SPIRITED PATTERN AND DECORATION IN CONTEMPORARY BLACK ATLANTIC ART

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates aesthetics of African design and decoration in the work of major contemporary artists of African descent who address heritage, history, and life experience. My project focuses on the work of three representative contemporary artists, African American artists Kehinde Wiley and Nick Cave, and Ghanaian artist El Anatsui. Their work represents practices and tendencies among a much broader group of painters and sculptors who employ elaborate textures and designs to express drama and emotion throughout the Black Atlantic world.

I argue that extensive patterning, embellishment, and ornamentation are employed by many contemporary artists of African descent as a strategy for reinterpreting the art historical canon and addressing critical social issues, such as war, devastation of the earth's environment, and lack of essential resources for survival in many parts of the world. Many artworks also present historical revisions that reflect the experience of Black peoples who were brought to the Americas through the transatlantic slave trade, lived under colonial rule, or witnessed aspects of post-colonial struggle. The disorderliness of intersecting designs could also symbolize gaps in memory and traumas that will not heal. They reflect the manner in which Black Atlantic peoples have pieced together ancestral histories from a patchwork of sources. Polyrhythmic decoration enables their work to act as vessels of experience, allowing viewers to bring together multiple histories and social references.

DEDICATION

I am so grateful to my husband, Tony L. Brown, and son, Samuel Solomon Sanders, for standing by me through the process of this dissertation. I also appreciate the boundless support of Rhoda Ross and Joseph Solomon. I am eternally thankful for the advice of Nancy Purcell.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Surface Substance

This dissertation investigates aesthetics of African design and decoration in the work of major contemporary artists of African descent who address heritage, history, and life experience. I explore how contemporary Black artists adapt decorative designs and aesthetic qualities from African adornment in textiles, sculptures, and other sources. My project provides a thorough analysis of pattern and decoration in art of the Black Atlantic world that reflects a radical transformation of found objects and symbolic use of materials that speak to the complexity of colonial and postcolonial history, global consumer culture, and knowledge systems of the African world. My research complements and builds upon the important work of scholars such as John Picton, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and Lowery Stokes Simms who have investigated African design and its relationships to textiles, culture, and language, and the work of Robert Farris Thompson, who has critically defined Africanist aesthetics in music, dance, and the visual arts.[1] This examination of pattern and decoration is different from other studies in that it critically analyzes the fusion of culturally-specific patterns

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[1] John Picton, *The Art of African Textiles: Technology, Tradition, and Lurex* (London: Barbican Art Gallery, Lund Humphries Publishers, 1995); Maude Southwell Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts* (New York: Studio Books in association with Museum of American Folk Art, 1993); Lowery Sims and Leslie King-Hammond, *The Global Africa Project* (New York: The Museum of Arts and Design and Prestel Publishing, 2010); Robert Farris Thompson, *The Aesthetic of the Cool: Afro-Atlantic Art and Music* (Pittsburgh and New York City: Periscope Publishing, 2011).

by artists who synthesize and layer motifs from African, European, Asian, and Semitic cultures.

The overlapping, intersecting, and creolization of patterns in these works represent a convergence of cultural engagement and experience. Polyrhythmic patterns such as those seen in many African textiles simultaneously layer two or more conflicting visual rhythms. This use of pattern suggests that there are broader, overarching design tendencies that permeate the Black Atlantic world, which derive from African pattern, including a sensibility of polyrhythmic layering and employment of ornamental designs to render a space or environment. I argue that extensive patterning, embellishment, and ornamentation are employed by many contemporary artists of African descent as a strategy for reinterpreting the art historical canon and addressing critical social issues, such as war, devastation of the earth's environment, and lack of essential resources including clean water and food. Many artworks also present historical revisions that reflect the experience of Black peoples who were brought to the Americas through the transatlantic slave trade, lived in Africa or the colonies under colonial rule, and witnessed aspects of post-colonial struggle and disempowerment. The disorderliness of intersecting designs and overlapping layers could also symbolize gaps in memory, dislocations that cannot be recovered, and traumas that will not heal. It also reflects the manner in which many Black Atlantic people have had to piece together their ancestral histories from a patchwork of sources. The combining of many found materials and patterns is a characteristic of a "nomadic aesthetic" that shows evidence of a painful history of slavery and

migration due to war, oppression, natural disasters, and lack of resources.[2] Repurposing of materials and appropriation of textures and designs in these artists' work reflects the resilience and resourcefulness of many Black Atlantic artists.

My research focuses on the work of three representative contemporary artists, Kehinde Wiley, Nick Cave, and El Anatsui, who have consistently and assertively engaged with pattern and decoration as a means of reinterpreting history and revealing and restructuring mainstream power systems. In discussing the work of African American artists Wiley and Cave, and Ghanaian artist Anatsui, I consider how they mine African pattern to challenge and expand accepted categories and institutional frameworks in ways that reflect our current condition of post-history, in which we look with a critical eye at the biased way that wars, migrations, and conquests have been documented and described from the perspective of victors.[3] These world-renowned artists represent practices and tendencies among a much broader group of painters and sculptors who employ elaborate textures and designs to express drama and emotion throughout the African Diaspora. Therefore, I use these artists as three specific art case studies that concentrate on surfaces of heavy pattern and decoration to transform the remnants of consumer culture into objects and images of power.

Pattern has always pervaded intellectual and cultural endeavors in the arts, sciences, and the humanities, and until recently patterns could be identified as more discrete and unique cultural types. In the late 1960s, Ulf Grenander

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[2] El Anatsui, telephone interview by Kate McCrickard," in *El Anatsui*, 2006, David Krut Publishing, unpaginated.
[3] Paul Gilroy, "For the Transcultural Record," *Trade Routes: History + Geography, the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale* (South Africa: the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council and the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development, the Netherlands, 1997), 26.

introduced pattern theory that attempted to offer an algebraic system for describing patterns as frameworks regulated by rules. Although mathematical algorithms and graphs cannot define the patterns of artists' works, artworks that I analyze in this dissertation reflect larger aesthetic tendencies that allow for a design to recognizably derive from a specific culture or ritual based on its motifs, symbols, or color palette. In my analysis, it is not only the patterns employed that distinguish these artists' work, but also the overlapping of many types of patterns and the prioritizing of surface decoration over other formal aspects.

In the last thirty years of Black Atlantic art scholarship and exhibition history, several camps have formed around the goal of validating it in the mainstream art world. These camps have defined concepts of the African diaspora and the major players in this category quite differently. Most Africanists have focused attention on artists living on the continent or abroad, but who were born or grew up on the continent. Several scholars have transcended this limitation to write about artists born in the Diaspora, such as Robert Farris Thompson with his study of David Hammons and Okwui Enwezor with his book on Lorna Simpson.[4] There has also been an agenda for curators and scholars such as Salah M. Hassan, Olu Oguibe, and Okwui Enwezor to show that African artists contribute to the realm of conceptual art as significantly as artists living in the West and Asia. Within mainstream contemporary art criticism, separate African American and African diaspora contingents have developed around an effort to distinguish the unique qualities of African diaspora art and situate these

[4] John Farris Colo, Greg Tate, and Robert Farris Thompson, *David Hammons* (New York: Exit Art, 1990); Okwui Enwezor, *Lorna Simpson* (New York: Abrams in association with the American Federation of Arts, 2006).

artists in a broader discussion. Artists themselves and the sociologist Paul Gilroy have helped to deconstruct these divisions, although they still persist.

Applying terminology from Gilroy's definition of the Black Atlantic world, I use a flexible definition of people of Africa and its diasporas and alternate this with the rather shifting term "Black" artists to allow for a greater appreciation of the widespread nature of these artists' creative practices that investigate pattern.[5] Gilroy writes,

> The specificity of the modern political and cultural formation I want to call the Black Atlantic can be defined, on one level, through [a] desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity.[6]

Gilroy defines Black Atlantic culture that is not specifically African, American, Caribbean, or British, but a synthesis of these cultures as a result of the African diaspora caused by the transatlantic slave trade. Therefore, Black Atlantic culture is not defined by the unstable construction of race, but characterized by particular cultural retentions and propensities that stem from language, music, art, religions, and social practices. I use this definition to explore the connections between Wiley, Cave, and Anatsui, who each prioritize surface ornamentation and materiality to reorganize dominant interpretations of history.

A number of major exhibitions and books paved the way for this dissertation by expanding the visibility and interpretations of Black Atlantic art in relationship to the global art world and how artists employ pattern to reference layered identity. The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art* (1984) showed African and Oceanic art in the context of

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[5] By Black artists, I am referring to artists of African descent either living in the diaspora or on the African continent.
[6] Gilroy, Paul, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 19.

European modern art to emphasize the influence and affinities that European artists had taken from "primitive" art.[7] The director of painting and sculpture, William Rubin argued that primitive art did not change the course of modern art because "[t]he changes in modern art at issue were already under way when vanguard artists first became aware of tribal art."[8] Attempts to address the issues born from *Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art* led to a transformation of the historical "tribal art" model to an awareness of contemporary African art that reflected popular culture and industrialization as well as a connection to the specific contexts of African cultures and iconography. *Magiciens de la Terre* in 1989 at the Centre Georges Pompidou curated by Jean-Hubert Martin identified a number of contemporary African artists and brought their work to a European public.[9] This exhibition endeavored to show the universality of art expression and to show art created in many different contexts on equal terms. It opened up a somewhat contrived controversy in the international art world about the differences between academically trained and self-taught artists that became a method for establishing false criteria of authenticity, and therefore defined the marketability of contemporary African artists.[10] However, by showing African artists in the company of artists from Asia, Europe, the Americas, and Australia, *Magiciens* challenged the hierarchy of the art world that positioned some cultures as central and others as marginal.

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[7] William Rubin, ed. Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984.

[8] Michael Brenson, "Gallery View: Discovering the Heart of Modernism," *New York Times*, October 28, 1984. http://www.nytimes.com/1984/10/28/arts/gallery-view-discovering-the-heart-of-modernism.html.

[9] Mark Francis et al., *Magiciens de la Terre,* exhibition catalog (Paris : Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1989).

[10] Clémentine Deliss, "7+7=1: Seven Stories, Seven Stages, One Exhibition," *Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1995), 15.

Also in 1995, the mammoth interdisciplinary festival *Africa 95* featured the exhibition *Africa: The Art of a Continent* at the Royal Academy of Arts in London that reinforced many stereotypes about African art and was reminiscent of an ethnographic museum in its presentation.[11] Smaller exhibitions of contemporary African art were overshadowed by this blockbuster exhibition and therefore the festival treated Africans as minor participants in their own history.[12] Clémentine Deliss, artistic director of Africa 95, curated for the *Africa 95* festival the exhibition *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* (1995) at Whitechapel Art Gallery in London, which presented personal interpretations and unique curatorial approaches by African artists and scholars of the major movements that have defined twentieth-century modern art in Africa. In spite of its problems, *Africa 95* gave important exposure to African artists and broadened the debates about the issues within exhibiting contemporary Black Atlantic art.

Beginning with the twenty-first century, exhibitions and scholarship have avoided the essentializing tendencies of the previous decades. Instead, they have tended to emphasize artists' diversity of expression around experiences of geography, the body, political issues, and urban experience. There has been a conscious move away from any effort to try to make broad aesthetic generalizations about contemporary African art. An exhibition that took an innovative approach to the definition of African Diaspora was *Looking Both Ways, Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora* (2003), curated by Laurie Ann

[11] Tom Phillips, ed. *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, exhibition catalog (London: Royal Academy of Arts and Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1995).
[12] Nancy Van Leyden, "Africa 95: A Critical Assessment of the Exhibition at the Royal Academy," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, Vol. XXXVI-1-2 (1996): 141-142.

Farrell at the Museum for African Art, New York City.[13] This exhibition did not attempt to represent the entire continent, but focused on the theme of re-defining the contemporary African diaspora. Several artists in this exhibition, including Ghada Amer, Zineb Sedira, and Yinka Shonibare, construct works with similar decorative methodologies for expressing the complexity of cultural identity as African artists living in Europe and America. Whereas Amer embroiders paintings and sculptures with texts and images, Sedira integrates family photographs into Islamic tile tessellations, and Shonibare appropriates Dutch wax fabric for its association with West African fashion and symbolism. Including African American or Afro-Caribbean artists in the discussion would have further enriched this exhibition, but it thoughtfully explored the psychic terrain between Africa and the West in a new way.

Another exhibition that re-interpreted the concept of the African Diaspora and pointed out the invalidity of exhibiting African art based on the artist's ethnicity or geographical location was *A Fiction of Authenticity: Contemporary Africa Abroad* (2003) at the Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri curated by Shannon Fitzgerald and Tumelo Mosaka.[14] The curators showed African artists living abroad whose work transcended the historical limitations of geography, ethnicity, and nationality. Included in the exhibition were Owusu-Ankomah and Odili Donald Odita whose heavily patterned surfaces conveyed the friction of cultural heterogeneity, expressed transition and transformation, and

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[13] Laurie Ann Farrell, ed. *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora* (New York: Museum for African Art and Gent: Snoeck-Ducaju & Zoon, 2003).
[14] Orlando Britto Jinorio et al., *A Fiction of Authenticity: Contemporary Africa Abroad* edited by Salah Hassan et al. (St. Louis, MO: Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 2004).

absorbed individual figures and motifs within larger environments of rhythmic pattern. Both *A Fiction of Authenticity* and *Looking Both Ways* expanded the definition of the African diaspora by applying this term to artists who had recently emigrated from Africa or who were born to African parents in other parts of the world, rather than to artists who were descended from African slaves brought through the transatlantic slave trade hundreds of years ago.

Other recent exhibitions have presented contemporary African art according to poetic concepts, but avoided any direct discussion of aesthetic relationships or specific movements among artists. The travelling exhibition that began at the Hayward Gallery in London entitled *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent* (2005) was perhaps the most direct revision of *Africa: The Art of a Continent* from ten years earlier.[15] It proposed to show that although contemporary African artists had no shared aesthetic, the common history of European colonization resulted in similar themes in artworks. The curator, Simon Njami, argued that African artists in the 21st century no longer felt the pressure to prove the authenticity of their work, and that their quest had become an existential questioning of their place in the world. The catalog focused on how contemporary African art reflected an amalgamation of experiences and influences, and argued that African modernity did not represent a break with the past, but instead revealed a reframing of it. It contributed the perspective that the adoption of new technologies and media into locally relevant practices was intertwined with evolving African modernities, and was interconnected with the

[15]Lucy Durán et al., *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent* (exhibition catalog), edited by Simon Njami and including a dialogue between Marie-Laure Bernadac and Abdelwahab Meddeb (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz; London: Hayward Gallery; New York: D.A.P., 2005).

resistance movements that began with colonial rule. This exhibition organized the work through themes of "Identity and History," "Body and Soul," and "City and Land," and unlike other exhibitions that included only artists from sub-Saharan Africa, it was the first major exhibition to represent the entire continent. It dispensed with the problematic distinction between art that is made for galleries and art created for communal or spiritual purposes, and focused on urban artists who had an awareness of the contemporary art world.

These exhibitions generally defined African modernity beginning in the 1970's with liberation and independence movements. The book *Contemporary African Art Since 1980* (2009) challenged this marker and instead proposed that 1980 was a turning point for the birth of contemporary African art produced both inside Africa and abroad.[16] Authors Chika Okeke-Agulu and Okwui Enwezor built upon exhibitions such as the *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994,* previously curated by Enwezor.[17] They aimed to accomplish three goals: first, to illuminate moments of cultural convergence and shared political conditions that led to the development of specific aesthetic languages; second, to review the works of art chronologically; and third, to investigate how these works have penetrated the 21st-Century global world. While this text pinpointed a new historical marker, it focused on many of the same artists that had been investigated in previous exhibitions and neglected to introduce lesser-known artists from beyond West or Southern Africa or the larger diaspora.

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[16] Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Contemporary African Art Since 1980* (Bologna: Damiani Press, 2009).
[17] Okwui Enwezor, ed. *The Short Century, Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994* (Munich, London, New York: Prestel, 2001).

In the past decade, Africanists shifted focus away from issues of authenticity and artists' origins to the myriad of concepts and methods that artists use. However, there remains a divide between those who write about contemporary African art and those who investigate contemporary African diaspora art. None of the exhibitions already mentioned included artists of African descent born outside the continent, which testifies to the rigidity of this qualifier of African authenticity as an impediment towards deeper investigation.[18] Breaking with this precedent was *Afro Modern: Journeys Through the Black Atlantic* (2010) at the Tate Liverpool in London, which was one of the first recent shows to perceive a common aesthetic lineage in modern and contemporary Black Atlantic art. This exhibition was inspired by Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) and it explored the aesthetic contributions of many Black Atlantic cultures from the early twentieth century to the present. Gilroy challenged the curators Tanya Barson and Peter Gorschlüter to consider Liverpool as the capital of the Black Atlantic due to its location as a portal to the Atlantic and its history in the slave trade. The exhibition catalog exemplifies a subversive counterculture to European modernism and to the legacy of the Enlightenment, its vision of scientific reason, and linear historical progress. Many of the artists in this exhibition approach the traumatic history of slavery and living in the diaspora by imagining and depicting

[18] This issue over who is authentically African has been problematic for many decades. Kehinde Wiley, an artist of mixed African American and African heritage, has always been represented as an African-American artist whereas Grace Ndiritu, born in the U.K. to Kenyan parents, is considered African. There are different interpretations of this arbitrary definition of identity based on whether one lives in Europe or America.

historical narratives for which we lack adequate records.[19] *Afro Modern* presented many Black Atlantic artworks that concentrated on a protective and beautified surface to counter the shared experiences of dislocation and racial terror. Taking a new approach, this exhibition brought artists together across the traditional categories of country of origin, ethnicity, or race, and made important aesthetic insights between modern and contemporary art periods.

In the past decade, polyrhythmic pattern and decoration are among the few specific Africanist aesthetics to have been highlighted in a number of major exhibitions and publications. Methodologies have varied from analyzing the symbolic meanings of ideographic scripts and their associations with proverbs to juxtaposing African textiles with contemporary artworks that have similar designs or motifs. Other scholars have focused on how inventively contemporary African decorative designs incorporate recycling of everyday materials to communicate a political or social message. Each of these strategies has supported a deeper awareness of the important relationship between form and function in artworks.

An example of an exhibition that investigated pattern through the lens of African language and knowledge systems was *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art* (2007), which took place at the National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C. and travelled to the Fowler Museum at UCLA.[20] *Inscribing Meaning* contended that an investigation of African writing is really a study of African patterning and embellishment. This exhibition and the accompanying catalog examined many types of African scripts as well as

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[19] Tanya Barson, "Introduction: Modernism and the Black Atlantic," *Afro Modern: Journeys Through the Black Atlantic* (Liverpool, England: Tate Liverpool and Tate Publishing, 2010), 18.
[20] Christine Mullen Kreamer et al., *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, 2007).

symbols associated with proverbs that condense much African wisdom and communication into each visual symbol. These scripts are most often presented through patterned adornment in textiles, murals, architecture, sculpture, and on the body. Curators Mary (Polly) Nooter Roberts, Christine Mullen Kreamer, Elizabeth Harney, and Allyson Purpura noted that earlier scholars connected African cultures with poetic or pre-logical thought and Western cultures with rational thought, and they argued that the variety of graphic systems in African art evidence many types of knowledge of African peoples. The exhibition presented graphic systems from ancient history to the present, and organized this information according to themes such as “inscribing the body,” “sacred scripts,” “political writing,” “circumscribing space,” and “word play,” or the relationship between text and image. It explored several sacred scripts employed by West African artists such as *nsibidi*, *adinkra*, and *uli* that appear in the work of contemporary African painters and sculptors internationally. While this exhibition included several African artists living in the Diaspora such as Iké Udé and Wosene Worke Kosrof, it unfortunately did not analyze any Afro-Caribbean or African-American artists, which would have further enriched the debate.

The Essential Art of African Textiles: Design Without End (2008) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and a concurrent exhibition *The Poetics of Cloth: African Textiles/Recent Art* (2008) at New York University’s Grey Art Gallery showed visual affinities and influences in African textiles with other contemporary

African artworks by pointing out analogous patterns.[21] These exhibitions sought to address the Western undervaluing of textiles in African art to demonstrate that many older fabrics contain the “DNA” of contemporary artworks.[22] They presented contemporary African art inspired by the complex graphic statements and brilliant color of many African textiles, the symbolism of African patterns, and the ways in which cloth was a key part of everyday personal expression, status, and social communication. Both exhibitions also showed fabrics that were not produced in Africa and were instead manufactured in Europe, such as Dutch wax fabric, which evidenced the complex interdependence of European and African textile design. These textiles are considered essentially African because they signify African proverbs and represent culturally specific motifs. Also, the exhibition included a number of artists of African descent who were based in Europe and explored colonial power play in their symbolic employment of African fabric, such as Yinka Shonibare, Grace Ndiritu, and Sokari Douglas Camp. This exploration of African pattern and textile influence in the contemporary art would have been more meaningful had it included African American and Afro-Caribbean artists who incorporated African textile patterns, and had it provided a more synesthetic investigation of music, textile patterns, and graphic systems.

Other recent exhibitions of contemporary Black Atlantic art have revealed the prevalence of artists that layer patterns and decoration by repurposing materials with a past history. *The Global Africa Project* (2010) at the Museum of

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[21] Alisa LaGamma and Christine Giuntini, *The Essential Art of African Textiles: Design Without End* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008); Lynn Gumpert, *The Poetics of Cloth: African Textiles/Recent Art* (New York: Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 2008).

[22] Alisa LaGamma quoted by Karen Rosenberg, “African Art, Modern and Traditional: Seductive Patterns From a Rich Palette,” *New York Times*, October 9, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/10/arts/design/10text.html?_r=0.

Art and Design presented many examples of this strategy. Rather than focusing on geography, ethnicity, or medium, this ambitious exhibition approached African design from a diasporic perspective, and organized works according to overarching themes such as “Intersecting Cultures” and “Global City, Urban Flux,” which addressed the cosmopolitan aspects of design in the work of many Black Atlantic artists. Though the exhibition highlighted the work of West African and African American artists to the exclusion of those from North and East Africa or the Caribbean, it showed many examples of Africanist patterning that transcended geography and explained how these practices were integral to communal workshops as well as to individual artists. It featured works that revealed critical social issues through appropriation of scavenged materials, such as environmental crisis due to the oil industry in West Africa. Curator Lowery Stokes Sims was groundbreaking in her attempt to bridge the divides in museum practices between African and African diaspora artists.

Using blended patterns as a metaphor for cultural hybridity, the exhibition *Pattern ID* (2010) at the Akron Art Museum in Ohio explored the work of contemporary diverse international artists who employed pattern and fashion to address the challenge of finding one’s place in society against the background of globalization. As Ellen Rudolph writes, many of these artists employ pattern to show that “identity can be cumulative, a result of moving in and out of various cultural milieu.”[23] This exhibition displayed many examples of work that appropriated pattern cross-culturally, and employed bold patterns and adornment to destroy stereotypes and show unpredictable mash-ups that subvert

[23] Ellen Rudolph, “The Cultural Currency of Pattern and Dress,” *Pattern ID* (Akron Ohio: Akron Art Museum, 2010), 11.

expectations. While *Pattern ID* focused on individual artists' practices rather than expounding on how these artists might represent larger tendencies, it suggested that the artists of African descent blended popular culture designs and decoration in a polyrhythmic manner with African textile processes and motifs. While these recent shows and criticism have introduced the cross-fertilization of African pattern influences in contemporary art there still remains little thorough analysis of the conceptual synthesis of patterns underlying Black Atlantic art and how this reflects the blend of African designs and symbols with motifs from European, Asian, and American cultures.

In collecting and curating contemporary African American art, a gulf continues between those who classify art based on the artist's racial identity and those who group artists according to cultural themes. The Rubell Family Collection's travelling exhibition *30 Americans* (2011) assembled three generations of Black artists who work in diverse media.[24] The exhibition's premise was that these artists were responding to a post-Black sensibility that arose following the 1960s civil rights struggle to explore racial, sexual, and historical identity, and their works demonstrated the legacy of the older generation upon the younger artists. However, the show did not organize this work to discuss these themes or relationships between artists so they seemed to have nothing more in common than a sense of postmodern irony and shared African American ancestry. On a much larger scale, the giant exhibition *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World*, a collaboration between New York City's El Museo del Barrio in conjunction with the Queens Museum of Art and The Studio

[24] Robert Hobbs, Franklin Sirmans, and Michele Wallace, *30 Americans* (Florida: Rubell Family Collection, 2008).

Museum in Harlem, promised to explore the diverse history of the Caribbean diaspora by grouping artists chronologically and according to overriding questions such as: "[i]s the Caribbean a place? If so, what are its boundaries?"[25] Similar to previous exhibitions of African art that attempted to present the art of a continent, the bulk of this exhibition made it difficult to grasp more specific concepts and connections between the 500 works of art spanning four centuries. As a result of its breadth and the minimal wall texts, the exhibition reinforced the idea of Caribbean art as a reflection of creolized and diasporic cultures affected by many myths and racial hierarchies, but without clearly elucidated experiences and traditions.

In contrast to these shows that deny important links between artists influenced by Black Atlantic cultures, the travelling exhibition *Blues for Smoke* (2012) considered the Blues not only as a musical category, but also as a network of artistic affinities and cultural idioms.[26] *Blues for Smoke,* curated by Bennett Simpson with support from artist Glenn Ligon at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, explored contemporary art, music, literature, and film through the perspective of Blues aesthetics. Similarly, the exhibition *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980* (2012) curated by Kellie Jones grouped artists based on a specific legacy of the African American arts community in Los Angeles. The overriding trend in these recent shows indicates

[25] Holland Cotter, "Islands Buffeted by Currents of Change, 'Caribbean: Crossroads of the World' Spans 3 Museums," *New York Times*, June 14, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/15/arts/design/caribbean-crossroads-of-the-world-spans-3-museums.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

[26] George E. Lewis et. al., *Blues for Smoke* (exhibition catalog), ed. Bennett Simpson (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art and Prestel/Delmonico, 2012).

that curators are increasingly focusing on groups of artists according to shared cultural, communal, and aesthetic themes.

In the realm of classical or traditional ceremonial African art analysis, scholars are trying to deal with previously overlooked subjects, such as symbolism and meaning that viewers can determine from the treatment of artworks' surfaces. The book *Surfaces: Color, Substances, and Ritual Applications on African Sculpture* (2009) provided a thorough explanation of how the surfaces of African artworks offer a mine of information that illuminates the processes of art making, an object's history and use, and the physical, conceptual, and emotional qualities that invest these works with collective value.[27] Investigating the social life of African artwork through the layers, patterning, and luster of surfaces, this volume includes many specific examples of ways in which the skin of an artwork can represent both personal or group history as well as spiritual beliefs.[28] This work expounds upon Arnold Rubin's argument that the superficial materials of sculpture across the African continent could provoke an array of intellectual and emotional reactions.[29] *Surfaces* also explains the manner in which African artworks often play a dual role as the vehicles of major activities, including initiations and annual celebrations, yet they are also the historical vessels and focal points of how people retain these activities in memory.[30] Although this book focuses on classical African art, it presents important analyses of the employment of texture, color, reflectiveness,

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[27] Leonard Kahan, Donna Page, and Pascal James Imperato, eds., *Surfaces: Color, Substances, and Ritual Applications on African Sculpture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009).
[28] Patrick McNaughton, "Introduction," *Surfaces: Color, Substances, and Ritual Applications on African Sculpture*, ed. Leonard Kahan, Donna Page, and Pascal James Imperato (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 4-5.
[29] Arnold Rubin, *African Accumulative Sculpture* (New York: Pace Gallery, 1974).
[30] McNaughton, "Introduction," 9.

and patina on surfaces of sculpture that can be applied to contemporary Black Atlantic art.

In works of Wiley, Cave, and Anatsui, similar treatments of the surface can be seen as those in some classical African works, and their repertoire of patterns and surfaces expanded as a result of ambitious projects that took their work across the globe. Their processes have diversified over the course of major solo exhibitions and catalogues raisonnés in the past decade. Of all catalogs from Wiley's "The World Stage" series, *The World Stage: Africa Lagos~Dakar Kehinde Wiley* was most instrumental because of Krista Thompson's essay "Find Your Father: Figuring Africa Between Colonial, Postcolonial and Diasporic Worlds."[31] Thompson analyzes Wiley's personal relationship to Africa through his longing to know his father. She also argues that his awareness of the colonial gaze is expressed through bright photographic light, and his focus on hip-hop style in Senegalese youth fashion provides an alternative to colonial and postcolonial African models. She contextualizes these paintings as his most deliberate appropriation of African patterning. In addition, the catalogue raisonné *Kehinde Wiley* (2012) published by Rizzoli presents different aspects of his prolific career. Robert Hobbs considers Wiley's work in the context of hip-hop rhythms and appropriated beats, the competition between background patterns and foreground subject, and the work's relationship to cross-dressing and drag performance. In addition to this resource, public programs such as journalist Lola Ogunnaike's interview with Wiley on March 15, 2012 at the Jewish Museum

[31] Krista A. Thompson, "Find Your Father: Figuring African Between Colonial, Postcolonial and Diasporic Worlds," in *The World Stage: Africa, Lagos~Dakar*, Krista A. Thompson et al. (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2008).

in New York City on the occasion of his exhibition *Kehinde Wiley/The World Stage: Israel* have revealed important insights into the symbolism of pattern in his work as a representation of cultural or religious identity and to challenge the historical prioritization of the figure as the primary subject of a painting.[32]

Cave has been included in many group exhibitions, but the solo exhibition catalog *Nick Cave: Meet Me at the Center of the Earth* (2010) for Cave's travelling exhibition that began at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts presents the most comprehensive array of his sculpture with fresh perspectives on his sculpture and performance such as its mining of Black Atlantic cultural festivals and the activists' vision of his work.[33] Dan Cameron's essay lays the groundwork emphasizing the relationship between Cave's performance work and sculpture in relation to 1990's performance art such as Leigh Bowery and the history of Mardi Gras Black Indians' regalia in New Orleans. Most important to my analysis, however, was the opportunity to interview Cave and to work with his installation and performance that he conducted at the Fabric Workshop and Museum (FWM) in December 2011. At FWM, his collaboration with musicians and dancers revealed the overall vision of his work as a multi-sensory experience for the audience. His development of an *Architectural Forest* using bamboo curtain sections demonstrated his process of mixing up existing patterns and changing the existing sterile space to create an atmospheric glow. His improvisational and interdisciplinary methods of layering patterns and textures (object, sounds, and

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[32] Kehinde Wiley and Lola Ogunnaike, "Kehinde Wiley in Conversation with *Today Show* Contributor Lola Ogunnaike" (public program at The Jewish Museum, in conjunction with exhibition *Kehinde Wiley / The World Stage: Israel*, March 15, 2012).

[33] Kate Eilertsen, Dan Cameron, Pamela McClusky, and Nick Cave, *Nick Cave: Meet Me at the Center of the Earth* (San Francisco: Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2009).

movement) became apparent through his collaborations with museum artists who helped construct the work, musicians and dancers, and the adaptations of his performance to the context of this small Philadelphia museum.

Several monographs on Anatsui have valuably contributed to an understanding of the evolution and recent breakthroughs in his processes and complex surfaces. The exhibition *El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote to You About Africa* (2010) for the traveling exhibition that began at the Royal Ontario Museum, Canada, and continues to travel analyzed Anatsui's work chronologically from the time of his early works with market trays and clay to his recent metal installations.[34] It included a variety of perspectives from Africanists Lisa M. Binder, Olu Oguibe, and Chika Okeke-Agulu to the contemporary art curator Robert Storr and philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah. Each essay offers unique perspectives on Anatsui's transformation of found materials that are related to food or drink and how these transformations represent his interpretations of history and reflect his appropriation of African graphic systems. Okeke-Agulu gives insightful analyses of the wooden sculptures that preceded Anatsui's current metal works, explaining how these represent a powerful relationship to African textiles such as kente cloth.

Africanist art historian Susan Vogel's film *Fold, Crumple Crush: The Art of El Anatsui* (2011) and her book, *El Anatsui: Art and Life* (2012) are especially valuable in their detailed portrayal of Anatsui's studio process and methods for working with assistants to manipulate metal bottle caps in over twenty different

[34] Olu, Oguibe, Chika Okeke-Agulu, Robert Storr, Kwame Anthony Appiah, *El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote to You About Africa.* ed. Lisa M. Binder (New York: Museum for African Art, 2010).

formats and organize patterned blocks of the resulting metal "cloth."[35] She contributed the unique analogy of the patterns within his metal sculptures to the *andamento* or visual flow within a mosaic resulting from the placement of rows of tesserae, as well as an important analysis of his recent architectural installations in conjunction with other contemporary public sculpture. Of recent public appearances by Anatsui, the conversation organized by the Brooklyn Museum of Art in February 2013 in which Vogel and curator Kevin D. Dumouchelle interviewed Anatsui in conjunction with his exhibition *Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui* (2013) offered insights into his bottle cap patterns and decorative surfaces in relationship to his memories, historical events, and as a departure from his original reliance on African ideographic systems.[36] Vogel connected Anatsui's work to that of Anish Kapoor and other contemporary sculptors who he admires, demonstrating the international sculptural influences in his work. Of the numerous contributions to Anatsui's vision, Vogel's analysis is the most in-depth.

