



GALLERIES



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Things hold together

El Anatsui brandishes a chainsaw and spins straw into gold

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BY DAVID BALZER October 20, 2010 19:10

EDITORIAL RATING:

EL ANATSUI "WHEN I LAST WROTE TO YOU ABOUT AFRICA"
To Jan 2, 2011. Mon-Thu, Sat-Sun
10am-5:30pm; Fri 10am-9:30pm.
\$16-\$24. Institute for Contemporary Culture,
Royal Ontario Museum, 100 Queen's Park.
416-586-8000. www.rom.on.ca.

Ghana-born international art star El Anatsui, whose work is currently receiving its first retrospective at the Royal Ontario Museum's Institute for Contemporary Culture (ICC), has a lot to say about the specifics of his continent and culture. Yet perhaps the most compelling argument he makes concerns the universality of aesthetics. Essentially, Anatsui spins straw into gold. Nine of his best-known works — shimmering, large-format tapestries made from flattened liquor-bottle caps held together by copper wire — are here, fastened on the wall in undulations to create a bit of chiaroscuro. They are all magnificent.

Arguably the best of the bunch, on the third floor, is a special commission Anatsui did for the ROM with the cap metal occasionally elongated into stringy, thread-like sections. Panels tell us the artist — who now works with a team of people to produce these works (news the likes of which always disappoints me, despite it being a fact of life in the contemporary art world) — is evoking Ghanaian weaving, notably the motifs of handmade kente cloths. I also saw Klimt in the works, which makes sense, given how much the early-20th-century symbolists capitalized on so-called primitivist art. Anatsui almost puts those colonialist underpinnings to rest: here, he implies, is visual splendour — the artist's job, pure and simple, no matter where she or he comes from.

Other works are just as glorious despite the inherent difficulties, posed to any retrospective at the ICC, in having to contend with the Crystal's awkward angles. Most modest are the wood works; many are made with the spectacular use of a chainsaw, which is Anatsui's conceptual criticism of colonialist enterprise but also his fun, new, rip-roaring artist's tool. (And, weirdly, a practice he shares with the Runaways' Cherie Currie.) The marks he makes are always delicate and deliberate: those, unmistakably, of a craftsman.

Two other works, hidden behind slanted walls, warrant special mention. Open(ing) Market spills over the floor, a collection of tin boxes variously opened and lined with brightly coloured product labels. Peak Project is similarly big, and is made of the medallion-like lids from Peak Milk, a brand common in Nigeria. The former is like a city; the latter, with its pyramidal tops, like a mountain range. Again, both have their statements to make, about daily life in West Africa, and, among other things, about how its folk culture is becoming integrated with the inexorable pulse of the global market. But Anatsui never glowers. His work may be about the complex negotiations, and even compromises, that happen when old and new worlds meet, but it does, in the end, seem triumphant. Beauty, he proclaims, is not easily broken.

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