



## Nomadic Aesthetic: El Anatsui in Amsterdam

By Marcelo de Melo



El Anatsui,  
Sculptor  
Lives and works  
in Nigeria  
Born in Anyako in  
Ghana in 1944

Untitled  
2014  
280 x 260 cm  
bottle caps and copper  
wire

On the 24th November 2016, I attended the opening of *Meyina*, a solo exhibition by Ghanaian artist El Anatsui (1944) at the Prince Claus Founds Gallery, in Amsterdam. The works on display were made exclusively for the exhibition.

A rare experience to see several of El Anatsui's bottle cap tapestries together, I noticed how they reacted magically to the venue's artificial light. Also, they felt much more intimate than the artist's monumental works, such as *TSIATSIA Searching for Connection* (2013) (which covered the entire façade of the Royal Academy building in London), or *Drying Towels and Pants* (2013) at the ArtZuid 2013 sculpture event in Amsterdam. For ArtZuid, El Anatsui's work was hung from trees over a later cast of Rodin's *The Thinker*. Nothing compared to the white cube experience of *Meyina*.

Much has been said about El Anatsui's groundbreaking works, and his contribution to contemporary art in an international context. El Anatsui has become

part of the art canon. His oeuvre has been analysed within post-colonialist trends in art, in conceptual associations with African textiles, or simply through formal compositional elements. The affinity of his work with mosaic has also been considered, a fact that opens his production up to interesting interpretations and strengthens the polysemic nature of his oeuvre and its engagement with multiple traditions. Occasionally, El Anatsui's metal caps and bottle necks works are referred to as aluminium mosaics and sometimes as textiles. However, most commonly, they are studied within the expanded category of sculpture.

When it comes to travelling, these monumental works are carefully folded and fitted into boxes. As



they are flexible and do not maintain their original shape, El Anatsui encourages the curators to reconfigure them on arrival to best suit the needs of the new location. For the artist, these circumstances imbue the works with an ever changing nomadic aesthetic. In 2013, sections of *Drying Towels and Pants* were placed on top of hedges and trees, vulnerable to weather conditions. Several pieces of the work fell off and were collected by passers-by. In *Meyina*, the works were impeccably lit and hung beautifully, revealing an interesting play of light and shadow that created a sense of opulence in the works. This reminded me of the Brazilian expression 'o luxo do lixo', the luxury that emanates from trash: referring to the creative ability of turning discarded materials into "luxury goods". It is a gesture that, in a way, turns the capitalist value system on its head. The exuding luxury and shimmer of El Anatsui's installations also have a parallel to the gold surfaces and spiritual nature of Byzantine mosaic. But the parallels to mosaic do not stop there. Compositionally, the artist employs seriality, unit interchangeability and modulation: a method of repeating patterns made from independent units. Historically, this way of working evidences the return of methodological and formal concerns closely related to mosaic making. Also informing El Anatsui's aesthetic is the advent of the ready-made and the influx of mass produced objects, as well as their abundant availability. These are concerns that eventually connect mosaic principles with the recycling mode of production favoured by many contemporary artists, from Tony Cragg's floor and wall assemblages of the 1980s to El Anatsui himself. The production of El Anatsui's works also reminded me of how ancient mosaic workshops from Roman times employed several assistants to prepare tesserae in large quantities in advance, to be assembled in situ. El Anatsui employs assistants to select, cut



*Oases*, 2014-2016, 306 x 292 cm  
printing plates, bottle caps and copper wire



*Default*, 2014-2016, 309 x 323 cm  
bottle caps, printing plates and copper wire



*Horizon*, 2016, 260 x 460 cm  
bottle caps and copper wire

detail



and shape the found aluminium caps and bottle-necks. Colour and shape are very important for the artist, and his assistants prepare sections of the works accordingly. After each section is produced by connecting the aluminium tesserae with copper wire, El Anatsui fits these sections together to complete the work. His favourite unit shape seems to be rectangular. However, there is a variety of shapes in his works, and more recently, square tesserae have also been used. These squares are usually made from metal printing plates and it is possible to read some of their content. The work *Oases* (2014-2016) is a good example of how he composes with squares and one of my favourites. Meyina also offered good insights into El Anatsui's early career by displaying works on wood, drawings, documents and publications. ■

[Meyina, Prince Claus Fund Gallery, Amsterdam, 24 November 2016 to 28 April 2017]



Untitled  
2016  
225 x 242 cm  
bottle caps and copper wire



Untitled  
2014  
280 x 260 cm  
bottle caps and copper wire

left, detail