This dissertation combines insights from these different camps of Africanists, art critics, and curators by incorporating many of their strategies for defining an African aesthetic of pattern and decoration while also addressing gaps in the literature. Whereas Africanist scholars have focused on specific patterns and techniques derived from classical African art, they have often neglected how contemporary African artists continue these aesthetics by

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[35] Susan Vogel, *El Anatsui: Art and Life* (Munich, London, New York: Prestel, 2012); *Fold Crumple Crush: The Art of El Anatsui*, directed by Susan Vogel (2011; Brooklyn, NY: Icarus Films, 2011), DVD.

[36] Brooklyn Museum of Art, "El Anatsui in Conversation with Susan Vogel," Public program in conjunction with the exhibition *Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui* (Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, February 10, 2013); Brooklyn Museum of Art, "Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui," Exhibition organized by the Akron Art Museum and by Kevin Dumouchelle at the Brooklyn Museum of Art February 8–August 4, 2013. http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/el_anatsui/#!lb_uri=gravity_grace.php.

assimilating pattern and design sources from many non-African cultures. Contemporary art critics such as Holland Cotter and Robert Storr also tend to focus on ways that African artists represent Africa in the international art world, rather than looking in many directions the expression of cross-cultural influence in Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Europe. It is still rare to see African and African diaspora artists shown in a similar context that explores common themes and approaches in their work. As Black artists are absorbed into the mainstream and included in many art fairs throughout the world, there is little investigation of the richly blended cultural contexts of their work, and the elitist nature of these events makes it difficult to see those relationships in terms of larger communities. The scholarship on Wiley's work is much more focused on African American and Western contemporary art, whereas the writing on Cave and Anatsui includes both Africanists and international art criticism, therefore transcending these categories somewhat. By bringing together these three artists, I explore how artworks' surfaces reveal personal perceptions of survival, protection, and spirituality.

Visual Counterpoint

These aesthetics of multiple, layered patterns create an experience that I call *visual counterpoint*, where the many rhythmic motifs are in dialogue with one another and cause a spatial tension between foreground and background layers. Also, these layers produce a symbiotic synergy that collectively infuses the artwork with movement, drama, and emotion. In jazz and blues music,

counterpoint is expressed through syncopation and spaces between notes as well as improvisational riffs in the music that add layers upon the main rhythms. Painter Stanley Whitney observes,

> Painting is like music. When I first saw Cézanne, I thought, this is like Charlie Parker, only painting. It's like polyrhythm, a beat and a beat and a beat and a beat, like call and response, you know – in the middle of the beat there's another beat.[37]

Many types of Black music, including gospel and hip-hop, are also characterized by call and response cadences that overlap with or repeat the dominant musical theme. In West African music, there are often more than fifteen percussion instruments that play overlapping and complementary rhythms. In visual counterpoint, repeating lines, designs, colors, or shapes create a pattern that seems to buzz with energy. Multiple patterning of these motifs is characterized by asymmetry or designs that unpredictably interrupt one another to produce the effect of improvisation. Not only does visual counterpoint create a compelling visual and aesthetic effect, but it also represents the disruption of historical narratives supplied by the dominant culture.

In the 20th century, pattern and decoration has been self-consciously employed by Black Atlantic artists to situate their work within frameworks of power and authority. In post-colonial Africa, the self-conscious development of African pattern aesthetics was an essential part of the formation of a modern state. Léopold Sédar Senghor defined the cultural production of the immediate post-independence era in Senegal by building an elaborate institutional and philosophical structure to promote Negritude through encouraging specific

[37] Stanley Whitney, "Stanley Whitney by David Reed," Bomb 123, (Spring 2013): 46.

aesthetic qualities in African art.[38] Senghor employed visual rhythm to symbolize the originality of African artistic production. Senghor's pan-African agenda argued that arts in a modernizing Africa would serve to revive traditional art aspects within a new national identity, and towards this end, he promoted many woven tapestries that emphasized African patterning and motifs.[39]

Similarly, in African American art, the relationship of rhythmic pattern and music was part of the self-conscious construction of African American aesthetics under the Harlem Renaissance. Musical qualities have been acknowledged in the work of abstract painters such as Norman Lewis in recent scholarship by Richard Powell and Anne Gibson as contributing new aesthetic qualities to abstract painting of the 1940s and 50s. Powell has argued for a "blues aesthetic" in works by Lewis and others that represent syncopated rhythms and call-and-response structures that are so culturally ingrained that they function as organizing principles across all aspects of Black cultural production.[40] This blues aesthetic is perhaps an aspect of Wiley's layering of hip-hop rhythms and certainly Cave's syncopated embellishment and patterns across the sculptural surfaces.

Finding many musical counterparts and inspirations for the artists in this dissertation, I discussed Wiley's references to hip-hop beats and fashion, Cave's associations with Black music such as New Orleans Jazz funerals, African percussion, and house music, and Anatsui's references to Ghanaian drumming

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[38] Elizabeth Harney, "Rhythm as the Architecture of Being: Reflections on un Âme Négre," *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal*, *1960-1995* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 19.
[39] Harney, "Rhythm as the Architecture of Being," 46.
[40] Graham Lock and David Murray, "Introduction – The Hearing Eye," *The Hearing Eye: Jazz and Blues Influences in African American Visual Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4.

and popular music that links to kente cloth weaving patterns. An important resource for these musical analogies was *The Hearing Eye: Jazz & Blues Influences in African American Visual Art* (2009), a volume of essays that attempts to bridge gaps in music criticism and art history through the relationships of rhythmic pattern and expressive qualities in music and visual art. It includes interviews with artists such as the painter Wadsworth Jarrell, who is part of the artist collective AFRICOBRA, and analyses of visual artists ranging from Norman Lewis and Romare Bearden to Jean-Michel Basquiat and Joe Overstreet. Including important contributions from Robert G. O'Meally, Robert Farris Thompson, Sara Wood, and many others, it expounds upon the synesthetic relationships between Black Atlantic visual art and music such as jazz and the blues as they are expressed through polyrhythmic pattern, improvisation, and off-beat phrasing. It also demonstrates the impact of particular jazz musicians such as Charlie Parker, Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, and John Coltrane on several generations of African American visual artists and the references to these musicians in artworks.

Additionally, Robert Farris Thompson's pivotal book *Aesthetic of the Cool: Afro-Atlantic Art and Music* (2011) served as an essential resource of the study over the past 40 years of Black Atlantic visual art and music based on the overarching principles of control and composure and their relationship to spirituality and transcendental balance in the universe.[41] Thompson's essays about music and rhythm exemplify a synesthetic understanding of the

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[41] Robert Farris Thompson, *The Aesthetic of the Cool: Afro-Atlantic Art and Music* (Pittsburgh and New York City: Periscope Publishing, 2011).

intertwining of performance and representation in much Black Atlantic art. In addition, his analyses of contemporary artists such as Betye Saar, Renée Stout, David Hammons, José Bedia, Keith Haring, and Jean-Michel Basquiat offer an important methodology for examining artists based in America and the Caribbean through the Africanist cultural contexts of their work. This book offers a historical framework for exploring Wiley's motifs analogous to hip-hop rhythmic beats and Cave's decoration related to African diaspora Carnival.

My exploration of pattern focuses on splendor and over-the-top decoration, as well as the hybridity of multiple designs, demonstrating that two or more agents work together to produce a result not obtainable by any of the agents independently. As in music, counterpoint is the relationship between two or more layers that are independent in contour and rhythm and are visually interdependent. Also, visual pattern and decoration influences flow in a similar way as musical influences spread across continents and genres. This dissertation addresses how Black Atlantic decoration and pattern in contemporary art translates experience in a synesthetic manner that relates to music, dance, language, and many vernacular traditions. I investigate the significance of artists' prioritization of pattern and decoration to tell marginalized and imaginative versions of history and adapt materials for their symbolic references to the past and their ability to trigger memories buried or forgotten.

Reorienting History with Pattern and Decoration

My first chapter analyzes Kehinde Wiley's work in terms of exoticized colonial European depictions of the Caribbean, images of the adorned Black dandy, incorporation of West African textiles patterns, and mining of street style from hip-hop culture. Wiley's grandiose "World Stage" series demonstrates his appropriation of patterns and fashion to create a transnational dialogue with specific cultures throughout the world, particularly Brazil, China, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Senegal, and Israel. He transforms historical narratives by employing compositions and gestures from historically canonical European paintings combined with patterns of the cultures that he engages in the series, to complicate grand narratives and tell an alternate version of history. In portraits of young men of color from New York City and these countries, he presents visual counterpoint with diverse pattern sources, including African and Indian textile motifs, Chinese fabrics and ceramics, and Jewish paper cuts and embroidered textiles. In many works, the patterns are as important a subject as the models themselves, amplifying a diverse perspective on male beauty. He plays upon the historical trope of the Black dandy, adding a homoerotic dimension to this theme to celebrate the bravado of urban youth and intertwine physical allure with folkloric designs from textiles, wallpaper, ceramics, and paper cuts. I argue that Wiley appropriates patterns to bestow pride and authority on the individual young men and to celebrate the aesthetic impact of many cultures included in the "World Stage" painting series.

The second chapter focuses on Nick Cave's sculptures entitled "Soundsuits," which employ dense surface textures and designs to disrupt hierarchies based on race, class, and other categories to push forward a socially conscious agenda. I explore how Cave's materials, scavenged and transformed from thrift stores, flea markets, and estate sales, re-contextualize these objects from their past use as he combines them into a cacophonous surface of patterns and textures. Cave incorporates old sweaters, embroidery, toys, twigs, and flamboyantly dyed hair in his sculptures of mythical beings. The transformation of the figure in Cave's Soundsuits is brought about through their dizzying patterns and textures, as well as the suggestion of the swishing, rattling, and tinkling sounds his materials might generate. Cave made his first Soundsuit in outraged reaction to the Rodney King beating in Los Angeles in March of 1991 by officers of the Los Angeles County Police Department. Cave retreated to the woods, and from branches he constructed a jacket and pants that rattled and crackled fiercely when he moved and transformed his own body into a type of power figure.[42] For Cave, the surface is encrusted with layers that protect the wearer and enable him or her to become part of a community or tribe, who he groups according to their heterogeneity or like kinds. Through upcycled materials and patterned layers, Cave's work embodies transatlantic connections that subvert a linear interpretation of history by adapting historical carnival characters to reflect contemporary issues of urban violence and environmental destruction. Cave sees his work provoking social change by enabling people of

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[42] UCLA Fowler Museum press release for exhibition: *Nick Cave: Meet Me at the Center of the Earth*, Jan 10–May 30, 2010, accessed May 20, 2010, http://newsroom.ucla.edu/portal/ucla/fowler-museum-presents-the-traveling-111442.aspx.

all kinds to dream and reconnect with their own humanity by connecting with the tangible beauty of his patterns. Cave states:

> My ability to make objects come alive is also a testament to my ability to have things resonate with their past history and usages alongside my personal though usually opaque meanings. I want my work to open up vistas to many cultures (including our own), explore a wide range of materials and formal approaches, and look inwardly as it examines personal and cultural identity in relation to the world.[43]

Cave's reorganization of found materials overlaid with layers of embellishment and patterns provokes his audiences to consider repressive aspects of colonial history through the subversive rituals of Carnival, and to appreciate the persistence of African spiritual adornment expressed in masquerade costumes and Vodun flags. Even without understanding these references, audiences can feel empowered by imagining their own bodies adorned and protected like his flamboyant power figures.

Many of the works that I analyze are part of Cave's recent project, *Meet Me at the Center of the Earth*, an exhibition that opened at the Yerba Buena Arts Center in 2010, travelled to the Seattle Art Museum in 2011, and toured on a smaller scale throughout the country. This project featured fifty Soundsuits and a number of performances that have taken place both inside the cultural center and museum and outside on the street. His large body of figurative sculptures and recent dance performances combine historical traditions of display and embellishment from African diaspora and African ceremony and blend these with adornment from European heraldry and the Catholic church. The chapter contributes an analysis of the ritualistic contexts of Cave's work and elaborates

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[43] Virginia Shore, "Cultural Crossroads: The Art Of Diplomacy At The United Nations," Department of State Official blog, accessed April 21, 2013, http://soundsuitshop.com/scene/news/cultural-crossroads.

on how his pattern and decoration promote social change by referring to the violence of colonial and modern history.

In the third chapter, I analyze El Anatsui's patterns that suggest history as a storehouse of memory that is reflected in the past lives of the materials themselves and his transformation of these elements by creating a patchwork of separate, moveable fragments. Anatsui often represents the passage of time through the worn textures of the surface and the synthesis of found objects in a multi-layered and patterned "cloth." Anatsui arranges fragments culled from the registers of African ideographic symbols and woven and stamped designs to allude to political events, environmental issues, and changing patterns of urban geography. His designs dislocate original systems of ordering whether he works in clay, wood, or metal. The materials also symbolize the touch and human "charge" of many hands through their use and reuse and also the collaboration of his assistants. His improvisational approach embraces flexibility since works can be installed and reorganized in many configurations, therefore enabling others to contribute to his ordering of patterns and textures.

For the past thirty years Anatsui's sculptures have borrowed characters from ideographic writing including those from *adinkra*, *nsibidi*, and *uli* ideographic systems. Writing has long been considered a determinant of civilization, but African graphic systems have often been excluded from this category even though they participate in the shared goals of written communication.[44] Anatsui's engagement with ideographic patterns reflects the interaction of West African

[44] Mary Nooter Roberts, Elizabeth Harney, Allyson Purpura, and Christine Mullen Kreamer, "Inscribing Meaning: Ways of Knowing," *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in association with the Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2007) 17.

peoples and power relationships both within the Continent and with the West. In recent work, he manipulates the surfaces of liquor bottle caps to produce metal "cloth" sculptures and architectural installations that have been shown in major cultural centers throughout the world. These works blend African motifs with non-African surfaces and building facades, therefore provoking an even more dynamic synthesis of pattern and form. The sparkling amalgam of patterns in his installations has propelled his work into the mainstream art world audience.

As Anatsui adapts these rich surfaces in architectural installations throughout the world, he responds to the textures of European, American, and Asian walls and buildings to contribute an Africanist aesthetic to these centers of culture and create cross-cultural conversations about history. Earlier sculptures implemented traditional ideographic scripts and textile patterns to reconfigure African history and his personal memories and experiences of migration as a result of war and political restructuring in West Africa. Most recently, the works reference history through the patina and past lives of the materials themselves. He implements pattern in a similar way to the processes of memory to reintegrate the gaps and holes to form a new order. Anatsui's works have always challenged the fiction of cultural purity and demonstrated the dialogue that Africa engages in with many other peoples throughout the world.

At first glance, it may seem that the work of Wiley, Cave, and Anatsui, it may seem that they share little in common in their media or subject matter. However, there are many points of intersection between these artists, particularly their challenge to Eurocentric perspectives of history and culture through heavy

pattern and ornamentation. Wiley and Cave approach pattern from a diasporic perspective that addresses the position of being historically marginalized in a dominant Euro-American culture. Wiley appropriates baroque wallpaper designs and European academic painting and blends this ornamentation with urban street culture, whereas Cave marries the ornate embellishment of European nobility with attire and body decoration from African and African diaspora ceremony. Wiley's overlapping patterns celebrate the beauty of his male subjects and establish a visual soundtrack for his subjects, while Cave's dense embellishment serves as a second skin for his figural sculptures and performances with dancers and musicians. Cave's patterns invigorate the body surface like the designs and textures of the African masquerade dancer or Mardi Gras Black Indian chief.

Both Cave and Anatsui construct from scavenged castoff materials that they synthesize into beautiful, iconic structures. Rather than new sculptural materials, they prefer elements that have a previous history and that include the symbolism of this past context. Cave and Anatsui both transform materials that relate to the colonial subjugation of Europe and Black Atlantic peoples: among many found materials, Cave implements fabric remnants and raffia that relates to the "pitchy patchy" character worn subversively by African diaspora revelers during Carnival festivities, and Anatsui builds his recent sculptures with liquor bottle caps that reference the use of liquor in the transatlantic slave trade. Both artists refer to the fragility of the environment and the disruption of ecosystems and communities as a result of corrupt industrial practices, wars, and violence both to the planet and to indigenous peoples. Cave's incorporation of animal

textures and masks corresponds to many African masquerades and Black Atlantic social and religious ceremonies, but his contexts are decidedly urban and relate to issues such as gang violence in inner city Chicago. Anatsui's re-purposing of old bottle caps, and his titles such as *Ozone Layer* and *Strips of Earth's Skin* imply the vulnerability of our planet, our overflowing landfills, and make clear our responsibility in protecting it from further harm.

Of the three artists, Anatsui's work demonstrates the most persistent investigation of classical African patterns and symbols, and increasingly responds to different topographies internationally. Anatsui's metamorphosis of bottle caps into sculptures resembling draped cloth signifies the importance of cloth as a monument in Africa and the diaspora. His layering of symbols and abstract marks implies that the fundamental roles of textile patterns and textural surfaces transcend the differences between artists living in Africa and those living in the diaspora. Similarly, his transformation of the wall surface through rhythmic patterns reminiscent of cloth designs references history through the many African textiles that commemorate historical events and the transformation of the symbol of liquor itself, which was used to barter for slaves in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. All three of these artists use material sumptuousness to seduce audiences to look beneath the surface, and to invest their work with a beauty and labor-intensiveness that was traditionally an inherent to religious art.

The synthetic use of pattern and decoration in each of these artists work alludes to a "nomadic aesthetic" that expresses Gilroy's transatlantic idea of

"belonging together" that transcends ethnic, geographic, and other differences.[45] The works' layered accumulation of surface designs and texture forges a stronger fiber that suggests levels of experience and shared identification. Each of these artists triggers memory and historical associations through the symbols that they incorporate into their works, changing the way that we reflect upon history by reorganizing systems of pattern. While Wiley subverts the traditional western portrait subject through his ornamental patterns, Cave repurposes scavenged fabrics and kitsch into a highly embellished and decorative casing for his figures, and Anatsui transforms the detritus of alcoholic beverages into luminous metal sheets of patterned gold, red, and black. Their creative processes integrate patterns and textures into a larger connective framework that represents the survival and resilience of African cultures and a multifaceted vision of history that represents many voices.

[45] Gilroy, "For the Transcultural Record," 25.

CHAPTER 2

KEHINDE WILEY'S ÀŞẸ: PATTERNS OF POWER

> The word, àşẹ, is literally translated and understood as "power", "authority", "command", "scepter", "vital force" in all living and non-living things and as "a coming-to-pass of an utterance" in the Yoruba cosmos … In order to capture and express verbally or visually the essence, character or primordial names of their subject, Yoruba artists have need of "ojú-inú", literally "inner eye", a special kind of understanding of a person, thing or phenomenon … Thus, it is with ojú-inú that an artist may know and use the right colors, designs and combination of motifs … all of which would imbue the artist's work with the proper identity and àşẹ of the òrìşà.[46]

This chapter contextualizes Kehinde Wiley's painting in terms of its relationship to Africanist aesthetics and argues that his transformation of conventional painting space is due to his radical use of pattern. This has not been the focus of other scholarship, since the majority of texts deal with Wiley's role as a post-Black artist who has been extremely successful in the global art market. Much scholarship has concerned itself with the identity of the artist, his methods of working with models, and the way in which he inserts himself into the canon of art history as much as the paintings he produces. I consider Wiley's work in regard to colonial textile and decorative arts of Asia, West Africa, and Europe, hip-hop style, and patterns that celebrate the Black dandy, odalisque and diva. These patterns dramatically transform the space of the painting to envelop the figure within an energizing atmosphere that positions him or her in a role of authority.

Although there are interesting parallels between African pattern and those of many other cultures throughout the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and the

[46] Rowland Abiodun, "Àşẹ: Verbalizing and Visualizing Creative Power through Art," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 24, fasc. 4 (November 1994): 309-311.

Americas, I do not attempt to derive the origin of specific designs through trade routes since similar motifs have developed in many parts of the world simultaneously and because many patterns reflect multiple sources, often drawing on some of the same traditions. The creolization of cultures is often expressed through a fusion of patterns and motifs from diverse origins. In the art world, this becomes even more complex because Wiley and many other artists fluidly draw from sources internationally as well as locally. One of Wiley's unique contributions is his layering of patterns over the figure to provide visual and psychological complexity to the historical portrait subject.

Kehinde Wiley's patterns derive from the aesthetic influences of his childhood and associations with wealth and power that were transmitted through early exposure to European painting. Wiley grew up in America, but his resourceful single mother, an African linguist and antiques dealer, provided him with early exposure to European art and aesthetics from many parts of the world. He and his five siblings lived in South Central Los Angeles, an area infested with violent gangs. His mother arranged for him to be bused to the suburbs for school and to participate in art education opportunities in local museums. During trips to the Huntington Art Gallery in San Marino, California, he learned about European master painters such as Gainsborough, Titian, Reynolds, Van Dyck, Rembrandt, Holbein, and others.[47] In addition to the subjects of the portraits, Wiley was inspired by the wallpaper patterns and design sensibilities of Rococo and Neoclassical art. He comments that he was struck by the artifice of these works,

[47] Joe Houston et al., *Kehinde Wiley: Columbus* (Columbus, Ohio: Columbus Museum of Art; Los Angeles, California: Roberts & Tilton, 2006), 8.

recognizing that these paintings served as propaganda for the power and dignity of great men and patrons.[48]

Wiley uses irony as a critique of power in his portraits that substitute men of color for European nobility or religious icons. He comments, “My work quotes historical sources, and it positions young Black men within that field of power.”[49] This strategy is typical of a generation of artists who have been defined as “post-Black” by curator and deputy director of the Studio Museum in Harlem Thelma Golden. She claims that these artists are “adamant about not being labeled ‘Black’ artists, though their work [is] steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of Blackness.”[50] Art historian Robert Hobbs argues that contemporary Black artists such as Wiley appeal to issues of race while not allowing this to dictate expression or vision. These artists show the effect of racism on their individual perspectives while asserting their right to identify with Blackness among other viable identities.[51] The opportunities and newfound privileges of a post-Black consciousness may be a reality for a handful of successful Black artists such as Wiley, who use their double consciousness of being Black in America to address many audiences. However, the term post-Black is problematic because it suggests that the struggles for civil rights, women’s rights, and gay rights accomplished all of its goals. It provides an easy way for the art world to dismiss the reality that most African American artists experience racism on a regular basis, and Wiley plays upon these double

[48] “Global Africa: Kehinde Wiley at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art,” YouTube video, uploaded April 28, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3zEsBersP0.
[49] Thelma Golden, *Freestyle* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001), 14.
[50] Robert Hobbs, Franklin Sirmans, and Michele Wallace, *30 Americans* (Florida: Rubell Family Collection, 2008), 43.
[51] Ibid.

standards and issues of marginalization in his work. Wiley's young alpha males with guarded demeanors inserted into fecund and lavish backdrops produce a slightly awkward parody. The dominance of the pattern as well as the heightened colors provide an extreme, over-the-top flamboyance that is more spectacular than the sober palette of its original source, establishing a contemporary context to the scene. In many portraits, he tows the line between kitsch, machismo, and dignity.

Wiley employs textiles and their patterns as both an immediate visual identifier of culture and as a raw material for constructing a unique personal space around the model. His work references interior décor because the paintings he appropriates would have been displayed in the salons of wealthy homes, hung on walls covered with silk damask or brocade textiles so that that the "sinuous floral tendrils of the textile designs escape from the background to caress and envelope the figures, drawing them deeper into the white European world of wealth and power."[52] He substitutes the typical view into a landscape, architectural space, or formal drapery backgrounds of the portraits with designs based on intricate silk wall coverings to re-contextualize his contemporary urban subjects within the manor house salon environment that he saw as a boy visiting the Huntington Art Gallery.[53] Perhaps the elaborate wallpapers also recall colonial American plantations with their aspirations to emulate European grandeur and wealth. However, Wiley's Black models, as in his *Alexander the Great* (2007) (Fig. 2.1), *Lord George Digby* and *Lord William Russell* (2007)

[52] Cecilia Gunzburger Anderson, "We Are What We Wear: Cross-Cultural Uses of Textiles," in *Pattern ID*, by Ellen Rudolph, (Ohio: Akron Art Museum, 2010), 74-75.
[53] Ibid.

(Fig. 2.2) and *Triple Portrait of Charles I* (2007) (Fig. 2.3) after Anthony Van Dyck, feature poses and clothing that simultaneously refute this power and the one-dimensionality of the European portrait subjects' heterosexuality and masculine arrogance. Additionally, urban clothing such as hoodies may invoke references to religious hooded garb, such as that of monks.

Fig. 2.1 Kehinde Wiley, *Alexander the Great*, oil and enamel on canvas, 6' x 5', 2007, Ann and Mel Schaffer Family Collection. Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery, New York and Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California

Fig. 2.2 Kehinde Wiley, *Lord George Digby* and *Lord William Russell*, oil on canvas, 72" x 96", 2007. Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery, New York and Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California

In his portraits, Wiley celebrates Black beauty and style through pattern and gesture in a way that is absent from most images of people of African descent in Western art history. In *Triple Portrait of Charles I* (2007), Wiley represents a young Black man in a triptych inspired by Anthony van Dyck's portrait of *King Charles I of England and Scotland from three angles* (1635-36) (Fig. 2.4), which shows the monarch from various angles in three different coats

Fig. 2.3 Kehinde Wiley, *Triple Portrait of Charles I*, oil and enamel on three canvases (ea. measuring 72" x 36"), 2007, Rubell Family Collection, Miami, FL. Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery, New York and Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California

Fig. 2.4 Anthony van Dyck, *King Charles I of England and Scotland from three angles,* oil on canvas, 84.4 x 94.4 cm, 1635, The Royal Collection, England

Fig. 2.5 Barkley Hendricks, *Sir Charles, Alias Willie Harris*, oil on canvas, 84 1/8" x 72", 1972, William C. Whitney Foundation

of brown, red, and black silk, each with a lacey collar. Wiley depicts his young subject against a sweetly colored wallpaper of scrolling acanthus vines, flowers, tendrils, and fleur-de-lis that appears inspired by nineteenth-century British arts and crafts or Art Nouveau, contained within gilt frames heavy with ornament. Wiley's rendition of the hoodie-clad youth fuses the materialism of European wealth and status with street fashion, and also refers to a garment that has become a symbol of racially-inflected sartorial profiling in the United States. The patterns of acanthus and leaves penetrate the foreground and asymmetrically merge with the plain sweatshirt. In the two side panels, the model eyes the viewer warily as the hoodie partly conceals his face and bright light casts shadows on his mahogany-brown face. The central image is more direct and the light hits his richly modeled features so that his skin glows, his lips appear fuller, and he looks out with youthful sangfroid. The contradiction of his beauty and the delicacy of the patterns with his masculine swagger establish a multi-dimensional

portrait, channeling the flamboyance of the flowing hair, delicate lace, silk, and pearl earring of van Dyck's image.

Patterns form the soundtrack, or "air," in which Wiley's subjects float and serve as a contrast or complement to the portrait figure. These motifs dominate most of his images, competing for attention with the figural subject, and intrude upon the figure's space. These designs communicate sartorial splendor, exoticism, fertility, and androgyny or the marriage of masculine and feminine beauty and power. In addition, they are usually signifiers of the culture he references since his models wear internationally hip styles of clothing rather than ethnically specific garb (except in the case of some of the paintings of African or Sri Lankan models), and they contrast with the emotional aloofness and cool composure of his sitters.

Coolness is a major element of Black style and hip-hop culture, a key Africanism in Wiley's work. Africanist and art historian Robert Farris Thompson has defined an "aesthetic of the cool" as a particular lexicon that pervades African dance and performance.[54] This "[c]ontrol, stability, and composure under the African rubric of the cool seem to constitute elements of an all-embracing aesthetic attitude."[55] Thompson asserts that hot is always balanced by cool, and that all the aesthetic canons work toward social and artistic synthesis.[56] The primary metaphor for this interpretation of coolness is control, and coolness is related to transcendental order and balance, and connects an individual with the

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[54] Robert Farris Thompson, "An Aesthetic of the Cool," *African Arts* 7, no. 1 (Autumn, 1973): 40-43, 64-67, 89-91.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.

ancestors.[57] The hot and the cool that Thompson describes in terms of dance and sculpture are also expressed through Wiley's manipulation of color and rhythmic pattern. Both the fashion and the repetition of vibrant patterns characterize Wiley's paintings with a quality of ephebism, the power that comes from youth, and a sense of balance that Thompson also describes as an intrinsic quality of African art and performance.[58]

Like Wiley's *Triple Portrait of Charles I*, Barkley Hendricks' painting *Sir Charles, Alias Willie Harris* (1972) (Fig. 2.5) demonstrates this coolness in response to van Dyck's *Charles I in Three Positions* (1635-1636). Certainly, Wiley is familiar with Hendricks's portrait of a small-time drug hustler that emphasizes the subject's red coat, signifying "not only his regal status in the mostly Black neighborhood that borders Yale near Dixwell Avenue but his refusal to acquiesce to a conservative, Ivy League standard of dress."[59] Wiley's painting is a nod both to the Van Dyck original and also Hendricks' image that reasserts the importance of bravado style in African American culture. Wiley's substitution of the hoodie for Hendricks' red calf-length overcoat makes this a twenty-first-century fashion statement, and the triumvirate has been separated into frontal and profile views in the triptych rather than a back, side, and three-quarter view of the subject. Wiley's subject does not dominate the space of the painting as does Hendricks,' but the pattern fills the white ground on which the former subject floats. Also, Wiley's portrait is less concerned with the model's character and more interested in the relationship to an art historical context. In a similar

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[57] Robert Farris Thompson, "An Aesthetic of the Cool II," in *The Aesthetic of the Cool: Afro-Atlantic Art and Music* (Pittsburgh and New York City: Periscope Publishing, 2011), 16.
[58] Robert Farris Thompson, *African Art in Motion* (Berkley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1974), 5.
[59] Richard Powell, *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 145.

way to the charisma of Hendricks' portrait subjects, Wiley's models express coolness through their attitudes and gestures that communicate authority as they are enveloped by a commanding pattern that affirms and offsets their glory. The contrast of ornately patterned environments that often intrude into the space of the blustering brown subjects causes a theatrical disjunction, as if these young men are interlopers rather than inheritors of legacy.

Wiley comments that viewers have traditionally experienced the foreground, middle ground, and background in terms of chronological time, but his paintings lack the spatial separation of foreground and background."[60] He reflects on his exhibition *Columbus* (2007) at the Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio,

> There was a question for me about the field, and the sitter, the sense of the portrait and the landscape … these power dynamics I try to investigate … [F]oreground and the background … are sort of fighting for dominance within the picture.[61]

Wiley wants there to be a competition between the foreground and background space, complicating the spatial hierarchy of academic portraiture. He attempts to dispense with the academic painting convention of putting the most important, usually male figure in the foreground and the lesser figures, often women, children, or animals, in the background. He consciously develops a tension between the spaces of the painting through patterns that compete for attention with the figurative subject.

Wiley's patterns add complexity to the one-dimensional masculinity of the figure by playing upon the Western association of intricate designs and decadence, Orientalism, and femininity based on their connection with the history

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[60] Kehinde Wiley and Lola Ogunnaike, "Kehinde Wiley in Conversation with *Today Show* Contributor Lola Ogunnaike" (public program at The Jewish Museum, in conjunction with exhibition *Kehinde Wiley / The World Stage: Israel*, March 15, 2012).
[61] "Global Africa: Kehinde Wiley at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art," YouTube video.

of women's craft such as embroidery and lacework. His design is not a superficial ornament but is symbolic and integral to the deeper meaning of the image. Thompson observes,

> [In African art,] design can be critical as in Kongo saying *tunta-tunta dya nitu e tunta-tunta dya nza* 'the dynamic of the body reflects the dynamic of cosmos'—meaning that red on one side of the face and Black on other is not just design, it's the person traversing through light and dark, night and day.[62]

Similarly, Wiley's models are surrounded by ornamental designs as a celebration of their beauty, uniqueness, and worthiness of subjecthood.

