

EL ANATSUI

Gli









**GI**i (WALL)







28 January – 14 March 2010

**EL ANATSUI**  
**gli** (WALL)

**Rice Gallery**  
HOUSTON, TEXAS











## F O R E W O R D

I first saw El Anatsui's work in *The New York Times*; it was an image of his masterpiece *Fresh and Fading Memories*, a site-specific work draped over the Palazzo Fortuny's façade for an exhibition held in conjunction with the 2007 Venice Biennale. Even in this small image, I was stunned by the beauty of El's transformation of a simple material – metal tops from liquor bottles – into a work that resonated so intensely with the building. Later, El told me that he had studied the 15th-century Gothic palace for two days, taking in, he said, "the whole building," its interior as well as the age and color of its decaying exterior. Despite this detailed observation, when he started to install the piece he found that it looked "too new, too recent," so he tore open holes and openings across its surface to reveal parts of the building behind, thus relating "the modern with the ancient." *Fresh and Fading Memories* and his other commissioned works in the 2007 Venice Biennale thrust El into the international art world spotlight,

a recognition long past due since he had been working steadily as an artist since 1975 while teaching sculpture at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

I began to follow El's work and suddenly, it seemed as if he were everywhere. In early 2008, I saw *Gawu*, a major traveling exhibition of his work, and in June, I met El when he exhibited in the 10th Sonsbeek International Sculpture Exhibition in Arnhem, The Netherlands. There, Gallery Manager Jaye Anderton and I watched El drape three sheets – one red, one yellow, and one gold – of his signature "bottle top fabric" over the enormous clumps of bushes in Park Sonsbeek. He thought of the three pieces as massive towels drying in the sun, like the towels set out to dry by residents of Nsukka. There were not enough people to install the sheets so Jaye and I offered to assist, which proved to be a wonderful opportunity to get to know El and to see his ability to show



grace under pressure. I asked El if he would do an installation at Rice Gallery and he accepted.

When El saw Rice Gallery during his site visit in May 2009, he was reticent about his impressions and initial ideas for the installation, but it was clear he saw new possibilities in the opportunity to create and oversee the installation of a site-specific work here. It would be a rare opportunity for El because throughout his career he has sent his work off, entrusting curators and preparators to install it, even working this into part of his artistic ethos, “to awake the inner artist in others,” as he puts it.

Seven months after the site visit and with minimum communication about what he might do for his installation, three large wooden crates arrived at Rice Gallery. Inside were three metal “sheets” folded like blankets and tied loosely with

strips of fabric. Shortly after, El arrived bringing with him a collaborative, workshop mentality that he had developed working with 25-30 young men he employs as studio assistants in Nsukka. Like a soft-spoken conductor, El would give a subtle point of a hand here or there to direct the installation team. El’s talent as a natural teacher was obvious as he worked with a young Nigerian student studying fine art at Texas Christian University, who had offered to assist with the installation that El named *Gli*, the Ewe word for wall.

In conversation with El and listening to his gallery talks, I realized that his work was almost always about the “wall,” whether it was how a piece was folded and shaped against a gallery wall or in the case of the first piece I saw, *Fresh and Fading Memories*, against an exterior wall. El also discussed earlier work in which he considered walls, specifically *Crocodile Wall* (1988) and *Crumbling Wall* (2000). Yet, *Gli (Wall)* was unlike



any “wall” he had made before. At Rice, El did not form and shape his pieces against the existing gallery walls; instead he suspended the large sheets to create free-hanging “walls” or dividers in the space itself. In a note he wrote after the exhibition, El mentioned that the installation was “already marking a new direction.”

