

ART REVIEW

In Anatsui's art, rescued trash comes to life, tells a story



JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

“They Finally Broke the Pot of Wisdom” is one of about a half-dozen works in “El Anatsui: New Worlds” at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum.

By Cate McQuaid | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MARCH 17, 2014

You only have 4 free articles left

Get unlimited access and never miss a story

[Subscribe Now](#)

be it's along

Consider the currents of history that bottle symbolizes. During the Colonial era, rum made in New England was shipped to the coast of West Africa and bartered for slaves. Slave ships traveled to the West Indies, where African men and women were traded for molasses and sugar, which were sent to New England to distill more rum.

CONTINUE READING BELOW ▼

Today's bottle has echoes of the commerce that shaped the fates of so many Africans. When African artist El Anatsui reclaims what must now be millions of liquor bottle caps and the aluminum sleeves that enclose them to make his magnificent works — call them textiles, call them sculptures, no name quite fits — that history is as palpable as the trashy material itself.

The sight of them up close — bright labels, bold text and designs, folded to meet the artist's needs — nearly conjures the stench of old liquor. Yet from a distance, you'd never guess these glittering, magisterial works were made of detritus from the recycling bin.

“El Anatsui: New Worlds,” at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, is a small show of only about a half-dozen artworks by the superstar artist, but it's a spectacle of an installation.



EL ANATSUI: New Worlds

Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, Lower Lake Road, South Hadley 413-538-2245.

<http://https://www.mtholyoke.edu/artmuseum>

Closing date: June 8

The pieces take up two galleries; they're that big. They look like the resplendent ceremonial robes of a monarch, shimmering in gold and silver, draping in luxuriant folds.

Anatsui, who was born in Ghana and works in Nigeria, had a stunning retrospective that traveled to the Davis Museum and Cultural Center at Wellesley College in 2011. This show of recent works follows that one like an after-dinner mint. Sweet, astringent, reminiscent, and eye-opening.

The artist has always looked to his environment for materials. He started using bottle tops in the late 1990s, after he found a discarded bag of them in a bush. His most daunting proscriptio for installing his art is that the curator has free rein. Massive but

pliable as textiles, and inclined to fold, sway, and pucker, these works are like living things — unpredictable, occasionally ornery, often graceful.

Museum director John Stomberg said in an interview that he and his co-curator, Amanda Gilvin, allotted three days for the installation. It took them two weeks of hanging and hanging again. Some configurations disappointed them.

Stomberg pointed to the old saw about Ginger Rogers, who did everything Fred Astaire did, except backward and in high heels.

“I felt like Ginger Rogers,” he said ruefully. “You had to dance with the sculpture.”

The commanding “They Finally Broke the Pot of Wisdom” hangs at one end of a gallery. Silvery little metallic discs frolic in the light, and small passages of color drift over that shining surface.

The center, though, is black, threaded with red and yellow — a dark center, veined with light. Made of the empty circles of bottleneck rings tied together with copper wire, it reads like netting, drooping and creasing, dense but porous. The shape that net takes might be a map of Africa; it might be a human heart. Perhaps it’s the pot of wisdom, broken and beginning to leak.

The scale and sheer voluptuousness of Anatsui’s works seduce. It’s not merely the glitter. They gather and roll; those folds feel almost fleshly.

With his materials, Anatsui freights the works with historic meaning. Then he leaves it to the viewer. Visually bold yet adaptable, blazoned with abstract forms that inch toward representation, they make a visual poetry of fleeting allusion and possibility.

“Alter Ego,” like “Pot of Wisdom,” has a form like the African continent at its center. The green shape rests against a looming black rectangle fretted with gold, which has a clock tower — or a gleaming red eye — at the top. A silver dagger drills into the continent, and three green stalks streak across it, like a fence holding it in, as it dimples and rises around them. Does it represent Africa? Perhaps, given the title, it depicts some aspect of the artist himself.

Lately, Anatsui, who guides a team of assistants, has been building floor pieces. “Tiled Flower Garden” has eight component parts. Stomberg and Gilvin spent three days in their stockinged feet arranging it.

It sprawls and crawls, bunches and spreads like an abundant garden in yellow, red, green, and black. Areas open to a bottom layer, revealing meandering ponds of blue-gray. Like a genie coalescing out of a bottle, a black-gold passage appears to gather into an upright form that rises near one corner. Maybe it's a figure with its head bowed, rapt in prayer.

Here, Anatsui (with the help of Stomberg and Gilvin) pushes a format that has been toeing the edge between flat and 3-D into full-fledged sculpture, and the transition is both surprising and utterly natural. The other works in "New Worlds" hang on the wall like paintings or tapestries. "Tiled Flower Garden" magically occupies our own space.

It's as if Anatsui has found in his liquor bottle wrappers the perfect material, which can morph from painting to textile to sculpture almost as easily as water changes shape. Yet it embodies a legacy nowhere near as pliant. That, too, makes it perfect.

Cate McQuaid can be reached at [cate mcquaid@gmail.com](mailto:cate.mcquaid@gmail.com).

Get Today's Headlines from the Globe in your inbox:

SIGN UP

[Privacy Policy](#)

0 COMMENTS