STRUCTURE AND FLOW

How El Anatsui broke the seal on contemporary art.

BY JULIAN LUCAS

When I saw El Anatsui's exhibition "Triumphant Scale" in Bern, Switzerland, on March 12, 2020, the World Health Organization had just declared COVID-19 a pandemic. I'd been looking for a flight back to New York since three o'clock in the morning, after learning that the United States was closing its borders with Europe. The streets were nearly empty in the quiet medieval capital, a city once home to Paul Klee and Albert Einstein. Every other building seemed to be made of the same gray-green sandstone. Kiosk displays alternately flashed ads for the exhibition and public-health advisories, which had grown more alarming in the four days I'd waited for Anatsui. Walking into the Kunstmuseum Bern, a stately neo-Renaissance structure overlooking the Aare, I realized that I would likely never meet the artist.

Under a skylight in the second-story rotunda hung "Gravity and Grace" (2010), a thirty-seven-foot sheet of more than ten thousand liquor-bottle tops joined with copper wire. Anatsui's works are often draped and folded, but this one was flat, and it shone like a dragon's hide stretched on an invisible rack. Shapes appeared in the field of aluminum disks, intricately arranged by chromatic value. A red sun enveloped in pink haze—Gravity—held court at one end; an oval of dusty blue—Grace—glimmered at the other. Around them, red, yellow, and silver caps swirled as though caught between orbits. The sculpture presided over the room like a faceless eminence, cautiously greeted by a semicircle of nineteenth-century busts.

Anatsui, a seventy-six-year-old Ghanaian sculptor based in Nigeria, has transfigured many grand spaces with his cascading metal mosaics. Museums don them like regalia, as though to signal their graduation into an enlightened cosmopolitan modernity; they have graced, among other landmarks, the façades of London's Royal Academy, Venice's Museo Fortuny, and Marrakech's El Badi Palace. The sheets sell for millions, attracting collectors as disparate as MOMA, the Vatican, and Bloomberg L.P. In the past ten years, public fascination with their medium's trash-to-treasure novelty has matured into a broader appreciation of Anatsui's significance. The man who dazzled with a formal trick may also be the exemplary sculptor of our precariously networked world.

"Triumphant Scale," a career-spanning survey, drew record-breaking crowds when it opened, in March, 2019, at Munich's Haus der Kunst. From there, the show travelled to the Arab Museum of Modern Art, in Doha, where Anatsui was fêted by Qatari royalty. The exhibition had been slightly downsized for Bern, a city of mannered architecture and muted colors, where the artist's shimmering invertebrate creations seemed almost unreal by contrast. There were massive red and black monochrome works, whose uniformity drew attention to their subtle folds and textural variations. Others conjured up landscapes, like the sprawling floor sculpture that filled one small gallery with a garden of bottle-cap rosettes. I stood before the exquisitely varied "In the World but Don't Know the World" (2009) for half an hour without exhausting its cartography: white-gold seas, blue-and-yellow checkerboards, silver cities with grids of black streets and tiny red districts.

It was all aluminum, but up close I found an origami of distinct alterations. Many of the caps were crushed into the shape of fortune cookies; others were neatly folded into squares. A swath of see-through "lace" was linked together from the bottles' thin seals. Some of the caps weren't caps at all. The brightest blues were tiles of roofing strip, while squares of iridescent silver

The artist pictured outside his studio in

Nsukka, Nigeria. "Life is a way of one being shuffled," Anatsui said. "And I've always wanted my work to be about life."

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAKIN OGUNBANWO

had been cut from newsprint plates. I leaned in to read the tiny headlines and trademarks: "Liquor Headmaster," "Plans for safe drinking water," "Game of luck explained." Every bit had been handled by countless individuals: Anatsui often describes his work as a gathering of "spiritual charge."

It was an incontestable demonstration that bottle caps have "more versatility than canvas and oil," as Anatsui recently wrote in the *Guardian*. A central principle of his work is the "unfixed form," which leaves a sculpture's final configuration up to curators and collectors. "He thinks of these as living objects, just like human beings," Chika Okeke-Agulu, who curated "Triumphant Scale" with Okwui Enwezor, explained during our tour of the exhibition. He showed me one early metal sculpture made of rusty milk tins, which resembled a heap of oversized coins draped over a walrus. It was displayed as "Yam Mound," but the same work, differently arranged, had appeared under other names and guises. Nobody sees the same Anatsui twice.

