

## El Anatsui and His Sculpture Installations: Out of Decay New Forms Shall Arise

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### Abstract

**E**l Anatsui has become world famous because of his monumental sculpture installations consisting of the use of liquor bottle tops and aluminum sheets. His artistic career has been one of creative experimentation with clay and wood which he had employed in his sculpture production over the last three decades until suddenly he began to reinvent sculpture in new creative directions. Present study discusses his earlier creative experiments and his eventual emergence into the production of giant installations using liquor bottle tops and aluminum sheets. It analyzes the nature of his installation media, his creative production sequences followed by an analysis of selected sculpture installations in terms of their pictorial compositions as well as their contextual analysis in the search for both overt and hidden meanings. The study concluded that the sculptor reinvented a new way of handling sculpture installation production and thus generating a new form of sculpture aesthetics and that he used these new creative directions to transform sculpture as a tool for interrogating colonialism and its assumptions. In this way, his art became redemptive in its politics of representation.

**Keywords:** *Liquor bottle tops/ aluminum sheets, Installation techniques and sculpture installation*

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### **Background to the Study**

Many creative artists have risen out of Africa into global prominence. Such artists would include El Sallahi of Ethiopia, Bruce Onobrakpeya of Nigeria, Sokapu-Douglas of Nigeria, the late Vincent Kofi of Ghana and several others who have become masters in their own right. One of them is El Anatsui who has sojourned in Nigeria from 1973 to present although he is Ghanaian in national origin. He has also practiced within this historical period and evolved new art styles and techniques in the use of sculptural materials. For him, every conclusion is the beginning of another argument. For him also, there is no final arrival in art. For him, we can also say that the creative journey in art encompasses both arrival and departure simultaneously and that the final arrival can only terminate in the artist's death. After practicing for many years, and charting new directions, of creative innovations, El Anatsui has finally exploded on the art world with his giant sculpture installations which have been shown in public exhibitions globally and earned him a creative reputation as a master, if not the reinvention of sculpture.

El Anatsui was born in 1944 in Anyako in the Volta region of Ghana. He had his early education in Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology with specialization in sculpture. El Anatsui arrived in Nigeria in 1974 and settled down at the University of Nigeria Nsukka where he began to teach sculpture and other related courses. From here he made a tour of important art sites in Nigeria studying different art traditions in Nigeria such as Nok and Ikom stone monoliths. He began to experiment with his field work research findings. He tried to produce human heads in clay which he fired having embellished their surfaces with chemicals that produced dotted textures on their surfaces in order to give them an antique quality like that of the Nok sculptures. These heads are highly simplified and, in some cases, only half of a head is produced giving them a frontal orientation. He also went into ceramics and produced pots without their necks and exposing their interior which he filled with labyrinthine forms. These were fired. He called them broken pots. By this he provided a new creative attitude by emphasizing that broken pots are more innovative than unbroken ones.

There were other art developments. He attended a sculpture workshop in Camden in the United States. There he was given a chain saw with which to log wood. Instead of logging wood, he turned it into a carving tool and began to produce linear grooves which he found fascinating. When he returned to Nigeria, he began to use chain saw to carve into wood panels arranged according to a desired number. These lines were burnt with oxyacetylene flame so that they were transformed into dark lines in contrast to the brown relief surface. Later he began to introduce finer pneumatic tools into his sculpture kit. While he used the chainsaw to produce dark sweeping lines, he used the finer pneumatic tools to produce more delicate contrasting designs in order to enrich the design surface of the wood panels which he could now hang on the wall in selected numbers. Again, he went beyond this. He tried to explore these designs in different design configurations and sometimes introducing color into the strategic areas of surface design, thus introducing color into his sculpture. Sometimes he introduced small mirrors into them in order to catch light and reflect the immediate environment. He worked with this technique for over fifteen years before something happened.

