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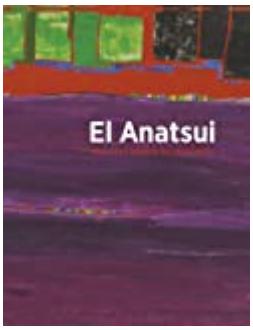

Lisa M. Binder, ed. *El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote to You about Africa.* New York: Museum for African Art, 2010. Illustrations. 170 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-945802-56-3.

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El Anatsui: Letters from Africa

The beautifully designed monograph, *El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote to You about Africa*, edited by Lisa M. Binder, assistant curator at the Museum for African Art, serves as the catalogue for an exhibit of the same name that she organized for the museum. As the first comprehensive study of the work of this Ghanaian-born artist, the book is an important contribution to the scholarship on El Anatsuiâs work and on contemporary art in general.

The subtitle, *When I Last Wrote to You about Africa*, signals Anatsuiâs interest in contemporary art as a visual language of cross-cultural communication; to this end, he utilizes ideographic languages; Akan *adinkra* symbols; and the Nigerian graphic systems *uli* and *nsibidi*, which he usually contains within geometric frames or cartouches. As Anatsuiâs art has migrated from the African continent to the international art world, it has retained the initial vocabulary of rectangular or circular modules that have anchored his works not only to African ideograms but also to textiles. âWhen I Last Wrote to Youâ is the first line of a poem that serves as the title of a suite of drawings and a sculpture from the mid-1980s. A subsequent line–âThere were many blank slots in the letterâ–is both a humble acknowledgement of his own artistic limitations as well as a warning to viewers who are likely to be ignorant of an artworkâs context, the major pitfall of cross-cultural communication. The filling of the slots, the incremental process of building content, has occurred over the course of the artistâs long career, with both artist and audience providing input. As Binder states in her introduction, âhis work seeks to tell our story as well [as] his ownâ (p. 13).

The catalogueâs four essays make a significant contribution to filling in slots for the Western audience. Although uniformly solid in terms of research and argumentation, the writing still leaves gaps that remain to be filled. The most important aspect of both the exhibition and the catalogue is the inclusion of a broad range of Anatsuiâs work in a variety of media: paintings, prints, ceramics, drawings, and sculpture. Significantly, neither the exhibition nor the catalogue is organized chronologically; rather, as Binder notes, the various media from dif-

ferent periods are interspersed, so that the reader/visitor can discover the âlinkages in pattern, color, and technique that run through the artistâs careerâ (p. 20). Unfortunately, there is no extended examination of Anatsuiâs paintings or drawings by any of the authors. The elements of color and graphic design are discussed as they pertain to the artistâs âsculpture,â even though all of the writers concede that Anatsuiâs art is suspended in the gaps between all of the media in which he has worked; indeed, they suggest that this formal hybridity constitutes one of his major contributions to contemporary art. Despite their lack of attention to the less familiar aspects of Anatsuiâs oeuvre, the essays are like solid blocks, linked thematically one to the other, like Anatsuiâs own structural process. In the aggregate they provide a broadly chronological overview that is reassuring for those of us still tethered to the concept of a linear progression of artâs history.

Olu Oguibe, professor of art and art history at the University of Connecticut, and former student of Anatsuiâs at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in the 1980s, examines the artistâs early work, and in his brief essay roots Anatsuiâs formative years in a moment of Pan-African optimism and nationalism. Oguibe argues that Anatsui, who had been appointed as a lecturer in fine and applied arts at the University of Nigeria in 1975, realized that the content of his art would reference the continent and its cultures, despite the neocolonialism of his European-based art education. Accordingly, he sought to to learn about its traditions, and was especially struck by Nok terracottas, understanding the fragments as âchambers of memoryâ (p. 30). His creation of ceramic sculptures reassembled from shards became metaphors not only for cultural memory, but also for the destruction and upheaval that the countries of the African continent continue to experience.