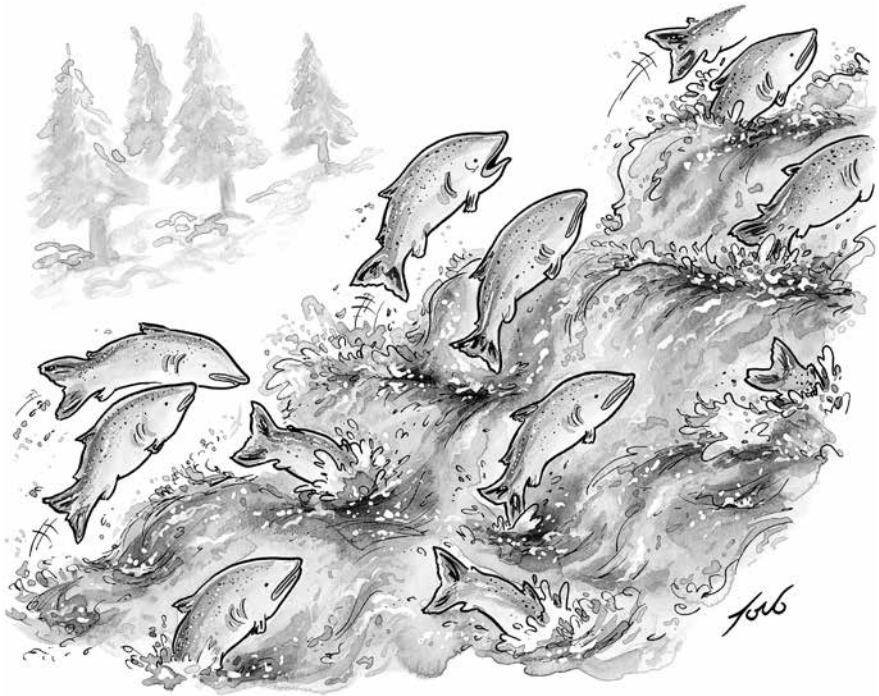
Okeke-Agulu, a scholar of modern and contemporary African art who teaches at Princeton, has known many Anatsuis. He studied with the artist as an undergraduate, later working as his studio assistant, and had carved two of the wooden wall reliefs on view. For Okeke-Agulu, the exhibition was a deeply personal milestone shadowed by the loss of his collaborator; Enwezor, perhaps the most influential curator of his generation, had died a year earlier. Confined by illness to his Munich apartment, where he kept a scale model of the museum's galleries, he oversaw the final preparations from his deathbed.

"Triumphant Scale" was in some ways the culmination of a campaign that began in 1994, when Okeke-Agulu published an interview with Anatsui in the inaugural issue of *Nka*, a journal that Enwezor founded to secure wider critical attention for African artists. Anatsui, who then worked in wood, had speculated about using cheap local materials to create large immersive sculptures. "It was precisely anticipating this moment," Okeke-Agulu told me. "The day that an African artist, alone, would occupy a major Western museum."

When I reached El Anatsui in April, Nigeria, like most of the world, had locked down. The sculptor was at home, trying, he said, "to keep the mind blank." He lives in a quiet hilltop neighborhood with sweeping views of Nsukka, the college town where he's resided for forty-five years. From his balcony, he could see his shuttered studio, where a monumental sheet destined for the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, sat unfinished on the workroom floor. For Anatsui, who doesn't sketch in advance—trees grow without a blueprint, he has remarked—work had more or less ceased. He'd cancelled trips to Bern, where I'd originally planned to meet him, and to Ghana, for the opening of a new studio near Accra. But he took the interruptions philosophically. "Life is a way of one being shuffled," he said. "And I've always wanted my work to be about life."

Anatsui is an extraordinarily deliberate man, prone to thoughtful silences that I couldn't always distinguish from lags in our Skype connection. ("El doesn't chat, inside the studio or out," Amarachi Okafor, a former student of Anatsui's who now works as his assistant and archivist, warned me.) His voice is low and gentle, with long, melodious vowels that he uses to dwell and reflect. Often stopping to revise and refine his words—or qualify them with a private laugh and a "Well, not *quiiite*"—he gives the impression of being both incurably restless and infinitely patient. At public appearances, where he tends to dress in slacks and colorfully patterned shirts, he's a warm, unflappable presence: arms crossed, slight slouch, gaze steady between his close-cropped white hair and silver brow-line spectacles.

The artist typically begins his mornings at six, waking to the sound of bells from a nearby Carmelite monastery. He drives to work in a Hyundai Tucson, stereo tuned to the Pidgin English station Wazobia, 93.7 FM. The studio, which opened in 2018, is a three-story fortress the color of gunmetal which towers over every other structure in the vicinity. Crews of young assistants shape bottle caps from distilleries in Nsukka and across Nigeria. (A supplier in nearby Onitsha, known for its storied market, ships more than a ton of them every few months.) The men work in two large halls of a gated complex equipped with offices, showers, security personnel, and enough room for several large works in various stages of assembly. But Anatsui says that his studio is, if anything, too small. A couple of years



"This is . . . a difficult . . . context . . . in which . . . to tell stories."