Wiley's work concentrates on men, and he notes that the absence of women in portraiture is the norm for much of art history, primarily because of the misogynistic construction of power as the sole territory of men.[63] Reminiscent of Matisse's paintings of odalisques in which the model becomes a curvaceous shape embedded among lush textile patterns, Wiley exoticizes and eroticizes the male body in a homoerotic gender switch. His seductive male figures embellished and embraced by patterns both undermine and elevate the power of the Black male subject. Wiley's portraits reverse masculine and feminine roles by subjecting the model to the eroticizing gaze that has traditionally been reserved for female subjects, especially emphasizing the aesthetic qualities of their skin, musculature, and youthful vitality offset by decorative motifs. In spite of the authoritative stance of the models in their regal patterned spaces, their faces and bodies express a sense of vulnerability and even isolation. By enticing the viewer to admire the youthful subject, Wiley marries the historical objectification of the Black male body with a new symbol of authority, wealth, and

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[62] Robert Farris Thompson, email message to author, April 9, 2011.
[63] Wiley and Ogunnaike, "Kehinde Wiley in Conversation with *Today Show* Contributor Lola Ogunnaike."

dominance. Representations of hip-hop flashiness can often appear pejorative, but in Wiley's work, there is a selective blending of detail and the dignity of the portrait subject.

Some of the African American subjects in Wiley's paintings may be *banjees*, a term mostly associated with New York City from the 1980s or earlier to describe young Latino, Black, or multiracial men who have homosexual sex and who dress in stereotypical masculine urban fashion to express masculinity, hide their sexual orientation, and attract male partners.[64] This word was referenced in Jennie Livingston's celebrated film *Paris is Burning* (1991), and it still has currency in contemporary gay balls that feature a "banjee realness" category.[65] Alternately, the term "homothugs" also describes minority males, who are primarily homosexual and who adopt hip hop culture, music, and style of dress perhaps to counter other stereotypes about gay culture. Keith Boykin observes that "[a]ided by the hypermasculinity of hip hop culture, Black homosexual identity in the nineties evolved away from house music and other gay-identified representations of self and instead established the homothug and the down low."[66] The term "down low" is another African American slang designation applied to Black men who keep a hyper-masculine cover but who secretly engage in homosexual sex while having primary relationships with

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[64] Tim'm T. West, "Deconstructing Banjee Realness," posted May 25, 2006, http://www.bravesoulcollective.org/perspectives/topic-of-the-month/maskulinity/deconstructing-banjee-realness/.
[65] Guy Trebay, "Legends of the Ball: Paris is Still Burning," *The Village Voice*, January 11, 2000; *Paris is Burning*, directed by Jennie Livingston, film (Santa Monica, California: Miramax Films; Los Angeles, California: Off-White Productions, Inc.; Fremont, California: Prestige, 1990).
[66] Keith Boykin, *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies, and Denial in Black America* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2005), 98, 234.

women.[67] Yet as Boykin argues in his book *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies and Denial in Black America*, clandestine homosexual relations are not unique to African American men. These relationships reveal a breach of honesty and have occurred among all races since ancient times due to homophobia, social stigma of same-sex relations and a failure to address these issues in the open.[68] African American codes for sexual orientation are problematic when applied to Wiley's paintings of models from many other parts of the world, although these societies are full of their own stereotypes about straight and gay men. Wiley's selection of models seems to be based on his interest in the unique face, style, swagger, or intensity of each individual rather than his sexual orientation. Most importantly, Wiley's juxtaposition of a delicate pattern and dramatic complementary colors against a muscular male body emphasizes the complexity of the individual and his charismatic attractiveness to both male and female viewers.

Fig. 2.6 Chris Ofili, *The Holy Virgin Mary*, paper collage, oil paint, glitter, polyester resin, map pins, elephant dung on linen, 1996, collection of David Walsh

Like Wiley, British painter Chris Ofili employs gold and heavily ornamental altarpiece-like surfaces in paintings to conflate sacred and art historical figures with images culled from popular culture or even pornography. For example, in his controversial work *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996) (Fig. 2.6), Ofili combines photographic images of Black women's exposed vaginas and backsides floating

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[67] J.L. King, On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of 'Straight' Black Men Who Sleep with Men (New York: Broadway Books, a Division of Random House, 2004), 1-6.
[68] Keith Boykin, *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies, and Denial in Black America*, 27-37.

in an abstract sea of gold with the Madonna's simplified brown face, her turquoise gown, and clumps of elephant dung that serve as an exposed breast and support the canvas' base. Ofili's combination of the highs and lows of subject and erotica is somewhat parallel to Wiley's incorporation of hip-hop style clothing and semen in his riffs on canonical artworks. For instance, in Wiley's rendition of *Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps* (2005) (Fig. 2.7), a camouflage-clad Black youth on a rearing white steed wears a bandana rather than Napoleon's famous black hat and is offset by a Neoclassical European wallpaper pattern of gold upon red rather than a dramatic landscape. Inspired by Jacques-Louis David's painting *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps at Grand-Saint-Bernard* (1801) (Fig. 2.8), Wiley blends the political and erotic through an onanistic pattern of tiny sperm that swim across the painted surface. These sperm ornament each corner of the work's gold frame that is topped by a male head surrounded by phalluses. Both Ofili and Wiley use sexually charged details from popular culture sources and heavily embellished materials to transplant their subjects from the coded eroticism of art

Fig. 2.7 Kehinde Wiley, *Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps*, oil on canvas, 108" x 108", 2005. Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery

Fig. 2.8 *Jacques-Louis David, Bonaparte Crossing the Alps at Grand-Saint-Bernard*, 1801

history to street vernacular and the earthy association of power with the sexualized body.

Wiley's appropriation of art historical contexts, design and pattern sensibilities of earlier periods and remakes of canonical artworks associate his work with the important precedent of an earlier generation of artists such as Faith Ringgold, Emma Amos, and Robert Colescott. Ringgold's *The French* Collection (1990-91) (Fig. 2.9) are twelve panels that take from iconic works in the Western canon such as da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (1503-6), Henri Matisse's *La Danse* (1909-10), Pablo Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907), and the architecture of the Louvre itself. Ringgold reinvestigates these artworks from the perspective of a Black American alter ego, Willia Marie Simone, who goes to live in Paris in the 1920's. Amos also references masterworks of modern art history, particularly focusing on primitivism and the global oppression of women and people of color in *Work Suit* (1994) (Fig. 2.10), based on a nude self-portrait by Lucien Freud. Art historian Sharon Patton observes, "[i]n *Work Suit*, Amos' inversion of the ubiquitous Western image of the male artist holding his palette of paints and brushes with a reclining nude model represents "the covenant of silence about the prerogatives that white artists have."[69] Pattern is an organizing force in Ringgold's quilt paintings and Amos' decorative textile borders, and it positions their heroic female protagonists in a field of power and beauty. Like Ringgold and Amos, Wiley adopts specific patterns and imagery that claims his place in the lineage of great white male painters. He also deals ironically with issues of

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[69] Sharon F. Patton, "Emma Amos: Thinking Paint," Kenyon College Olin Art Gallery, 2000-2001, accessed September 2, 2011, http://www2.kenyon.edu/artgallery/exhibitions/0001/amos/amos2.htm.

race and gender within the artist/model relationship through the awareness of his position as a Black man projecting a homoerotic gaze on other men of color, rather than a female (or white male) model.

Wiley's renditions of canonical European painting provoke a tension of

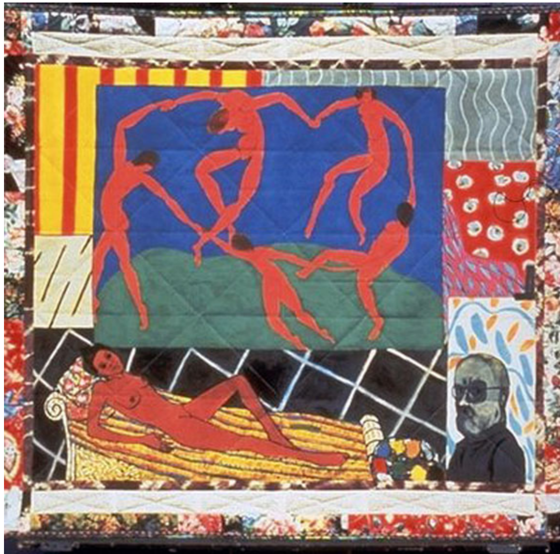

Fig. 2.9 Faith Ringgold, *Matisse's Model (The French Collection) Part 1: #5*, acrylic on canvas and fabric, 1991

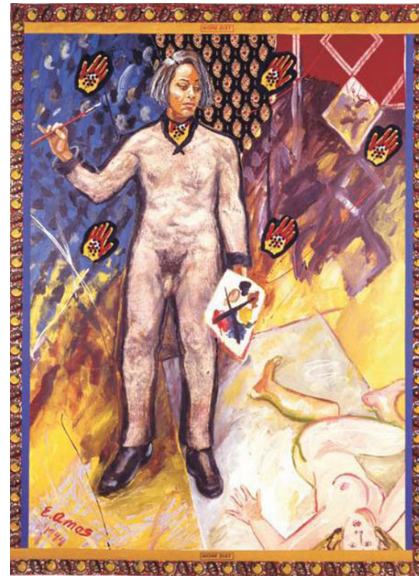

Fig. 2.10 Emma Amos, *Work Suit*, acrylic on linen, photo transfer, African fabric collage and borders, 74.5" x 54.5", 1994

highs and lows that characterize Pop Art's romance with commercialism and remakes of canonical paintings, and have also been explored in earlier works by Colescott. Colescott's paintings such as *Les Demoiselles d'Alabama vestidas* (1985) (Fig. 2.11) and *Venus I* (1996) inject the Black artist into mainstream Western art discourse and have sparked controversy through their engagement with dichotomies of high/low, vernacular/elite, and good/bad painting through humor and satire. *Les Demoiselles d'Alabama vestidas*, for example, parodies Picasso's iconic cubist image of prostitutes, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) (Fig. 2.12). Colescott transforms Picasso's primitivist, anonymous group of nude figures into a saucy, multiracial group of women that is individualized through

their range of complexions and sexy clothing. Wiley's seductive males in reclining poses similarly co-opt the history of the female exotic nude, such as odalisques by Delacroix and Ingres.

Fig. 2.11 Robert Colescott, *Les Demoiselles d'Alabama vestidas*, acrylic paint on canvas, 96" x 92", 1985

Fig. 2.12 Pablo Picasso, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, oil on canvas, 8' x 7'8", 1907, Museum of Modern Art, New York

Wiley's inclusion of his models' names in many works combines with the visual context established by pattern to establish the history and culture of his portrait subjects. Henry Louis Gates wrote in his 1989 book of critical theory, *The Signifying Monkey: Towards a Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* that in Afro-American discourse "signifyin(g)" is an open-ended process, which depends on and plays off of previous expression.[70] What is said in words is understood in terms of context and other factors, rather than in and of itself alone. The symbolism and double entendre of Black vernacular language allows

[70] Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: a Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 44-88.

for a more creative interpretation of the meaning, as well as a subversive manipulation of language. Naming is an example of this signifying since a good number of African Americans have exploited naming as a way to bestow dignity and authority on the next generation. Names for male children names such as "Sir," "Mister," "King," and "Prince," such as the famous American musician, actor, and producer, and for girls such as "Princess," "Precious," and "Justice" have been a way of instilling a sense of respect that could not be attained during segregation and even after the Civil Rights period. In that very direct way of collapsing title and name, African Americans have attempted to claim a sense of authority and self-determination that has historically been denied them. Other names signal the culture and ethnicity of Wiley's models, such as those from Brazil, Senegal, Nigeria, and Israel, suggesting the global sphere in which he works.

Wiley's employment of young African American models invokes the reality of survival as a Black man in America and gives visibility to a population that has been treated almost exclusively by derogatory stereotypes in the media and otherwise made invisible, particularly in the Western art museum. Wiley reflects,

> I try to use the Black male body in my work to counter the absence of that body in museum spaces throughout the world. But the work also resists any type of normalizing or corrective impulse that you might expect a young Black artist to investigate.[71]

Wiley's process of celebrating young Black men runs counter to the landmines that African American males face, whether by their own actions or by their association with other Black men. Writes Michael A. Fletcher,

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[71] Christine Y. Kim, "Christine Y. Kim and Malik Gaines in Conversation with Kehinde Wiley," in *Kehinde Wiley, The World Stage: Africa, Lagos~Dakar*, by Thelma Golden et al. (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2008), 11.

> Being a Black man in America can mean inhabiting a border area between possibility and peril, to feel connected to, defined by, even responsible for other Black men … of sometimes wondering whether their accomplishments will be treated as anomalies, their individuality obscured by the narrow images that linger in the minds of others.[72]

Persistent stereotypes about Black male athleticism, hypersexuality, and criminality are ever-present in the media. At an abysmal rate, Black male youth fall prey to gang and street violence, fail to graduate high school, and become incarcerated for petty crimes. These issues directly relate to the population of men that Wiley elevates and exonerates in his work.

Patterns of Power in the World Stage

Wiley's monumental "World Stage" series shows a conscious development of pattern to create a global conversation with specific cultures throughout the world. Wiley began this series not long after the establishment of the international coalition known as BRICS — Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, the fastest growing economies in the world. In this series he provides visual counterpoint with diverse pattern sources, including African textile motifs, Chinese fabrics and ceramics, and Jewish paper cuts and embroidered textiles. In search of his own origins, Wiley first traveled to Nigeria in 1997 to meet his father, which was very important because he had no images of him.[73] Wiley is a twin (Kehinde means second-born), and his mother named him after the Yoruba *Ibeji* twins, although his father was of the Ibibio tribe. This travel as well as other journeys abroad inspired him to engage in a dialogue with cultural

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[72] Michael A. Fletcher, "At the Corner of Progress and Peril," *Washington Post*, June 2, 2006, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/01/AR2006060102184.html.

[73] Thelma Golden et al., *The World Stage: Africa, Lagos~Dakar, Kehinde Wiley* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2008), 8.

and art historical influences from China, the Caribbean, West Africa, India, Sri Lanka, and Israel. Of all these series, the "World Stage: Lagos~Dakar" began as a quest to find his own origins, in a process of self-discovery and it nourished his richer and more specific establishment of pattern as a primary subject in of itself.

Like an international corporation himself, Wiley brings his "World Stage" project to major art centers that also reflect new markets and he employs elaborate patterns to express a synthesis of cultural, art historical, and design influences. As Wiley describes it,

> "The World Stage" is a painting project that allows me to expand portrait making outside the city streets in America, where I traditionally have been working, and go to different nations throughout the world and use models who are sourced from the street.[74]

When scouting for models, Wiley presents images of art historical works and allows young men to choose the pose. Wiley seeks models based on how they are dressed, how they move, and how they look in the arena of the street. Wiley remarks, "When looking for models, I'm looking for someone who has a spirit of self-possession."[75] He approaches young men who exemplify the stylish, urban African American youth that have made hip-hop music and fashion an international phenomenon, and that epitomize coolness. Usually, Wiley organizes a photo-shoot the same day that he meets the model, allowing for a spontaneous and chance opportunity to become the subject of a visual monument. He has worked most comfortably, perhaps, with African-American models, but as the World Stage project has incorporated models from Brazil, West Africa, Indian, Sri Lanka, and Israel, his relationship with these societies

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[74] "The World Stage: Africa, Lagos ~ Dakar," YouTube video, edited by Joe Nanashe and original music by Patrick Grant, uploaded July 13, 2008. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nq8Yr-Se7mc&feature=player_embedded#at=274.
[75] "Profile of artist Kehinde Wiley on the *Today Show*," YouTube video, uploaded May 22, 2006. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZkRszO8DKI.

has become more complex. Through his appropriation of culturally specific patterns, he communicates both an identification with and also estrangement from the subject that he depicts. Wiley comments, “I go through all the art history books with my models. They choose moments in art history that mean something to them … aspects of themselves that will then become public ... but at the same time, I’m painting myself.”[76] Perhaps part of Wiley’s identification with the subject is his appreciation for male beauty as a gay man, but it is also an exploration of self.

The paintings play with the idea of an authentic moment in which he heightens colors, removes extraneous elements, and adds designs. Wiley downloads his photographs of models onto a disk, manipulates them, and projects them onto canvas. With Photoshop, Wiley places layers of textile-inspired designs to the background and foreground to design a new space for his figures. He then draws the images onto the canvas and applies a sepia under-painting. After the sepia under-painting, he completes the final portrait. There are a total of three different layers of painting: the under-painting, then the building of forms, and finally a sweep of glazing and heightening of color and shade.[77] His colors and patterns often come from memories of being in a specific place, and then he alters the truth of the scene according to associations.[78] Says Wiley,

> I use Photoshop not only to take what you think was that actual moment in real life, but to alter the colors, alter the clothing, alter certain features, fatten the lips,

[76] “Kehinde Wiley Character Approved Commercial, USA Network,” YouTube video, uploaded May 12, 2010. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xu03cYbvlAA&playnext=1&list=PL929C3AD5BB239635.
[77] Brendan Davis, “You're more likely to be struck by lightning than to become a successful artist”, Interview with Kehinde Wiley for *Art Interview Online Magazine*, uploaded September 5, 2008, accessed March 3, 2009, http://www.art-interview.com/Issue_009/interview_Wiley_Kehinde.html.
[78] Wiley and Ogunnaike, “Kehinde Wiley in Conversation with *Today Show* Contributor Lola Ogunnaike.”

> broaden the eyes … you are getting a manufactured, quasi-truth that approximates a moment, but never quite is there. In most of the World Stage series, there is always a Black American boy in the room."[79]

The resulting image is a type of fiction and fantasy, which is in stark opposition to the desire to see an anthropological truth when looking at people from other countries.[80] He asserts authorship of the story he constructs about the model and also confronts the viewer's expectations and assumptions.

The World Stage: China

"The World Stage: China" paintings took as their source of inspiration social realist posters from Maoist China and emphasize issues of Black masculine identity juxtaposed with macho poses of communist propaganda and the delicacy of Chinese floral patterns. Wiley found a correlation between ways that Black identity has and continues to be manufactured and manipulated by the media and society, and how Chinese national identity was distorted during the Maoist era.[81] In the way that Warhol's images of Mao were a commentary on celebrity, fame, propaganda, and image saturation, Wiley also invokes the kitsch aspect of propaganda images. The series references Chinese culture through the delicate patterns, colors inspired by Chinese porcelain and silks, and gestures from the social realist posters.

Wiley's designs forge a strange hybrid between the propaganda of young Chinese men and women as symbols of revolutionary power, intricate floral motifs and honeyed colors of Chinese decorative arts, and the "gangsta" style of

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[79] *Global Africa: Kehinde Wiley at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art*, uploaded April 28, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3zEsBersP0.
[80] "The World Stage: Africa, Lagos ~ Dakar," YouTube video.
[81] Jennifer Jankauskas, et al., "Kehinde Wiley: The World Stage: China," *Kehinde Wiley: The World Stage: China* (New York: Kehinde Wiley Studio, 2007), 5.

his African American models. A number of paintings feature motifs of butterflies such as *Romaine I* (2007) and *Regard the Class Struggle As the Main Link in the Chain* (2007), and others have a bright palette, and floral designs that encroach on the subject's space. Moreover, in works such as *Carry Out the Four Modernisations of the Fatherland* (2007) (Fig. 2.13), the bold black of the larger figure's hair acts as a compositional device that is similar to Chinese and Japanese paintings in which floating black shapes serve as a major design element. Wiley's exploitation of gesture and design is also reminiscent of the graphic role within the Black Power Movement's employment of posters by Emory Douglas, the revolutionary artist of the Black Panther Party.

When comparing *Carry Out the Four Modernisations of the Fatherland* to its original poster source (Fig. 2.14), Wiley has eliminated the smiles from the models' faces, and slightly altered the angle of the raised arm on the figure to the left so it approximates the gesture of Black power, minus the clenched fist. The warm palette of the poster has been changed to an overall icy blue background with the figures dressed in yellow and pink similar to the original poster colors. Whereas the poster features a pattern of concentric circles that provides a sense of depth in the image, Wiley has flattened the space of his version through the emphatic repetition of similar forms. The very intricate floral pattern contrasts with the stocky build of the model to the left. The "butch" model with the Black power Afro hairstyle contrasts with the more delicate, short-haired model with hazel eyes, who wears bright pink. The opposing gestures of the two models,

Fig. 2.13 Kehinde Wiley, *Carry Out the Four Modernisations of the Fatherland*, oil on canvas, 96" x 72", 2007

Fig. 2.14 Carry Out the Four Modernizations of the Fatherland, poster, 1981, China

one active and the other passive, also convey the machismo and polarized genders of the original source of social realist propaganda.

Aesthetically, the "World Stage: China" series is a deliberately ironic mix of African American and Asian stereotypes. The gestures of the Black Panther party's angry Black man meet Chinese communist zeal. These stereotypes are further complicated by the Asian motifs and colors that "feminize" the models' space, playing upon a stereotype of Asian men comparable to the Orientalist stereotype in which the Oriental man is portrayed as feminine and therefore weak (although sexually threatening to white, Western women).[82] The intricate patterns suggest pre-colonial and colonial Chinese art that was associated by Europeans with opulence and became the plunder of imperialist conquest. Wiley's overlapping patterns circumvent the figures' macho body language and

[82] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House Inc., 1978).

seduce the viewer to look more closely. The presence of African American models negates a true interaction with Chinese culture and with Asian men. Additionally, the models' smiles in some works diminish the sense of coolness that pervades other works and ground them in hip-hop aesthetics. It also somehow undercuts the masculine identity of the models, so that they appear to placate the viewer rather than stand proudly and assertively. The element of awkwardness and discomfort on the part of the smiling models is palpable.

In a similar way to Yasumasa Morimura's 1989 photographic drag version of Manet's *Olympia* (Fig. 2.15), Wiley's "World Stage: China" series emphasizes the disjunction of a male body assuming a female art historical role. These images' obvious artificiality comments on intolerance of homosexuality in many macho cultures and also the objectification of the female subject in Western and Asian art history. Art historian Norman Bryson argues that Morimura's gender bending and masquerading as a woman challenges the Western colonial construction of Asia as female, and the idea of Asian males as effeminate.[83] Morimura titles his image *Portrait (Futago)*, meaning twin. A twin himself, Wiley's rendition of the models exaggerates their qualities of sameness and difference.

Fig. 2.15 Yasumasa Morimura, *Portrait (Futago)*, photograph, 1989

[83] Norman Bryson, "Three Morimura Readings," in *Art + Text*, no. 52 (1995): 74-79.

Wiley's models in this series appear stiff and artificial similar to men in drag that can seem overdone in their gestures and style.

In the "World Stage: China" series there is a feeling that these models have been thrust into a drama that is not their own. Musician and author Greg Tate observes, "the figures in Wiley's paintings don't have a story to tell so much as a story they've been hijacked into—maybe to help toss the more mundane versions into grim relief."[84] Perhaps more than his original rococo-inspired portraits, the aesthetic qualities of rhythmic pattern or the "cut," as James Snead has called a Black cultural insistence on repetition, are even more developed in this series.[85] Wiley's manipulation of pattern to define an artificial space is heightened when the patterns physically intrude on the space of the figure, adding to this surreal drama. In this series, Wiley conflates Black power gestures with those of communist propaganda and at the same time he undermines these stereotypes with his "effeminate" patterns and soft colors.

The World Stage: Brazil

In contrast to the "World Stage: China", Wiley's "World Stage: Brazil" series is characterized by patterns of tropical flowers and colors of the jungle. Wiley found textiles for his ornate backgrounds in Rio's Sahara market.[86] He selected many fabrics with floral or jungle patterns of tropical birds, suggesting

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[84] Greg D. Tate, "Kehinde Wiley's Cipher Syntax," in *The World Stage: China*, essays by Jennifer Jankauskas, Greg Tate, Paul D. Miller (aka Dj Spooky), (Sheboygan, Wisconsin: John Michael Kohler Arts Center; New York: Kehinde Wiley Studio, 2007), 12.

[85] Paul D. Miller aka Dj Spooky, "Painting by Numbers, Kehinde Wiley," in *The World Stage: China*, essays by Jennifer Jankauskas, Greg Tate, Paul D. Miller (aka Dj Spooky), (Sheboygan, Wisc.: John Michael Kohler Arts Center; New York: Kehinde Wiley Studio, 2007), 22.

[86] Brian Keith Jackson, "The Promise of Life, The Life of Promise," *Kehinde Wiley, The World Stage: Brazil,* by Brian Keith Jackson and Kimberly Cleveland (Culver City, CA: Roberts & Tilton, 2009), 12.

stereotypes of a lush and Edenic Brazil untouched by modernization. The models themselves had never seen Wiley's local sources of inspiration, such as the statues and monuments found throughout Rio, although Wiley used them to represent those symbols of history, courage, and power.[87] Most of the models for this series come from a region called Vidigal, one of Rio de Janeiro's over 600 *favelas* or slums, which are much like public housing in major cities in the United States, where the so-called "haves" and "have-nots" live in close proximity.[88] Rio is known for its tropical beaches, beautiful people, and wild Carnival celebrations, but it is also a site of vast poverty, violence, homelessness, and drug trafficking. Brazilian artist Vik Muniz's photographic portraits of impoverished Brazilians beginning with *The Sugar Children* (1996) and his images of *catadores* or self-designated pickers of recyclable materials who work in the largest garbage dump, Jardim Gramacho, located on the outskirts of Rio, were documented in his 2010 film *Waste Land* that testifies to the extraordinary hardships and resilience of these individuals. None of this painful reality is present in Wiley's choice of colors or patterns.

However, a number of the works in this series refer to the history of slavery in Brazil and colonial representations of this history. His *Alegoria à Lei do Ventre Livre (Allegory of the Law of Free Birth)* (Fig. 2.16) is a painted version of Bressae's gesso sculpture in Rio's National Historical Museum that serves as an allegory of the 1871 law that awarded freedom to children who were born

[87] Ibid., 16.
[88] Ibid., 10.

to slave parents.[89] However, this law bought slave owners time against the abolitionists by requiring that unless the owners were compensated, these

Fig. 2.16 Kehinde Wiley, ***Alegoria à Lei do Ventre Livre***, oil on canvas, 2009

Fig. 2.17 A.D. Bressae, ***Alegoria à Lei do Ventre Livre***, plaster, 1871

Fig. 2.18 Detail of A.D. Bressae, ***Alegoria à Lei do Ventre Livre***, plaster, 1871

children must stay with their slave parents until they were 21 years of age; this irony is suggested by the less than joyful expression of Wiley's model in contrast to the original sculpture in which a smiling Black boy proudly holds a notice of the law in his right hand and a broken chain in the other (Figs. 2.17 and 2.18).[90]

Wiley's work features a pattern of exotic orange and yellow flowers and toucans against a buzzing turquoise background. The model's hair is bleached blond against his brown skin and he looks down at the viewer with a hint of contempt in his simple red sleeveless shirt and purple baggy pants. The palette glows with complementary colors and dense foliage, as in a jungle. Perhaps the youngest model in Wiley's portraits, the boy still appears older (perhaps twelve)

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[89] Kimberly Cleveland, "Kehinde Wiley's Brazil: The Past Against the Future," in *Kehinde Wiley, The World Stage: Brazil*, 26.
[90] Ibid., 26.

than the original subject of the sculpture and projects a toughness beyond his years.

Wiley's exoticization of the Black male physique points to the Western art historical objectification of people of color in painting and sculpture, as well as ethnographic photography and pornography. By addressing the impact of colonization on Afro-Caribbean art, Wiley similarly shifts the focus from European high art to that of Latin American and Caribbean history and culture. Even more than his presentation of the exotic, brown body, Wiley's appropriation of tropical patterns for the "World Stage: Brazil" reinforces tropes of the exotic constructed in paintings and tourist imagery for the last two centuries. In *An Eye for the Tropics, Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque*, art historian Krista Thompson investigates tourism campaigns and representations of Jamaica and the Bahamas between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[91] She critiques these representations and their implications on race and the visual imaginary, tracing how Jamaica was visually constructed through eighteenth-century plantation estate paintings and naturalists' depictions of the Anglophone Caribbean. She explores works by British flower painter Marianne North and the American artist Martin Johnson Heade, who depicted Jamaica in 1871 and in the 1860s respectively, focusing on the most eccentric forms of nature.[92] Thompson notes that "[a]t the same time that North and Heade heightened and exoticized the island's tropical appearance, they ordered and

[91]Krista A. Thompson, An Eye for the Tropics, Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
[92] Ibid., 42-44.

subsumed the environment into naturalism's classificatory schemas.[93] In later photographs, Black Jamaicans are shown as peripheral props to the main photographic subject such as bananas and other crops. Instead, White tourists are featured as socially naturalized as the Bahamian landscape through "social photography," whereas Blacks were pictorially dispossessed from the island's environment by barely being visible.[94] By making central, visible, and heroic the youthful bodies of Brazil's lowest class, Wiley deconstructs a similar history that took place in Brazil.

However, his paintings also continue the trope of Brazil as an exotic, sensual, and lush Eden. The stereotype of Brazil as a brightly colored, unindustrialized paradise as well as its naturalist's engagement with the local floral and fauna is suggested by Wiley's almost exclusive choice of floral patterns as backgrounds for the series. Although it is the fifth largest economy in the world, until recently, Brazil has been symbolized almost exclusively by Carnival, samba, and soccer to international markets.[95] Wiley's engagement with these stereotypes call to mind the 1959 film *Black Orpheus* by Marcel Camus that recreates the Orpheus and Eurydice myth and features the Latin American pop Bossa Nova within the Rio de Janeiro Carnival. This beautiful film suggests that the *favelistas*, the impoverished people who live in the Brazilian shanty towns or favelas, are simple yet happy folks, always filled with song and dance. Yet Wiley does not reinvent this fiction, and his focus on the favelistas is quite different

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[93] Ibid, 45.
[94] Ibid, 135.
[95] Benny Spiewak, "Inside Views In Brazil And The IP World, It's Tropicalization Time!" *Intellectual Property Watch*, uploaded on March 4, 2011, http://www.ip-watch.org/weblog/2011/03/04/in-brazil-and-the-ip-world-its-tropicalization-time/.

because it engages a more critical investigation of their vibrant culture through a dialogue with Brazilian art historical references.

The World Stage: Lagos~Dakar

Of all the cultures in which he engaged, Wiley had a personal identification with West Africa since it is where his father came from and also the source of his African American heritage. This series gave him an opportunity for direct engagement with West African history, popular culture, and the models themselves. Wiley acknowledges that the models he mines from streets and marketplaces brought their own histories and personas to the work, and that every painting was also colored by Wiley's specific cultural and personal viewpoint as an African American.[96] He describes his models' vernacular and unique style by the pattern of the canvas background as well as the model's own clothing. In Senegal and Nigeria, Wiley took inspiration from objects that occupy a strong public presence such as sculptural portraits of military generals and colonial masters, and the ways in which these nations pictured themselves after independence.

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[96] Christine Y. Kim, "Christine Y. Kim and Malik Gaines in Conversation with Kehinde Wiley," 11.

As background to Wiley's pattern choices in the "World Stage Africa: Lagos~Dakar," it is helpful to consider that in post-colonial Africa, the self-conscious development of African pattern aesthetics and visual counterpoint was an essential part of the formation of a modern state. Senegal's first president, Léopold Sédar Senghor, employed visual rhythm to symbolize the originality of African artistic production. He stated,

> Rhythm is the architecture of being: the internal dynamic, which gives form …. It expresses itself through the most material, the most sensuous means: lines, surfaces, colors, volumes in architecture, sculpture, and painting; accents in poetry and music, movements in dance. But in doing so, it guides all this concrete reality toward the light of the spirit. For the Negro-African, it is the same measure that rhythm is embodied in the senses that illuminates the spirit.[97]

To establish a sense of African authenticity, Senghor's pan-African aesthetic depended on a link to Negritude, and he believed that arts in a modernizing Africa would serve to revive traditional art aspects within a new national identity.[98] Under Senghor's reorganization of Senegal's educational infrastructure for art the École des Arts was transformed and defined by the directions of two of Senegal's most successful artists, Iba N'Diaye and Papa Ibra Tall. Both N'Diaye and Tall were trained in Europe and brought this exposure to European oil painting, tapestry and art history as well as an appreciation of jazz and Senegalese music to their paintings. In 1965, Senghor supported Tall in founding a tapestry school, known as the Manufacture Sénégalais des Arts Décoratifs (MSAD). Employing what Tall considered to be authentic African themes, colors, and patterns, these decorative tapestries featured elaborate rhythmic patterns that depicted scenes of daily life, the marketplace, relationships

[97] Léopold Sédar Senghor, quoted in *Senghor and the Politics of Négritude,* by Irving Leonard Markovitz (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann Educational Books, 1970), 7.
[98] Elizabeth Harney, "Rhythm as the Architecture of Being," in *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960-1995* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004), 46.

between men and women, local plants and wildlife, masks and sculptures of ceremonial art, and exalted heroes of pre-colonial Africa and local myths.[99] Under the support of Senghor's administration, MSAD produced up to one hundred tapestries per year.[100] The Afrocentric designs of these tapestries supported the visualization of Senghor's independent identity for Senegal. Senghorian Negritude's legacy was the establishment of a powerful image of Senegalese arts both in Africa and abroad, and this was in a large part due to the patterned aesthetic that he put forth through state-sponsored tapestries and other projects. Wiley incorporates aspects of these visual statements of authority by appropriating gestures of classical sculptures and public artworks in Senegal and Nigeria.