**T**he *Gli (Wall)* public opening was an incredible event. Over 400 people attended, some asking El to sign their brochures and to take photographs with them. He accommodated everyone in a remarkably humble and gracious way. We were thrilled to have Lisa Binder, Assistant Curator, Museum for African Art, New York, on hand to engage in a dialogue with El at the opening. I am grateful to Lisa, who is the curator of *When I Last Wrote to You About Africa*, a retrospective of El’s work that premiered at the Royal Ontario Museum in October 2010, for her generosity of knowledge

and spirit in helping us throughout the entire process of planning El’s show. I wish to extend special thanks to Eli Aheto, El’s nephew; Julie Kinzelman, Principle, Kinzelman Art Consulting; Alisa LaGamma, Curator, Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Stephen Moskowitz, Director, Houston Facilities, ConocoPhillips; Christopher Tribble, TY-Art, and Kristina Van Dyke, Curator for Collections and Research, The Menil Collection, each of whom contributed expertise and counsel that helped to make El Anatsui’s Rice Gallery exhibition a reality and a success. I would like to express my gratitude to the Nightingale Code Foundation, Houston for its support of the exhibition.

Each of us who had the privilege of working with El learned that his regal bearing and natural reticence are complemented by great warmth. His ready laughter, special health tea, and use of the expression “so many things” to describe a great

sweep of thought or events were missed after he left. I thank El for the magnificent work that was *Gli (Wall)*, a result of his determination to create something new and unforeseen. He could have taken an easier route and based his installation (as I first suggested) on the dense and richly colored sculptures for which he is revered. On his site visit, however, El stated his intent to “use this opportunity to break into something different,” and he did. By joining together the thin, delicate rings that hold the cap onto the bottle, rather than the flattened caps he had used before, El embodied transparency and openness in a form that echoed the gallery’s architecture and expressed perfectly his idea of a sense of freedom that can transcend obstacles.

The sheer beauty of the installation and the contemplative space El created moved many visitors. One visitor wrote in the guestbook, “It’s wonderful to see something ordinary made to

be extraordinary,” while another wrote, “This work moves me in ways I cannot yet explain, . . . I feel . . . I am in a sacred space.”

Kimberly Davenport  
Director



## B R E A K I N G   D O W N   B A R R I E R S

Ghanaian artist El Anatsui's latest work, *Gli (Wall)*, brings a compelling message of freedom to its debut at Rice Gallery

Theresa Boyer, Rice '13

It is Monday, and a tangible sense of excitement and raw creativity fills the Rice Gallery as volunteers and various gallery staff work to install El Anatsui's new piece, *Gli (Wall)*, into the space. A scissor lift allows workers to connect large sheets of flattened bottle rings to fishing line suspended from the ceiling.

Kim Davenport, the gallery's director, converses with her colleagues regarding the proper positioning of the sheet in relation to the overhead lighting. The industrial logistics that make a work like Anatsui's 15-foot-high installation a reality contrast sharply with the overall aesthetics of the final product.

Suddenly, the sheet disconnects from the fishing wire and the entire piece comes crashing down in a cacophony of clangs. Such an incident would usually incite panic in the hearts of most gallery workers, but the durable ring medium remains

unharmful. Now on the floor, the rings are surrounded by large segments of aluminum refuse. This combination of industriousness and garbage makes it abundantly clear that Anatsui's work – and artistic mentality – are quite different from other, more controlling, fastidious modern artists.

During the general mayhem of the installation process, Anatsui sits quietly and calmly in a corner, removed from the group that attempts to puzzle together the "perfect" position for the piece, and he shows no signs of worry or distress when his work comes thundering to the ground. He does not even assert himself, leaving creative decisions to those assembling his work. Yet his presence permeates the gallery as only the company of a world-renowned artist can.

Anatsui is a native of Ghana, but he has been working at the University of Nigeria since 1975. Throughout his career, his work

has demonstrated a continual evolution in materials. His first shift was from wood to clay, before an eventual transition to the metal and the aluminum he now uses.

The inspiration for Anatsui's latest pieces, which have permanently solidified his place in the global art world, was a bag of garbage he found in the Nigerian countryside in the late 1990s. After mulling over what to do with the bag, which contained aluminum tops of various liquor bottles, Anatsui began to flatten the tops and stitch them together with copper wire, producing a sheet that resembled a giant section of metal cloth.

Anatsui's new installation, *Gli (Wall)*, uses the same principles he mastered while creating his first works with metal. However, the installation also demonstrates the evolution of Anatsui's conceptual and aesthetic vision. As a site-specific artwork, *Gli (Wall)* was designed with the openness and spaciousness of

the Rice Gallery in mind. Anatsui was intent on allowing his piece to coexist with the space, highlighting the gallery's high ceilings and broad width.