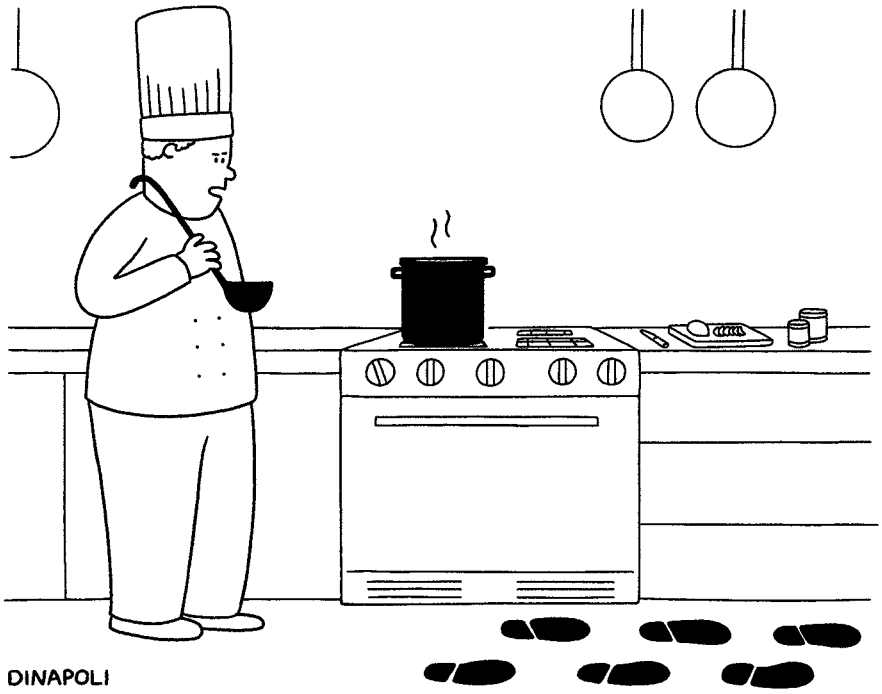
ago, he visited Anselm Kiefer's studio near Paris, where the German artist invited him to ride a bicycle across the hangar-size workshop. In comparison, he said, "my studio has no size at all."

Everything starts on the ground. Anatsui paces the floor in sandals, bottle caps crunching underfoot, taking pictures and inspecting each block of linked metal before indicating where it should fuse into the larger composite. The bigger sheets are made of separable sections, and, often, Anatsui can't be sure of exactly what a composition will look like until it's installed. Sometimes he ascends a staircase to a small balcony for a better view. From there he directs assembly using a laser pointer, guiding his assistants like the conductor of a symphony orchestra.

Anatsui recruited more than a hundred and fifty temporary workers to complete three monumental commissions for "Triumphant Scale." In the words of his studio manager, Uche Onyishi, he "extended his workshop into the community." Many were rural women who worked at home; others were students, teachers, or civil servants, some of whom earned more than their yearly salaries from the project. Nsukka's authorities took notice. Shortly after Anatsui returned from Munich, the town's traditional monarch awarded him an Igbo chieftaincy title—a rare distinction, especially for a foreign-born man—in recognition of his contributions to local life.

Afamefuna Orji, a mechanical engineer who once worked at Anatsui's studio, first approached the artist for a job as an impoverished teen-ager. Anatsui not only hired him—paying enough that his mother visited to make sure that the "studio" wasn't a front for petty crime—but supported his education. "Boys come to the studio, and in a few months they have motorbikes, they have businesses set up," Okafor told me. "Some of them graduate and still come back. It's art on another level."

The virus interrupted this intensely collaborative work. Anatsui spent much of the spring and summer reading, growing produce in his garden, and walking for exercise around the empty university campus, where he taught sculpture in the fine-arts department for thirty-six years. His few indulgences revolve around wellness. A yoga and squash enthusiast, he attends yearly retreats at health resorts from Kerala to West Palm Beach, where he adopted a raw vegetarian diet. When I asked if he ever drinks the liquor that furnishes material for his sculptures, he said no, but added that, as a young man, he drank quite a bit. Now an occasional glass of beer or wine suffices, though a former colleague recently introduced him to single-malt whiskey.



"The plot and the vichyssoise thicken."

Anatsui, a lifelong bachelor, lives alone, but keeps in close touch with family in Ghana and the United States. It isn't always easy; Internet access comes and goes. He enjoys the comedy of Trevor Noah ("a brilliant chap") and often exchanges memes with a nephew in Brooklyn, though he hardly uses social media, except to read the latest in a WhatsApp group dedicated to the highlife music of his Ghanaian youth. (His college band once performed alongside a formative group led by Fela Kuti, whose horn Anatsui played between sets; he says it was "decrepit.") Because the local utilities are so unreliable, he generates his own electricity using solar panels, and collects rainwater in a tank.

He lived in faculty housing until his retirement, in 2011. Even now, his circumstances are modest. A friend called his two cars "disreputable-looking," while Orji, the former assistant, described his two-story concrete residence as hardly one of the nicest in the neighborhood. "I think my house is more beautiful than Prof's," he reflected. "He knows where to show off and where not to show off."

Like his bottle-cap sheets, often mischaracterized as a form of recycling, Anatsui's austere life style can easily be taken as a high-minded statement. In fact, he lives simply for the same reason that he uses found materials: to afford himself the maximum possible freedom. Anything that might impede his creativity is out, not least his own sculptures; the walls of his home are bare. "If you feel attached to your work, it means you have a feeling you have gotten to the end," he told me.

Anatsui's first bottle caps were an accidental discovery. In 1998, he was walking on the outskirts of Nsukka when he found a discarded bag of loose caps along the roadside. It was an invitation. For decades, the artist had been resurrecting refuse in metamorphic sculptures,

At the Nsukka studio, a new work bound for Houston's Museum of Fine Arts.

expanding the significance of everyday objects without effacing their origins. "I let the material lead me," he said. "If it can't say something, then it better not be *made* to say it."

His process requires a great deal of patience. Anatsui didn't know what to do with the first bottle caps he collected. Busy experimenting with other used metal—evaporated-milk cans, cassava graters—he kept them in his studio for two years before working them into a sculpture. Most were red and gold, with silver undersides and evocative brand names that changed as often as every few months. He eventually secured a regular supply from an area distillery, taking part in an active local market.