By responding to this history and the continued relevance of pattern in Senegalese and Nigerian culture, Wiley reinvigorates some of Senghor's Afrocentric philosophy in this series. Wiley's adoption of African motifs in the "World Stage Africa: Lagos~Dakar" series allows for a richer iconographic experience of pattern that is also developed in his latter works of the "World Stage" series. For example, *Dogon Couple* (2008) (Fig.

Fig. 2.19 Kehinde Wiley, *Dogon Couple*, oil on canvas, 2008

[99] Harney, "The École de Dakar: Pan-Africanism in Paint and Textile," in *In Senghor's Shadow*, 68.
[100] Papa Ibra Tall interviewed by Elizabeth Harney, The École de Dakar: Pan-Africanism in Paint and Textile," *In Senghor's Shadow*, 69.

2.19) is inspired by a Dogon wooden sculpture of a husband and wife seated in an embrace (Fig. 2.20). According to Hélène Leloup, this "southern cliff face" type of Dogon sculpture is characterized by clean, angular lines and defined geometric volumes, with hands and arms set at angles; the faces are distinguished by an arrow-shaped nose, defined lozenge or button-shaped eyes, and a crest-shaped headdress; and often the arms are heavily adorned with bracelets.[101] Wiley transformed the elongated bodies of the original sculpture into the lean and shiny Black bodies of the male couple, carved and glossy like oiled ebony. Wiley paired two Senegalese models in a way that is similar to gender swapping in previous works, yet as he notes, "the homoeroticism reads more potently to me in paintings of modern Africans, given their relative absence in our media."[102] Wiley recalls,

Fig. 2.20 Dogon people, *Seated Couple*, late 19th-early 20th century, wood, Senegal

> The lighting on the skin was an extraordinary opportunity going into these deep darks … purples and dark blue Blacks that are incredibly hard to paint if you learn from the classical western example. Eroticism comes from the play of light more than from the actual subject matter.[103]

The two men are juxtaposed against a bright orange pattern of West African factory print fabric with parrots, flowers, and leaves that complements their ebony and burnt umber skin.

Unlike other works, the patterns do not interrupt the foreground, but the couple seems to float in this busy space and their red chairs blend almost

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[101] Hélène Leloup, "Dogon Figure Styles," *African Arts* 22, no. 1 (Nov. 1988): 44-51, 98-99.
[102] "Global Africa," YouTube video.
[103] Ibid.

seamlessly into the background. Wiley adapted the attenuated bodies of the original source and their cool composure so that his painting has a similarly specific gesture and grandiose stature. The man on the left gazes upward, the equivalent of the wife in the original sculpture. The figure on the right looks directly at the viewer, his palm open in what may represent a gesture of generosity since it is the palm that holds the money and is therefore the "sweetest" part of the hand.[104] A popular design of factory printed cloth called *Hands and Fingers* (Fig. 2.21) similarly shows an open palm with gold coins in the center and represents a West African interest in proverbs, education, and self-empowerment.[105] The mix of this type of African symbolism with one model's PUMA-brand shirt is an ironic comment on commercialism.

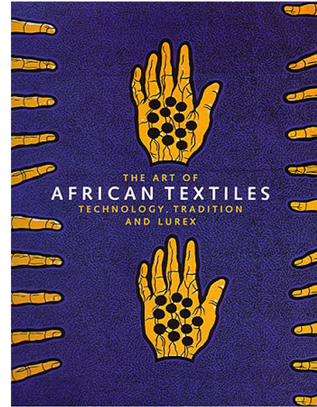

Fig. 2.21 Fancy print cotton textile, *Hands and Fingers* design, acquired Ghana, 1993

The figure the right, perhaps the more stylish of the two, wears a large pendant bearing a photographic image of his *marabout*, the holy man to whom he looks for spiritual guidance.[106] Such pendants are generally made from leather and sometimes hold prayer papers in them to bless and protect the bearer. The great majority of Senegalese Muslims are either Tijans or Mourides, and the latter group is more likely to wear photo-pendants like the one shown in the Wiley painting.[107] The young man wearing the pendant is most likely a Mouride, and Wiley may have based the photographic detail of his jewelry upon

[104] John Picton in discussion with the author, March 24, 2011.
[105] John Picton, *The Art of African Textiles: Technology, Tradition, and Lurex* (London: Barbican Art Gallery, Lund Humphries Publishers, 1995), 28.
[106] Allen F. Roberts (Professor, Department of World Arts & Cultures, University of California, Los Angeles), email discussion with author, September 20, 2011.
[107] Ibid.

the image of a marabout named Serigne Kara, who is very popular with urban young people.[108] The photo-pendant blesses the bearer with the marabout's *baraka* or holy blessings that trace back to Sheikh Amadou Bamba (1853-1927), the saint who inspired the Mouride movement.[109] Wiley's attention to the details of this pendant provides an African art historical and religious context for the painting that combines the iconography of Dogon sculpture with that of the Senegalese Muslim brotherhood. In contrast to the designs of earlier works, such as those of neoclassical scrolling acanthus leaves, the patterns in these African factory print cloths form a tightly knit web of African motifs around the figures.[110] Wiley's emphasis on the young man's religious jewelry with his athletic jacket and pants featuring the PUMA logo, the symbol of a wild and exotic cat found in the mountains throughout South and North America, perhaps equates the popular desire for designer sports clothing with that of cultish behavior. However, since Wiley has himself collaborated with PUMA to make a limited edition line of designer sports clothing, this is probably not a negative critique of consumerism, but rather a positive comment on the youth's stylishness.

Public monuments became the basis for his models' gestures, in the same way that European portraiture served as the inspiration for his earlier paintings. Wiley's painting entitled *Three Wise Men Greeting Entry Into Lagos* (2008) (Fig. 2.22) is inspired by a monumental sculpture known under different names, most

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[108] Ibid, email discussion with author, September 20, 2011.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Anderson, "We Are What We Wear: Cross-Cultural Uses of Textiles," 75.

Fig. 2.22 Kehinde Wiley, *Three Wise Men Greeting Entry Into Lagos,* oil on canvas, 72" x 96", 2008

Fig. 2.23 Dr. Bodun Shodeinde, *Welcome to Lagos Monument,* concrete?, 21' x 14', Lagos, Nigeria

commonly, the *Welcome to Lagos Monument*, which that was commissioned by former Military Governor of Lagos State, Colonel Raji Rasaki and designed by Dr. Bodun Shodeinde in 1991. Shodeinde's sculpture depicts three Yoruba Babalawo (or Awo-diviners), traditional priests and healers in Nigeria (Fig. 2.23), or according to other interpretations, one figure engaged in three different hand positions that make up a gesture of greeting.[111] The figures represent the senior members of the Ogboni elders who served as kingmakers in Yoruba culture and this monument emphasizes Yoruba religious beliefs.[112] Wiley represents the three wise men in elevated poses of the Babalawo, traditional gestures that signify their authority and function, to communicate how these figures convey power through material, scale, and framing.[113] His figures' poses are almost identical to the original sculpture, which is made of concrete or stone and are somewhat awkward in their body proportions, caught between naturalism and

[111] Email to author from Lagos-based artist Lemi Ghariokwu and blog entitled "I am fulfilled that 'Lagos Welcome Statue' became the symbol of Lagos – Bodun Shodeinde," posted by *My Lagos* November 25, 2012, accessed July 2, 2013, http://lagostomegacity.com/?p=475.
[112] Krista A. Thompson, "Find Your Father: Figuring African Between Colonial, Postcolonial and Diasporic Worlds," in *The World Stage: Africa, Lagos~Dakar*, Krista A. Thompson et al. (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2008), 21.
[113] Ibid., 21.

stylization. However, Wiley's models are idealized and proportionate, and much younger than the original subjects. Wiley noticed that public sculptures in Lagos such as the *Welcome to Lagos* statue bear a strong Soviet Socialist aesthetic and surmised that these social realist styles of modern African art developed in relationship to cold-war power grabs.[114] Most of these sculptures were made in the post-independence era and served to construct a usable past, establishing an indestructible tradition and making ethnic and class divisions less palpable and the colonial period less persistent. As in his earlier triptychs, Wiley represents three dynamic figures from different angles, but he reorients Christian iconography to symbolism found in Yoruba ceremonial art as well as the *Welcome to Lag*os sculpture.

Wiley's *Three Wise Men Greeting Entry Into Lagos* is animated by many layers of pattern from African cloth. The pattern of the factory print fabric behind the figures is an extremely elaborate plant and floral motif that is most likely made from an intricate relief roller print. Its yellow-orange and green patterns have a complementary effect against the flat turquoise background. Also, the three wise men wear African print fabric clothes. The central figure sports a turquoise dashiki with extensive embroidery around the neck that stands out against the background since it is a few shades darker blue and is decorated with a pattern of large disks with concentric rings. The man to his left is dressed in a long brown dashiki with a pattern of small staffs and the man to his right wears a red dashiki with a complex layering of designs that include black and white circles and stars against a more intricate pattern. The figures are subjected to

[114] Christine Y. Kim, "Christine Y. Kim and Malik Gaines in Conversation with Kehinde Wiley," 10.

the light rather than illuminated by it, and in contrast to the flat color of the Dutch Wax print behind them, uncharacteristic shadows dance across the folds of their patterned dashikis.

African factory-printed fabric that serves as clothing and background in Wiley's paintings began to be produced in Europe during colonial times, initiating a transatlantic relationship based on the desire for imagery and proverbs represented with aesthetics that were appreciated by African customers. Dutch merchants first encountered wax-resist dyed textiles in the seventeenth century on the Indonesian island of Java, and by the nineteenth century, Dutch textile manufacturers had found a way to imitate Javanese hand-drawn batik by roller printing a resin resist on the cloth prior to dyeing. This technique resulted in a distinctive cracked or veined effect in the final design. The Dutch and also English manufacturers of so-called wax prints found a market among West Africans, who, unlike the Indonesian market, appreciated the slightly off-register effects and asymmetry of pattern that made the images seem to dance and sparkle. These European companies incorporated motifs representing important African symbols such a stools and staffs, as well as designed inspired by African proverbs. Fancy prints, less expensive roller-printed versions of the cloth, became popular during the period of independence movements in the 1960's, when many African-owned companies produced their own commemorative designs (Fig. 2.24). The Dutch Vlisco Company produces the most expensive

and high quality fabrics (Figs. 2.25 and 2.26), and their European designers call their product “Real Dutch Wax.”[115]

Fig. 2.24 ***Commemorative Wax Print of Abdou Diouf President of Senegal 1981-2000, 1992, cloth is from the election year (1983)***

Fig. 2.25 Vlisco, *Nouvelle Histoire*, 2011

Fig. 2.26 Vlisco, *Sparkling Grace*, 2010

Wiley’s use of Dutch wax in the “World Stage: Lagos~Dakar” paintings marries a European portrait tradition with the role of this fabric as backdrops for portrait photography by African artists, such as Seydou Keïta. Also, like the work of British artist Yinka Shonibare, Wiley employs Dutch wax fabric to suggest that African identity and iconography extends well beyond the borders of the continent. Shonibare uses only the costly Real Dutch Wax fabric in his Victorian-inspired vignettes to insert Africa into the world of European high society and make explicit the colonial source of Europe’s wealth.[116] This cloth indicates high status in Africa, worn by the same social caste of upper-middle-class women such as the elegant Victorian ladies in Shonibare’s *Three Graces* (2001) (Fig. 2.27). The double-C Chanel logo is also featured on one of the Grace’s skirts,

[115] Anderson, “We Are What We Wear: Cross-Cultural Uses of Textiles,” 70.
[116] Ibid.

collapsing Western and African high fashion plays and presenting a double entendre. Shonibare employs this cloth as "an apt metaphor for the entangled relationship between Africa and Europe and how the two continents have invented each other, in ways currently overlooked or deeply buried."[117] According to Africanist John Picton, the shimmering array of patterns in Shonibare's installation of a hundred rectangles of stretched textiles is an expression of twenty-first century identity that is "an eclectic, self-mocking, part handmade, part industrial, fantastical thing; a formally ordered yet very personal improvisation, with some elements that are self-chosen and others imposed by stereotypes or the whim of history."[118] Like Shonibare, Wiley excavates art history to interpolate the Baroque, Rococo, and Victorian eras, although he is perhaps focused more on France than his native England. The sharp juxtaposition of youthful, trendy clothing against historical scenes and contexts is what marks his work as a contemporary critique of history. As much as the models and poses themselves, Dutch wax patterns are the main identifier of the African context in Wiley's Africa paintings.

Fig. 2.27 Yinka Shonibare, *Three Graces*, three life-size mannequins, Dutch wax printed cotton, dimensions variable, 2001

[117] Nancy Hynes, "Re-Dressing History," in "Yinka Shonibare" by Nancy Hynes and John Picton, *African Arts* 34, no. 3 (Autumn 2001): 66-73, 93-95.
[118] John Picton, "Undressing Ethnicity," in "Yinka Shonibare" by Nancy Hynes and John Picton, *African Arts* 34, no. 3 (Autumn 2001): 66-73, 93-95.

Krista Thompson observes that Wiley's series is engaged with the photographic production of knowledge about Africa, and highlights the impossibilities of accessing Africa through its representations.[119] While colonial power was directed through the gaze of the camera, the post-colony expressed its power through public sculptures that were experienced by citizens and visitors in the public realm.[120] She argues that Wiley's portraits of local African youth may be viewed as a form of "representational intimacy with Africa, a personal and diasporic getting-to-know from all sides through the process of representation …. The paintings make visible a history of not seeing, and represent how colonial, national and diasporic efforts to see and represent Africa have often resulted in its disappearance."[121] In a departure from his typical process, the models swapped clothing for *Three Wise Men*, and Wiley digitally changed the images before using them as the subject of his painting. These manipulations underscore the idea that his images are unrealities and testify to the inability of any medium to reveal a "true" Africa.[122] Therefore, Wiley participates in the construction of contemporary African identity in his series.

Wiley's "World Stage: Lagos~Dakar" images also provide a snapshot of youth culture in Dakar and Lagos, recalling the photographs of the independence era by artists such as Mama Casset in Senegal and Seydou Keïta in Mali, that reflect an alternative to both colonial and postcolonial models.[123] Wiley's incorporation of textile designs are reminiscent of how African photographers

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[119] Thompson, "Find Your Father," 20.
[120] Ibid., 21.
[121] Ibid., 18-19.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.

engage fabrics as studio backdrops and his concentration on single figures striking a self-conscious pose also recalls images of that period, especially those of Samuel Fosso, whose work Wiley collects.[124] Wiley's delight in the eloquence of African patterns seems to be an extension of this celebration of Black beauty and aesthetics, in a similar way that many African Americans donned dashikis, kente cloth, and other types of African dress in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a sign of solidarity with their African brothers and sisters, especially in regard to independence movements.

The patterning of Wiley's "World Stage: Lagos~Dakar" paintings have an especially synesthetic relationship to rhythm that derives from West African music. Robert Farris Thompson notes that there is a correspondence between the dramatic juxtapositions of color and tone in African textiles and the physical stress on musical notes. He writes,

> There are two ways of preserving the full sonority of colors in textile patterning: either through contrastive colors, hot and cool, of equal strength, or by maintaining equality of dynamics in the phrasing of light and dark colors (the textiles of the Akan of Ghana are excellent examples) … full sonority and attack in the handling of color means that every line is equally emphasized. For this reason, many or most of the textile traditions of Africa seem "loud" by conventional Western standards, but this is precisely the point. Equal strength of every note parallels equal strength of every color.[125]

Akin to the relationship between bold color and strong musical notes is the correspondence between pattern and rhythm in Wiley's African paintings. Thompson observes that "[s]taggered motifs on certain chiefly cloths can be profitably compared with off-beat phrasing in music, dance, and decorative

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[124] For more information on Wiley's collection, see Franklin Sirmans, "Painting Time," in *Kehinde Wiley: Columbus.* (Columbus and Los Angeles: Columbus Museum of Art and Robert and Tilton, 2006), 15.
[125] Thompson, African Art in Motion, 7.

sculpture."[126] For instance, the regular patterns of striped patterning in Upper Volta weaving is often interrupted by vibrant suspensions of expected placement of the pattern; however the careful matching of cloth ends shows that the overall design was well-calculated and deliberate.[127] Thompson suggests that this formal choice communicates a philosophical concept of governance and human relations. He writes,

> [I]t may be that the chiefly person who wears a cloth with staggered pattern in effect promises to rediscover wholeness in perfecting uneven human relationships, even as he unties the knot of trouble and obstruction. Suspending the beat hints that to dwell at one level is to lose the precious powers of balance inherent in human capability.[128]

Regularity in pattern and musical rhythm can also suggest stagnation and thwart the way motifs lead the eye around the composition. Asymmetrical patterns and rhythms, however, add drama and unpredictability, aspects that are important in African music that often features passages of complete improvisation. Patterns that playfully interrupt one another in Wiley's depictions of African men exemplify this sense of irregular movement and spontaneity.

Dutch wax patterns may convey Wiley's distinctive relationship with Africa and its aesthetic influences; he approaches it with a personal interest in finding his familial connection and his relationship to these African brothers. However, whether Wiley adopts an African motif from factory printed textiles or a rococo design of an acanthus vine (of ancient Roman origin), it is not simply the pattern itself but how he manipulates it that gives it this Africanist aesthetic. By jazzing up the colors to boldly contrast hot and cool, using larger motifs than would have

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[126] Ibid.
[127] Thompson, African Art in Motion, 11.
[128] Ibid.

appeared in a European context, and by layering designs to produce multiple levels of motifs, Wiley re-contextualizes how we experience these patterns and recharges them with a hip-hop, Africanist aesthetic. The complex motifs and palette of hot and cool colors in the Africa paintings present a similarly vibrant affect of syncopated musical rhythms. Wiley's construction of Africa includes both photography and the appropriated poses of postcolonial sculptures; however, it is the clothing and the rhythmic patterns in these paintings that most represent African identity.

The World Stage: Israel

Israel offered Wiley a myriad of opportunities to expand his investigation of the world through pattern. Wiley said that he "entered Israel as a provocation," and like the other subjects of the "World Stage" series, because of its political and global importance.[129] He observes that Israel features profoundly in the American imagination, and relates both to his own story and to America's narrative. Says Wiley,

> My driving question was how do we take a nation with this level of intensity with regards to how we look at it, and go beyond the media stereotypes about national identity … There are Arab Israelis, there are Ethiopian Jews, Ashkenazi Jews from every part of Eastern and Western Europe. So there is this immense diversity.[130]

About a third of the models are Ethiopian Jews, and the rest are Palestinians and other Jewish Israelis. Ethiopian Jews were recognized by the Sephardic chief rabbi as descended from the lost tribe of Dan.[131] From 1984 to 1991 thousands

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[129] Jori Finkel, "Kehinde Wiley Paints A Diverse Israel," *Los Angeles Times,* Saturday, April 9, 2011.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Hagar Salamon, "Blackness in Transition: Decoding Racial Constructs Through Stories of Ethiopian Jews," *Journal of Folklore Research* 40, no. 1 (January – April 2003): 6.

of Ethiopian Jews, known as the community of Beta Israel, immigrated to Israel because of famine and political instability in East Africa in two major airlifts called Operation Moses (1984) and Operation Solomon (1991), a result of the Law of Return, which outlines the terms for automatic citizenship to Jewish applicants. Ethiopian Jews continue to immigrate to Israel at the rate of approximately 300 per month, and the younger generation is focused on embracing their Jewish-African heritage, celebrating many cultural festivals throughout the year.[132] Wiley's agenda in the Israel paintings was to feature the diversity of Israeli people and to debunk myths about its aggressive image in the media by celebrating Semitic pattern, color, and beautiful male subjects.

Before Wiley went to Israel, he visited the Jewish Museum in New York to look at a number of Eastern European paper cuts and textiles such as bed covers and Torah ark curtains from the Jewish Diaspora. Among a number of sources, he took inspiration from a *mizrah* plaque by Israel Dov Rosenbaum, a clockmaker to the local count in Podkamen, Ukraine (1877) (Fig. 2.28) in the museum's collection. The mizrah plaque decorated the eastern walls of many European Jewish homes and synagogues to show the eastern direction of Jerusalem, the direction of their worship.

[132] Ruth Eglash, "Israel: From Melting Pot to a Colorful Mosaic of Culture, Nationality and Religion," in *Kehinde Wiley: The World Stage Israel*, by Ruth Eglash and Claudia J. Nahson, interview by Dr. Shalva Weil (Culver City, California: Roberts and Tilton, 2012), 10.

Wiley appropriated many patterns from this intricate work, replete with architectural structures, animals, and many other symbolic motifs, to design the background for *Alios Itzhak* (2011) (Fig. 2.29), which has now also been acquired by the Jewish Museum. For instance, the Hebrew word mizrah, meaning east, is also an acronym made up of the first letters for the Hebrew phrase "from this side the spirit of life," and adorns both the four corners of the central section of the papercut and also Wiley's image, reinforcing the source's original function as a plaque for the eastern wall.[133] By blending this motif with the image of Itzhak, Wiley recontextualizes its meanings to focus on an individual within the collective of Jewish identity.

Fig. 2.28 Dov Rosenbaum, *mizrah plaque*, paint, ink, and pencil on cut-out paper, 1877, Podkamen, Ukraine, collection of The Jewish Museum, New York

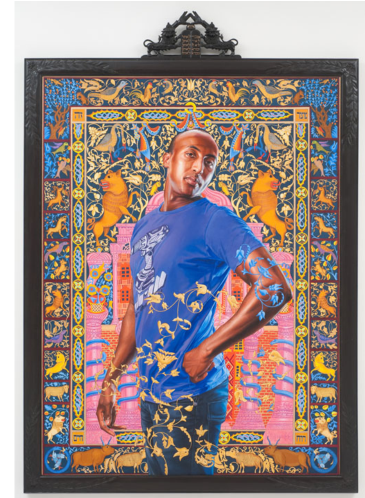

Fig. 2.29 Kehinde Wiley, *Alios Itzhak*, oil and gold enamel on canvas, 2011, The Jewish Museum, New York

Alios Itzhak shows a confident Ethiopian Jewish Israeli man entwined in a complexly patterned background that exemplifies traditional Eastern European Jewish ornamentation's horror vacui and expresses the multicultural and multiracial complexity of Israeli society today.[134] Mizrah plaques in Eastern Europe were designed to resemble Torah arks with carved wooden designs in

[133] Claudia J. Nahson, "Yearning for Jerusalem: A Papercut Decoration for the Eastern Wall," in *Kehinde Wiley: The World Stage Israel*, by Ruth Eglash and Claudia J. Nahson, interview by Dr. Shalva Weil (Culver City, California: Roberts and Tilton, 2012), 5.
[134] Ibid.

synagogues. Architectural features such as columns and arcades often balance the layout of papercuts, however, it is rare to see a prominent building as the central element of the composition as in Rosenbaum's paper cut.[135] Wiley uses a vibrant hot and cool palette to render the flaming pink building and other symmetrical designs of Rosenbaum's image to frame and heroicize Itzhak, and to suggest that this young man is part of the integral structure of contemporary Israel. Itzhak rotates dynamically towards the viewer and his bronze skin is incandescent. Animals feature symbolically throughout the composition and relate to the common imagery of papercuts, Jewish tombstones in Eastern Europe, and carved wooden synagogue interiors. Other sources include printed books such as Hebrew primers that relate an animal corresponding to each letter of the Hebrew alphabet or illustrated versions of the *Meshal ha-Kadmoni*, a collection of animal stories. The prominent placement of four animals often featured in Jewish papercuts represents the saying, "Be bold as a leopard, light as an eagle, swift as a deer, and strong as a lion, to do the will of your Father who is in Heaven."[136] Wiley includes mythical beasts that are part of the original papercut such as the leviathan (shown as a curled fish), the wild ox, and the unicorn represented in the outer border. These animals have an ancient biblical meaning that speaks to the metaphorical richness that has survived and taken different forms throughout the Diaspora. Wiley's repetition of the Lion of Judah as a prominent symbol in this series represents the tribe of Judah, as mentioned in Genesis. Jewish Ethiopians claim that they are descended from the ancient

[135] Ibid., 5-6.
[136] *Ethics of the Fathers (Pirkei Avot)*, The Talmud: a selection, ed. and trans. Norman Solomon (London, New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 5:23.

Tribe of Dan and Judah that went with the Queen of Sheba back from her visit to King Solomon.[137]

Wiley addresses the ongoing tension between Jewish and Arab Israelis through both iconography and pattern. His images of Arab Israelis or Palestinians (known by a variety of names) that are enmeshed with floral and animal patterns, not specifically from papercuts but perhaps derived from Jewish and Arabic textiles, acknowledge this important part of the Israeli population. His double portrait of two Palestinians, *Abed Al Ashe and Chaled El Awari* (2011) (Fig. 2.30) seems to be inspired by a woven textile as suggested by the gold cross-hatching of the background. In Israel, Wiley went to the Arab Souk to shop for items linked to decorative traditions, and he learned that in addition to Judaica, many Arab Israeli and Islamic objects and textiles are available and represent a cultural diversity in Israel. His images employ much gold and many include text and medallions that surround the stylish Israeli youth. Wiley's hand-carved wooden frames adorn the works with Jewish subjects differently than those presenting Arab models. The frames encircling Jewish models are adorned with emblems borrowed from Jewish decorative tradition: the hands of a Kohen (priest) and the Lion of Judah,

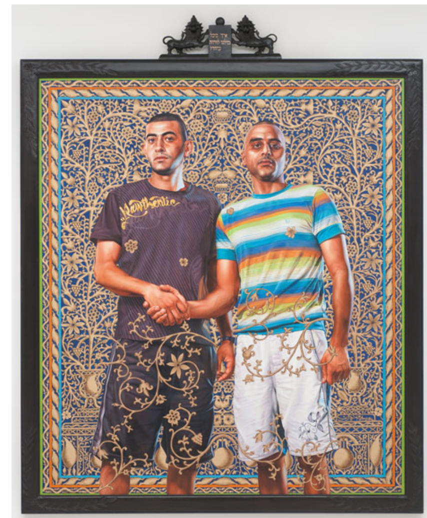

Fig. 2.30 Kehinde Wiley, *Abed Al Ashe and Chaled El Awari,* oil and gold enamel on canvas, 95.937" x 84," 2011, courtesy of Roberts & Tilton Gallery, Sean Kelly Gallery, and Stephen Friedman Gallery

[137] Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (Oxford: University Press for the British Academy, 1968), 75.

symbolizing blessing, power, and majesty.[138] Each portrait frame supports a specific text: the images of Jewish men render quotes from the Ten Commandments. For his depictions of Arab men, Wiley employed the plea of Rodney King, victim of a brutal police beating that sparked race riots in the artist's home city of Los Angeles in 1991: "Can we all get along?"[139] Although both are Semitic peoples, Wiley seems to interpret the divide between Jews and Palestinians along racial lines by referencing the Rodney King quote, rather than focusing on other differences in religion, politics, or ideology. He suggests that Palestinians and African Americans have suffered similar experiences of discrimination and harassment due to their political and social disempowerment in the society. With pattern and design, he supports the Israeli peace effort and embraces the idea of brotherhood across racial, ethnic, and religious differences.

In his research for patterns and design elements for this series, Wiley strove to find the hip-hop connection with Israeli youth. He sought out hip-hop artists and disc jockeys in Israel and found Kalkidan Mashasha, an Ethiopian Jew who is one of the most popular hip-hop singers in Israel and who agreed to model. His name means covenant or pact in Amharic.[140] Mashash raps about "Father Zion and Mama Africa," expressing the layered identity of Ethiopian Jews. Wiley visited his home in Tel Aviv, and many of his friends joined the gathering and conversation about Israeli hip-hop. The portrait *Kalkidan*

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[138] "Kehinde Wiley / The World Stage: Israel," YouTube video, accessed February 6, 2012, http://www.thejewishmuseum.org/exhibitions/kehindewiley.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Shalva Weil, "Kalkidan Mashasha," *Kehinde Wiley: The World Stage Israel*, in *Kehinde Wiley: The World Stage Israel*, by Ruth Eglash and Claudia J. Nahson, interview by Dr. Shalva Weil (Culver City, California: Roberts and Tilton, 2012), 15.

Mashasha (2011) (Fig. 2.31) shows him in a khaki shirt with patches of the Ethiopian flag and Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie. Surrounding him are patterns from North Africa and papercuts appearing in Jewish history as decorative and devotional objects to adorn homes. The motif of the *hamsa* hand flanks Kalkidan on both sides; this symbol, occurring extensively in North African and Middle Eastern Jewish communities, is the open palm of the hand that wards off the evil eye.[141] Also known as the "Hand of Fatima," it is a favorite Muslim talisman that became part of Jewish imagery. In kabbalistic lore, the number five, as represented here by the finger of the hand, stands for the "Ineffable Name" and is considered a protector against evil.[142] Epitomizing protection, the hamsa is a talismanic motif Wiley employs in many works in the series.

Fig. 2.31 Kehinde Wiley, *Kalkidan Mashasha*, gold and enamel on canvas, 45" x 36", 2011, courtesy of Roberts & Tilton Gallery, Sean Kelly Gallery, and Stephen Friedman Gallery

The World Stage series is Wiley's ambitious exploration of pattern, as much as a celebration of men of color from around the world. He comments,

> In the field of aesthetic theory, humans are pattern-seeking creatures … That can be seen in terms of musical structures, patternmaking, even in terms of storytelling and literature. What's interesting is that in western cultures, patternmaking has been relegated to women's work. And it's highly associated with the irrational and hysteria ...[from hyster, womb, discussed in Foucault's Madness and Civilization] whereas in other cultures patternmaking has been a shamanistic process, where religious leaders are in charge, so it is almost in the vanguard of the rationalist way of ordering the world. So, you have two very

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[141] Joseph and Yehudit Shadur, *Traditional Jewish Papercuts, An Inner World of Art and Symbol* (Hanover, New Hampshire and London: University Press of New England, 2002), 92.
[142] Ibid.

> different ways of looking at patternmaking, even within the same human experience.[143]

Wiley claims that pattern should not be identified with the feminine in these and other works, but he views it as a symbol of male strength and vital force.

Wiley visualizes identity and dynamic personalities through pattern in the "World Stage: Israel." Unlike other works from the "World Stage" that are linked to specific canonical art historical sources, the Israel paintings celebrate an array of physical attributes and perspectives of individual Israeli men almost exclusively through exquisite patterns and powerful iconography. Rather than deriving poses from specific sources of painting or sculpture, Wiley proceeded from a collective knowledge of body language from European portrait painting, and when models were posing, he would give direction. The young men range in their demeanor from confident to forthright and vulnerable, and the expressiveness of the light emanating from these men's faces suggests optimism about the possibility for peace and nonviolent resolution for Israel's conflict with the Palestinians.

Enmeshed into a decorative field that speaks as loudly as their commanding personas, Wiley's portraits of Israeli men express their subjects' charisma, spirituality, and inner power. This series is also a reminder that there have always been Black Jews, since the times of Solomon and Sheba. In the sense that Jewish identity is defined by culture and religion rather than race or ethnicity, this series broadens the scope of Wiley's compartmentalized representation of national identity in the World Stage series. The "World Stage:

[143] Kiša Lala, "Kehinde Wiley On the World Stage: A Conversation With the Artist," *Huffington Post*, April 16, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kisa-lala/kehide-wiley-on-the-world_b_1418058.html.

Israel" strengthens Wiley's series by shifting the emphasis away from the superficialities of popular style and focusing on a nation that has been at the center of controversy for millennia but whose history at once parallels and has often neglected the Black experience.[144]

In "The World Stage" series, Wiley began by orchestrating a highly constructed experience limited to African American models and the historical and aesthetic influence of Chinese culture. This series evolved into a very synthetic exploration of culture by the time he undertook his projects in Brazil, West Africa, Sri Lanka, and Israel. Throughout these years, he began to maintain a major studio in Beijing where he continues to produce much of the work. When he began "The World Stage: Israel" with the decorative papercut as his starting point, he had adapted his process to combine many resources from the Jewish Diaspora and improvisationally encounter his models in discos and through seeking out local hip-hop artists. Throughout this process, Wiley's patterns subverted stereotypes of masculinity and sexual orientation, represented a source of inner power, and they add heroic status to his subjects.

