

# El Anatsui

Acclaimed international artist El Anatsui's first major exhibition in Australia



Photo: *El Anatsui, Tiled Flower Garden, 2012, aluminium and copper wire, approx. 12x12m dimensions variable.*  
©El Anatsui. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

This January internationally acclaimed Ghanaian artist **El Anatsui** will present his first major exhibition in Australia at Carriageworks as part of Sydney Festival, marking the first Schwartz Carriageworks project. Presented from 7 January until 6 March 2016, *El Anatsui: Five Decades* presents more than 30 works from the 1970s to the current day, including ceramics, drawings, sculptures and woodcarvings, alongside the intricate and expansive, large-scale installations for which Anatsui is best known.

The project represents the first Schwartz Carriageworks project following the recent gift to Carriageworks of \$500,000 by Anna Schwartz, director and founder of Anna Schwartz Gallery, to develop a new five-year series of major international and Australian visual arts projects.

Born in 1944 in Anyako, Ghana, Anatsui lives and works in Nsukka, Nigeria and is recognised as one of the world's leading contemporary artists, having been awarded the esteemed Gold Lion award at the 2015 Venice Biennale. Categorically undefinable, Anatsui's work combines the history and trajectory of abstract art with the local vernacular of Ghana and Nigeria.

Lisa Havilah, Director of Carriageworks, said "*El Anatsui: Five Decades* is an ambitious project and reflects Carriageworks commitment to presenting the most ambitious contemporary art from around the world in Australia. This major exhibition continues our annual series presenting the major installations by the most exciting international visual artists working today."

*Five Decades* displays the artist's early propensity to merge traditional styles with contemporary art and current issues. From the earliest works in *Five Decades* to the most recent, a number of key themes run through Anatsui's practice. The artist reveals an awareness of the fragility and transience of existence; a belief that damaged or discarded objects can be transformed into something new; a working method that incorporates multiple sources and parts to form a whole; and the importance of language as a metaphor to expand the interpretation of art.

*"El Anatsui is one of the world's great artists and it is an honour to be presenting these remarkable works in*



*Carriageworks' unique spaces. We hope the audiences of Sydney and beyond relish this very special experience,"* continues Beatrice Gralton, Visual Arts Curator, Carriageworks.

*Five Decades* demonstrates Anatsui's ingenuity in working with repurposed materials including wood, aluminium printing plates, tin boxes and liquor bottle tops. In 1998 the chance discovery of a garbage bag of Nigerian alcohol bottle tops presented him with a new material with which he could produce an extraordinary range of effects. Flattened, folded and bound together with copper wire, the labels from whiskey, wine, rum, gin, brandy, vodka and schnapps – all produced in West Africa – reflected the stories of cultural exchange, consumption, colonialism and migration particular to the continent. The shimmering palette of these labels and evocative brand names including Dark Sailor, King Solomon, 007, Chairman and Makossa also added a new kind of graphic element to Anatsui's work.

Many of Anatsui's early ceramics, prints and sculptures incorporate West African *adinkra* symbols within their surfaces. Anatsui's adaptations of the rich visual culture of Africa reaffirm that art is never stagnant nor determined, rather it is part of the changing rhythm of contemporary life. While many of his later works are monumental in scale, they are also handmade, shaped by human touch and individuality. From the walls to the floor the objects unfurl, expansive rather than confined they suggest the contours of landscape, cartography, and the language of abstract painting.

*Five Decades* probes the histories of colonial and post-colonial Africa alongside themes of consumption, exchange and renewal and the limitless beauty found in the everyday. Anatsui's art presents a coming together of cultures, artistic traditions and contemporary life.

*El Anatsui: Five Decades* is A Schwartz Carriageworks project in association with Sydney Festival.

*El Anatsui: Five Decades* will be presented at Carriageworks from 7 January until 6 March 2016. The exhibition is free to the public and will be open from 10am until 6pm every day.

### About El Anatsui

El Anatsui was born in Anyako, Ghana, in 1944, and studied at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, receiving a BA from the College of Art, and a Postgraduate Diploma in Art Education. Anatsui had a long and distinguished teaching career, beginning at the University of Winneba, Ghana (1969–75) and spending close to four decades working at the University of Nigeria Nsukka (1975–2011). Since the late 1970s Anatsui has held many solo exhibitions around the world including the major exhibitions *Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui*, Akron Art Museum, Akron, Ohio; Brooklyn Museum, New York; Des Moines Art Center, Iowa; Bass Museum of Art, Miami, USA (2012–14), and *El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote To You About Africa*, organised by the Museum for African Art, New York, USA; Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada; Davis Museum, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts; Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas, Austin; North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, North Carolina; Denver Art Museum, Colorado; University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA, (2010-12).

He has been featured in many international exhibitions, currently including, *Atopolis: WIELS @ Mons 2015*, Manège de Sury, Mons, Belgium, 2015 and *The Contemporary 2: Who Interprets the World?* At the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan, 2015. Large-scale public installations include *Broken Bridge II*, commissioned by High Line Art and presented by Friends of the High Line (2012-2013), and *Tsiatsia – Searching for Connection*, which was installed on the façade of the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 2013.

In 2015 Anatsui was honoured with a Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale. Anatsui's works are held in many public and private collections including The British Museum, London, UK; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France; De Young Museum, San Francisco, USA; Fowler Museum, University of California, Los Angeles, USA; French Cultural Centre, Lagos, Nigeria; Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi, UAE; Jordan National Gallery of Arts, Amman, Jordan; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, USA; National Museum of African Art,

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Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., USA; The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA; The National Gallery of Art, Lagos, Nigeria; The Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, Missouri, USA; Osaka Foundation of Culture, Osaka, Japan.

### About Carriageworks

Carriageworks presents a contemporary multi-arts program that engages artists and audiences with contemporary ideas and issues. The program is artist led and emerges from Carriageworks' commitment to reflecting social and cultural diversity. The Carriageworks artistic program is ambitious, risk taking and unrelenting in its support of artists. Carriageworks is a cultural facility of the NSW Government and is supported by Arts NSW. The Carriageworks program can be viewed at <http://www.carriageworks.com.au>

Where Carriageworks

When 7 January until 6 March 2016 at 10am until 6pm every day.

Price Free

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