Later, Anatsui drew connections between his medium and the triangular trade that once linked Europe, Africa, and the Americas. But his first interest was in what bottle caps could *do*, and in what new dimensions they might open in his pursuit of flexibility and freedom. They proved an ideal material—vivid, malleable, local, abundant, and cheap.

Assisted by two former students, Anatsui started connecting the bits of metal with copper wire, as he'd previously done with can lids. There was little sign that anything significant was about to occur at the former warehouse then serving as his studio; Okafor, who worked with Anatsui on the first sheets, said that "playing" with the caps was at first a form of busywork. Her friends used to come by and laugh, asking why she wasted her time in a "dirty-looking place" surrounded by old wood and metal. But she'd learned to see art differently: "You finish making it in the dirt, and then you come out and put it in a clean place."

Anatsui's Adam and Eve in the new medium were "Man's Cloth" and "Woman's Cloth." The "male" was composed of flattened rectangular strips from the bottle's neck; the "female" added circular bottle tops. Doubtful whether the caps had enough tensile strength to hold together at larger sizes, Anatsui made each one only a few yards long. He had conceived the pair as a one-off experiment but discovered a sense of possibility in the material. A mesh of liquor-bottle caps wasn't a static thing but a kind of tactile "choir," distilling opaque, elusive flashes from a community's life. "What I'm interested in is the fact of many hands," he told me. "When people see work like that, they should be able to feel the presence of those people."

In the early days, Anatsui would sometimes transport his bottle-cap sculptures in a practical way that surprised their recipients: folded in small crates or even in suitcases that he delivered himself. The first to receive such a shipment was Elisabeth Lalouschek, the artistic director at London's October Gallery, where "Man's Cloth" and "Woman's Cloth" were installed in 2002. Anatsui hadn't yet decided how to exhibit the metal sheets; in photographs he'd sent ahead, they were draped over bushes. Lalouschek installed them in their now familiar format: as wall hangings with ripples and folds, like metal tapestries.

Lalouschek had championed Anatsui's work since the early nineties, when she saw his wooden reliefs featured in a Smithsonian documentary about contemporary Nigerian art. But the "alchemy" of these metal sheets struck her—and nearly everyone who saw them—as miraculous, a water-into-wine transformation. "It didn't matter who walked into the gallery, whether it was a child or an ambassador or somebody else," she said. "It affected them

all in some way or other. We had entered a completely new arena."

Major collections that had previously paid scant attention to contemporary African art took notice. The British Museum acquired "Man's Cloth" and "Woman's Cloth." The following year, Anatsui exhibited an entire group of the bottle-cap sheets for a solo show at the Mostyn Gallery, in Llandudno, Wales, an exhibition that ultimately travelled to nine other venues in Europe and the United States. By 2007, Anatsui's bottle-cap sheets were in the collections of San Francisco's de Young Museum, Paris's Centre Pompidou, and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The bottle-cap medium dramatically exceeded Anatsui's expectations. He devised a spectrum of new elements from the deceptively simple material, and recruited a team of part-time assistants to incorporate them into ever-larger works. "Sasa," a twenty-eight-foot synthesis of his developing style, was his first monumental bottle-cap sculpture, and featured prominently in "Africa Remix," a blockbuster group show that opened in 2004, in Düsseldorf, then travelled to London, Paris, Tokyo, Stockholm, and Johannesburg.

The ratification of Anatsui's new success came at the 2007 Venice Biennale, where his bottle-cap sculptures ravished the art world's most influential audience. For the central exhibition in the Arsenale, once a medieval shipyard, he designed two monumental commissions. "Dusasa II," a twenty-four-foot sheet that hung between pillars at the end of a long hallway, served as its culminating work. (The Metropolitan Museum swiftly acquired the sculpture, and recently showcased it in the autobiographical exhibition "Making the Met, 1870–2020.") A third sculpture, "Fresh and Fading Memories," fell like enchanted scaffolding over the fifteenth-century Palazzo Fortuny. It was the first of many flirtations with architecture, a white-gold sheet with colorful grid lines that bunched over the heavy wooden doors like a rising curtain. Careful tears disclosed the brick of the underlying façade; a curator told the artist that the work looked as if it might have been there for a hundred years.

In a highly factionalized art world, Anatsui found universal acclaim. To formalists, he was an Abstract Expressionist who worked in aluminum refuse; to the postmodern and the post-colonially minded, a maverick interrogator of consumption and commerce; to Old Guard Africanists, a renewer of ancient craft traditions. To most, his work was simply beautiful, with transcendent aspirations rare in the self-reflexive context of contemporary art. As it turned out, the unfixed form wasn't just a way of sculpting. It was the principle of a career that had opened itself to the world without sacrificing its integrity.

In 1944, thirteen years before Ghana declared independence from Great Britain, El Anatsui was born in the Gold Coast lagoon village of Anyako. He warned me not to go looking for his birth name. "El" was a later adoption, which he chose in his mid-twenties from a list of words for the divine. His father was a fisherman and a weaver, but Anatsui, the youngest of thirty-two children, learned neither trade. After his mother died, the family shipped him across the lagoon to his uncle, a Presbyterian minister. Anatsui grew up in a mission house, learning the discipline that characterizes his life as an artist: "You do what is necessary—only—and don't bother with extravagance."