Commercial Offshoots of The World Stage

Following on the heels of the "World Stage: Lagos~Dakar," the brand PUMA commissioned Wiley to paint four original works of art inspired by Samuel Eto'o of Cameroon, John Mensah of Ghana, and Emmanuel Eboué of Ivory Coast, to herald the start of a World Cup year. Wiley produced individual portraits of the players as well as a fourth *Unity Portrait* (Fig. 2.32) with all three

[144] Peter Frank, "Haiku Reviews: Kafka, Trompe-L'oeil and Vietnam," *Huffington Post*, May 27, 2011.

players together using inspiration from a pose from a pre-colonial sculpture, perhaps this sixteenth or seventeenth-century Benin Edo plaque (Fig. 2.33), that depicts three men with interlocked arms, symbolizing the united countries of Africa.

Fig. 2.32 Kehinde Wiley, Puma World Cup Africa Collaboration, *Unity*, oil on canvas, 108” x 144”, 2010, courtesy of Roberts & Tilton Gallery, Sean Kelly Gallery, and Stephen Friedman Gallery

Fig. 2.33 *The Oba of Benin with Attendants and Europeans*, brass, 19” x 15”, 16th or 17th century, made in Benin City, British Museum, London

For his individual portrait of Samuel Eto’o, Wiley shows the soccer player with arms crossed and bearing an expression of cool composure (Fig. 2.34). Much attention is given to the veins on his arms, his glowing mahogany skin, his lean and taught torso, and elegant bone structure. His PUMA shirt is wet and fits his chest tightly, making the surface of the fabric more important than the logo. Eto’o is surrounded by an African factory textile print of keys in a circle, and individual keys float across his chest, arms and belly. Keys are an important symbol in a number of African cultures. A gold Akan bracelet of ninety small keys

Fig. 2.34 Kehinde Wiley, Puma World Cup Africa Collaboration, *Samuel Eto’o*, oil on canvas, 72” x 60”, 2010, courtesy of Roberts & Tilton Gallery, Sean Kelly Gallery, and Stephen Friedman

exemplifies the wearing of keys as a representation of power (Fig. 2.35). Beginning in the fifteenth century onwards the Akan obtained keys from Europeans in trade, and by 1601 it was reported that they wore them in bunches around the body.[145] Later bunches of keys were customarily kept among the stool property of the various Akan states, signifying the power and wealth of the state, and publicly exhibited at festivals.[146] An Akan proverb about keys reads *Asem bi na ehini asem bi sfoa* meaning one question acts as the key to another.[147] In Kumasi, this type of bracelet is called *basahia*.[148] The pattern of keys surrounding Eto'o suggests his radiating power and associates him with many aphorisms using the symbolism of keys.

Fig. 2.35 *Akan bracelet of ninety small keys*, 9.5 cm, Ghana, 17th Century perhaps, collection of the Barbier-Mueller Museum, Geneva, Switzerland

Wiley's *Unity* portrait commissioned by PUMA depicts all three Football stars, in a pose that was inspired by a pre-colonial African pendant found while touring the Continent.[149] A number of similar pendants, which are semicircular and feature a triadic composition with a central figure flanked by attendants who support his hands, may relate to the iconography of the Osun cult.[150] The central figure wears a necklace that bears a large object or perhaps a "ball of medicine"

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[145] Timothy F. Garrard, *Gold of Africa* (Geneva: Barbier-Mueller Museum, and Germany: Prestel-Verlag, 1989), 229.
[146] Garrard, *Gold of Africa*, 299.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Ibid.
[149] "Last Stop on Kehinde Wiley Unity Portrait Series Tour," YouTube video, uploaded August 27, 2011, http://creative.puma.com/us/en/tag/kehinde-wiley/.
[150] Paula Ben-Amos and Arnold Rubin, eds., *The Art of Power, The Power of Art: Studies in Benin Iconography* (California: University of California Los Angeles, 1983), 100.

and holds something similar to an Osun priest's horn used for calling witches.[151] The complex imagery and symbolism of Benin pendants have a long history in the region and shed light on art as a tool of state power in Benin.[152] Wiley wanted to engage with the many variations in soil pigments from Africa so the brown pigment within the paintings was custom made by PUMA using a mixture of soil samples from Ghana, Cameroon, the Ivory Coast and Mozambique.[153] Wiley rendered the three athletes in front of an undulating pattern of curving vines and yellow flowers. They seem to be illuminated by very bright light that also emphasizes the lines of their muscles, bone structure, and animated facial features. The foliage overlaps the soccer players' legs and waists, as if they stand together in a lush field, but these areas cast no shadows on their idealized bodies, collapsing the space of foreground and background. The complementary colors of their shimmering PUMA blue shirts and orange shorts pop out against the reddish brown background with green, blue, and yellow. The gesture of the athletes' interlocked arms also seems echoed by the curving pattern.

Wiley's utopian vision for his commission is expressed in the statement, "Looking back, I just can't help but to be amazed at how one ball creates such a sense of solidarity and bring together over 1 billion people in Africa. I can see clearly that no matter where you are from, we're all of the same earth."[154] While this is true, these men seem to have a superhuman grace and dignity, as if they are demigods rather than regular men. At the same time, the painting is a

[151] Ibid.
[152] Ben-Amos and Rubin, *The Art of Power*, 101.
[153] "PUMA Presents: Of the Same Earth," Featuring: Samuel Eto'o, Emmanuel Eboué, John Mensah, and Kehinde Wiley, YouTube video, posted January 26, 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1dECwcdJMXg.
[154] Ibid.

commercial endorsement that further commodifies the image of the Black athlete rather than presenting African men as statesmen, doctors, or intellectuals. Wiley's commission reflects an international infatuation with the image of Black male athlete to sell products, without offering any ironic identification with the objectification of his subjects.

Pattern as Beat: Hip-hop and Regular Irregular Rhythm

Wiley's pattern provides a rhythmic space that connects to the musical rhythms of hip-hop and other genres. Wiley says that hip-hop is a state of grace that begins with an ability to deal with randomness.[155] In his works that use complementary color combinations, Wiley establishes a vibrant and powerful rhythm like "phat" beats in hip-hop music. For instance in the "World Stage:

Fig. 2.36 Kehinde Wiley, *Thiogo Oliveira do Rosario Rozendo*, oil on canvas, 48" x 36", 2009, courtesy of Roberts & Tilton Gallery, Sean Kelly Gallery, and Stephen Friedman Gallery

Fig. 2.37 Kehinde Wiley, *LL Cool J*, oil on canvas, 96" x 72", 2005, courtesy of Roberts & Tilton Gallery, Sean Kelly Gallery, and Stephen Friedman Gallery

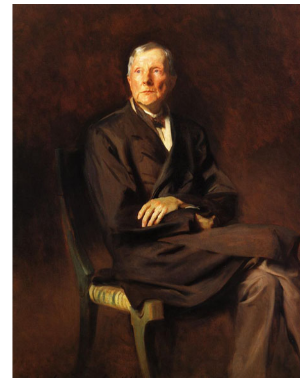

Fig. 2.38 John Singer Sargent, *John D. Rockefeller Sr*, oil on canvas, 70" x 60", 1917

Brazil," the psychedelic red and green patterns surrounding the figure in *Thiogo Oliveira do Rosario Rozendo* (2009) (Fig. 2.36) are almost the same as

[155] Wiley and Ogunnaike, "Kehinde Wiley in Conversation with Lola Ogunnaike."

the palette of Wiley's earlier portrait *LL Cool J* (2005) (Fig. 2.37). The image of Rozendo, however, has a pattern of swirling spirals that competes with the subject and the bright red of this textile reflects on the bronze face of the model rather than the pattern intruding on his space. His humble expression opposes the egotism of LL Cool J, who is painted from below so that the viewer must look up at him as if he were a god. In 2005, VH1 commissioned Wiley to paint portraits of the honorees for that year's Hip-Hop Honors program, for which he used his trademark references to add legitimacy to paintings of this generation's already powerful musical talents. Taking inspiration from Ron Chernow's biography of John D. Rockefeller, LL Cool J wanted his portrait to have a pose similar to John Singer Sargent's painting of the philanthropist (1917) (Fig. 2.38).[156] However, the Sargent portrait shows the aged Rockefeller on the same level as the viewer, in a dark palette, in conservative dress, and with an unswerving expression. The patterns surrounding LL Cool J are from Rococo wallpaper and other European textiles, but the color combination is specific to a different context. The vivid bright red and green juxtaposition is often seen in factory print West African textiles and also in Jamaican fabrics, but rarely in a European or Asian context. This color combination produces a visual counterpoint that dominates the composition as much as the figure and create visual noise similar to the layers of swift rapping, electronic beats, ambient sounds, instrumentals, and appropriated tracks that typify the edginess of hip-hop music.

[156] National Portrait Gallery, "Now on View: LL Cool J by Kehinde Wiley," Face to Face (blog), Smithsonian Institution, November 19, 2009, http://face2face.si.edu/my_weblog/2009/11/now-on-view-ll-cool-j-by-kehinde-wiley.html.

Although Wiley's designs are meticulously controlled, they express an irregularity and improvisational style that springs from hip-hop's origins in African Diaspora culture and its method of appropriating many elements, such as ambient sounds and police sirens, into the mix to develop new patterns. Wiley's rhythmic designs build upon a synesthetic aspect of mark-making, color, and pattern that has been a longstanding theme in African American art. The relationship of rhythmic pattern and music was an important part of the self-conscious construction of African American aesthetics under the Harlem Renaissance.

Fig. 2.39 Norman Lewis, *Jazz Musicians*, oil on canvas, 36" x 26", 1948, The Estate of Norman W. Lewis, courtesy of Landor Fine Arts, Newark. Courtesy of Kenkeleba Gallery

Richard Powell and Anne Gibson have acknowledged musical qualities in the work of abstract African American painters such as Norman Lewis that contributed new aesthetic qualities to abstract painting of the 1940s and 50s. Powell has argued for a "blues aesthetic" in works by Lewis and others that shows syncopated rhythms and call-and-response structures that are so culturally ingrained, they function as organizing principles across all aspects of Black cultural production.[157] Gibson also has observed that a number of abstract expressionists "adapted the formal structures of jazz but left its explicit references to its African American roots behind"

[157] Graham Lock and David Murray, "Introduction – The Hearing Eye," *The Hearing Eye: Jazz and Blues Influences in African American Visual Art*, eds. Graham Lock and David Murray (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4.

whereas Lewis "meshed analyses of the structure of jazz with visual references to its production."[158] Lewis' gestural marks and repetitive shapes embody the layered structures and the syncopated chords of jazz, and also underlie the organizing function of pattern throughout the seeming chaos of lines. Lewis' paintings that depict jazz performers such as *Jazz Musicians* (1948) (Fig. 2.39) are defined by patterns of vertical lines and swirls. *Jazz Musicians* shows the musician's bodies melded with the shapes of their instruments, the Black, red, and white forms project against the red background. The punctuated vertical lines suggest the human form, as well as the necks of the bass and bows of string instruments. The lyrical movement and gesture derived from the movement of jazz and bebop inform the repeated motifs and improvisational style of his abstract paintings. In a similar way, Wiley's syncopated designs fall within the framework of this blues aesthetic, although the flat regularity of his motifs is also influenced by the electronic music generation.

Wiley's aesthetic relates to the associative correspondences of music and visual pattern represented by many African American artists including Sam Gilliam, Charles Searles, and Moe Brooker. Gilliam said, "[j]azz leads to the acrobatics of art, and it leads to that kind of exterior thinking perhaps sometimes that even the viewer can't see but that is very necessary to the artist."[159] Gilliam suggests that music opens the mind to free association and to improvisation that can take visual form in painting and sculpture. After Searles traveled to West Africa in 1972, his paintings and sculptures became vibrantly patterned and

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[158] Ann (Eden) Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 32.
[159] "Artist Sam Gilliam talks to ArtsMedia News about the influence of Jazz," YouTube video, uploaded April 23, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8chkNLRdLo.

referenced music with percussive rhythms and beats like the designs that direct the eye around his canvases.[160] A musician himself, Searles often celebrated the completion of a work by drumming. Art historian Michael D. Harris has compared Searles' single-color, flat shapes interspersed with areas of dense pattern to the "musical jump spaces" in jazz that that mark and keep time. In a related manner, Wiley's African paintings from the "World Stage" series create a continuous textile rhythm interrupted only by the patterns of the models themselves, akin to the syncopated saxophone riffs, vocal refrains, and long stretches of percussion in music by Fela Kuti or King Sunny Ade.

The musical aspect of Wiley's pattern contributes to the fantasy aspect of his works like the surreal use of musical references in Jamaican artist Keith Morrison's allegorical and lush paintings. Morrison's large watercolor and oil paintings visualize scenes of Afro-Caribbean and jazz instruments with African sculptures, rag dolls, skeletons, and other symbolic figures. Like Wiley's appropriation of Christian iconography in many works, Morrison's watercolor painting *Sound the Knell Slowly* (2001) (Fig. 2.40) is dense with Afro-Christian symbolism. The scene of a Black crucifixion emerges from the belly of

Fig. 2.40 Keith Morrison, *Sound the Knell Slowly*, watercolor, 30" x 40", 2001

[160] Jennifer Zarro, "A Charles Searles celebration – Three concurrent exhibitions," *The Art Blog*, May 20, 2013, http://www.theartblog.org/2013/05/a-charles-searles-celebration-three-concurrent-exhibitions/.

a steel pan drum, and its title is like a drumroll of death.[161] The scene of three crucified men with dreadlocks, one presumably Christ, takes place on a drum that represents Calvary. Morrison blends African figures and musical instruments for Christian elements such as the drumsticks, one of which becomes a halo. Unlike Wiley's rendition of Christian icons into urban African American men, as in *The Blessing Christ*, Morrison's Holy Mother is a slave doll, and other African sculptures augment the tableau in addition to a lamb and a goat (more revered in the Caribbean than the lamb).[162] A menacing knife rests near the top of the composition, perhaps representing the sword that stabbed Christ on the cross. Enveloping all are musical instruments that suggest Biblical Jericho and also the blues and jazz. The sharp angles and perpendicular lines of these objects punctuate the surface with a dance-like rhythm that also refers to music. However, unlike the rich notes of Morrison's narrative scenes and imaginative compositions, Wiley's portraits simulate power with their flat and monotonous percussive rhythms, akin to electronic drumbeats.

Whereas those painters who listen to jazz seem to employ improvisational and asymmetrical marks and colors, hip-hop generates a repetitious mark-making that is interrupted by other passages. Wiley samples from art historical prototypes in a similar way to how rappers lift existing instrumental tracks or percussion breaks from hit songs. Robert Hobbs describes Wiley's appropriation of vibrant pattern and art historical contexts as analogous to how hip-hop artists

[161] Keith Morrison, email-message to author, February 9, 2012.
[162] Ibid.

invent their musical compositions.[163] Wiley's preference for alpha-male models, the visual equivalents of rappers, who dominate a soundtrack through their cadenced style of speaking over the beats, is another example of his hip-hop aesthetic.[164] Similar to hip-hop's incorporation of a wide range of prototypical musical styles including classical, jazz, pop and reggae, Wiley takes his inspiration from a broad range of historical and cultural sources. Hobbs notes that Wiley's dominant background patterns are analogous to the appropriated instrumental tracks or percussion breaks of hip-hop music, and they also assume the abstract role of being both opaque and resistant to representation of anything other than themselves.[165] Hobbs notes that textile designs in Wiley's art "briefly halts the past/present contrapuntal reading of the illusions his art-historical prototypes and present-day models enact."[166] Like the printed backdrops of Malian photographer Seydou Keïta and Dutch wax cottons of British artist Yinka Shonibare, "they also assume the highly important role of being both opaque and resistant to the representation of anything other than themselves."[167] Wiley comments that his combinations of pattern that are often imposed upon the model and art historical reference causes a tension and "[a]t times, the ground is fighting. It's taking over the figure. It's jockeying for position," creating a certain hostility.[168] By reinforcing the painting's self- reflexiveness, the exoticism of these patterns blends cultures unrelated to his subjects or their art historical

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[163] Robert Hobbs, "Kehinde Wiley: Détourning Representation," *The World Stage: Africa, Lagos~Dakar* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2008), 27.
[164] Ibid., 28.
[165] Ibid.
[166] Robert Hobbs, "Kehinde Wiley's Conceptual Realism," in *Kehinde Wiley* by Thelma Golden et. Al. (Rizzoli, New York, 2012), 49.
[167] Ibid., 48.
[168] David Lewis, "The Art World: Kehinde Wiley," *Prophecy Magazine 9* (Summer 2006), unpaginated.

prototypes, undermining a seemingly modernist conventionality.[169] Wiley's patterns synthesize styles and time periods in a similar way to appropriated music in hip-hop.

Fig. 2.41 Kehinde Wiley, *St. Sebastian II*, oil on canvas, 96" x 72", 2006, courtesy of Roberts & Tilton Gallery, Sean Kelly Gallery, and Stephen Friedman Gallery

Wiley's patterns encircle his models like halos that radiate from their youthful and expressive bodies and communicate vitality in the same visual language as hip-hop. Power in hip-hop is most apparent in the aggressively layered, dynamic array of shapes assumed by the gesturing and dancing body as in his painting *St. Sebastian II* (Fig. 2.41) (2006), in which the tattoos and the patterns complement one another. Hip-hop dances contain an assertive angularity of body posture, controlled body isolations that allow for "popping" and "krumping" and an insistent virtuosic rhythmicity.[170] Whether defiant, proud, or coolly composed, Wiley's models radiate a powerful aura. Wiley says,

> I believe that hip-hop is a state of grace that begins with an ability to deal with randomness … there's an essence that came from the …. African people that were enslaved … from having everything suppressed and destroyed. It strengthened their ability to improvise and find joy in the smallest moments … my work at its best tries to acknowledge patterns and deal with Black masculinity.[171]

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[169] Ibid.
[170] Thomas F. DeFrantz, "The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip-hop Dance and Body Power," Accessed August 8, 2011, *web.mit.edu/people/defrantz/Documents/BlackBeat.PDF.*
[171] Wiley and Ogunnaike, "Kehinde Wiley in Conversation with Lola Ogunnaike."

Wiley's patterns amplify the subject's hip-hop bravado and charismatic energy with their rhythms and bold complementary color combinations. They interrupt the foreground to highlight the model's physique and define a space of authority for his figures in the same way that hip-hop's repetition embellishes and plays upon variations of words and posturing.

Wiley's rhythmic designs, which evidence a visual equivalent of the beat, are the key aspect that ties his work to hip-hop, as much as the style of the models themselves. Africanist Halifu Osumare analyzes the force of these phat beats in hip-hop music that derive from their African rhythmic aesthetics and that define the postmodern cool of popular culture.[172] She observes,

> [R]hythm is the foundation of the emcee's oral phrasing and metaphoric allusions that create a dense polyrhythmic bricolage. In global hip-hop, rap music's approach to the layered, polyrhythmic aspects of the Africanist aesthetic unites with other world music, such as the Hawaiian hula ipu rhythms, bhangra music emanating from Punjabi-Asian British pop culture in London, and kwaito music of South Africa … Hence, the answer to why hip-hop is so compelling to youth around the globe can be discovered in the most basic human connection: the rhythmic life force itself.[173]

These phat beats draw upon the lowest registers of the synthesized and looped bass sounds, and they are engineered using the most powerful electronic systems to produce effects similar to an African drum beat. The structure of hip-hop music depends on rhythmic and textural tonal layering that use circular phrasing patterns rather than linear progressive ones.[174] While hip-hop instrumentation differs from West African drumming, the "principles of multiple meter and cross-rhythms produced in call-and-response modes, along with the upbeat access that are emphasized as much as the downbeat–all converge in a

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[172] Halifu Osumare, *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-Hop: Power Moves* (New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2007), 43.
[173] Osumare, The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-Hop: Power Moves, 43.
[174] Ibid., 44.

particular African-based musical methodology. These musical characteristics are found in African American swing, bebop, gospel, soul, funk, disco, and rap," in addition to many Caribbean genres and jazz.[175] The term "flow" is used in hip-hop to denote either the rhythmic fluidity of the beat or an emcee's rhyming, but the breaks and ruptures in combination with flow more fully explain the energy of hip-hop aesthetics.[176] Wiley's patterns provide a visual flow that runs across and interrupts the space of the figure.

The logos and motifs of fashion are another aspect of power in the world of hip-hop that Wiley appropriates in his portraits. These highly theatrical fashions associated with gangsta rap include its preference for cavalier baggy pants, flapping shirttails originally associated with prison inmates, Black-ink tattoos and bandanas of Chicano gangsters, and do-rags. Since the 1990s, these styles have been topped off with high fashion logos and generous amounts of jewel-encrusted platinum and silver "bling," which both play into and differ from traditional portraits of bejeweled nobles.[177] African-American men sporting the bling earrings, rings, gold chains, and iridescent silk-screened patterns on their t-shirts and hoodies seem comparable to the decorative qualities of many African textiles and brightly colored fabrics, not to mention the extraordinary gold jewelry worn by Akan kings. American artist Robert Pruitt has also explored this highly decorative aspect of African-American fashion through his series of embellished guns with Swarovsky crystals designed in collaboration with the Fabric Workshop and Museum in 2010. In Pruitt's series, the guns taken from wars that

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[175] Ibid., 45.
[176] Ibid., 47.
[177] Hobbs, "Kehinde Wiley: Détourning Representation," 28.

specifically reference turning points in African-American history, from the Civil War era to the present, become fashion accessories and headdresses, as in one gun that serves as the medallion for a gold chain. Wiley layers decorative patterns like bling jewelry and tattoos on top of the model's arms, chest, and legs.

Fig. 2.42 Rashaad Newsome, *Black Barbie*, collage in antique frame, automotive paint, 56 3/8" x 43 ½ x 3", 2011

In a similar way as Wiley's portraits, collages by artist Rashaad Newsome exploit a notion of bling through extremely decorative hip-hop style. Originally from New Orleans, Newsome conflates European heraldry with hip-hop swagger. Says Newsome of his conglomeration of images, "A coat of arms is really a collage of objects that represent social status and economic status and status as a warrior, so they're kind of like portraits without using the figure."[178] His exhibition Herald at Marlborough Chelsea in January 2011 features many tributes to excess and affluence through details such as a cross encrusted with jewels, a diamond Piaget watch, objectified female body parts, flowers with expensive brooches, rings, a yacht and a jet, Black American Express cards, and tons of gold chains that make up intricately patterned coats of arms. His piece *Black Barbie* (2011) (Fig. 2.42) is a tribute to female rapper Nicki Minaj, and she is represented as a bodiless pair of legs in high heels surrounded by a kaleidoscope of gems and, like a confection, elaborate neo-Baroque pink frame. This visual accumulation is comparable to

[178] Ibid.

the rapid-fire spoken word of Minaj's bawdy hip-hop songs. In each of the corners are Black fists clenching money. Newsome appropriates advertising images of bling and its conflation with celebrity and status in European history to suggest that this materialism is the contemporary fantasy and opiate of the masses. Like Newsome's critique of corporate industry's commodification of hip-hop style and associations with the historical iconography of European nobility, Wiley's paintings incorporate the contemporary pervasiveness of branding by featuring the logos of PUMA, Adidas, and other companies that form decorative patterns, similar to the namedropping of famous designers such as Gucci, Versace, and Vuitton in hip-hop songs to convey status and cachet. These logos invoke the fantasy of wealth and status as suggested both in hip-hop lyrics and reality TV shows, as well as models of sexiness in fashion. However, Wiley has also participated in the commodification of hip-hop culture and fashion through his collaborations with PUMA and by promoting logos in his paintings, rather than offering his own critique of its shallow and often stereotyping use of Black male models.

By incorporating these styles and rhythmic patterns into his work, Wiley attracts a more youthful, hip audience than would ordinarily be interested in contemporary painting. In a theory that she calls *connective marginalities*, Halifu Osumare argues that outside of the United States, constructed meanings around hip-hop culture overlap with issues of social marginality.[179] Global inequalities coalesce with Africanist aesthetics in the international lure of hip-hop. At the same time, Wiley's references to art history attract high art patrons. His patterns

[179] Osumare, The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-Hop: Power Moves, 69.

present a visual counterpoint, a rhythmic texture and beat that manifests as a space of dreamlike fantasy for his figures. Through the synesthetic experience of his paintings, viewers are brought into a world where the diversity of Black beauty is honored, the layering of cultural histories is re-examined, and a more inclusive version of history is established.

The Black Dandy, the Exotic Odalisque, and the Ebony Diva

Wiley's heavy use of pattern calls upon the seductiveness and magnetic image of the European dandy, who is known for his sartorial flamboyance and allure to both male and female audiences. The dandy was ideologically and socially idiosyncratic, serving as a cultural alternative to mainstream bourgeois society, a sartorial figure acting the part of an aristocrat within the context of an emerging modern nation-state.[180] Yet the Black dandy is also an anomaly in African Diaspora culture. While the European dandy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was tolerated for his fashion and behavioral excess, African American men who had the audacity to dress with extravagance were publicly ridiculed, physically attacked, and often lynched.[181] Symbolically, the Black dandy's wardrobe spoke to modernity, freedom, rebellion, and power.[182] As documented in Lenwood Morris' painting of Alain Locke and James VanDerZee's photograph of Prince Tovalou Houénou, the Black dandy manifested aspects of Baudelaire's legendary flâneur: "an urban idler and habitual witness who, through his associations and conscientiously constructed

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[180] Richard J. Powell, *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 69.
[181] Ibid, 70.
[182] Powell, 71.

self-representation, extracts the timeless from the temporal."[183] In his important study, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, Brent Hayes Edwards explores the transatlantic dispersals of Black intellectuals and artists between the World Wars. He shows that patterns of migration and exchange articulated the credentials of Black dandies such as Alain Leroy Locke, Marcus Garvey, Tovalou Houénou, Jean Toomer, and Claude McKay, and demonstrates that Black dandies were masters of "the art of seduction through transgression."[184] The Black dandy's unabashed narcissism is what resurrected him from invisibility and elevated him to personhood.[185] Wiley's models masquerade as contemporary Black dandies, but they also traverse time through his references to canonical art historical works.

As Wiley suggests with his subjects' distinctive hip-hop clothing and his own embellished backgrounds, the Black dandy does not attempt to play the role of his white counterpart. As Monica L. Miller points out, "The Black dandy's style is not solely a mimicry of European dress or effort to achieve power associated with whiteness, but was instead a Black interpretation designed to offer the Black performer a greater degree of mobility within the expressive form.[186] Furthermore, "Black and Blackness are themselves signs of Diaspora, of cosmopolitanism, that African subjects did not choose but from which they necessarily re-imagined themselves" and therefore Black dandyism is an

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[183] Ibid, 72.
[184] Brent Hayes Edwards, The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).
[185] Powell, 74.
[186] Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2009), 14.

"interpretation and materialization of the complexity of this cosmopolitanism."[187] The dandy's vivid affectations such as fancy clothes, attitude, and fierce gestures represent more than compulsive self-fashioning, but are an attempt to control representation, self, and cultural expression.[188] Wiley's models become dandies into the fantasy world of his paintings with their lavish patterns. Although traditionally the Black dandy was a heterosexual figure, in the work of contemporary artists such as Kehinde Wiley, a homoerotic aspect is implied because of his sartorial expressiveness and the self-conscious focus on his beauty. Only a celebrity of pop music or the sports industry has an equal amount of social freedom to decorate and celebrate his body with fashion.

Wiley's patterns that blur gender distinctions and establish an ethos of coolness for his contemporary dandies function similarly to designs in paintings by Mustafa Maluka, a South African artist now based in Helsinki and New York. Maluka depicts heroically-scaled faces and torsos against decorative and often striped backgrounds. The faces are often multi-racial or racially and gender ambiguous, alluring, and their expressions enigmatic. Maluka appropriates images of male and female models from fashion magazines, whose vague expressions often resemble passport photos and mug shots or cell phone photos from parties posted on Facebook and other social networking sites.[189] The casualness of Maluka's scouting for images is reminiscent of Wiley's sourcing the streets for models, or Wiley's early use of a mugshot for the subject of a portrait while an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

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[187] Ibid., 6.
[188] Ibid., 7.
[189] Holland Cotter, "Out of Africa, Whatever Africa May Be," Art Review: 'FLOW', *New York Times*, April 4, 2008, http://www.bertrand-gruner.com/pdf/artistspress/new-york-times-maluka.pdf.

Like Wiley, Maluka often elicits a visual tension between the foreground through the subject's clothing or colors of the person's face and hair and the rhythmically patterned background. In *The Answers Get Harder and Harder* (2009) (Fig. 2.43), Maluka shows a handsome young man against a dominating backdrop of pink with wedges of pastel colors flaring out in all directions overlapped by heavy Black dots. The figure himself, who is perhaps of African and European descent, has a long face flecked with warm and cool colors that merge in a spattered brownish with yellow and blue highlights. His hair sports a different pattern that suggests angular designs shaved or bleached into the hair, while his shirt has another design of red and green biomorphic shapes. He has a strong jaw line, chiseled features, and a determined expression, but the pastels and pinks behind him also suggest a youthful or even feminine playfulness. His lips are curved and painted a sensuous red, also expressing his eroticism, and perhaps homoerotic allure. Maluka's use of color has a heightened, Pop art sensibility, similar to Warhol's silkscreen paintings, in which the color glows and replaces any naturalistic sense of light.

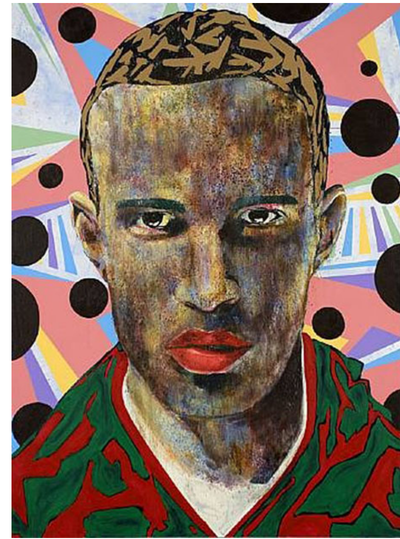

Fig. 2.43 Mustafa Maluka, *The Answers Get Harder* and Harder, oil and acrylic on canvas, 72" x 52.4", 2009

In a similar way, Wiley's *Mame Ngagne* (2007) (Fig. 2.44) portrait of a young Senegalese man from the "World Stage" series features a delicate pattern

of flying birds from an African factory printed cloth that overlaps the young man's torso and even the pendant on his necklace that shows a highly detailed photograph of his marabout, probably identifying the young man as a Mouride. In *Mame Ngagne*, the offbeat patterning of the bird motif and its diagonal lines suggest the illusion of movement, as does the partially turned position of the model. The magnetic, flamboyant subjects depicted by Wiley and Maluka seem to exist only in an urban, contemporary setting. However, Black dandies have always had a powerful presence in African and African Diaspora religion and cultures, as in the many manifestations of Eshu-Elegba, Yoruba god of the crossroads, whose nature often associates him with the Black dandy.

Fig. 2.44 Kehinde Wiley, *Mame Ngagne*, 2007, courtesy of Roberts & Tilton Gallery

For his exhibition at Deitch Projects in New York City entitled *Black Light* (2009), Wiley showed monumentally high resolution, digitally manipulated photographs such as *Dion 'OJ' Bey, After Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' The Virgin Adoring the Host* (2009) (Fig. 2.45) and *After Sir Joshua Reynolds' "Portrait of Samuel Johnson"* (Fig. 2.46) that reveal how he manipulates color, pattern, and surface even before he begins the painted subject, and allows viewers to experience the construction of a fictional image. Wiley's heightened exploitation of light in this series emphasizes the luminosity emanating from his subjects and increases this sense of a dream-world, "enveloping them into the conversation

that is an extension of their singular as well as separate existence."[190] He comments,

> The light was played up, not only in the religious sense, but I went so far as to use some techniques of the late 90s hip-hop video lighting, where that type of rapturous light is married with something more like a Hype Williams vernacular, and the heightening of the orifice, which plays up the more sexual use of light.[191]

Soliciting his models from Fulton Mall in downtown Brooklyn, Wiley seems to have picked a range of young men who are more muscular and masculine. However, all of the images accentuate their glistening lips, gleaming skin, and radiance of the model's eyes and tone. Krista Thompson describes their eyes, which emit a halo of white light and reflect the source of their illumination, evoking the art historical way that "[l]ight governed ideals of beauty and the sublime, of visibility and invisibility, of the sacred and profane."[192] This inner glow is another way of showing the distinctive magnetism of the dandy.