Suddenly, there was a radical change. El Anatsui began to explore new media possibilities as well as accompanying techniques. This he did by exploring the creative potentials of aluminum sheets and liquor bottle caps. He saw the possibilities of transforming these discarded materials to make new artistic statements or even to reinvent sculpture. He also saw the possibility that these bottle tops can be repurposed and transformed as a tool of liberation from colonial deprivations so that the discarded objects would provide a context for possible political and social transformations of Africa. This is that art can be a tool of the creative empowerment of the African image. After collecting thousands of bottles tops he got them beaten into varied shapes and arranged in different color tones. These are then strung together with copper wire. This technique has enabled him to create giant installation sculptures that are sometimes a storey high. When hung on the wall of an art gallery, an installation may look like an African fabric with its various folds. In fact, the artist has mastered the nature of the African cloth and can explore its folds in new creative possibilities. And when these works are bathed with artificial light in an art gallery, what we have before our eyes is a dazzling spectacle. By this, we are confronted with creative possibilities in sculpture innovation especially in the context of installation sculpture. El Anatsui's global reputation and awards derive from the intensity of his creative inventiveness. And that art is a mirror unto social and historical change. It has been said of his art that "His style combines the world history of abstract art with his local aesthetic traditions." (Jackshainman.com).

Another writer has remarked that

*El Anatsui uses resources typically discarded such as liquor bottle caps and cassava graters to create sculpture that defies categorization. His use of these materials reflects his interest in reuse, transformation, and an intrinsic desire to connect to his continent while transcending the limitations of place. Http / / (elanatsui).*

How does one explain the artist's fascination with liquor bottle tops and aluminum sheets? To answer this, one has to remember that the artist had always opted for improvised materials in his sculptural production. This was the reason why he sourced and appropriated discarded palm oil mortars from Nsukka villages, some sixty to hundred years old, while others may even exceed this age. He ended up transforming the inner cavity of these palm oil mortars into beautiful sculptural surfaces, while the external surfaces are left in their raw state. In one instance, he would place the mortar in a vertical position. The top which is open as a result of age, he inserts what looks like a wooden mortar now adorned with a palm wine tapper's hat. He now places a palm wine tapper's climbing rope on what now looks like an improvised shoulder which is only a bump on the old palm oil mortar. He gives it the name "The Palm Wine Tapper." This manner of sculptural improvisation is a pointer of the fecundity of his creative imagination. It is this creative mentality that informed his fascination with liquor bottle tops.

His interest in the liquor bottle tops shows his preoccupation with the repurposing of the found objects as a form of creative investment. He certainly may have foreseen the creative potentials

of liquor bottle tops which needed to be repurposed in new creative directions through a process of creative transformation. He may have been fascinated that the sheer abundance of a variety of color tones in liquor bottle tops, their potential for creative exploration. He may have seen them as a template for interrogating artistic issues by harnessing and harvesting their potentials at one's local site of sculptural production. He may also have seen that sculpture needed the use of transgressive media for the creative intersection of painting and sculpture. More importantly, this concern with improvisation and the repurposing of art may have grown out of a creative ideology which may be his own reassessment of African history and colonialism, especially its economic depredations. He began to interrogate this so that colonial oppressions and denials could be used as a means of achieving creative and social redemption of a benighted race of peoples. It is a creative ideology which seeks to transform the politics of colonialism into one of creative intervention so that out of ruins, new forms shall arise as a metaphor of restoring what Obiechina (1992) has described as our truncated consciousness. To Achebe (1976) it is a means of restoring the tail of the severed trunk of our tale.

However, El Anatsui and his artistic improvisation, driven as it is by a collective ideology of liberation for African peoples can begin to make a lot of sense against the various directions of his production strategies. The first phase of this begins with the accumulation of thousands of liquor bottle tops which he probably may have negotiated for in various liquor manufacturing companies. Having amassed these bottle tops in their large quantities, he employed field workers who helped in the production of sculpture installation through different phases of creative partnership. First, the artist would supervise his production assistant as they spread out these bottle tops in independent clusters according to their design conception and supervision. Of course, the design clusters were shifted in their changing compositions as the artist would have conceived them in his miniature installation designs.



