstein, *Full Metal Fabrics*, in 'Art in America', May 2006, pp. 158-161.
Holland Cotter, *Visions Of A Continent That Is Rich With Life*, in 'New York Times', 25 November 2005, pp. B35-B37.



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