Fig. 2.45 Kehinde Wiley, *Dion 'OJ' Bey, After Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' "The Virgin with the Host"*, archival inkjet print on Hahnemühle fine art paper, 30" x 24.5", 2009

Fig. 2.46 Kehinde Wiley, *After Sir Joshua Reynolds' "Portrait of Samuel Johnson"*, archival inkjet print on Hahnemühle fine art paper, 30" x 24.5", 2009

Wiley is one of many artists who sought to represent Black light and to pun on this title since the 1960s, and he does so through his heightened color and pattern. Artist and activist Faith Ringgold made a series of "Black Light"

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[190] Brian Keith Jackson, "I See You," in *Kehinde Wiley: Black Light*, Brian Keith Jackson and Krista A. Thompson (Brooklyn, NY: Powerhouse Cultural Entertainment, 2009), 9.
[191] Ibid., 9.
[192] Krista A. Thompson, "How to See a Work of Art in Blinding Light," in *Kehinde Wiley: Black Light*, Brian Keith Jackson and Krista A. Thompson (Brooklyn, NY: Powerhouse Cultural Entertainment, 2009), 11.

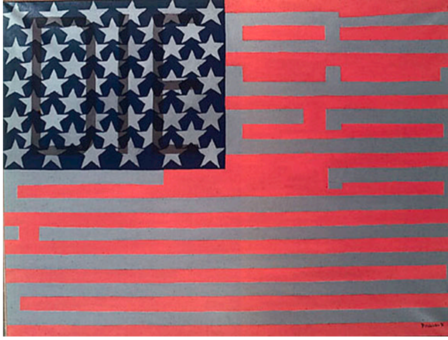

Fig. 2.47 Faith Ringgold, *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger,* oil on canvas, 36" x 50", 1969, collection of the artist

paintings exhibited in 1970, and in an "effort to reflect on the use of light in art history and its implicit role in manifesting whiteness and denigrating Blackness, removed the color white from her palette."[193] In her "Black Light" series, the painting *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger,* 1969 (Fig. 2.47) shows the American flag as it would mark the race to the moon. "Die" overlays the stars and "nigger" is spelled through the pattern of stripes on July 20, 1969. In the 1960s, the space program was unpopular with many African Americans because they saw it as a pretext to funnel public money away from the poor and minorities.[194] Thompson argues that Wiley's series represents a broader disruption of what light signifies, by using the type of illumination used in clubs, and therefore casting a critical perspective on photography and the way in which it was employed to fix race, normalize whiteness, and visualize Blackness.[195] The title "Black Light" is another example of Henry Louis Gates' term "signifyin" and it puns on the gap between the denotative and figurative meanings of these words. Light and pattern act as a foil to the gritty reality of urban spaces to shed light on those who are Black.

In Wiley's "Black Light" series, floral patterns and vines are animated and suggestively interrupt the space of the figure to suggest eroticism, fertility, and complement the splendor that often surrounds the Black dandy, and decorate his

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[193] Ibid.
[194] Hunter Braithwaite, "Faith Ringgold: American People, Black Light," *There is No There*, November 28, 2011 at 9:43am, accessed February 14, 2012, http://www.thereisnothere.org/2011/11/faith-ringgold-american-people-black-light/
[195] Thompson, "How to See a Work of Art in Blinding Light," 13.

skin like tattoos. *Dion 'OJ' Bey, After Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' The Virgin Adoring the Host* shows a handsome young man clad in a colorfully patterned baseball cap and a pink, purple, and white Adidas sweatshirt with turquoise stripes. The heightened detail of the photograph adds to the artificial slickness of the image, like an advertisement. The dense foliage of the background is appropriated from a contemporary home décor design rather than a Neoclassical European wallpaper or textile. The patterns serve as a flat and surreal layer that embellish the subjects' luscious surfaces and contrast against his masculine bravado.

Wiley's electric color arrangements in the "Black Light" series are most heightened in the portrait entitled *Sharrod Hosten, After Sir Joshua Reynolds' Portrait of Doctor Samuel Johnson* (2009), which features a dominant turquoise, pink, and coral elaborate rococo-esque background that intrudes into the foreground over the model's arms and torso. The hot and cold color contrasts evoke Oriental opulence positioned against the model's Black and white satin ensemble. Artist Victor Ekpuk has observed, "Kehinde Wiley is a dream-maker and he is also creating wet dreams." In response, Wiley said, "There is something called a lucid dream … in that state of dreaming, you actually know that you're dreaming … throughout West Africa, what we call the artist comes from the dream space."[196] This dream space is also constructed through the artificiality of the light in the image.

Wiley's portraits satisfy a lust for the exoticization and display of the Black body upon which the dandy consciously plays. Iké Udé's *Sartorial Anarchy*

[196] "Global Africa," YouTube video.

photographic series similarly constructs a framework for exploring the portrait against a staged environment and manipulates the theme of an exceptional, but difficult to define, Black gentleman. Thomas Carlyle described a dandy as "a clothes-wearing man, a man whose trade, office, and existence consists in the wearing of clothes. Every faculty of his soul, spirit, purse, and person is heroically consecrated to this one object, the wearing of clothes wisely and well."[197] Udé's *Sartorial Anarchy: Untitled #4* (Fig. 2.48) shows him in the incongruous pairing of the familiar (straw boater garnished with flowers, football socks, English shoes, Boy Scout shirt) with the less familiar items (eighteenth-century neckwear, vintage wool breeches, an Afghani folk-coat) that also contrasts with the elaborate Turkish rug and ornate cloth flung over a stool. In this patterned mélange, Udé challenges the social construct of our fashion aesthetics and also invokes a history of exoticization. He also makes the African man appear a person of the world, of high status, and refinement. Lowery Stokes Sims observes, "*Sartorial Anarchy* demonstrates a debt to artifice while acknowledging an ongoing back-and-forth between culturally subjective ambiguities in men's dress codes and its attendant beauty, flaws, and

Fig. 2.48 Iké Udé, *Sartorial Anarchy: Untitled #4,* pigment on satin paper, 40" x 36", 2010

[197] Lowery Sims and Leslie King-Hammond, "Artist Statement by Iona Rozeal Brown," in *The Global Africa Project* (New York: The Museum of Arts and Design and Prestel Publishing, 2010), 98.

contradictions."[198] Similar to self-portraits by Udé, Wiley combines textures and designs that define a surreal space for a powerful Black, male protagonist, and therefore invents a new narrative for the Black male subject.

Wiley's intricate decorative backgrounds have an affinity to the work of major African studio photographers such as Malian master Seydou Keïta. Revived by curators in the early 1990s, Keïta's photographs of elegance and iconographic power were "…mnemonic time bombs that exploded the mythologies and ethnographic obsessions of Africa by the likes of the German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl (1902-2003) and other safari photographers."[199] Keïta often employed textile backdrops with bold, graphic designs that create a visual counterpoint with motifs and details of the portrait subject. For instance, in *Untitled (Man with Flower)* (Fig. 2.49) (1959), Keïta depicts a refined-looking, slender, and cosmopolitan African man, a true dandy. He wears a white suit with a pen in his pocket, a watch, striped tie, and eyeglasses, all perhaps props from Keïta's studio if not the man's own possessions that construct the image of elegance and education. The model looks with sensitivity and dignity at the camera, and holds a flower in his hand. Behind him, the delicate patterns of a floral print adorn the fabric backdrop and pick up the elegant details throughout the image. Keïta's representation of an empowered,

Fig. 2.49 Seydou Keïta, *Untitled (Man with Flower)*, 1959

[198] Sims and King-Hammond, "Artist Statement by Iona Rozeal Brown," 98.
[199] Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Contemporary African Art* (Milan, Italy: Damiani, 2009), 36.

educated class that could afford to have a portrait and used props to show their success and modernity. Using an American equivalent of upper middle-class textiles, Wiley's backdrops for the "Black Light" portraits were inspired by home décor magazines from the 1950s and Martha Stewart's home collection of 1999, offering a nostalgic fantasy of good taste and a foil to his model's urban, hip-hop swagger. Wiley admires and collects the works of Cameroonian-born photographer Samuel Fosso, who sets a precedent for staging the photograph with fantasy backdrops of pattern.[200]

Fig. 2.50 Samuel Fosso, *Le Chef: celui a vendu l'Afrique aux colons*, color print, 40. 2" x 40.2", 1997

Fosso's self-portraits represent the artist in an array of imaginative costumes and guises that communicate a plethora of desires and fantasies about the Black dandy.[201] In his images, Fosso often utilizes textile backdrops ironically in both Black and white and color images. For instance, in his "Tati" series (1997) Fosso bought garishly patterned outfits from the popular Parisian bargain-basement seller of cheap goods, called *tati*, and photographed himself in saturated color, pushing the work towards a masquerade and parody of social types. Also, in his photograph *Le Chef: celui a vendu l'Afrique aux colons* (1997) (Fig. 2.50), Fosso perches like a pasha on his

[200] Krista A. Thompson, "How to See a Work of Art in Blinding Light," 13.
[201] Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, *Contemporary African Art*, 38.

fake leopard print throne against a busy backdrop of three bold West African factory print textiles on the wall and four other patterns under his feet. These contrast with his faux leopard print loincloth, fur hat, and body bedecked in many necklaces and adornments, including funky sunglasses. It is the Dutch wax print fabric background, as much as the commercial leopard print and jewelry, which challenge the authenticity of "traditional" African in the image. In contrast, Wiley's "World Stage: Lagos~Dakar" paintings enlist the Dutch wax print, but mix it up with American brands of youth culture. Flamboyant Black dandies by Fosso and Wiley employ pattern and irony to challenge stereotypes of African men.

Wiley's celebration of illuminated Black skin offset by patterns builds upon the depiction of the Black dandy by African American artists Kerry James Marshall and Barkley Hendricks. These artists often emphasize the darker tones of the models' complexions and make them appear shiny black, an emphasis on the beauty of Black skin that may relate to the politics and visual aesthetics of the Black Power movement and "Black is beautiful" consciousness of the 1960's and 1970's. Curator Franklin Sirmans writes, "Marshall has amplified Blackness in his figures with charcoal Black characters against luscious super-saturated primary colors to question the way we see Black people in the history of art."[202] This aspect of Black beauty is not simply an aesthetic choice, or even a political one, but an existential space from which the artist speaks. Wiley cites Marshall's paintings as a longtime influence on his work, setting a precedent for a vision of dignified Black identity.

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[202] Franklin Sirmans et al., "Art Chronicle," *30 Americans* (Florida: Rubell Family Collection, 2008), 21.

Marshall's painting of a Black barber shop, a space that deals with male beauty and style, may have inspired many of Wiley's images of dandies. Wiley remembers that as a boy he saw Marshall's barber shop painting, *De Style* (1993) (Fig. 2.51) that hangs at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and stood out because of the lack of other images of Black people in the museum.[203] In *De Style*, a group of Black men gather at a barber shop, a place where men bond over discussions about politics, news of the day, and sports. Wiley recalls the impact of Marshall's advice to him, while he was a student at Yale University, about painting an empathetic awareness of Blackness as an African American artist. Wiley comments,

Fig. 2.51 Kerry James Marshall, *De Style*, 1993, Los Angeles County Museum of Art

> Kerry James Marshall … spoke about this [difference in how one paints Black bodies if one is Black]. He said there's certain empathy to the softening of the hardness of the contour. It's a choice, are you going to create an angular or graphic edge on your figures or are you going to create something that's much more empathetic.[204]

However, whereas Marshall subverts stereotypes by literally employing the color Black to represent African-American skin, Wiley focuses on the Black dandy. Wiley's portraits also build upon the important precedent of Barkley Hendricks' surfaces and decorative patterns that adorn the Black dandy. Hendricks' idea of an embodied and robust African American attitude coincided in the late sixties

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[203] Maxwell Williams, "Kehinde Wiley: The Transcontinental Breadth of a Contemporary Master," *Flaunt*, no. 114, (March 24, 2011): 137.
[204] "Global Africa," YouTube video.

with a groundswell of racial consciousness and push for increased Black visibility. He introduced the subject of city-dwelling Black individuals whose power lay not in words or deeds but in clothing, posture, and color.[205] He focused on attractive, young African Americans, but his flâneurs had more of an edge and a street vernacular in their gestures and fashion, insistent patterning to their clothing, athleticism, and other aspects of Black popular culture.[206] Powell acknowledges the legacy of Hendricks' portraiture when he writes, "Hendricks's 'school' built its attitudinal and dandified *terribleness* with the tools of a learned pictorialism."[207] Hendricks' manipulation of matte versus glazed areas creates the effect of focal juxtapositions and dissonances that psychologically lead to social and political interpretations of the paintings. His emphasis on the allure of Black skin and urban clothing was unprecedented: both counter internalized racism and celebrate the sitter's confidence and bravado. Hendricks' models wear flamboyantly coordinated or Afrocentric clothing, often with specific colors and vibrant patterns, as in the painting *Blood (Donald Formey)* (1975) that features a handsome "blood brotha" in a deep red plaid. Not unlike Hendricks' portraits, many of Wiley's models have hip and funky hairstyles that range from Afros to dreadlocks and even bleached-blond. In addition to his models stylish clothing, Wiley heightens the luminosity of Black skin by oiling or spritzing the models' bodies with water, making their lips appear pink and glossy. Hendricks's process of beginning with a portrait photograph that serves as a guide for the

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[205] Powell, *Cutting a Figure*, 128.
[206] Ibid., 131.
[207] Ibid., 129.

painting seems to be a direct inspiration for Wiley, as well as Hendricks's practice of choosing models off the street or working with friends and acquaintances.

Fig. 2.52 Barkley Hendricks, *Family Jules (NNN)*, 1974, oil and acrylic on canvas, 91 ½" x 60 ¼", 1974, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Wiley's ornate backdrops also may also relate to Hendricks's patterned backgrounds that offset some of his figures. In Hendricks's painting *Sweet Thang (Lynn Jenkins)* (1975 – 76), the Islamic tiling counterpoises the model's iridescent skirt and the Oriental rug. In his portrait of George Jules Taylor entitled *Family Jules (NNN)* (1974) (Fig. 2.52), a title that puns on male genitalia, Hendricks features the same backdrop of an Islamic tile wall. Both of these works play upon the Orientalist tradition of iconic French paintings of odalisques by artists such as Eugène Delacroix and Henri Matisse, as well as Alice Neel's languid nude portrait of John Perreault. Taylor's splayed, reclining position juxtaposed against the soft, white couch exploit the psychological intersection of race and sexuality, along with his ornate marijuana smoking pipe and ornamental kimono draped over the couch, to convey a dreamy half-consciousness. The initials "NNN" stand for "No Naked Niggahs," parodying a rude rebuke against Black nudity and undermining the seriousness of the odalisque tradition.[208]

Wiley's two images entitled Sleep (2008-9) (Figs. 2.53 and 2.54) of model Mark Shavers as an the idealized reclining male semi-nude are inspired by Jean-

[208] Ibid., 146.

Bernard Restout's painting *Sleep* (1771) (Fig. 2.55) and may perhaps also reference Hendricks' *Family Jules (NNN)* as well as other poses from art history

Fig. 2.53 Kehinde Wiley, *Sleep*, 2008-9, *After Jean-Bernard Restout's "Sleep"*, archival inkjet print on Hahnemühle fine art paper, 30" x 50", 2009, courtesy of Roberts & Tilton Gallery, Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Friedman Gallery

Fig. 2.54 Kehinde Wiley, *Sleep*, 2008-9, oil on canvas, 132" x 300", 2008, Rubell Family Collection, Miami, FL, courtesy of Roberts & Tilton Gallery, Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Friedman Gallery

Fig. 2.55 Jean-Bernard Resout, *Sleep*, 1771, 38 3/8" x 51 1/8", 1771, Cleveland Museum of Art

such as the Pietà or other martyred figures. In Wiley's *Black Light* exhibition, Sleep represents Shavers in a high-resolution photograph, his skin sprayed with droplets of water, and only a white fabric conceals his loins. His muscular body drapes sinuously across a simple studio bed, propped on some pillows. The photographic image is completely devoid of patterns and therefore provides a wonderful comparison to a second oil-painted image of the model in the same pose. This painted image of Shavers, included in Wiley's "Down" series, shows the model surrounded by a dense and lush floral pattern that also seems to grow from around him and delicately overlaps his feet and thigh. The floral pattern in green, yellow, orange, and blue, provides a romantic space, as if we have come across sleeping beauty surrounded by flowers and ready to be awakened with the life of a kiss. Unlike the realism of Hendricks' portraits, Wiley provides a contemporary romanticism so that viewers delight in the decorative motifs and the surfaces of the body rather than gain insight into the specific identity of the

model. The title of this series perhaps puns on the idea of the "down low brotha," but it also focuses on the art historical theme of the fallen warrior, the slain Christ, and other tragic heroes from mythology.

In a comparison of *Family Jules (NNN)* and *Wiley's St. John the Baptist II* (2006) (Fig. 2.56), Powell observes that the perceptual differences between these works correspond to the same contrasts from playful irreverence to blunt hubris, and racial idealism to postmodern cynicism.[209] Powell writes, "In sharp contrast to Wiley's corporeal exclamations and competing surface 'bling,' the odalisque-like parody through which Hendricks operates in *Family Jules (NNN)* puts a real body and a whimsical background in a complementary, if not oppositional, relationship: the painting's neoclassical whiteness and Islamic décor invaded by incisive yet casual, Black male nakedness."[210] Therefore, Wiley reinterprets Hendricks' 70's dandies with a 21st century take on Black Atlantic pattern, style, and masculine bravado.

Fig. 2.56 Kehinde Wiley, *St. John the Baptist II*, 2006, archival inkjet print on Hahnemühle fine art paper, 30" x 24.5", 2009

In his "World Stage" series and also recent explorations in photography such as the "Black Light" series, Wiley draws upon and also challenges the traditions of the Black dandy and the exotic odalisque. Wiley's "Down" images in comparison with the work of African American artist Mickalene Thomas and Afro-

[209] Ibid., 169.
[210] Ibid.

British artist Grace Ndiritu reveal how these serpentine, horizontal compositions play upon the trope of the exotic odalisque. Thomas similarly utilizes decorative designs to situate the Black subject in an erotic fantasy space, representing the female nude or semi-nude set in lavish, domestic interior sets following in the tradition of Venuses and odalisques by Titian (Tiziano Vecellio), Diego Velázquez, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Eugène Delacroix, Édouard Manet, Henri Matisse, and Romare Bearden.[211] She photographs her models in patterned dresses reminiscent of the 1970s and seated on animal print and seventies-inspired patterns, and reassembles these photographs into collages that serve as studies for her rhinestone-encrusted enamel paintings. Engaging with the tradition of odalisques by Manet, Picasso, and many others, Thomas' women challenge that history with their provocative and conscious gazes. *In A Little Taste Outside of Love* (2007) (Fig. 2.57), named after the iconic Tina Turner song, Thomas shows a nude African-American woman in a confrontational reclining pose— also

Fig. 2.57 Mickalene Thomas, *In A Little Taste Outside of Love*, acrylic, enamel, and rhinestones on wood panel, 108" x 144", 2007

[211] Rudolph, *Pattern ID*, 14.

referencing Velazquez's *Rokeby Venus* and Ingres' *Odalisque*—who floats amidst an array of floral, animal print and other graphic patterns. Thomas' work responds to the Black is beautiful concept and Afrocentric styles of the early 1970s. Thomas' subjects and their flashy textiles engage the viewer in the history of how the Black female body has been depicted as sensual and foreign object on display for the white male viewer's pleasure, although in this case, from a Black lesbian perspective. As a tribute to his associate, Wiley transforms Thomas into a hip-hop dandy in his photograph from the "Black Light" series entitled *After George Romney's Elizabeth Warren as Hebe* (2009) (Fig. 2.58). In contrast to Romney's portrait, Wiley has removed the dramatic shadow behind the figure and placed Thomas against a vivid floral pattern that competes with her red and green shirt and "Etch-a-Sketch" belt buckle. Wiley's rare portrait of a woman is both a homoerotic joke between the artists as well as a nod of mutual respect, and is consistent with his conventions of patterning that celebrate the Black male dandy.

Fig. 2.58 Mickalene Thomas, *After George Romney's Elizabeth Warren as Hebe*, 2009, archival inkjet print on Hahnemühle fine art paper, 30" x 24.5", 2009

Like Wiley, Thomas embellishes her surfaces to a similar high effect to elevate everyday Black womanhood to iconic status. *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith describes Thomas' unique blend of styles,

> From a foundation of Pop Art, Ms. Thomas resuscitates and extends movements like Photo Realism, New Image Painting and Pattern and Decoration … She fuses the strategies of the photo-based work of the Pictures Generation and the

collage-prone art of its loyal opposition, the Neo-Expressionist painters … but with a more urgent and specific message.[212]

By marrying inspiration from many textile and interior design influences from fine art and popular culture decoration, Thomas' paintings speak loud and proud for a new hedonism in painting that celebrates the range of possibility in surface and texture, where paint is as sexual and physical as the images it depicts.

Comparable to Wiley's painted floral patterns, Thomas employs rhinestone designs to enhance the glow of her female models' bodies and their decorative environments. Her rhinestones have been interpreted by some critics as a gaudy craft material that was used to decorate denim in the 80s, recently used by designers and makeup artists on everything from shoes and pocketbooks to nails and lips. She says that interpreting the rhinestones as just "bling" is a reductive reading of the work, and she continues to use this decoration as a way of reclaiming it from that reference.[213] The layers of her paintings can overwhelm the eye as they cause it to shuttle between the contrasting textures of thick slatherings and silky enamel-like finishes. Her patterns of faux gems suggest lavish opulence that lends decorative texture as well as flashiness to the surface, like a layer of diamonds. Thomas says that "… using rhinestones confronts the ideas of artifice and masking and ties into my investigation of beauty."[214] Similar to Wiley, she exploits a popular culture and hip-hop association of the decorative with wealth and class to problematize the exclusiveness of fine art attitudes about kitsch. Like Wiley's designs that adorn

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[212] Roberta Smith, "Loud, Proud, and Painted, 'Mickalene Thomas: Origin of the Universe,' at Brooklyn Museum," *New York Times*, September 27, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/28/arts/design/mickalene-thomas-origin-of-the-universe-at-brooklyn-museum.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.
[213] Mickalene Thomas and Lisa Melandri, "Points of Origin: An Interview with Mickalene Thomas by Lisa Melandri," *Origin of the Universe* (Santa Monica, CA: Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2012), 32.
[214] Ibid.

the Black male body, her glittering patterns and highly accessorized models subvert the sense of invisibility and marginalization that has been the historical experience of many Black people throughout Western history.

The decorative surfaces of her paintings and glitzy patterns express the magnetism of the "soul sistah," an urban diva who makes herself remarkable through flamboyant clothes, hairstyles, makeup, and accessories, such as *Qusuquzah, une très belle négresse 3*, (2012) (Fig. 2.59). Qusuquzah's outer accouterments emphasize the importance of hair, clothing, and jewelry in African and African Diaspora cultures. Thomas observes, "When I was growing up, everyone had the idea of changing and reclaiming your name by choosing an African name. Mine was Quanikah."[215] In this invention of a character, an artificial African self to substitute for the history of slavery and miscegenation, Thomas presents a glamorous and independent Black woman. Her language of pattern and rhinestone-bedecked surfaces reflect the construction of a glamorous self to substitute for many dehumanizing stereotypes of Blackness through history and exalt everyday women to the status of Venus. Wiley's portraits of dandies similarly implement pattern to beautify and eroticize the portrait subject, and explore

Fig. 2.59 Mickalene Thomas, *Qusuquzah, une très belle négresse 3*, acrylic, enamel, and rhinestones on wood panel, 96" x 80" x 2", 2012, courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York and Hong Kong

[215] Ibid., 29.

the way in which disenfranchised men of color puff themselves up to mask their absence of power and privilege in the world. As Kiša Lala observes,

> Lured by the opulence of early Euro-American styles of portraits, he [Wiley] found it not unlike the men strutting the streets of Harlem whose uber-glitz, bling and vanity were a façade that belied their real lack of power … He invited men off the streets to pose and parody the pompous gestures of historical portraits – it was a bit like voguing.… although he holds the choice of theatrical décor and accoutrements at an ironic distance, they're something he's also complicit to. He embraces it, but remains morally ambiguous.[216]

Wiley's patterns, like those of Thomas, express both the superficial construction of identity as a mask worn by the individual, and simultaneously communicate something transcendent and spiritual about that individual's àşẹ. As mentioned earlier, Wiley says he represents an aspect of himself at the same time that he collaborates with the model for role-play. He critiques constructions of power through decoration and posturing at the same time that he identifies with the necessity to aggrandize the self in order to garner respect in both the art world and on the street.

Also akin to Wiley's patterns that counterbalance the male odalisque or dandy, Grace Ndiritu incorporates heavily patterned fabrics in works that establish a surreal space to challenge the odalisque tradition and the objectification of the Black nude woman under the male gaze. In *Lying Down Textiles* from her "Still Life" series (2005-7) (Fig. 2.60), she displays herself almost completely obscured by blue Dutch wax

Fig. 2.60 Grace Ndiritu, *Lying Down Textiles*, video still, 2005-7

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[216] Kiša Lala, "Kehinde Wiley On the World Stage: A Conversation With the Artist," *Huffington Post*.

fabric with a gold floral pattern and against a backdrop of green and yellow cloth with a bird motif. Her face is covered and she reveals only her shoulder and arm, controlling the erotic charge evoked in conventional odalisque images that cater to the Orientalist fascination with the exoticism of the veiled female body versus the nude female form (part of the same European fantasy of harems). Wiley's male odalisques such as Mark Shavers in the "Down" series equally exploit the contrast between exposed skin and patterned fabric or adornment. His models' languid poses and fanciful designs put his subjects in the passive role that satisfies the Western fantasy of the exotic "other" who craves to be dominated by the European man. Wiley flips the script of dominant narratives in art history by substituting the decorated male body for the female subject because he challenges viewers to rethink the contexts of the gaze, the stereotyped roles of male and female, and the manner in which ornamental patterns partially concealing skin have been a trope for the exoticized body.

Exploring the Black diva as a complementary study of Black beauty to the Black dandy, Wiley departed from working almost exclusively with male models when he exhibited a series of entirely female subjects in the exhibition *Kehinde Wiley: An Economy of Grace* (May 2012) at Sean Kelly Gallery. He posed female models using historical portraits of society women by Jacques-Louis David, Thomas Gainsborough, and John Singer Sargent among others. Rather than painting the women in their own clothing, he collaborated with Riccardo Tisci, Creative Director of the French couture house Givenchy to create long gowns paired with wide leather belts with chains that may refer to womens'

historical role as the property of men and also to African American slavery. A makeup and hair designer styled the models with elaborate, silky wigs that threaten to bust out of their tightly coiled mounds and associate them with upper-class hairstyles of the eighteenth century. Wiley states, "This series of works attempts to reconcile the presence of Black female stereotypes that surrounds their presence and/or absence in art history, and the notions of beauty, spectacle, and the 'grand' in painting."[217] Wiley corrects the lack of Black women in academic portraiture, except for those in exoticized roles. However, his portraits invoke another stereotype: the myth of the Black superwoman, a figure who has "inordinate strength" and is "stronger emotionally than most men" as it has been defined by scholar Michele Wallace.[218] His images replace the historical absence of Black female portrait subjects with a manicured visualization of the powerful Black woman who can overcome any odds with strength and dignity. The intimidating elegance and power of these divas is further emphasized by the dominance of their sensuous floral designs. They appear jarring due to the hyperrealism of the crisply painted flowers and foliage that shine with phosphorescence against dark backdrops. The models' diaphanous gowns and gleaming skin cause a strong textural distinction between foreground and the background of opaque designs. Unlike the psychological expressiveness of some of his works with male subjects, Wiley seems more interested in playing dress-up with the women than revealing the underlying essence of their individuality and character.

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[217] Sean Kelly Gallery, press release for *Kehinde Wiley: An Economy of Grace*, May 6 – June 16, 2012, Sean Kelly Gallery, New York City, unpaginated.
[218] Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York and London: Verso Classics, 1978).

The Two Sisters (2012) (Fig. 2.61) is one of the first and strongest works in the series that revisits the idea of siblings and multiples discussed early in this chapter. Through doubling the women and the repetition of motifs, Wiley represents two figures that have distinctly different faces but wear similarly sheer white gowns with ruffles around the neckline or sleeve that offset their shimmering, pecan-brown skin. A curvilinear, incandescent vine with grapes and flowers in chartreuse, orange, red, and blue overlaps and embraces their translucent dresses and projects against the Black ground. The sisters stand with sober gentility and valor, devoid of the arrogant posturing of Wiley's young men. The women's big hairdos and flowing gowns are reminiscent of upper class Southern belles and they lack the urban edginess of his dandies. Their beauty depicts an idealized Black womanhood and upper class status purged of any funkiness or Afrocentric identification.

Fig. 2.61 Kehinde Wiley, *The Two Sisters*, oil on canvas, 2012, courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery

Painted in the time of Michele Obama's powerful presence as first lady, these images celebrate Black female beauty and represent women as thinkers, heroines, and leaders rather than objects of the male gaze. They remake the Victorian ideal of white women to show Black woman as elegant vessels of profound spirits. In his rendition of *Judith and Holofernes* (2012) (Fig. 2.62), Wiley ironically addresses the past power of white women over Black women as a visual pun on the "kill whitey" idea and also

speaks to the art historical canon that has positioned white women as the feminine ideal.[219] However, this work also twists the story of Judith into a stereotypical racial catfight between women. The recurring motif of a heavy orange flower that droops downwards echoes the severed female head held by the forceful model, who wears a subtle heart-shaped tattoo and decorated nails specific to Black hip-hop diva style. Perhaps more than the other women, Judith takes an active and dynamic role that celebrates her strength.

Fig. 2.62 Kehinde Wiley, *Judith and Holofernes*, oil on canvas, 2012, courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery

As erotic subjects, mothers, and heroines, Wiley's divas are more conservative in their poses and limited in their representation of womanhood than his images of Black dandies. His lack of intimacy or erotic potential with the female subjects diverges from the Black dandies, and makes them seem somewhat hollow. In spite of its limited range, the "Economy of Grace" series breaks new ground for Wiley in terms of the substance and heaviness of his day-glo patterns that belie the womens' strength, hint at their fertility, and infers that Black women lead with grace in all arenas.

Using pattern to redefine constructs of beauty, Wiley holds a mirror to beautiful Black personhood and addresses the ever-present demons of racist histories. He engages and deconstructs the intellectual circumstances that brought about in the eighteenth century the conflation of whiteness with the good,

[219] Christopher Beam, "The New Art World Rulebook - #6: Outsource to China, While Riffing on the Western Canon, Kehinde Wiley's Global Reach," *New York Magazine,* April 22, 2012, http://nymag.com/arts/art/rules/kehinde-wiley-2012-4/.

the beautiful, the intelligent and the civilized.[220] Philosopher and scholar Paul C. Taylor describes this tendency as the basis for classical racialism, "which holds that the physical differences between races are signs of deeper, typically intellectual and moral, differences … that the physical ugliness [according to Western culture] of Black people was a sign of a deeper ugliness and depravity."[221] This led to the justification of inequitable distribution of social goods along the lines of race, including property and even personal freedom. Identifying inferiority with physical appearance, modern Blackness has been engaged in a battle against the cultural imperative to internalize the opinion of one's own hideousness, resulting in the widespread feeling among nineteenth century Black people that Black features link to a dark past and to savage ways.[222] Referencing this history by dressing the models in wigs and neoclassical gowns, and matching their poses to canonical academic paintings, Wiley refutes this denigration of Blackness through the insistent patterns that command attention and create a contemporary context for his subjects. Wiley's orchestration of model, dress, hair, and most importantly the elaborate chorus of patterns that accompany the operatic arias of these works pays tribute to his mother, his Black sisters, and to the women of color who have been neglected by the painter's brush. More than a comment on gender, his diva series offers a fitting counterpart to his motifs that celebrate male beauty.

Through the appropriation and fusion of motifs from many cultures, in concert with art historical references, Wiley's work is informed by the aesthetics

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[220] Paul C. Taylor, "Malcolm's Conk and Danto's Colors; or, Four Logical Petitions Concerning Race, Beauty, and Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, (Winter 1999): 16.
[221] Ibid.
[222] Noliwe Rooks, *Hair Raising* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 35.

of African ornamentation such as its persistent and often asymmetrical repetition, off-beat and syncopated meter, and the tension between foreground and background space that establishes unique textures and invigorates this artwork. More than gilt frames and muscular brown bodies, it is the patterns that bestow on his subjects a sense of àşẹ that transcends the specific context of each portrait.