**Fig.1:** A Composed Segment of an Installation Sculpture.  
Note the Subtle Laying of Colors and their tonalities.

Having made all the design changes such that all the liquor tops design clusters are now to his compositional satisfaction, he would now ask them to string the various clusters with copper wire so as to form a monumental sculpture hanging or installation. This may be seen as a quick summary of his in the original place in situ production procedures. More research is needed

and if possible, a video study of the various processes that encompass the creative production of his sculpture installation in his studio. What may fascinate an observer and ignite the sense of wonder may derive from a close analysis of the artist's sculpture installations. In a previous article, Aniakor (1991) has studied El's sculptures in wood with the theme.

“El Anatsui: Incantations in wood.” Is it possible that these sculpture installations are the artist's creative incantations with liquor bottle tops? May be. However, we need a detailed discussion of some of the works in terms of their sizes, compositional phrasings, color work and other compositional/aesthetic devices that easily transform these sculpture installations into veritable works of art. These sculpture installations have continued to seduce and fascinate his global audiences in different parts of the world.

What distinguishes his installation sculptures may derive from their awesome visual phrasings. These derive from their formatting techniques, surface configurations and his inventive use of color which gives a dazzling effect to these works and accord them a tangible and sculptural presence. To understand this is to discuss some of his production strategies. El Anatsui is a master of the aesthetic surface in his sculpture installations. Traditionally, a relief sculpture is either high relief or low relief as with Benin bronzes which are high relief sculptures. The artist had disowned this sculpture typology and invented his own. His installation sculptures are deeply sculptural in ways that make them unique, autonomous and self-sufficient, as if living their own life. One of his sculptural devices is the manipulation of borders in his installations. In many examples of his works, we see his skillful manipulation that he brings to bear on the borders of the sculptures. The borders may be folded like a window curtain or ripple like folds of an African cloth. In fact, it is the latter technique of folding the surfaces of the installation's sculptures in strategic ways. For example, in Fig. 2, we see a giant installation consisting of the use of liquor bottle tops and aluminum sheets.



**Fig. 2:** In the World but Don't Know the World.  
Aluminium and Copper Wire.  
(2009).  
Dimension: 560X1000mm.

The surface composition of the installation sculpture is simply ingenious both in the manipulation of the materials and the configuration of forms. The beauty of the work derives

from the artist's creative strategies in the manipulation of form. Guided by the use of color and surface manipulation, one would have thought that it consists of vertical panels which are strung together to form one continuous surface of art events. This may not be true. The truth may lie more in the skillful ways in which what looks like vertical panels are manipulated to stimulate sculptural forms with undulating folds at strategic points. The borders of the installation have been transformed into what looks like relief installation sculpture. Some parts of the borders are rendered as drawn curtains while others are simply folded. We see how the sculptor is able to manipulate the installation surfaces by transforming them into the drawn, the twisted and the folded. By means of these design-construction strategies the installation simulates the effects of folded African cloth. But his is even more delightful than the indigenous cloth edition. We see the intersection of relief images which are a product of the artist's ability of composing with folded surface form. The colors range from the cool to the hot and of tonal contrasts flowing in their chromatic eddies. Through these devices the installations become very sculptural in their technical manipulation and compositional phrasing. The elusive tonalities of the work have the emotional effects of music as the sculptural surfaces of the installation resonate, radiate and engage the observer with visual intensity of their chromatic values. To imagine that this installation was planned on a giant scale evokes a sense of wonder on an onlooker. The work is solid yet elusive in the organization of compositional elements which interweave and separate at the same time and play on the human imagination in a seamless way.