In order to further elucidate and highlight the structure of the room, Anatsui turned his creative spirits to the idea of a wall. Within the last year, Anatsui visited Berlin, Jerusalem, and Togo, noting the common factor of the walls, both physical and ideological, which linked the three locations together in spirit. In the Berlin Wall separating Western Europe from the communist Eastern Bloc and the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem fundamentally dividing the Israelis and Palestinians, Anatsui realized that walls, wherever they are, symbolize obstacles and barriers.

Additionally, and on a more personal level, Anatsui registered his work's connection with west African history by keeping in mind the legendary Togolese wall built by a tyrannical king to



separate the region from Ghana. Anatsui described how the clay wall, 12 feet thick, provided security for the king at the cost of “subjugating and closing in the people” of Ghana. But though the wall formed a physical barrier for the Ghanaian people they, like all people, searched and “looked for ways to break the wall.”

**A**natsui believes that walls are “something that can close you in,” though they also incite a sense of curiosity in the individual trapped on one side of the divide. Walls titillate the imagination and provoke the individual to leap mentally over the wall to picture what is on the other side. According to Anatsui, a wall reveals more than it hides, and thus it challenges the individual to use his or her imagination to surmount physical obstacles.

It is easy to see this concept of a wall within *Gli (Wall)*. The title of the installation is actually the Ewe word for “wall,” “disrupt,”

and “story,” further reinforcing the interplay between the paradoxical qualities of physical limitations and mental freedom contained in the notion of a wall. Anatsui’s installation is comprised of three giant sheets of connected, flattened aluminum rings suspended from the ceiling, raising the “wall” to the very top of the ceiling.

However, unlike his other works in this medium, *Gli (Wall)* retains a clear sense of transparency. Since the first sheet is hung in front of the other, the viewer’s vision of the second sheet is slightly obscured. Gazing through the myriad flattened metal pieces forms a slightly distorted vision of the other sheet. The mind quickly jumps to its own conclusions regarding the exact composition of what is occurring on the other side of the first metal sheet, much like those on one side of a wall surmise what is happening on the other side. An overall textural quality enhances the visual pleasure of the installation. Thicker dimensions of aluminum cluster in waves

in the upper portions of the sheets, eventually tapering to a thinner, more translucent form. The numerous metallic colors blend together in a complementary manner, continuously stimulating the eye, all the while avoiding distracting the viewer from the overall effect.

*Gli (Wall)* is a magnificent installation carrying a thought-provoking message. In addition to the meaning behind natural walls, Anatsui's unique medium speaks to themes in current African art, such as globalization and the permeation of Western consumer culture. But through a sense of grand optimism – enough optimism to entrust the piece's installation to complete strangers, in fact – it is clear that Anatsui harbors a great belief in the power of individuals to overcome any barrier with their imaginations.

*This article first appeared in The Rice Thresher, 29 October 2010.*





**W**hen I was in primary school, we had an excursion to the ancient walled city of Notsie in Togo, where my people, the Ewes, last settled before they moved to their present places in Benin, Togo, and Ghana. Seeing the city's thick walls, I realize now that the idea of the wall was unconsciously implanted in my mind. In the past two months, I have been to many cities with walls. In November I was in Berlin, and in December, on a quest to know more of my personal history and the history of the Ewe people, I visited Notsie and saw remnants of the wall again. Then, in January, I went to Israel and saw the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

When I visited Rice Gallery in May 2009, I thought it was a space that needed something on the quiet side, something that you could see through. For the past 10 years I have been creating sculpture with bottle caps, using primarily the shafts and the round tops, which give the works a solid appearance. I had not used the rings that hold the cap to the bottle. Using the rings allows you to see what is happening on the other side and this ties in with the idea of the wall that I am thinking about. I think that walls are human constructs that are meant to block views, but they block only the view of the eye, the retinal view, not the imaginative view. When the eye scans a certain barrier, the imagination tends to go beyond that barrier. Walls reveal more things than they hide; so working with the rings and seeing their transparency gave me the idea to use them for *Gli*, a wall that doesn't block, but instead reveals.