Wiley invents an atmospheric patterned environment for his figures that expresses an individual's inner character or àşẹ. Like an aura, these designs exude from the portrait subject and embrace his or her body with glowing color and vitality. The serpentine and floral motifs are as opulent and erotic as the seductive skin of the models, and their layering functions like a visual soundtrack. Their colors and motifs manifest an aesthetic of the cool that complements his subjects' composure and dignity. The patterns are both specific to the individual and they also refer to broader social identities and art historical contexts. In Wiley's paintings, patterns establish a stage for the performance of identity, cultural celebration, and power.

CHAPTER 3

MY HEART SKIPS A BEAT: CARNIVALESQUE PATTERNS BY NICK CAVE

Sculptor and performer Nick Cave has created an extraordinary series of sculptures that he calls “Soundsuits” using pattern and surface decoration that unite his sculpture and dance with many performance traditions of the Black Atlantic world. In the Soundsuits (Fig. 3.1), Cave appropriates already embellished fabrics, accumulating and layering motifs to establish complexity and meaning, and he uses beauty to present an activist’s vision for social change. Much of the literature about Cave’s work focuses on its seductive and sophisticated construction and flamboyant beauty, but glosses over the myriad of pattern and performance contexts that influence his work. Although curators and scholars have noted the visual relationship between his work and African and African Diaspora ceremonial art and performance, there has not been in-depth analysis of the connections that I address in this chapter.

Fig. 3.1 Nick Cave, *Let’s C*, the Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, PA, 2011, photo by James Prinz

I explore how African Diaspora Carnival and African masquerades have informed Cave’s approach to ornamentation. In terms of form and function, I examine the relationship between his multi-patterned characters and those of

African Diaspora Carnival, the association between his process and Black Atlantic motifs and embellishment, and the spiritual symbolism invoked in his use of geometrical designs, polka-dots, and other patterns. Cave's patterns and textures serve as a second skin for his figural sculptures and performances. His art represents both cultural continuity and a contemporary elaboration of Black Atlantic ritual art and performance. Like Wiley's seductive models, Cave energizes the surface of the body with pattern to radiate a similar àşẹ as that of the African masquerade dancer or Mardi Gras Black Indian chief. Cave's carnivalesque motifs and surfaces inspire visceral and spiritual responses to his Soundsuits, define his work in a broader cultural context, and present a multi-sensory experience of history.

Cave is from Fulton, Missouri, one of seven boys raised by a single mother. Like Wiley, he acknowledges the resourcefulness of his mother as a key inspiration for how he works as an artist. He comments, "I was not raised in a privileged environment and I had to figure out how to make things happen for myself … I started by making stuff out of things I found out in nature – I used my natural resources!"[223] Like generations of artists of color who found ways to invest their creative spirit into everyday domestic tasks and crafts, he learned to "make it work" by reusing commonplace objects.[224] Cave constructs his Soundsuits and relief sculptures from fabric and fiber remnants that he mines from thrift stores, flea markets, and estate sales including knit sweaters and afghans, sections of embroidery or crochet, wicker furniture, and beaded embellishment, traditionally

[223]Kate Eilertsen et al, *Nick Cave: Meet Me at the Center of the Earth* (San Francisco: Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2009), 233.
[224] Michelle Joan Wilkinson, "Of Material Importance," *Material Girls: Contemporary Black Women Artists* (Baltimore, Maryland: Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture, 2011), 12.

the realm of women's craft. He upcycles remnants, embroidery, bric-a-brac, old toys, beads, sequins, leaves, and hair to transform the human form into mythical beings and to transcend the distinctions of fashion and wearable sculpture. To a large degree, the transformation provoked by Cave's Soundsuits is generated by its dynamic and dizzying patterns, as well as the reflective quality of the materials and the specific sounds they generate. Cave's materials reveal a story about identity and his way of connecting with community.

In addition to adorning the body, Cave's Soundsuits shield the body from racism and homophobia, as well as other kinds of prejudice that he is keenly aware of as a Black, gay artist. Cave made his first Soundsuit in outraged reaction to accounts and broadcasting of the Rodney King beating in Los Angeles in March of 1991 by officers of the Los Angeles County Police Department. He identified with the vulnerability of King who had been described by the officers as larger than life and frighteningly "buffed out," when in fact there were seven officers involved in his beating, some watching and joking while others exacted brutal injuries on his prone body.[225] Cave retreated to the woods, and from branches, he constructed a jacket and pants that rattled and crackled fiercely when he moved and transformed his own body into a type of power figure (probably similar to Fig. 3.2).[226] Cave's Soundsuits follow in

Fig. 3.2 Nick Cave, *Soundsuit,* twigs, wire, metal armature, 1998, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

[225] Ann Landi, "Dressing for Excess," *ARTnews* (June 2012): 66.

Fig. 3.3 Louise Bourgeois wearing sculpture from *A Banquet/A Fashion Show of Body Part*, 1978, Hamilton Gallery, New York

Fig. 3.4 Leigh Bowery, photographed in one of his signature performance costumes, 1980s

the vein of many types of body performance art, such as Louise Bourgeois' elaborate performance *A Banquet/A Fashion Show of Body Part* (1978) at Hamilton Gallery, New York (Fig. 3.3) or Leigh Bowery's imaginative transvestite costumes in London in the 1980s (Fig. 3.4). However, his specific textural response to the racial attack on King was the genesis of his Soundsuit sculptures and performances, relic series (Fig. 3.5) that employ found objects such as African American memorabilia, and tondo series (Fig. 3.6), his round wall pieces made with beaded and embellished fabric.

Fig. 3.5 Nick Cave, *Untitled (Relic series)*, mixed media, courtesy of Jack Shainman gallery from the *New York City Armory Exhibition* 2012, New York

Fig. 3.6 Nick Cave, *Untitled (Tondo series)*, mixed media, courtesy of Jack Shainman gallery from the *New York City Armory Exhibition* 2012, New York

Cave's recent project, *Meet Me at the Center of the Earth*, was an exhibition that toured from the Yerba Buena Center in 2010 to the Arts to the

[226] UCLA Fowler Museum, *Nick Cave: Meet Me at the Center of the Earth* (press release), Jan 10–May 30, 2010, http://newsroom.ucla.edu/portal/ucla/fowler-museum-presents-the-traveling-111442.aspx.

Seattle Art Museum in 2011, and featured fifty Soundsuits and a number of performances that have taken place both inside the museum and outside on the street. Taking inspiration and experience from his background as a dancer trained with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Cave's Soundsuit performances include choreography from African and African Diaspora dances, urban hip-hop dance, and modern dance. The title of this multidisciplinary project conveys that Cave believes that the social responsibility of his art is to provide a "place for dreaming." He says, "I want people of every age, race, and interest to be transported for a few minutes with me, to another place at the center of the earth."[227] He expresses a utopian vision that connects to spiritual dimensions of Black Atlantic art throughout history.

Towards this goal, the Soundsuits are festooned with stripes, elaborate sequin patterns, embroidery, halos, and concentric rings of crochet, rows of buttons or beads, synthetic hair dyed in patterns of stripes, zigzags, diamonds, and polka-dots, and elaborately decorative knitted stocking feet. The suits are both sculpture and performance attire, and they dissolve hierarchies in Western societies between the fine art and decorative arts, performance, and street culture. As Kate Eilertsen has written, "Cave's work explores issues of ceremony, ritual, myth, and identity" and while he takes from many different cultural influences, African and African Diaspora art appear to be the primary source.[228]

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[227] Nick Cave and Kate Eilertson, "Working Toward What I am Leaving Behind," in *Meet Me at the Center of the Earth* (San Francisco: Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2009), 231.
[228] Eilertsen, "Introduction," *Meet Me at the Center of the Earth*, 18.

Cave collages many types of patterns to make a dazzling surface that exemplify Robert Farris Thompson's concept of "looking smart." According to Thompson,

> The vibrations of color and muscle in looking smart make human patterning resonate with inner life; it is playing the patterns as if they were autonomous forces of their own, in one instance, part-leopard, in another, bird-like quivering, while at the same time shaped by ordering consideration of limit and of line … looking smart carries us within an existential African sense of 'art.'[229]

Looking smart, or having a powerful and dramatic message conveyed through art, is confirmed during dances that make the body glitter and play like a musical instrument in response to multiple meter; by wearing design upon or deep within the flesh, all elements rhythmized with speed and strength.[230] There is no differentiation between pattern that moves through dance or that has an optical effect of dancing on a textile or wall. Cave's aesthetic of combining patterns reflects this collage of rhythms. He observes, "It's not just about borrowing directly, but using these things indirectly to establish a new way of looking at pattern."[231] Cave appropriates designs from many sources, creating a new hybrid based on his travel in India, South Africa, and Trinidad at Carnival. These hybridized motifs give his Soundsuits globally creolized personalities and provide each work with a unique aura. Looking smart manifests in the integration of pattern through visual art, music, and dance in the work of Nick Cave.

Cave's figurative Soundsuits use pattern and texture to suggest multiple centers of energy throughout the body that sometimes radiate out in the form of a halo of objects such as flowers, birds, mirrors, and other materials. This

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[229] Robert Farris Thompson, *African Art in Motion* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), 18.
[230] Ibid.
[231] Nick Cave, interview with the author, June 8, 2011, Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, PA.

emphasis on multiple energy centers is a specific quality of Black Atlantic dance that prizes controlled body isolation and articulation over symmetrical unity and balance as in Classical ballet. His presentation of a multi-sensory (seen, touched, heard) experience also relates to a democratic invocation of the senses that characterizes African derived pattern. Thompson has described the formal qualities of much African and African Diaspora art as "a high effect esthetic" that creates an impact that can be experienced through the five senses.[232] Among the Efik of Southeast Nigeria, the word for art really refers to pattern and decoration produced through painting, textile making, marking, shaping, impressing, and representing, and among the Yoruba, lined designs or imagery known as art is a key aspect of defining civilization.[233] Therefore, art in a West African sense means becoming civilized through the vital patterns drawn on or within objects taken directly from nature.

His work also engages in a dialogue with other Black Atlantic artists who explore history through the social resonance of materials such as that of American artist David Hammons and Jamaican artist Nari Ward in these artists' processes of scavenging for used, non-traditional materials for his art. Kellie Jones has described Hammons as a "hip junk dealer, sculptor, performer, conceptual artist, environmental sculptor, magician, philosopher, social commentator, draftsman, and griot who positions himself somewhere between Marcel Duchamp, Outsider art, and *Arte Povera*."[234] In contrast, Cave engages his audience through enticing patterns and lush textures to honor the handmade

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[232] Robert Farris Thompson, *Tango: The Art History of Love*, (public lecture on his book at The Yale Club of New York City April, 2012).
[233] Ibid.
[234] Calvin Reid, "David Hammons," in *Casinò fantasma* (New York: Institute for Contemporary Art, 1990), unpaginated.

with an almost spiritual reverence. He challenges the way in which people perceive difference, and to mask categories of race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and class.

Cave's overlapping of patterns and assemblage of textures and materials from many different sources, both mass-produced and hand-made (Fig. 3.7), produces a flamboyant, cultural gumbo. This is not his aesthetic alone, but is a major characteristic of Black Atlantic art and performance. According to Judith Bettelheim, the African/African Diaspora aesthetic synthesizes many disparate elements to birth a "high-effect collage, combining strongly contrasting elements" such as feathers, sequins, mirrors, cutouts, and ribbons that are put next to one another to create contrasts in color, texture, and pattern.[235] Rhythmic, narrow-line and wide-band stripes are juxtaposed with swirling dots and undulations. Bettelheim argues that artwork produced by hybrid cultures is characterized by this aesthetic of assemblage and evidences cultures rubbing up against each other and causing sparks to turn to flames.[236] This aspect of creolization may seem to be a postmodern phenomenon.

Fig. 3.7 Nick Cave, *Untitled Soundsuit*, *For Now*, Mary Boone Gallery exhibition, September 2011, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery and Mary Boone Gallery, photo by Sophie Sanders

[235] Judith Bettelheim, "From Masquerade to Fashion and Back," *Global Africa Project*, ed. Lowery Sims and Leslie King-Hammond (New York City: Museum of Art and Design, 2010), 163.
[236] Ibid.

However, it is part of a process of postmodernism that began when African slaves were sold into the world of European colonialism; Black Atlantic artists necessarily realized that the prefabricated products of the modern world were "signs" of another order of existence.[237] In rural areas, as in Phyllis Galembo's image (Fig. 3.8) of a practitioner of Brazilian Candomblé in Bahia, "African straw" continues to be symbolic of protecting righteous people from disease and laying pestilence upon the immoral.[238] Adhering to the same aesthetic, city masqueraders often replace raffia with manufactured cloth featuring bold contrasting prints and adorn with glittering objects to make the wearer stand out dramatically.[239] An aesthetic of accumulation and bricolage is complemented by the glut of cheap mass-produced goods available to the urban dweller. In Cave's sculpture, the blend of synthetic, natural, mass-produced, and hand-made materials becomes indecipherable in the construction of their masterfully layered patterns. In this metamorphosis, Cave produces a fusion of patterns that integrate high effect qualities to communicate messages of both local and global concern. I categorize the Soundsuits according to characters and materials that have their own distinctive types of patterns and textures to analyze how his approach to ornamentation has been informed by Black Atlantic cultural contexts and history.

Fig. 3.8 Phyllis Galembo, *Terreiro São Jorge, Bahia*. *Divine Inspiration: From Benin to Bahia*, Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1993.

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[237] Donald Cosentino, *Vodou Things: The Art of Pierrot Barra and Marie Cassaise* (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 43.
[238] Phyllis Galembo, *Divine Inspiration: From Benin to Bahia* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 124.
[239] Judith Bettelheim, "From Masquerade to Fashion and Back," 163.

Form

Patterns of Hot and Cool

Many ideas in Vodou theology are analogous to Cave's use of decoration and design. The suits suggest a coterie of divine spirits expressed through human and anthropomorphic forms similar to the *divine horsemen*, who literally embody the ideas of Vodou theology.[240] These gods and demigods of Vodou, also known as the *Iwa*, choose individuals to serve as vessels through which the sacred is channeled.[241] Cave's Soundsuits transform the wearer into a new identity in the same manner of the spirit possession that occurs when the Iwa are invoked and travel from the Vodou equivalent of Mount Olympus, *Lavilokan*, to inhabit the bodies of believers. Thus, he establishes a relationship between his multi-patterned characters and Black Atlantic ceremonies, such as those of Haitian practitioners of Vodou.

According to this analogy, Cave's Soundsuits can be seen in categories similar to the Iwa: suits that are cool (*fwet*) and soothing in nature, suits whose characters are hot (*cho*) and abrasive, and those who bridge the two extremes.[242] *Petwo* are the collective of hot Vodou spirits noted for their hard and abrasive personalities and often-malevolent behavior.[243] *Rada* are the coterie of cool Vodou spirits generally associated with healing and spiritual protection. Like the representations of Iwa in Haitian *drapo sèvis* or flags used in Vodou ceremonies (Fig. 3.9), the Soundsuits serve as the physical representation of something

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[240] Patrick Arthur Polk, *Haitian Vodou Flags* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 10.
[241] Ibid.
[242] Polk, Haitian Vodou Flags, 10.
[243] Polk, Haitian Vodou Flags, 39.

spiritual and symbolic, even in their tactile physicality, and in performance contexts their movement and sound-making qualities transport them to a ceremonial context beyond entertainment or spectacle. I apply the Vodou categories of lwa into three categories to investigate Cave's carnivalesque approach to ornamentation in the Soundsuits:

Fig. 3.9 Phyllis Galembo, *Léogâne, Rose Anne and Andre Rose Mercilien, with drapo (ritual flags) for Ogou Feray and Saint James the Greater*. A vèvè depicting Danbala, Ayida Wédo, and Ayizan is on the floor, 1998

Hot. Cave's hot suits emulate noblemen or heraldic power. They have elaborate peacock-like beading, embroidery, sequins and often militaristic or aggressively-shaped heads and spectacular embellishment like noble or high priestly vestments. Their heads are reminiscent of Catholic mitres, taking a phallic or condom-like form (Figs. 3.10-3.12). Many have specific motifs formed by sequins and beads such as diamonds that may stem from Afro-Catholic, Kongolese, or Scottish designs. Cave has suggested in interviews that these Soundsuits represent authority, and consequently their patterns are impressive and even intimidating.[244]

[244] Nick Cave, *Let's C* (artist talk presented at the opening of Cave's *Let's C exhibition* at the Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, December 16, 2012).

Fig. 3.10 Nick Cave, *Untitled Soundsuit*, mixed media, 2010, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 3.11 Nick Cave, *Untitled Soundsuit*, *For Now* exhibition, Mary Boone Gallery, 2011, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery and Mary Boone Gallery, image by Sophie Sanders

Fig. 3.12 Nick Cave, *Untitled Soundsuit*, mixed media, exhibited at Art Basel Miami Beach, 2011, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 3.13 Nick Cave, *Untitled Soundsuit*, synthetic hair, 2011, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 3.14 Nick Cave, *Untitled Soundsuit*, *For Now* exhibition, Mary Boone Gallery, September 2011, courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery and Jack Shainman Gallery, photo by Sophie Sanders

***Cool*.** These Soundsuits use materials, colors, or textures that relate to nature or animals. They are cool because they appear healing, gentle, and protective of the spirit inside. A number of these are covered from head to toe with sticks like porcupine quills, and some have synthetic berries. Many are reminiscent of West African or Afro-Atlantic masquerade costumes such as the synthetic raffia-covered "Forest Shrubs," as Cave terms them in his recent performance at the Fabric Workshop and Museum, or "Pitchy-Patchy" figures of Afro-Caribbean carnival, or hairy figures who sport strands of bugle beads, sisal, or wear body suits accompanied by afro-wigs.[245] These also include the group of Soundsuits covered entirely in dyed synthetic hair, also referred to by Cave as the "Guardians."[246] Although all these suits may refer to nature, the Guardians are most like specific animals such as bears, horses, and

[245] Nick Cave, interview with the author, December 15, 2011, Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, PA.
[246] Ibid.

rabbits. Others in this group are made with natural wicker furniture parts that resemble pre-historic animals such as horseshoe crabs (Figs. 3.13-3.14).

Those that Reconcile Hot and Cool. Soundsuits that harness aggressive energy and resolve it with cooling forces belong in this category because of the re-contextualization and transformation of the materials they employ. These include much bric-a-brac such as button-bedecked figures that often have horn-shaped heads and play a funerary role. Soundsuits made of toys, dolls, mirrors, or bundles of stuffed fabric hung like amulets or charms around the body, memorabilia, porcelain birds and other antique relics, and often strands of beads draped like Mardi Gras necklaces fall within this category. This group also includes Soundsuits that are made of throw rugs, pipe cleaners, socks, "beanie babies," and feature knitted stocking legs (Figs. 3.15-3.16). Employing these categories derived from Vodou offers deeper insight into the formal aspects of Cave's heavily embellished suits.

Fig. 3.15 Nick Cave, *Untitled Soundsuit*, mixed media, 2011, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 3.16 Nick Cave, *Untitled Soundsuit*, *For Now* exhibition, Mary Boone Gallery, September 2011, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, photo by Sophie Sanders

Hot Soundsuits seem to relate most to Afro-Catholic pageantry, nobility, heraldry, and the opulence of papal art and architecture. In *Untitled Soundsuit*

Fig. 3.17 Nick Cave, *Untitled Soundsuit, Meet Me at the Center of the Earth*, 2010, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

(2009) (Fig. 3.17) Cave breaks up the form of a mitre-shaped Soundsuit with an undulating pattern of geometrical crochet patchwork, including a small green cross near the top of the head and a bright red hexagon, reminiscent of a large stop sign. From a distance, the shapes and designs inside the crochet segments suggest heraldic insignia. The patches of bright yellow and red pop against the sparkling purple ground. The severity of the conical head is offset by the irregular placement of large and small forms that cascade across the body and are playfully matched with rainbow-striped knit socks. In images of this and other suits, Cave hops gaily to one side and disrupts the verticality of the sculpture.

Hot Soundsuits resemble West African knitted masquerade costumes, such as those documented by Phyllis Galembo in her photographs of a variety of masquers from the Cross River region in Nigeria that wear knitted body wear vibrating with patterns of stripes, triangles, and squares in yellow, pink, red, white, green, and black, and topped with goat or horse hair (Fig. 3.18). At the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art at The College of Charleston, Galembo's photographs were exhibited alongside Cave's Soundsuits highlighting the strong affinity of these electric patterns in the masquerade images (Fig. 3.19) and the outrageous geometrical designs covering Cave's suits. In this and other

Fig. 3.18 Phyllis Galembo, *Ngar Ball Traditional Masquerade Dance*, Cross River, Nigeria, 2004

Fig. 3.19 Phyllis Galembo, *Akata Dance*, Cross River, Nigeria, 2009

exhibition contexts, his patterns and surfaces have demonstrated many connections with African masquerade performance attire.

Cave's hot suits also relate to African American artist Jeff Sonhouse's appropriation of European regalia and heraldic symbols to convey authority. Sonhouse, in his *piece Exhibit A: Cardinal Francis Arinze* (2005) (Fig. 3.20), employs striking designs to emphasize the power and magnetism of Arinze, an Igbo Nigerian who has been Cardinal Bishop of Velletri-Segni since 2005, and who was considered as a successor to Pope John Paul II. Arinze's skin is painted with a diamond pattern of black and red that he wears like a mask with holes cut out for the blue circles under his glasses, dark brown nose, and pink

Fig. 3.20 Jeff Sonhouse, *Exhibit A: Cardinal Francis Arinze*, oil and mixed media on wooden panel, courtesy of the Rubell Family Collection, 2005

Fig. 3.21 Nick Cave, *Untitled Soundsuit*, mixed media, 2009, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

mouth. This diamond design common to many of Cave's suits (Fig. 3.21) derives from Europe as well as Africa, and can be seen in harlequin figures by Pablo Picasso and Max Beckmann among other modern artists. In Scotland, argyle patterns have been used for Scottish highlanders' tights and leggings since the 17th Century. However, as Robert Farris Thompson has pointed out, the diamond motif is an African Kongo cosmogram and it represents "life everlasting, a shield against diminishment."[247] Diamond motifs often appear as a border design for the sequin embellished Haitian *drapo* or Vodou flags (Fig. 3.22). In addition to their employment of this pattern of power, Sonhouse and Cave allude to the Catholic church as a symbol of patriarchal omnipotence and historical decadence for some audiences by incorporating the aggressive shape of

Fig. 3.22 *Drapo for St Jacques Majeur*, photo from *Beads, Body, and Soul* by Henry John Drewal and John Mason (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1998), p. 352

[247] Robert Farris Thompson, "Kongo, Louisiana, Kongo New Orleans," in *Aesthetic of the Cool, Afro-Atlantic Art and Music* (New York and Pittsburgh: Periscope Publishing, 2011), 156.

headgear such as the galero in the case of cardinals and the mitre worn by a bishop and the pope.

Cool Soundsuits covered with hair and some that feature bugle bead strands that drape like micro-braids suggest a correspondence of texture and design that has always existed between African hairstyles and fiber arts. American sculptor Sonya Clark's early wig piece, *Extensions in Blonde* (1997) (Fig. 3.23) similarly exemplifies a synthesis of fiber and hair through its use of hair texture and color. The wig displays a tufted black fiber parted and evenly sectioned into individual "Afro-puffs." In her version, however, little blonde extension braids seem to sprout from the rounded rhythm of black puffs, tied with rubber bands and baubles like those used to decorate little girls' hair, and which can be described as a "pervasive type of African American folk art."[248] Clarks' integration of hair with other materials such as metal, beads, and thread challenges the distinction between natural and synthetic, showing that artifice and synthesis are always part of body ornamentation. In hairy Soundsuits and those worn by dancers sporting florescent wigs, Cave similarly features hair dyed in patterns of day-glow colors to reinforce the artificiality and decorativeness of this material, but he places the

Fig. 3.23 Sonya Clark, *Extensions in Blonde*, mixed media, 1997, accessed July 11, 2012: http://sonyaclark.com/gallery/extensions-in-blonde/

[248] Jacquelyn Long, "Things My Mother Never Taught Me," in *Tenderheaded: A Comb-Bending Collection of Hair Stories*, eds.Pamela Johnson and Juliette Harris (New York: Pocket Books, 2001), 53.

colorful patterns with an asymmetrical, offbeat phrasing (Fig. 3.24). Suits that reconcile hot and cool have especially chaotic combinations of materials and patterns. They embody the tension of diverse textures and patterns in which hot and cool elements balance each other.

Fig. 3.24 Nick Cave, *Untitled Soundsuit*, mixed media, 2009, *Meet Me at the Center of the Earth*, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, p. 149

Animal Patterns

Cave's reverence for the power of animal spirits characterizes most religions from Africa as well as Native American and Oceanic cultures. His employment of hair patterns and textures conveys the human relationship with other animals, as exemplified in his pink or blonde bunny-eared

Fig. 3.25 Nick Cave, *Mating Season, Ever-After* exhibition, Jack Shainman Gallery, NY, NY, September 2011, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 3.26 Ann Hamilton, *Tropos*, multimedia installation, 1993, accessed July 11, 2012: http://www.vincentborrelli.com/cgi-bin/vbb/101942

Soundsuits, such as the *Mating Season* group (2012) (Fig. 3.25). American installation artist Ann Hamilton exhibited *Tropos* (1993-94) (Fig. 3.26) at the Dia Center for the Art in New York City that appropriates the silky surface of animal

hair to convey a similarly democratic relationship between humans and animals. The Soundsuits express the patterns and exoticism of animal fur, feathers, and hair. Their fetish-like power represents the spirits that they protect. The suits' often bold designs and glowing colors may signal danger in a similar way that one encounters bright patterns and camouflage in nature. The more elaborate the design and colors of certain fish, snakes, birds, frogs, and insects, the more dangerous or intimidating to other animals, in some cases warning of venom or poison. A number of the Soundsuits feature a prominent stop sign motif that seems to be the human equivalent of an animal's warning signal or markings of intimidation. Other patterns suggest the camouflage adaptations of insects such as butterflies and moths with large circular patterns. One insect-like suit (Fig. 3.27) appears in a manipulated image in Cave's exhibition catalog *Meet Me at the Center of the Earth* where it ogles another frightening mantis with big iridescent eyes.

Soundsuits made from hair and raffia imitate the animalistic patterns and surfaces used in a number of masquerade costumes from sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean (as well as

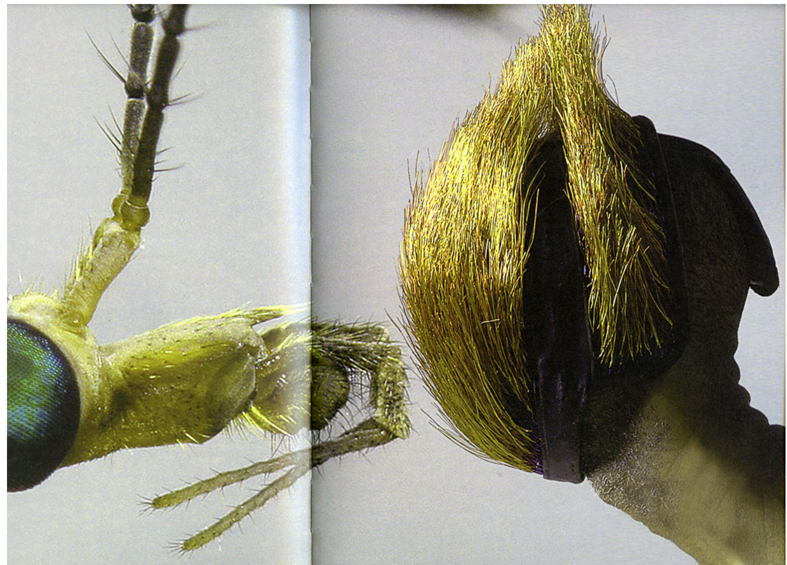

Fig. 3.27 Nick Cave, *Untitled Soundsuit* image, *Meet Me at the Center for the Earth*, 2011, p. 214.

Native American and Oceanic costumes). For instance, masquerade costumes of the Nuna, Mossi, Bwa, and other peoples from Burkina Faso (Figs. 3.28-3.30) represent the spirits of bush buffalo, antelopes, panthers, birds, and monkeys constructed from carved wooden masks painted with geometric designs and dyed hemp. Cave's use of the forms, patterns, and textures of animals associates his work with futuristic hybrids seen in science fiction, but even more so with African ceremonial use of animal iconography. Suits that have a patchwork of colored raffia reproduce the movement, voluminous texture, and

Fig. 3.28 Phyllis Galembo, *Masquerade from Gossina Village, Burkina Faso,* 2006, courtesy of Tang Museum, http://tang.skidmore.edu/index.php/calendars/view/139/tag:1/year:all.

Fig. 3.29 Phyllis Galembo, *Panther Masquerade, Samaga Village, Burkina Faso,* 2006, courtesy of Tang Museum and the artist

Fig. 3.30 Christopher D. Roy, *The antelope mask of the Gnoumou family, Bwa culture, in Boni, Burkina Faso*, 1984, courtesy of Artstor

layering of animal hair and textures of the bush akin to African and Afro-Caribbean masquerades.

A performance by master dancer Sidi Balo, which took place in 1978 in Saturday City, in Dogoduman, Mali, prefigures performances of Cave's Soundsuits. Balo's bird costumes arise out of a rich West African masquerade tradition dating back at least to the court of the Mali Empire, in which bards

performed for the emperor to praise, inspire, and challenge him.[249] These bird costumes employ cloth, feathers, and different kinds of tent-like scaffoldings to form a conical shape. Balo fitted factory printed cloth covered with a pattern of vulture feathers and ribbons over a structure of three flexible wooden hoops attached with vertical elements (Fig. 3.31). Balo made the masquerade costume appear to hover, shape-shift, vibrate according to the percussive rhythms, and create sounds like castanets with the large red beak on his mask that could open and close. Patrick McNaughton explains that Balo's costume "becomes like a second skin," a term Cave also uses to describe his Soundsuits.[250] In addition to the patterned similarities between Balo's masquerade and Cave's suited performances, their common communal purpose links the two.

Fig. 3.31 Patrick McNaughton, *Kono Rears Up, A Bird Dance in Saturday City*, 1978.

Increasingly, Cave's work focuses on animals as in his performance entitled *Heard* (Figs. 3.32 and 3.33) (March 2012) that took place at the University of North Texas and at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, Texas. Student dancers, costumed as raffia-covered horses, marched around the stage and then transformed into spinning pom poms. Cave performed a similar version of *Heard* at New York City's Grand Central Terminal in March 2013. His title for the

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[249] Patrick R. McNaughton, A Bird Dance Near Saturday City: Sidi Ballo and the Art of West African masquerade (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 69.
[250] McNaughton, A Bird Dance Near Saturday City, 73.

Fig. 3.32 Nick Cave, *Heard* performance, University of North Texas, March 2012, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 3.33 Nick Cave, *Heard* performance, University of North Texas, March 2012, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

performance puns on the rustling sounds produced by the performers as the herd walked and stomped. Each pair of dancers wore a horse suit, and midway through the performance they separated to become whirling dervishes that resembled a Caribbean Carnival trickster character called *Pitchy-Patchy*. In preparation for this performance, Cave said,

> I've been looking at early puppetry [in which] it took two bodies to build the horse. I'm also responding to ideas around the dream state. As kids and as adults we still could be convinced to have a believable experience … that magical moment where we allow ourselves to believe and dream.[251]

This fantasy experience was enabled by the horses' splendid patterns, and the position of the audience and percussionists in a large circle around the performers. The event unfolded in the same manner as an outdoor African masquerade ceremony, and Cave included the audience in the ceremony as active participants. The uniqueness of each horse Soundsuit as represented by its color and markings speaks to the variety of characters within the Iwa and the spiritual symbolism of the horse in this context. In the heat of a Vodou ceremony, the Iwa mount or possess their "horses," and through the medium of

[251] Nick Cave, interview with the author, November 3, 2011, Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, PA.

their borrowed human bodies express their own peculiar and often capricious proclivities and desires.