**Fig. 3:** A Sculpture Installation.

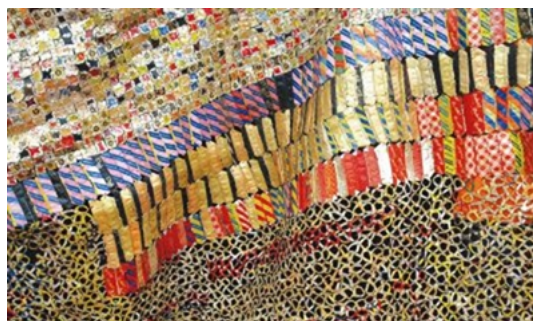
In this work, the sculptor's creative strategy remains consistent and unmistakable. The giant construction is characterized by the artist's ability to create a variety of folds that seemed to be kept in tension and makes the work very much alive. There is a sense of vigor and thrust in the way the various folds stand out in firm relief. Using the artistic device of folded forms, it becomes possible to create forms in high relief that at the same time fold inwards to create depth. In this way a variety of forms can be created by bending the installation surface for any desired visual effects. But these effects are also products of the sculptor's skill in tonal distribution of given sculptural surfaces. The lower base of the installation is like a woven cloth with openings that serve as dark tones to stabilize the base of the installation. Yet the reddish color of the installation consists of a subtle distribution of different tonal variations of the parent color tone. He also uses gray color to develop a horizontal linear design across the

surface such that while one enjoys the aesthetic charm of the use of color, one is also confronted by his sculptural vigor of the installation itself. This may be part of the secret behind the visual alertness of the installation as if it has an independent life. The sculptor has evolved different approaches in the production of his installation sculpture. Some of them look like giant wall hangings planed on a monumental scale as if to intimidate the onlooker and induce his or her aesthetic loyalty as if art is an act of faith. In other cases, he seems to imitate the way washed towels are arranged under the sun in layers. We see a good example in Fig. 4.



**Fig. 4:** A Sculpture Installation.

We see strips of sculptural forms, with one layer of forms overlapping the second layer which is longer in length. These compositional strips are enriched with a variety of colors such as gray, yellow and possibly red. These vertical strip designs show us how the sculptor manipulates his forms in their compositional phrasing such that their visual effects derive from the chromatic textures that characterize different installation panels. Simple in composition, yet the installation is rich in terms of its visual effects.



**Fig. 5:** Details from a Sculpture Installation.

Very intriguing is the only way to describe the sculptor's technical mastery of his media and materials. Sometimes he works like a painter in the way he relies on colors to drive the visual mobility of his sculptures. In Fig.5. we see his ingenious handling of form by means of different production strategies. At the foreground we see a strip of beaten liquor bottle tops and in which the artist harvests their surface textures for visual effects. This is followed by three rows of vertical design units in different colors which also transform as a third level as blue and white design elements and terminate at the background of the composition as rectangular design elements enclosed by white borders. One does not fail to appreciate his design strategy by which forms are bent in and out for rhythmic effects. It is this level of technical mastery and control of his compositional elements that transforms his sculptures into one of dazzling aesthetic experience.

### **Conclusion**

The sculptor, El Anatsui, is a Ghanaian and has lived in Nigeria for the past four decades during which he may have begun to regard it as home. He had worked in clay and wood and ended up with his installation sculptures which had literally taken him to every part of the world on the basis of individual/solo and group exhibitions. He had received many international awards for his creative devotion and commitment over the years in his professional career. However, his name has become synonymous with sculpture installations which he reinvented from his local creative site through the use of liquor bottle tops and aluminium sheets. These he crushed, cut into desired units and harvested their potentials in terms of design, color and textures in producing monumental sculpture installations that thrill and delight his global audience with their dazzling and shimmering colors and the seamless twists and folds of his installation compositions. But he did not just create them. He used them to reexamine the politics of colonialism which needed to be interrogated so that art could be used and turned into a redemptive tool of group liberation. In this, he had more than succeeded. He had charted a new direction for sculpture installations in ways that demonstrate the validity of one's local site for creative production. For this he stands tall in the arena of global sculpture production and its guiding aesthetics. His sculpture installations would seem to have begun to chart a new direction in the development of modern sculpture. One cannot deny him this creative uniqueness and distinction. Through him, the local has transcended its boundaries to become the universal. To borrow from Achebe, a man must master his homestead before developing the eye of the eagle to look into the distant horizon. In his works, the homestead (the local site), has interconnected the horizon (the world). Herein lies the merits and the significance of his creative productions.



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