

Vice Chancellor, I have the honour to present, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Fine Art (honoris causa), El Anatsui.

Born in Ghana in 1944, El Anatsui studied at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, in Kumasi, graduating in the sculpture programme. Today, he is one of the critically most acclaimed sculptors working in the contemporary global art world. As a measure of the extraordinarily high esteem in which he is held, both in Africa and globally, his work has been collected by, for example, the African Studies Gallery at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria; the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in Seattle; the British Museum and Tate Modern in London; the Pompidou Centre in Paris; various major museums in New York, including the Brooklyn Museum, the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art; the Osaka Foundation of Culture in Japan; and the Royal Ontario Museum in Canada, among many other major institutions.

In 2015, Anatsui was honoured with a Golden Lion Award for lifetime contribution to art at the Venice Biennale, which noted not only “his ... successes internationally, but also his artistic influence amongst two generations of artists working in West Africa”. In an interview on the occasion of receiving this award, he told a reporter from the BBC that “At the time I went to art school, any parent would think that his child is crazy if he chose of all disciplines, of all professions, to do art because there wasn’t anything like a role model or a famous artist in the area that I grew up in.”

Aligning himself with the progressive cultural politics championed by Ghanaian and African cultural nationalists of the independence era, which had a significant impact on his subsequent development as an artist and a teacher, Anatsui went on in 1975 to join the Fine and Applied Arts Department at the University of Nigeria, becoming a leading member of the famed Nsukka school, a revivalist movement that promoted traditional painting to raise important questions of identity. He also played a leading role in the founding in 1986 of the AKA Circle of Artists, arguably the most important artist group in late 20th-century Nigeria, which sustained a high profile and critically acclaimed programme of annual exhibitions of its members’ work in Lagos and Enugu.

Anatsui's illustrious career as an artist and a teacher culminated in the production of truly extraordinary, awesomely monumental, shimmering tapestry-like wall sculptures, which have captured the imagination of the international art audience since 2003. Often filling one's entire field of vision, these works constitute virtual environments for the spectator, in some cases draped over the facades of large buildings. Their pliant form means that they have no fixed shape, instead undulating across the surfaces they cover. The production of these works, which involves the cooperation of a large number of dedicated, enthusiastic assistants, transforms the banal – such as bottle tops, aluminium plates used for printing obituary notices, rusted steel graters used for processing *garri*, a West African staple food – into massive artworks that serve as a sustained critical reflection on the legacies of western economic imperialism.

In Nsukka, where Anatsui still mainly works, rival distilleries use one another's bottles but reject the metal labeling that distinguishes one product from another. Anatsui collects these metal labels in their thousands and uses them to fashion his wall sculptures, which loosely echo the forms of West African textiles. According to the artist, his use of this debris from the alcohol industry refers to colonial trade in Africa, and so to the struggles of African peoples against colonial oppression. Similarly, he has explained that he is drawing attention to environmental issues in his use of waste material. Currently, West Africa is a dumping ground for the First World's obsolete computer hardware and Anatsui expresses through the titles of some of his works his commitment to recycling. That said, he pointed out recently that he objects "to people using the word 'recycle' in connection with the way I use my materials because my materials are not recycled, they are given a new life, they are transformed."

But while these and other ideas are clearly crucial to an understanding of Anatsui's recent work, the sheer physical beauty of his shimmering sculptures goes back to his earliest days as an artist. From the very beginning, he devoted himself to the search for a contemporary, global language in which to express enduring African ideas. In his wall sculptures, the large amount of gold in the labels he uses likely reflects the predominance of yellow in Ghanaian Kente cloths. In combination with patches of warm reds and browns, together with

silver and black, sometimes blue, they are free variations on textile designs. Interestingly, though, in many of these works the fragmented areas of gold take on the quality of mosaic tesserae in monumental Byzantine church decorations. Thus although there is nothing overtly religious in Anatsui's work, for some viewers the sheer power of their beauty and the enveloping nature of their form takes on spiritual significance.

When, last year, Anatsui received the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement, he said, laughing, that the award "would tend to give the impression that one is at the end of the road. It means that there's a feeling that my practice is maybe at an end, which I don't think so."

I don't think so either. May you go from strength to strength in enriching the world with your spectacular contributions as a critically reflective artist.

Vice Chancellor, I have the honour to invite you to admit to the degree of Doctor of Fine Art (honoris causa), El Anatsui.

Citation delivered by Deputy Vice-Chancellor Sandra Klopper at the humanities graduation ceremony on Wednesday, 15 June 2016.