He discovered an aptitude for drawing and enrolled in art school, without his family's encouragement. It was seven years after independence, and President Kwame Nkrumah spoke urgently about the need to assert an "African Personality." It had yet to manifest at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, in Kumasi, where Anatsui studied a curriculum imported from Goldsmiths, University of London. He chose sculpture for its novelty, and wrote a thesis on chieftaincy regalia, prefiguring a talent for sculpture that effortlessly projects authority. He impressed his instructors, but questioned their emphasis on imported materials like plaster of Paris, and looked beyond the classroom for ways to "indigenize his aesthetic."

After graduation, he took a teaching position in the coastal town of Winneba, and started buying circular wooden trays that were used to display goods in local markets. He added metal inlays around the edges and used a heated rod to emboss them with symbols called *adinkra*. Often found on Ghanaian textiles, *adinkra* represent proverbs and adages. In "Triumphant Scale," mounted on the wall like icons, they seemed to offer metaphysical sustenance in lieu of fish and beans.

The trays inaugurated a career-long commitment to making work from "whatever the environment throws up," an embrace of the local that was also a pragmatic choice. Wherever Anatsui found himself, material would be readily available. In 1975, he left Ghana to teach at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, which had opened fifteen years earlier, and was the nation's first university independent of any European institution. U.N.N., once among Nigeria's leading schools, had suffered during the country's civil war, when the majority-Igbo southeastern region attempted to secede as the Republic of Biafra. When Anatsui arrived, bullet holes still riddled the campus.

Under the debris, a revival was stirring, as Igbo artists and intellectuals unwelcome elsewhere in the country flocked to U.N.N. Among them were Chinua Achebe, who founded his magazine *Okike* at the university, and Uche Okeke, one of Nigeria's leading painters, who had begun to fuse European modernism with indigenous design traditions in a movement called "natural synthesis." Achebe opened one of Anatsui's first solo exhibitions; Okeke was the chair of his department. Before long, the Ghanaian émigré was embedded in the so-called Nsukka school, which took inspiration from *uli*, a tradition of body- and mural-painting among Igbo women that is characterized by spare, linear designs.

By immersing himself in local styles, Anatsui began to forge his own deeply hybridized notion of the "African Personality." He studied a panoply of sign systems—including the Bamum script from Cameroon, Yoruba Aroko symbols, and a locally indigenous system known as *nsibidi,* as well as *uli* and *adinkra*—growing obsessed with the esoteric scripts of a continent often depicted as devoid of writing traditions. "Rather than feeling that there wasn't any writing tradition

in Africa, we had Tower of Babel syndrome," he recalled discovering. He was similarly fascinated by Nigeria's national museums and archeological sites, evidence of a patrimony more intact, as he saw it, than Ghana's. History and its fractures, from the vanishing of ancient societies to the instability of post-colonial nations, became central to his subsequent works in clay and wood.

In Nsukka, Anatsui developed studio processes that could mimic the effects of time, the erosion and renewal of cultures. One influence was Nok terracotta figures, among the only remnants of a civilization that emerged in Nigeria two millennia ago. He began making "broken" ceramic sculptures from old potsherds, which he pulverized and fired at high temperatures with manganese. The metal admixture created a pockmarked, just-excavated appearance, and a solidity playfully at odds with their fragmentary shapes. "Chambers of Memory" (1977), which I saw in "Triumphant Scale," resembles a Nok head, except that in the space behind its visage Anatsui has hollowed out empty rooms—voids of loss and forgetting, but also vessels of renewal. "When an old pot is destroyed," Anatsui has written, "it comes back to life, providing that grog of experience which strengthens the new form."

In 1980, Anatsui began working with a more brutal tool: the chainsaw, which became a surrogate for the colonial destruction of African cultures. He demonstrates its use in the Smithsonian documentary, appearing onscreen to the soothing narration of Ruby Dee. Laying a set of planks across the floor of his plein-air workshop, he gouges them along pre-marked lines, sawdust flying as he steps on the boards to keep them still. He applies the final details with a blowtorch, as though to cauterize gashes in the wounded wood—and, by extension, repair its shattered cultures. Fire, he explains, gives the cuts "an over-all black configuration which lends unity."

The finished planks were mounted side by side on the wall like xylophone keys, provisionally ordered by the artist but left open to rearrangement. Sometimes Anatsui inscribed more delicate patterns using a router, or painted over certain markings in tempera. Of the many such works exhibited in Bern, the most arresting was "Invitation to History" (1995), a sculpture that dramatizes the boundary between our knowledge of the past and its reality. Designed to lean against a wall, the relief has two layers: a crooked outer "fence" of unpainted planks, and a burnt-black core that seethes with colorful designs, which seems to beckon through the gaps.

Often, the carving was done by studio assistants, who worked from Anatsui's rough preparatory drawings. (The speed and irreversibility of chainsaw carving made sketching unavoidable.) Most, in the early days, were his students at U.N.N., where Anatsui was known for his relaxed attitude and enigmatic assignments. Chika Okeke-Agulu, who studied with him in the eighties, recalled a lesson in figuration and abstraction that involved drawing the Nigerian specialty *egusi* soup.

