

Two museums, two countries, one cooperative purchase

The Kunstmuseum Bern and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam jointly acquire a monumental work by Ghanaian artist El Anatsui.



El Anatsui, *In the World But Don't Know the World*, 2009, aluminium and copper wire, 560 x 1000 cm, Kunstmuseum Bern and Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Purchased by Stiftung GegenwART, the Vereniging Rembrandt (thanks in part to its Titus Fonds, its Themafonds Naoorlogse en Hedendaagse kunst and its Coleminks Fonds), the Mondriaan Fund and the BankGiro Loterij, with special thanks to the SIGG COLLECTION © El Anatsui

Rising prices in the art market are making it increasingly difficult for public art institutions to purchase new works. Now the Kunstmuseum Bern and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam have joined forces to acquire a work by El Anatsui from the Sigg Collection, a Swiss private art collection. El Anatsui from Ghana is Africa's most prominent contemporary artist, known for large sculptures made from recycled bottle caps. For the Kunstmuseum Bern, this is the first joint acquisition with an international partner. The work will be shown alternately in Bern and Amsterdam. The purchase was financed for Bern by the Stiftung GegenwART, for Amsterdam by the Vereniging Rembrandt, the Mondriaan Fund and the BankGiro Loterij. The purchase was also made possible by the special patrons' pricing offered by the Sigg Collection.

The artwork in question is *In the World But Don't Know the World* from 2009. The monumental sculpture made of aluminium and copper wire measures 560 x 1,000 cm and was on view until a few weeks ago in the exhibition "El Anatsui: Triumphant Scale" at the Kunstmuseum Bern. At the moment, until 21 February 2021, the work is the centerpiece of the exhibition "Small World Real World" at Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. It is one of El Anatsui's central "bottle cap" works and thus an outstanding complement to the collection of Kunstmuseum Bern. El Anatsui has been crafting works like this one from found screw caps from liquor bottles since 2001. The sculptures already overwhelm the viewer from afar with their monumental scale, and upon closer inspection exert a special fascination with their jewel-like details. Cutting, flattening, shaping, twisting, folding and assembling thousands of bottle caps exemplifies the diversity of the material and can be read as an allegory for interaction in human communities.

The

works are always created through the cooperative labour of countless helpers. Bottle caps are recycled waste material, while alcohol, which the bottles contained, was once used as a medium of exchange in the days of slavery. El Anatsui's monumental works thus equally address Africa's colonial history, the negative aspects of globalisation and the consumer world, as well as environmental concerns. Kathleen Bühler, curator, Kunstmuseum Bern: *"With El Anatsui's works, we experience the dignified power of beauty and poetry. And yet at the same time they also tell us something about the history of African countries that have had to shake off their colonial past and find their way back to their own cultural heritage. El Anatsui provides a unique vision of this history by radically relying on the universal intelligibility of art."*

Nina Zimmer, Director Kunstmuseum Bern – Zentrum Paul Klee: *"This key work by El Anatsui is an important addition to our contemporary collection. Since the 1990s, the Kunstmuseum Bern has been focusing on global contemporary art, and with this acquisition we are carrying on this tradition. The joint purchase of this piece together with the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, and with the generous support of the Stiftung GegenwART, shows what is possible when we work together internationally in a truly cooperative spirit."*

Rein Wolfs, Director Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam: *"We are happy and grateful for the collaboration with Kunstmuseum Bern and the support of the Vereniging Rembrandt, the Mondriaan Fund, the BankGiro Loterij and the Stiftung GegenwART for making this possible. This is the first work by El Anatsui in a public collection in the Netherlands. For us, this 125 year anniversary acquisition indicates the direction the Stedelijk wants to take in the near future. We are working on broadening the collection, including works of art from countries of origin other than those customary for the Stedelijk. El Anatsui's work stands like no other for contemporary art from Africa and the African diaspora. At the same time, this work offers a different context to the monumental works that mark the collection of the Stedelijk and it has everything it takes to become a new public favorite."*

About the artist

El Anatsui is a native of Ghana who has lived and worked in Nigeria since 1975. He teaches at the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka and is one of the most important artists of the African continent. In 2015, he received the Golden Lion of the Venice Biennale for his life's work. El Anatsui's works reveal his critical search for alternative models of art production. One of his ideas embraces the notion that art is capable of engaging with the complex trajectories of history, memory and time, and with how these forces shape human society. This approach goes hand-in-hand with El Anatsui's ongoing exploration of the impact of colonial and postcolonial global forces on African cultures, giving his work a profound conceptual cause.