El Anatsui discussing *Gli (Wall)* as he created the installation on site at Rice Gallery





















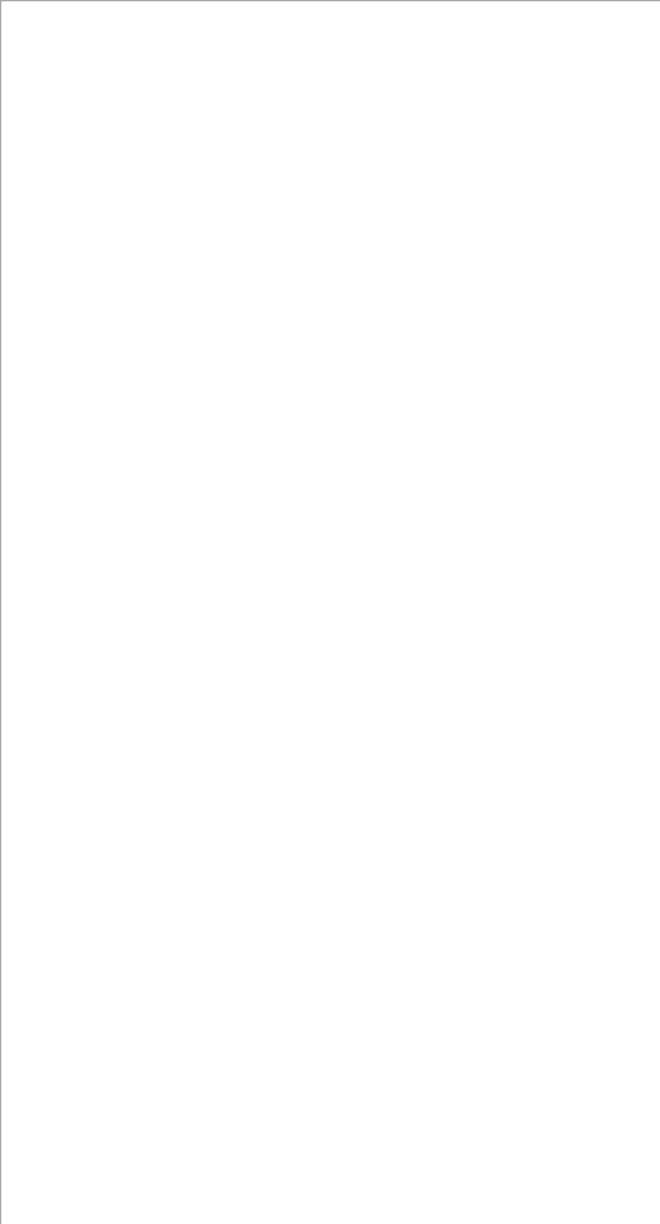






























































































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EL

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## A B O U T   T H E   A R T I S T

**E**l Anatsui was born in Anyako, Ghana in 1944, and holds degrees in sculpture and art education from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana. A professor of sculpture at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka since 1975, his work has been exhibited extensively in international solo and group exhibitions, including the 1990 and 2007 Venice Biennales. His work is in the permanent collections of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, the British Museum, and numerous other museums throughout the world. A major retrospective of Anatsui's work, *When I Last Wrote to You About Africa*, will be the inaugural exhibition of the Museum for African Art's new building scheduled to open in Manhattan in 2011. Curated by Lisa Binder, the exhibition premiered at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada and surveys thirty years of Anatsui's work as a sculptor tightly bound to the materials of his home. El Anatsui lives and works in Nsukka, Nigeria.







El Anatsui, *Gli (Wall)*

Commission, Rice University Art Gallery

28 January – 14 March 2010

Rice University Art Gallery is located in Sewall Hall on the campus of Rice University, 6100 Main Street, Houston, Texas 77005, and on the web at [ricegallery.org](http://ricegallery.org).

Rice Gallery exhibitions and programs receive major support from Rice Gallery Patrons and Members, The Brown Foundation, Inc., and the Kilgore Endowment. Exhibition catalogues are funded in part by the Robert J. Card, M.D. and Karol Kreymer Catalogue Endowment. The gallery receives partial operating support from the City of Houston. KUHF-FM and Saint Arnold Brewing Company provide in-kind support.