"Any student who was keen enough, bright enough, could show up at his studio, and join whatever was being worked on," Olu Oguibe, another artist who studied at U.N.N., told me. Recently known for erecting an obelisk to honor refugees and migrants in the central square of Kassel, Germany, he's one of several former Anatsui students to achieve major success in the arts. Others include Sylvester Ogbechie, an art historian, and Nnenna Okore, whose woven webs of recycled fibre also draw on the textures of Nsukka.

Oguibe credits Anatsui's generous extracurricular mentorship for their success. He and Okeke-Agulu spent time not only at Anatsui's studio but in his home, often poring over issues of the magazine *Sculpture*. "Because he was travelling and coming back with books and magazines on sculpture, visiting his home was like going to a big library for us," Okeke-Agulu said. "We pined to be invited."

The Nsukka art scene that sustained Anatsui's work foundered in the nineteen-nineties, when Sani Abacha's military dictatorship cracked down on universities. Colleagues like Okeke-Agulu and the painter Obiora Udechukwu left Nigeria. Increasingly, Anatsui turned abroad. He accepted residencies from Brazil to Namibia, and exhibited work in a group show of African artists at the 1990 Venice Biennale, earning a new degree of international recognition. His wooden reliefs were joined by larger, freestanding sculptures, often in groups suggesting themes of exodus. Driftwood from a beach near Copenhagen became "Akua's Surviving Children," a reflection on the Danish slave trade. Discarded palm-oil mortars from Nsukka

THE CRICKET

In this little borrowed
wooden house in January,

down on the field-colored rug
I came across a cricket
close to death, or sleeping.
Not breathing, that I could see.

Out walking, I saw a skull of snow,
and a snow-frog listening.
Back in the house,
my cricket, your heart has stopped.
Would you like snow over you?
Or be in here together, by the hearth.

But now your body is fallen in pieces around you.
Help me find a leaf for you to lie on, another
to cover you.

—Jean Valentine (1934–2020)

households found new life as "On Their Fateful Journey Nowhere," a procession of migrants with pestle arms stretched skyward.

In 1992, Anatsui created one of his largest works in Manaus, Brazil, at a residency with artists such as Antony Gormley and Marina Abramović. "Erosion," a ten-foot sculpture carved from a single Amazonian pequiá-marfim tree, was as much performance as sculpture; after weeks of engraving the log's surface with geometric figures and evocations of crowds, Anatsui revved up his chainsaw and defaced it. When I saw the sculpture in "Triumphant Scale," it stood in the middle of the gallery like a wrecked totem, shredded in a spiral that ran from the top to a base surrounded by wood scraps and sawdust.

It was a step toward the monumental aspiration that Anatsui later discussed with Okeke-Agulu in *Nka*. In 1994, the man who would someday cloak entire museums in patchworks of gleaming aluminum was skeptical of the American vogue for immersive installations—"Most regale on mere size," he says—but also wondered about ways to accomplish similar effects on the continent. Artists in Western cities might have art materials in abundance but so did Africans, Anatsui insisted, "depending on one's choice." Creators sufficiently attuned to their environment could sidestep scarcity and work in freedom, an old insight given new life by his experience in Brazil. "It could be that the freedom engendered monumental concepts," Anatsui said. "I indulged in the extravagance."

Anatsui has won several of the art world's most prestigious awards—the Prince Claus Award, the Præmium Imperiale, the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement—and earned widespread recognition for the depth of his formal innovations, from his marriage of painting and sculpture to his insistence that art works need not be static objects "completed" by their creators. Robert Storr, who curated the 2007 Venice Biennale, credits him with renewing abstraction's depleted emotional force, creating a formal language in which tragedy and sublimity are newly convincing. Yet, for all this, many casual museumgoers know Anatsui only as the man who uses recyclables to make kente cloth.

The simplification has a basis in reality. Anatsui had drawn connections between his earlier wooden reliefs and the weaving of Ghanaian narrow-strip cloth, which also connects small, patterned segments into a larger composite. He used the word "cloth" in the titles of a few early bottle-cap sculptures, not realizing how tenaciously the metaphor would cling. The Metropolitan Museum discussed the metal sheets in a monograph on African textile traditions. Osaka's National Museum of Ethnology displayed them along with a mannequin dressed in kente. Soon every other review and snippet of wall text was mentioning "metal cloth."

The metaphor's popularity undermined Anatsui's principle of letting materials remain themselves. "The colors were selected by the bottles," he told one interviewer, but "lazy art writers" had failed to look beyond the coincidence. The association also threatened to confine his work to the realm of ethnographic curiosity. Okeke-Agulu told me that he'd watched other African artists get sidelined by the neo-traditionalist label. Neglected by contemporary collections, their works became solitary novelties surrounded by masks in dimly lit vitrines.

Anatsui began saying that he didn't want to be geographically defined. After a final 2005 show at New York's

Skoto Gallery, a tiny but groundbreaking Chelsea venue devoted to contemporary African art, he began working with Jack Shainman, whose roster included such heavyweights as Nick Cave and Carrie Mae Weems. (Okwui Enwezor made the introduction.) Anatsui says that the decision was dictated by the size of his new bottle-cap sculptures, which had little room to breathe at Skoto. But the move also enabled him to command higher prices.