Kunstmuseum Bern

The Kunstmuseum Bern is one of the oldest art museums in Switzerland. At the present time, the collection comprises over 4,000 paintings and sculptures as well as some 45,000 drawings, prints, photographs, videos and films. As a result the museum has in its care not only one of the leading and most diverse collections in Switzerland but also enjoys international standing. Works by Ferdinand Hodler, Paul Klee, Albert Anker, Pablo Picasso, Franz Gertsch, Vincent van Gogh, Meret Oppenheim and many other artists have made the Kunstmuseum Bern an institution of international renown. Additionally, the Kunstmuseum Bern inherited the legacy of Cornelius Gurlitt in 2014. In response to the controversial history of this outstanding and meanwhile world-famous collection, the Kunstmuseum Bern has established the first provenance research department in Switzerland. The Kunstmuseum Bern not only presents its permanent collection but likewise mounts thematic and comprehensive solo exhibitions.

Stiftung GegenwART

Stiftung GegenwART is a foundation established in 2005 on the initiative and with the support of the Bernese art patron Dr. h.c. Hansjörg Wyss. Ever since the Board of the Kunstmuseum Bern made the decision at the end of 2009 to forego the construction of an extension of the museum, the foundation has endeavoured – based on a clear allocation of funds – to promote contemporary art within the framework of theme-based special exhibitions, presentations of the collection, publications, artist-in-residence projects, lectures, symposia and the purchase of artworks, which become part of the collection of the Kunstmuseum Bern. Most recently, the foundation has acquired paintings by Miriam Cahn, a portfolio by the artist group Guerrilla Girls, and a video work by Yael Bartana. The Board comprises the following members: Daniel Bögli (Chairman), Babette Berger, Dr. Rachel Mader, Annette Schindler, Jobst Wagner, Dr. h.c. Hansjörg Wyss, Hedwig Wyss and Dr. Nina Zimmer

Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

The Stedelijk Museum, opened in 1895, is the largest museum for modern and contemporary art and design in the Netherlands, and holds an internationally renowned collection of 100.000 works, from 1870 to the present day. The collection encompasses clusters of work by Kazimir Malevich and Russian avant-garde, Bauhaus, De Stijl, German Expressionism and American Abstract Expressionism, as well as in depth collected oeuvres of artists like Bruce Nauman, Ettore Sottsass and Rineke Dijkstra. The Stedelijk is currently transforming into an engaged, multi-vocal, more inclusive art institution.

Contact
Aleksandra Zdravković
Communications, Kunstmuseum Bern – Zentrum Paul Klee
press@kunstmuseumbern.ch
T +41 (0)31 328 09 93

In The World But Don't Know the World by El Anatsui is a joint acquisition by Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and Kunstmuseum Bern. Acquired with support of the Stiftung GegenwART, the Vereniging Rembrandt (thanks in part to its Titus Fonds, its Themafonds Naoorlogse en Hedendaagse kunst and its Coleminks Fonds), the Mondriaan Fund and the BankGiro Loterij. The purchase was made possible in part by the special patrons' pricing offered by the SIGG COLLECTION.

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Dr. h.c. Hansjörg Wyss**R** Vereniging
Rembrandt**M**
mondriaan
fund**BankGiro**
Loterij
– SINDS 1961 –

KUNSTMUSEUM BERN

HODLERSTRASSE 8 – 12 3011 BERN
T +41 31 328 09 44

INFO@KUNSTMUSEUMBERN.CH WWW.KUNSTMUSEUMBERN.CH

PRESS OFFICE KUNSTMUSEUM BERN

T +41 31 328 09 93

PRESS@KUNSTMUSEUMBERN.CH