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Page 2

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Printing: Masterpiece Litho, Houston, Texas

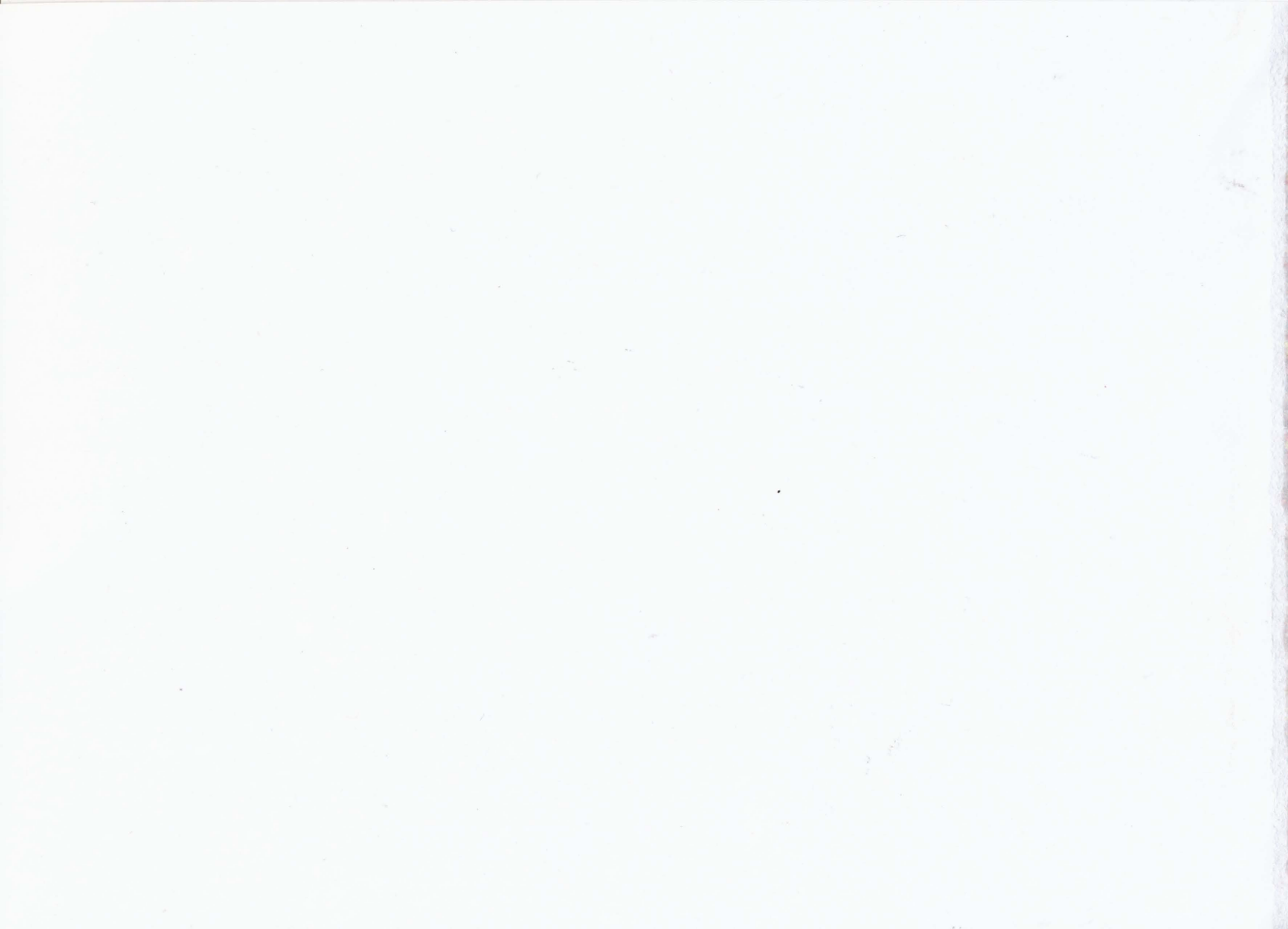
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ISBN: 1-932281-38-X















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