The ascetic artist turned out to be uncompromising when it came to the valuation of his work. His partnership with Shainman began at the 2007 Venice Biennale, when he asked the gallerist to prove himself by selling "Dusasa I" and "Dusasa II" for half a million dollars each. "My jaw hit the floor of the palazzo," Shainman told me. "I want to be the piranha that everybody thinks pushed the market to that level," he said, but, "truth be told, El tells me what the price will be. And, back then, it was always a lot more than I wanted."

Anatsui's insistence elicited a miserly racism from some collectors. "People will say to me, 'My God, those prices! Why don't you talk to him for me? That's so much for an African artist. What will he do with all that money?'" Shainman told me. But Anatsui's stubbornness paid off. Aigboje Aig-Imoukhuede, a prominent Nigerian banker and art collector, described him as the first Black artist based in Africa to have his works valued at an "international" price standard: "Prior to him, there were always discounts."

Nowadays, it isn't unheard-of for modern and contemporary African art to sell for millions of dollars; in 2017, Anatsui was joined by the Nigerian-born painter Njideka Akunyili Crosby. Sotheby's and other international auction houses have opened divisions dedicated to new art from the continent. Long-dead masters, like the Nigerian sculptor Ben Enwonwu, have found international markets. The wave of "discoveries" has even inspired Anatsui imitators, notably Serge Attukwei Clottey, a young Ghanaian whose monumental, draped hangings made of plastic jerricans are sometimes mistaken on Instagram for Anatsui's work. (One of them hangs at Facebook's headquarters, in Menlo Park.)

Along with the demand for contemporary African art have come new questions about who gets to see it. In the New York *Times*, Okeke-Agulu has decried what he calls the "gentrification" of African cultural creativity. Even as campaigns for the repatriation of colonial plunder meet with unprecedented success, Western collectors have dominated the market for African visual talent. Residents of London, New York, or Kansas City can see

an El Anatsui bottle-cap sculpture on demand, but Nigerians and Ghanaians must travel thousands of miles.

The landscape may be changing with a new wave of art institutions, from Dakar's Museum of Black Civilizations to the architect David Adjaye's planned Edo Museum, in Benin City, Nigeria. In 2017, the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa opened in a former grain silo in Cape Town, becoming the world's biggest museum dedicated to contemporary art from the continent. Anatsui was prominently featured in the inaugural exhibition; later, his largest bottle-cap sculpture, "TSIATSIA—Searching for Connection" (2013), was installed in the museum's vast atrium.

More individual African collectors are buying, too. In 2017, Liza Essers, the owner and director of South Africa's Goodman Gallery, organized Anatsui's first solo exhibition of bottle-cap sculptures in Africa. She sold many of the works to collectors from the region, who are growing more numerous.

A small contingent of Nigerians have been collecting Anatsui's work from the outset. The Yoruba prince Yemisi Shyllon, who recently opened a private museum in Lagos for his extensive collection, owns several of Anatsui's early trays. Aig-Imoukhuede, who as the C.E.O. of Access Bank helped build one of the country's largest corporate collections, has avidly acquired the artist's bottle-cap sheets and wooden reliefs. The Nobel Prize-winning writer Wole Soyinka keeps Anatsui's "Wonder Masquerade" (1990)—one of a series of freestanding wooden sculptures inspired by Nigerian masking traditions—in his sitting room in Lagos. "I'm not surprised that in Europe it's this catapult again," Soyinka told me. "But of course, long before then, *we* had seen and admired and enjoyed his artistic genius."

When I last spoke with Anatsui, in early November, he'd just completed the long-delayed work for the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. On the final day, his assistants at the newly reopened studio cleaned the sculpture's eight massive sections with soap and brushes before hosing them down, stomping them into crate-size bundles, and sending them on their way.

Like many of Anatsui's recent installations, the sculpture is a complicated dance with architecture: in this case, an underground arrival hall for a new building to house the museum's expanding collection of contemporary art. Visitors will reach it through a tunnel designed to "subtract color," by the Danish artist Olafur Eliasson, known for his experiments with light. From there, they emerge to a dreamlike flash of sky: a hundred-and-ten-foot sheet of bottle tops displaying their metallic undersides along a curved wall. Across this white-gold expanse play suggestions of weather—jagged lightning, storm-cloud abrasions, multicolored flecks strewn by invisible currents—which float as though painted on the gold-leaf paper of a Japanese landscape.

A section of the work arches to accommodate a second tunnel that leads to another gallery building. Anatsui told me that he sometimes dreams of renouncing shows and commissions to work in freedom, "like Christo and Jeanne-Claude." For now, his negotiation with given spaces continues. For a site-specific installation at the Conciergerie, in Paris, several of his bottle-cap sculptures have been hung in fireplaces at the former royal palace.

Ultimately, he said, architectural obstacles are often productive. Three of the most ambitious commissions for "Triumphant Scale" were designed specifically for Munich's Haus der Kunst. In 2017, when Anatsui first saw the museum, a gargantuan neoclassical construction from the Third Reich, he knew that he wanted to throw it off balance. "He kept complaining that everything in the museum was so rigid," Damian Lentini, who assisted with the show's curation, told me. "He wanted to mess up the symmetry." The result was "Second Wave," which covered the museum's three-hundred-and-sixty-foot façade in slanting columns of aluminum newsprint plates.