Chika Okeke-Aguluâs âMark-Making and El Anatsuiâs Reinvention of Sculptureâ traces Anatsuiâs work in wood, his dominant medium through the 1990s. However, the most interesting part of his argument is at the essayâs beginning when he refutes American critic Ken Johnsonâs comments on âthe inherent risk in Anatsuiâs new work, specifically the danger that it might degenerate to âroutine craftâ or start to seem âgimmickyâ once its *novelty* wore offâ (p. 33). As Okeke-Agulu astutely points out, the ânewnessâ is simply a matter of the Western criticâs ignorance of the artistâs previous work. It is hardly the artistâs fault if Western critics have only recently begun to respond to Anatsuiâs decades-long âcorrespondence.â

Okeke-Aguluâs essay focuses on the centrality of two-dimensional motifs in the development of Anatsuiâs sculpture; in brief, his argument is that an African modernist sculptor had to look away from the African sculpture that so strongly influenced European modernists, and to turn instead to other indigenous traditions, such as basketry or calligraphy, for inspiration. While Oguibe points to the nationalism inspired by the brief Nkrumah era as the source for Anatsuiâs interest in *adinkra* ideograms, Okeke-Agulu suggests that these sources provided him with the opportunity to develop a formal language independent of European sources, such as Henry Moore, who had been modeled to him at the University of Science and Technologyâs College of Art in Kumasi, Ghana. Significantly, the early Winneba-phase market tray from the late 1960s and 70s signal the development of âa new aesthetic in which found and fashioned objects, craft and art techniques, painting, drawing, and sculpture collidedâ (p. 37). This approach, the blurring of boundaries between media, is explored and developed from then on, and is the ânoveltyâ Johnson warned about.

Yale Professor Robert Storr, who included Anatsuiâs metal wall hangings in spectacular installations at the Venice Biennale in 2007, expands Okeke-Aguluâs argument that Anatsui has transformed the terms on which modernist abstraction has been based. In âThe Shifting Shapes of Things to Come,â he reiterates that Anatsuiâs work, specifically his âhangings,â occupies a place between painting, sculpture, drawing, and textile. In support of this argument, he draws brief, seemingly random comparisons with Hans Hofmann, Donald Judd, Yayoi Kusama, Frank Stella, and whoever else happens to spring to mind, thus inadvertently providing an example of the sort of blinkered Eurocentric perspective that Okeke-Agulu identifies as the primary obstacle to the reception of non-Western contemporary art. Even today, it seems that until a work of non-Western art can be slotted into preexisting Western categories, it cannot be recognized. To his credit, Storr states that âany viewer who comes upon Anatsuiâs work owes it to that work, to its creator and to themselves, to learn about those [African] traditions just as any thoughtful viewer would seek out the meanings inscribed in complex art from their own cultureâ (p. 58). However, he then proceeds to renege on that obligation, awkwardly shoehorning Anatsuiâs work into the outdated confines of American formalist criticism.

The major weakness of this otherwise insightful catalogue is the lack of an essay that places Anatsuiâs work

in the context of his Ghanaian and Nigerian contemporaries, including his students. Monographic studies are the means by which the Western art world establishes the importance of an artistâs oeuvre, but such valorizations of the individual artist, while a means of countering the marginalization of non-Western practitioners, can tend to come at the expense of an account that would attest to the vitality of the Africa-based art world that has nurtured Anatsuiâs work over time. It is also unfortunate that neither Okeke-Agulu nor Storr choose to analyze Anatsuiâs complex iconography, specifically his profound explorations of colonialism and neocolonialism, migration, consumerism, and cultural exchange.

The final text, Kwame Anthony Appiahâs lively and engaging essay, âDiscovering El Anatsui,â builds on Oguibeâs examination of Anatsuiâs early sources by distinguishing the various textile traditions, including Ewe and Akan Kente and *adinkra* funeral cloth. Though expanding on one important source for Anatsuiâs work, textiles, Appiah also acknowledges his internationalism. âThe connection across nations and across art worlds is an essential element of our contemporary experience of the arts, and El Anatsuiâs participation in that global system of exchanges began, at the latest, when he went to college in my hometown more than forty years agoâ (p. 75).

It is appropriate that the catalogue ends with a text that expresses the delight and challenge of encountering the work of an important artist for the first time. The book provides a comparable encounter with aspects of Anatsuiâs art that have been unfamiliar to the Western audience (or at least to me, anyway). The plates and the figures provide a visual overview and an intuitive sense of the richness and complexity of Anatsuiâs art. I would have welcomed an extended analysis of the content of the elegant pen and ink drawings, the stunning ceramics, or the vigorous painted and burned wood reliefs in greater detail. Nonetheless the quality of this current publication is exceptionally high and bodes well for future ventures at the Museum for African Art.

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