Outdoor installations have given new dimension to his long preoccu-

pation with the elements. In Marrakech, on the fringes of the Sahara, one large sculpture spent months in the sun. The red caps faded, acquiring an uneven delicacy that Anatsui compared to the unpredictably colored glazes of Japanese rakuware. "You can't get it in any other way—it's only time that can do it," he said of the effect, which he hopes to duplicate in the studio. Light and longevity, to his mind, "shear things of their prose."

Many have wondered when Anatsui might "move on" from bottle caps. A few years after Venice, critics were warning that the material risked becoming "formulaic" and its creator "a token African artist for Western collectors." Now it seems clear that they underestimated Anatsui's medium and misconstrued his persistence; in fact, he's spent two decades ringing changes on his protean material.

Susan Vogel, a curator, scholar, and filmmaker, was once among the skeptics. "I wasn't sure that maybe the bottle tops weren't a kind of a gimmick," she told me. But after making "Fold Crumple Crush" (2010), a documentary about Anatsui shot in Venice and Nsukka, she became one of the leading experts on his creative development. In her book "El Anatsui: Art and Life," published in an expanded second edition this month, Vogel tracks the evolution of the artist's medium from the first decade's "cloth" works—rectangular, warmly colored, and quilt-like—to the past decade's profusion of styles and shapes. Anatsui now works more like a painter, she writes, creating focussed, graphic expressions against simplified backgrounds. Greater shifts may come as he secures new sources of metal.

Anatsui used to buy liquor-bottle caps from a distillery near Nsukka, but his new supplier in Onitsha offers more variety: caps from bottles of medicine, bitters, and even wine. Aluminum roofing strips furnish certain colors, like blue, green, and beige, and serve as a way of introducing the textures of the local cityscape. Recently, he has started incorporating caps from bottles of Goya olive oil, which is imported for ceremonies in the deeply Christian region. Anatsui left the church at a young age, but a latent religiosity suffuses his sculptures. "There's no way you can dodge it," he said. "A lot of people are involved, so it has to touch your work." David Adjaye, who designed Ghana's new national cathedral, in Accra, has asked Anatsui to make an altarpiece.

The project will be a kind of homecoming for the artist. After four decades in Nigeria, Anatsui is finally returning, at least part of the time, to Ghana. Retirement isn't the idea: he has constructed a two-million-dollar studio and residence in Tema, a bustling port city thirty minutes from Accra. The complex is shaped like three linked hexagons, in an allusion to the bottle-cap sheets, but Anatsui will be looking for fresh material. One possibility is old fishing boats, which are plentiful in the area, not far from the lagoon where he grew up.

Anatsui also aspires to welcome local artists for residencies, as well as foreign ones who have "something to offer" artists and craftsmen in the community. He's bothered that so few non-Africans see the continent as a destination for studying the arts. "There are as many centers as there are people, civilizations, societies," he says. "And each can develop a center in a way that it's able to offer something to the rest of the world."

Someday Anatsui will stop making bottle-cap sculptures. Already, he has lost certain materials, as thrifty Nigerian distilleries switch to plastic or adventitiously rebrand their spirits. He uses more colors than ever, but deploys them sparingly, often as accents in monochromatic works. "In the past, I have revelled in color freely," Anatsui told me. "But I think it's getting too loud for somebody my age." For Ghana's pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale, he created "Earth Shedding Its Skin," a wide sheet of brilliant yellow caps corroded by silvery cobwebs that disclosed the underlying wall. It marked a return to the elegiac mood of his wooden sculptures, a medium he's revisiting: in a concrete lot adjoining the studio in Nsukka, he has amassed more than a hundred wooden mortars.

Lately, he's been studying mathematics—in particular, the two fields known as chaos theory and catastrophe theory, which concern the self-organization of seemingly random systems. Among contemporary artists, he's drawn to experiments with environment and light: Olafur Eliasson, Anish Kapoor, and James Turrell, who has spent more than forty years transforming an extinct Arizona volcano, Roden Crater, into a labyrinth of observatories for the contemplation of time and light. Anatsui would try his own hand at land art if he found an opportunity. In whatever medium, his works will go on evolving, unfurling their challenge to new sets of hands and eyes.

Shortly before I left Bern for the airport, I spent a few minutes with one of Anatsui's rarely exhibited works on paper, a small black-and-white aquatint titled "Chief with History Behind Him" (1987). The subject is faceless, wearing a striped cap and billowing robes. Over his shoulders hovers a cloud of shapes and symbols: spirals, squares, zigzags, small creatures, curved swords. This detritus haunts the man, who reminded me of the central figure in Paul Klee's monoprint "Angelus Novus." Walter Benjamin, who once owned it, described it as the angel of history caught in a storm, ceaselessly blown into the future as he contemplates the wreckage of events.

Anatsui's vision isn't quite as melancholic. His sculptures are mirrors of entropy, but also affirmations of a collectively constructed freedom. There is grandeur and humility in his gathering of spiritual sediment, a profoundly material reminder that art, like life, is only an emergence from what the Chinese poet Du Fu called "the loom of origins / tangling our human ways." Bottle caps, though, might have a better shot at eternity than most of us. In 2012, when Hurricane Sandy flooded galleries in Chelsea, Anatsui was among the few artists sure to find his works unscathed. He's discovered a kind of immortality in something cheaper than a penny, fragile enough to tear by hand. ♦