Cave's animal imagery and patterning seems lighthearted, but it is embedded within painful historical memories as well as the endurance of African symbolism. Slavery and its lingering racial stereotypes animalized African American people by reducing them to the attributes of the body, and the Soundsuits reconfigure this relationship both figuratively and literally.[252] Through their exoticism, colorful patterns, and vibrant textures, the animal suits invoke a range of stereotypes about Black men. For example, multiple meanings of Cave's horse and rabbit symbolism prevent a simplistic interpretation of these animals. The horse that serves as a beast of burden suggests the exploitation of African American slave labor, and the rabbit that is known for its fecundity may refer to the objectification of Black male bodies, or perhaps a Black "mammy" or wet-nurse. As a positive Black Atlantic archetype of the trickster, the rabbit may invoke the Yoruba deity *Eshu-Eleggua* (known by other names throughout the many diasporic practices of this religion) that is associated with *Anansi* in Ghanaian ritual storytelling and *Br'er Rabbit* in African American folklore.[253]

The Soundsuits also convey animals' bizarre adaptations, their amazing abilities such as superior sight and smell, and the endangerment of many wild species. Cave comments that animals have much to teach us and that he is increasingly using animal forms, patterns, and textures because he believes that "[w]e have invaded the natural world and now we have to figure out how to

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[252] Alissa Bennett, "Nick Cave," *Ponytail: fashion, art, music*, (Summer/Spring 2009): 18-25, http://www.ponytailmagazine.com/features/nick-cave/.
[253] Victor Leo Walker II, "Mythology and Metaphysics," in *Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora*, Paul Carter Harrison, Victor Leo Walker II, Gus Edwards. Eds. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002) 133.

change our behavior."[254] Cave's decorative patterns enable a suspension of disbelief to allow for the blurring of animal and human to seem natural, as in a dream. Cave notes that this ability to inspire a dream state is a challenge because "[w]e are in a time where it's just about existing, like with the economy. We are caught up in the different ways that we think about surviving."[255] Cave distracts his viewers from this mundane effort to exist by seducing his audience with the playfulness of his works' sensual spectacle. In his array of animal forms and patterns, Cave shows deep respect for the struggle of wildlife to survive in the world dominated by human exploitation and industry at the same time that he engages African American history and the struggle for Civil Rights. His fusion of human and animal in recent Soundsuits and performances encourage empathy for the sentient spirits of animals and express respect for the interdependent fabric of mutuality that bind us to the animal world.

Patterns of the Carnivalesque

Cave lures his audience into an imaginative, participatory experience through material displays of abundance that verge on folk art and gaudiness while they are also well fitted for haute couture and fine art museums. In the same way that Caribbean Carnival and American Mardi Gras has always functioned as a counter-culture event, his motifs inject mischief into the sobriety of the art world to challenge social hierarchies. Yvonne Daniel argues that many Caribbean dances and festivals evidence the carnivalesque, which she defines as "the metaphoric challenge to quotidian rules, the mocking or satirical

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[254] Nick Cave and Kate Eilertsen, "Working Toward What I Am Leaving Behind," 231.
[255] Nick Cave interview with the author, December 15, 2011, Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, PA.

challenge to authority and to traditional social order."[256] From colonial times in the Caribbean, the defiance of authority fueled a shape-shifting character for Carnival celebrations that revolved around sumptuous costuming, erotic debauchery, boisterous chaos or anger, rebelliousness, and maliciousness.[257] Daniel contends that this same rebellious spirit is what ignites citizenship into social and political action. Cave's dramatic representations of character through arrangements of materials and patterns express personalities, species, or attributes of individuals. The disruption of stasis and aesthetic hierarchies caused by the irregularity of his layered designs, riotous patterns, and spectacular gestures serve a similarly disruptive and cathartic role as Caribbean Carnival.

The subversive impact of Cave's patterns parallels the transformative effects of Carnival costume, body adornment, and dance. Carnival celebrations throughout the African Diaspora present a pantheon of characters and related costumes, as well as corresponding rhythms and dances. A common role portrayed in Carnival is that of the "bad child" or *malcriado*, who represents a protester, rebel, or rude trickster.[258] This character manifests in Jamaican Carnival costumes, Trinidadian floats, and in *Zarenyen*, the Haitian trickster spider who cleverly conquers presidents, military leaders, and other powerful men.[259] In Brazil, *malcriado* is the Black, one-legged forest spirit, also called *Saci*

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[256] Yvonne Daniel, *Caribbean and Atlantic Diaspora Dance: Igniting Citizenship* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 108.
[257] Ibid, 109.
[258] Ibid.
[259] Ibid.

Perere, who suggests a slave that was mutilated for attempting to escape.[260] In Lance de Corde, Jacmel, Haiti, masquers resurrect a dramatic visualization of slavery by coating their bodies with crude oil and charcoal, and sometimes donning animal horns (Fig. 3.34), again suggestive of Cave's animalistic suits.[261]

Fig. 3.34 Phyllis Galembo, *Three Men with Chains, Jacmel, Haiti*, 2004, courtesy of Phyllis Galembo and Steven Kasher gallery, accessed July 13, 2012, http://mother-magazine.com/blog/?p=1777

The diversity of Cave's suits reflects the heterogeneity of Carnival's racial mix and its specific characters that grew out of the persistent social hierarchy in the American colonies. Trinidadian Carnival (Fig. 3.35), perhaps the oldest pre-Lenten parading festival in the Americas, rarely included Black characters until after emancipation when their participation increased and opened up a path for them to introduce a Black male presence of specific masquerade or *mas* characters.[262] Between 1860 to 1896, Trinidad and Tobago's European population used the term *Jamette*, derived from the French *diametre* that means below the diameter of respectability, to derogatively describe the African population's Carnival celebrations. Similar to American blackface minstrel shows, European Carnival masqueraders portrayed racist caricatures of the

Fig. 3.35 Amelia Ingram, *Trinidad Carnival Queen: Wild Indian*, 2003

[260] Ibid.
[261] Madison Smartt Bell et al., *Kanaval: Vodou, Politics and Revolution on the Streets of Haiti, Photography and Oral Histories by Leah Gordon* (London: Soul Jazz Publishing, 2010).
[262] Ibid.

Jamettes or the impoverished population of stickfighters, prostitutes, and dustmen who lived in the barrack yards of East Port of Spain.[263] In 1955, anthropologist Daniel Crowley identified specific categories of Carnival characters such as "Rare and Extinct," "Sailor and Military," "Indians and Other Warriors," to name a few.[264] In Crowley's "Rare and Extinct" category, earlier characters such as the *Negre Jardin* or Garden Nigger, the Stickfighter, the *Pissenlit* or bedwetter, and Jamette bands were all portrayed by Black male maskers that had reclaimed these characters from the European landowners and slaveholders that created them as a humiliating parody of Africans.[265] Although Cave blurs racial distinctions in his Soundsuits, a number of motifs represent Black hair texture or skin, such as Afro wigs, vintage black dolls, raffia, and glimmering strands of bugle beads that suggest braids, whereas other Soundsuits are pale or white, and have silky blonde hair.

Cave's patterns and color schemes that correspond to different species of suits may derive from Carnival's stereotyping of colonial characters. African, Native American, and non-Christian characters mainly characterize Carnival's popular personification of the devil, although the devil originates from a Judeo-Christian and European context.[266] Masking traditions that represented devils existed in both Europe and Africa and therefore coalesce in Caribbean Carnival;

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[263] "Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago", National Library and Information System Authority, National Library of Trinidad and Tobago, Hart and Abercromby Streets, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, accessed May 30, 2013, http://www.nalis.gov.tt/Research/SubjectGuide/Carnival/tabid/105/Default.aspx?PageContentID=79.
[264] Daniel Crowley, "The Traditional Masques of Carnival," *Caribbean Quarterly*, 4 (1955-56): 194-223.
[265] Pamela R. Franco, "The Invention of Traditional Mas and the Politics of Gender," in *Trinidad Carnival: The Cultural Politics of a Transnational Festival*, eds. Garth L. Green, Philip W. Scher (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 30.
[266] Ibid.

"The Devil" was struck down on the Feast of Corpus Christi in southern European tales, and "evil" was thrown out of West African ethnicities through danced rituals in white masks.[267] Trinidadian Carnival sets aside a whole day to this most carnivalesque event, entitled "djab" or "djab-djab," from the French *diable* (devil).[268] Carnival's "bad child" and devil costumes are characterized by a distortion of the head and body as well as black and red colors, as in costumes from Haitian *Kanaval* (Figs. 3.36 and 3.37). Cave's hot Soundsuits also have a sinister quality because the faces are masked or concealed and due to the distended or phallic shape of many of their heads, as if something could explode out of them at a given moment. Many suits rise to a pointed, conical head that brings to mind Ku Klux Klan hoods. Cave describes his synthetic process of conceiving of the intimidating shape of these suits:

Fig. 3.36 Leah Gordon, *Kanaval*, Haiti, 2009

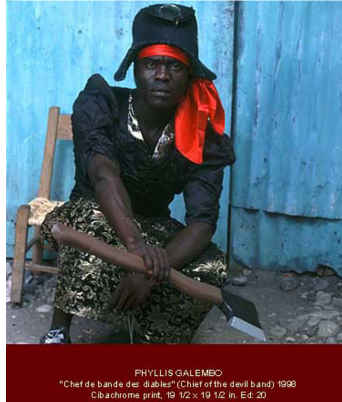

Fig. 3.37 Phyllis Galembo, *Chef de bande des diables (Chief of the devil band)*, 1998, courtesy of Phyllis Galembo

> [When I'm making the Soundsuits,] I look at the shape of a miner's hat, a Ku Klux Klan uniform hood, a condom, and a missile. I think about all of these things that are destructive… At the same time, it's sort of like a high priest thing.[269]

Through his ironic mixture of allusions, Cave destabilizes the most entrenched symbol of American racism and also invites comparisons with the papal mitre.

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[267] Daniel, Caribbean and Atlantic Diaspora Dance, 111.
[268] Ibid., 112.
[269] Nick Cave, interview with the author, June 8, 2011, Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, PA.

The decorative patterns that adorn the Soundsuits heighten the impending threat of these characters. Writes Alissa Bennett on the ominous aspect of the Soundsuits, "Cave's utilization of the tropes of beauty is simply a means of immediate engagement, a way to stall viewers long enough to confront them with notions of alienation, socio-historical persecution, and a very personal request on Cave's part that we reconsider the absolute violence of history in order to conceive of a contemporary antidote for it."[270] Cave's theatrical suits both reflect and debunk racist stratifications through their caricatures of Black people, Native Americans, and Europeans that stem from colonial history. Through their seductive patterns and surfaces, the Soundsuits invite a deeper investigation of the affects of slavery, colonization, exploitation and the ways in which racism and homophobia have impacted history.

The patterned embellishment of some Soundsuits seem to be inspired by

Fig. 3.38 Phyllis Galembo, *Rara, Haiti,* 2005-2006, courtesy of Phyllis Galembo

Fig. 3.39 Clarence Rolle, *Junkanoo festival*, Bahamas, July 12 2011

[270] Bennett, "Nick Cave," http://www.ponytailmagazine.com/features/nick-cave/.

Haitian Kanaval and the subsequent season of *Rara* that begins on Ash Wednesday, described by the locals as "Vodou taken on the road" with parading and Vodou dances.[271] Rara bands and participants wear a rainbow of bright colors with shiny ribbons and often with beads or sequins, as well as colorful hats (Fig. 3.38). Other characters that may be represented in the form and patterning of Cave's Soundsuits include those found in Jamaica, Trinidad, and New Orleans. In Jamaica, current-day *Jonkannu* grew out of *Roots Jonkannu* (Fig. 3.39), a festival of masking and celebration of African origins that included dancing, fighting, and stock characters, such as: Pitchy-Patchy, Devil, Belly-Woman, Whore-Girl, Horse, Cow, Indians, Warriors, and others.[272]

Pitchy-Patchy appears like many of Cave's Soundsuits covered with loose raffia or other synthetic fibers. Texturally, he bears a resemblance to many animal West African masquerades that employ raffia for its animal-hair quality. Pitchy-Patchy most likely represents a Jamaican Maroon covered entirely in palm fronds who returns from hidden locations to "steal" family members from the plantation.[273] After the British abolition of slavery in 1833, this character was instead clothed in hundreds of multicolored cloth strips.[274] According to Yvonne Daniel, it is unclear whether similar outfits worn by English mummers influenced this change in costume. More likely, it is a retention from Yoruba Egungun costumes made of many red panels of cloth with woven designs and sawtooth borders that "make and bring back the spirit … [by attacking] witchcraft and

[271] Daniel, Caribbean and Atlantic Diaspora Dance, 120.
[272] Ibid, 117.
[273] Daniel, Caribbean and Atlantic Diaspora Dance, 118.
[274] Ibid.

disease" as the masquer spins like a whirlwind, "rising like a crimson cyclone."[275] Pitchy-Patchy is known to shimmy his rags in double time steps, dance in your face and then coyly twirl and dart away. This accumulation of loose strips of colorfully patterned cloth characterizes many of Cave's shaggy Soundsuits, as well as the opposition of shy versus bold gestures on the part of his dancers.

Although many contemporary artists have used cast-off clothes and rags for sculptural installations, the association with Pitchy-Patchy's confetti-like patterns and patchwork is a distinctive Africanism (Fig. 3.40).[276] This aesthetic characterizes African American artist John Outterbridge's project *The Rag Factory* (2011), exhibited at LAXART as part of the city-wide initiative *Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945-1980* that was constructed almost entirely out of rags collected from the streets of Los Angeles and from a downtown factory. Outterbridge reorganized Pitchy-Patchy's rag skirt into a festive fabric chain that

Fig. 3.40 *Annet Richards-Binns as Pitchy Patchy in Jamaican Jonkonnu dance*, Row Botham Dance, http://www.rowbotham-dance.book.fr

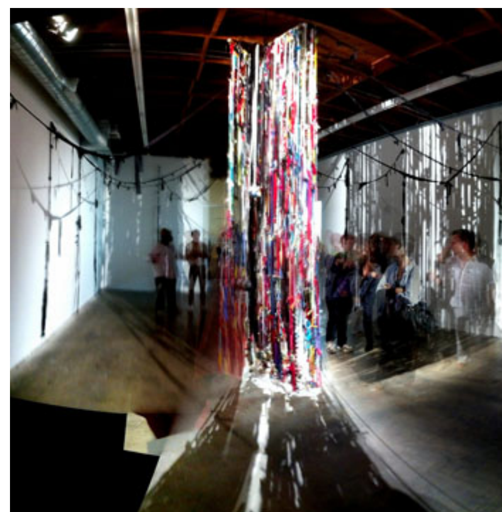

Fig. 3.41 John Outterbridge, *The Rag Factory*, exhibited at LAXART as part of the city-wide initiative *Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945-1980,* 2011

275 Thompson, "The Whirling Return of the Eternal Kings of Yorubaland," in *African Art in Motion*, 219-221.
276 "Africanism" is a term developed by anthropologist Melville Herskovits whose theory of acculturation included the concept of Africanisms that were cultural elements traceable to African origins, in Joseph Holloway ed., *Africanisms in American Culture,* Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), ix.

drapes from floor to ceiling, inviting us to dance among its shadows (Fig. 3.41). Outterbridge observes, "I see a rag as an object of many vibrations … Because of the colors, because of their previous lives and their histories, rags are pretty much a statement about our social position in the world and the importance of the cast-off."[277] Outterbridge's comment applies well to Cave's creative meld of new and old patterns to suggest layers of memory. Cave elevates the rag to an even more glorified level with his dashing patterns and embellishment. Invoking Pitchy-Patchy, he represents the magical resourcefulness of the artist to transform cast-off remnants imbued with memory, turning rags into riches.

Fig. 3.42 *Carnival Parade, Shaw Park, Scarborough, Tobago*, Moreen O'Brien Maser Memorial Collection (Skidmore College), 1970, maser catalog number: 1970-T-413, accession number: 1975-22606, source Image and original data provided by Skidmore College

The carnivalesque aspect of Cave's embellished Soundsuits is one of many Vodou associations in his work. Cave may point to Vodou's synthesis with elements of Catholicism in African diaspora cultures through the mitre-like heads of some Soundsuits, as in some Trinidad and Tobago Carnival attire reminiscent of papal garb (Fig. 3.42). Also, his inclusion of black hand-made dolls suggests the use of these objects in Hoodoo. An aspect of Vodou or "Voodoo," as it is called in New Orleans, are magical acts known as "hoodoo," and imply that an

[277] John Outterbridge and Allese Thomson Baker, "Outterbridge," *Art Forum*, September 12, 2011, http://artforum.com/words/id=28948.

individual was made to do something against his or her will.[278] In her book *Mules and Men,* Zora Neale Hurston describes the African ancestral tradition, called "hoodoo" and "conjure" by early twentieth century New Orleans residents. She writes,

> Hoodoo … is burning with all the intensity of a suppressed religion… It adapts itself like Christianity to its local environment, reclaiming some of its borrowed characteristics to itself … It is not the accepted theology of the nation and so believers conceal their faith.[279]

Many practitioners of Vodou in New Orleans are also members of Catholic congregations, and it continues to be a more secretive religion due to a long history of religious intolerance. The Soundsuits' decorative surfaces debunk the myths surrounding Vodou and Hoodoo, and evidence their survival of tradition.

African religious and ceremonial rituals, Native American heritage and the tradition of Mardi Gras Black Indians constitute some of the confluence of influences that inform Cave's Soundsuits and their decorative patterns. His process of embellishing the Soundsuits is parallel to the labor-intensive decoration that characterizes Black Indians' costumes and reflects a similar intertwining of African and American cultures. Some of Cave's suits bear a resemblance to these Mardi Gras

Fig. 3.43 Eric Waters, *Darryl Montana, Mardi Gras Indian*, 2008, image courtesy of Eric Waters

[278] Jessie Ruth Gaston, "The Case of Voodoo in New Orleans," in Africanisms in American Culture, ed.Joseph E. Holloway (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 137.
[279] Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 1935 (Reprint, New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), 185.

costumes, such as those made by the legendary late Allison “Tootie” Montana, who died in 2005 and passed his title as the Big Chief of the Yellow Pocahontas “tribe” to his son, Darryl (Fig. 3.43). Cave’s ecstatic decoration is akin to the showy plumage of Mardi Gras suits, and they share an essential ceremonial and performance context. In New Orleans, Congo Square was the only public location in antebellum North America where African drumming was performed every Sunday, and the African-descended community reproduced the spiritual energy of the West African festival and religions through music, masking, and dance.[280] In a related way, Cave’s performances in museums and outdoor spaces consecrate these secular spaces as sites for ritualistic performance for the Soundsuits to bring their multi-patterned dance and drum beats.

Fig. 3.44 *Ervin “Honey” Barrister, Creole Wild West,* Barrister shows off his Mardi Gras Indian costume during the West Bank Super Sunday Parade, 1997, *Meet Me at the Center of the Earth*, 2010, p. 23.

Cave’s suits with fluffy layers of hair and those with bead-encrusted embellishment are reminiscent of many applications of feathers in West African ritual regalia and also Mardi Gras costumes. When African slaves from Mande, Ejagham, and especially north Kongo arrived in Louisiana, they were fascinated by Native American bead and feather art, and some were familiar with bead art

[280] Richard Brent Turner, *Jazz Religion, the Second Line, and Black New Orleans* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 6.

and symbolism from the Yoruba, Fon, and Bakongo.[281] These traditions of creative bead and feather working were married in New Orleans, and resulted in the most powerfully dressed group in the region, expressing Red and Black unity in the mid 19th Century. Beginning in 1947-50, a process of creolization became apparent as Mardi Gras Indians began to use ostrich feathers and other large plumes (Fig. 3.44), reorienting the tradition so that it resembled those headdresses of Central Africa, where a possible precedent was that of the heavily plumed *ndunga* masters from Lwangu in North Kongo.[282] Additionally, the beadwork became less similar to the symmetrical and geometrical patterning made on looms and "began to work offbeat, like the syncopes of jazz."[283] Feathers in Mardi Gras Indian costumes are commonly attached to the periphery of the suit and entirely surround the costumed performer, creating a profusion that serves as a powerful signifier of flight and movement.[284] Although Cave does not use feathers, the swishing sounds and splendor of hair in motion for some Soundsuits produces a similar affect to

Fig. 3.45 Nick Cave, *Untitled Soundsuit*, synthetic hair, metal armature, *Meet Me at the Center of the Earth*, 2009, p. 150-151

Fig. 3.46 Nick Cave, *Untitled Soundsuit*, synthetic hair, metal armature, *Meet Me at the Center of the Earth*, 2009, p. 147

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281 Thompson, "Kongo Louisiana, Kongo New Orleans," 158.
282 Ibid.
283 Thompson, "Kongo Louisiana, Kongo New Orleans," 159.
284 Ibid.

plumage and to the gestures of flight (Figs. 3.45 and 3.46), as in his *Drive-By* video that shows his Soundsuits jumping on pogo sticks.[285]

Cave's suggestion of non-mechanical flight supports the idea of spirits that have superhuman or even divine powers, as in Sidi Balo's masquerade discussed previously. Thompson has analyzed how the use of feathers and sequin arts in Haiti and New Orleans represents a "tripartite, circum-Atlantic relationship of memory, performance, and surrogation" for the Mardi Gras Indians.[286] He links the use of feathers in the making of sacred *pacquets*, Kongolese feather headdresses, and Mardi Gras Indians:

> As altar … the crossroads came with a thousand voices to the Americas. Haitian healers make "Congo pacquets," bags with feathers inserted at the top to indicate heaven and within the earths, embedding spirit. In Africa, Kongo healer diviners are known as "leopards of the sky"—i.e., predatory birds … hence their feathered bonnets…. The climax was New Orleans, city of Kongo Square. Here the all-over feather costumes of Black Mardi Gras Indian groups compare directly with the all-over feather masks of the Loango region in Kongo.[287]

The power and intimidation of puffed-out Mardi Gras feather costumes is an aspect of an oppressed group asserting its power and effecting social change, just as Cave seeks to do with the Soundsuits.

Cave's bead-embellished designs also associate his work with beaded West African art and textiles, the tradition of Haitian *drapo* or ritual flags, and decoration on Mardi Gras suits. In Haiti, flag makers produce a kaleidoscopic perspective of sacred space and ritual movement through which the entire *ounfo* [the temple where Vodou worshipers perform ceremonies and rites] is translated

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[285] "Drive-By" a video by artist Nick Cave, Peabody Essex Museum, featured as part of PEM's FreePort [No. 006], YouTube video, uploaded April 8, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mx1_zBkqcUM.

[286] Robert Farris Thompson, *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas* (New York: Museum for African Art, 1993), 28; Robert Farris Thompson, "From the Isle beneath the Sea," 107; and Robert Farris Thompson, *Aesthetic of the Cool*, 112.

[287] Ibid.

into fabric."[288] The appearance of embellished flags initiates the choreography of the religious ritual in a Haitian Vodou temple, whereas in New Orleans, the presentation of the flag and sequined suits by characters such as the flag boy, Mardi Gras Indian chief, and other secret society members serve as a surrogate for memories of pre-twentieth century Vodou dances in Congo Square. The tradition of bearing flags at ceremonies seems to have been stimulated by the colonial period, although indigenous flag customs may well have existed within the kingdoms of sub-Saharan Africa prior to colonial expansion.[289] The influence of European commercial, martial, and missionary groups provoked the ceremonial use of European flags, which have continued to serve as a major means of expressing relationships of power and authority and continue to represent spiritual and social unity within Afro-Atlantic communities.[290] In the beginning of both Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Mardi Gras ceremonies, there is a similar ritual presentation of hierarchy of the Vodou spirits through the carrying of sacred weapons, mock battles, and acknowledging of the authority of the warrior spirit of *Ogou*, the *Iwa* who confers the might to survive.[291] In a similar spirit, Cave's suits increasingly take the form of ritual processions.

Cave's color palettes and elaborate sequined patterns are akin to the iconography of Vodou festivals and Mardi Gras. Patrick Polk argues that the

[288] Polk, "Sacred Banners and the Divine Charge," 326, 327, 329.
[289] Polk, Haitian Vodou Flags, 8.
[290] Ibid., 8-9.
[291] Tina Girourd, *Sequin Artists of Haiti* (Cecilia, Los Angeles: Girourd Art Projects, 1994), 23.

spectacular colors and elaborate designs of sequined flags and suits in both Haiti and New Orleans reflect "the elaborate choreography of their ceremonial use."[292] Writes Polk of the sequined cosmograms called *vévé* or work emblems, and figurative images on Vodou ritual flags (Fig. 3.47), "Each is normally dedicated to a specific *Iwa*, incorporating the sacred colors and symbols of that deity … Flashing colors and glittering ornaments catch the eye and direct attention to the advent of a supernatural encounter."[293] Perhaps related to these Vodou embellishments are the unique patches sewn onto Mardi Gras Indian's ornate suits, described by Michael P. Smith as "a tableau made out of beads, sequins, and other materials sewn onto canvas."[294] Although costume colors vary, the patches are consistent and are cousins to the beaded and sequined panels worn by Mardi Gras masqueraders in Trinidad, and the beaded and appliquéd panels of Yoruba Egungun costumes (Fig. 3.48).[295] Sequin-adorned

Fig. 3.47 *Haitian Vévé, Erzulie*, flag from the New York Public Library Archive, Image ID: 1162852, http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/dgkeysearchdetail.cfm?strucID=461923&imageID=1162852

[292] Patrick A. Polk, "Sacred Banners and the Divine Charge," in *The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald J. Cosentino (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 331.
[293] Sallie Ann Glassman, *Vodou Visions: An Encounter with Divine Mystery* (New York: Villard, 2000), 127.
[294] Robert Farris Thompson, "Kongo Louisiana: Kongo New Orleans," 159.
[295] Ibid.

Fig. 3.48 Phyllis Galembo, *Egungun Bohican, Benin,* 2006, courtesy of Phyllis Galembo and Tang Museum, Skidmore College

Fig. 3.49 Dan Kitwood, *Voodoo Ceremony, Ouidah Benin*, January 11, 2012 courtesy of The Baltimore Sun, http://darkroom.baltimoresun.com/2012/06/benins-voodoo-heartland/

panels are part of many Vodun ceremonies in Benin (Fig. 3.49). By applying this specific element of sewn patches of sequins and beads in embellished Soundsuits and tondos, Cave's process shares decorative details with Haitian Vodou flags, Mardi Gras and Yoruba Egungun masquerades, and Vodun ritual textiles in Benin.

Like the Mardi Gras Indian costumes that created a blend of Ougou and the mystical Black Indian identity, Cave's patterns synthesize myth, religion, culture, and artistic invention. His recent exhibitions simulate invented festivals, complete with specific textures and palettes to complement each context. *Speak Louder* (2011), exhibited in *Ever-After* at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City, consists of monochromatic figurative collectives with horn- shaped heads that connect to form one organism. An obsessively button-encrusted surface links these figures to a regenerative form, dancing in procession. Covered in a skin of assorted white buttons in one ensemble (Fig. 3.50) and black buttons in another group, these Soundsuits subsume each figure's individuality into the

Fig. 3.50 Nick Cave, *Speak Louder*, installation part of *Ever-After* exhibition, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, 2011

Fig. 3.51 *Yoruba crown with veil or adéńlá*, photo from *Beads, Body, and Soul* by Henry John Drewal and John Mason (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1998), p. 206

Fig. 3.52 Nick Cave, *Untitled Soundsuit*, fabric with appliqué of found beading, sequins, pearls, buttons, knitted yarn, metal armature, 2007, *Meet Me at the Center of the Earth*, p. 69, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 3.53 Nick Cave, Detail of *Untitled Soundsuit*, fabric with appliqué of found beading, sequins, pearls, buttons, knitted yarn, metal armature, 2007, *Meet Me at the Center of the Earth*, p. 69, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

movement and personality of the whole. Cave's selection of all white decoration affirms their coolness. As exemplified by an all-white Yoruba crown with veil or *adéńlá* (Fig. 3.51) and Cave's ivory Soundsuit (Figs. 3.52 and 3.53), according to Yoruba religion, to bathe oneself in beaded whiteness is to radiate calmness, control, and centeredness, representing the moment when past and present unite.[296] Cave explains that *Speak Louder* is about stifled sound, therefore muting bright color, and was made as a response to youth violence and the frequent rate of teen death in Chicago.[297] These figures are engaged in a funeral march, perhaps related to a New Orleans Jazz funeral. Each button, like tiny dots, offers the inheritance of personal identity. Using the metaphor of the Soundsuit, "The accumulation of buttons invades a singular cloth producing a choir of voices."[298] Also, the Soundsuits that have colorful "mouths" resemble industrial buffers or steel wreathes become speakers for the group (Fig. 3.54). They are organized into tribes akin to Black Mardi Gras Indians.

Fig. 3.54 Nick Cave, *Untitled Soundsuit,* mixed media, 2011, installation part of *Ever-After* exhibition, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

In a carnivalesque manner, *Ever-After* used pattern and texture to contrast the sober against the comic. This exhibition marked a shift in Cave's approach because it showed the suits interacting within a narrative tableaux. As Jack

[296] Henry John Drewal, in *Beads, Body, and Soul: Art and Light in the Yoruba Universe,* by Henry John Drewal and John Mason (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1998), 206.
[297] Nick Cave, "Let's C."
[298] Jack Shainman Gallery, http://www.jackshainman.com/exhibition117.html.

Fig. 3.55 Nick Cave*, Speak Louder, Ever-After* exhibition, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, 2011, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 3.56 Nick Cave, *For Now* exhibition, Mary Boone Gallery, New York, 2011, courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery and Jack Shainman Gallery

Shainman Gallery described it, "These figurative landscapes connect the viewer to a social consciousness, summoning the echoes and voices which Cave believes have been paralyzed to silence and subjected to unfair altercations in an often hostile society."[299] Grouped according to like patterns and textures (Fig. 3.55), the Soundsuits formed distinct species or communities reminiscent of Rodin's *Burghers of Calais* (1889) or Kollwitz's *Mutter/Mothers* (1919) that seemed both ceremonial and self-protective. *Ever-After* presented a sober and psychologically charged inner world of duality that explored the funerary and spiritual, innocence and death.

His concurrent exhibition at Mary Boone Gallery, entitled *For Now* (2011) (Fig. 3.56), was quite the opposite. *For Now* was a frozen performance by Soundsuits of every species, as if they were each vying for attention through their decorative patterns, flamboyance, or stunts. The suits formed a unified group in their colorful and textured heterogeneity and physical relationship to one another so that viewers had the voyeuristic experience of witnessing a Carnival

[299] Ibid.

celebration. This Soundsuit playground indulged in characteristic exuberance, chaos, and cacophonous color. He described the exhibition as a "psychedelic, functified freak show that is an accumulation of the decades from the perspective of voodoo woo-loo."[300] Cave also poked fun at and dispelled myths about the religion of Vodou and the myths surrounding festivals such as Caribbean Carnival. Similar to his move towards narrative groupings at Shainman, Cave heightened the suits' individual theatricality by assembling them in circus acts, piled on top of each other, or arranged in acrobatic encounters.

The deep conviction of Cave's decorated suits provokes a spiritual transformation for many in his audience. The vivid patterns and textures of Soundsuits and other works represent a struggle for survival and protection of the sacred. Cave was raised as a Christian, and he is not a Vodou priest, Mardi Gras Indian chief, or religious person in the sense of observing one faith or another.[301] However, his work is embedded with the same spirit of Ougou, the Vodou deity who inspired the Haitian slave rebellion in 1789 that lead to the country's independence. His Soundsuits and performances catalyze a transformation for the audience that surpasses entertainment and pleasure. In late 19th- and early 20th-century New Orleans, overt displays of Ougou would have been perceived as too threatening to the politically repressive system that criminalized Vodou, and in a similar way, Cave keeps his work in the framework of sculpture and performance even as he pushes its boundaries.[302] The

[300] Mary Boone Gallery, "For Now," *For Now* exhibition by Nick Cave (press release), September 2011, Mary Boone Gallery, New York, accessed June 4, 2012, http://www.maryboonegallery.com/exhibitions/2011-2012/Nick-Cave/CAVE%20press%20release.pdf.
[301] Nick Cave, interview with the author, June 8, 2011, Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, PA.
[302] Turner, Jazz Religion, the Second Line, and Black New Orleans, 58.

Soundsuits are culturally subversive in the same way that Haitian flags evidence the revolution of Haiti's slaves and the Mardi Gras Indian tradition embodies the convergence of resistance tactics and re-created memories of Congo Square. In both Cave's work and Carnival costumes, the decorative and fantasy elements of the body and its festive patterns bring about a change of character. The prevailing power is reflected in the theme of the Afro-Haitian proverb, "When I'm right, my magic will prevail."[303] Cave's shamanistic use of pattern and texture functions with the activist purpose of freeing people of their mental slavery or inability to dream.

What underpins the success of Cave's work is his ability connect with his audience through patterned surfaces of dazzling beauty that are imbued with social and cultural messages. Dan Cameron writes,

> If indeed Nick Cave's art proposes a radical re-imagining of the cultural role of the visual artist, it's partly because the deep need for such a transformation seems to be shared by many in both the art community and the culture at large.[304]

Through pattern and materials, Cave expresses many aspects of his identity, as a person living in the Midwest, an African American, and a part of Queer culture. At the same time, he refutes being tied to any one of these aspects and therefore can serve as a kind of shaman to all people, while enabling some of his viewing audience to feel that he is addressing them directly.[305]

True to the inclusive aspect of Carnival that integrates a multicultural and diverse audience, Cave has been traveling his work through "performance labs"

[303] Marie-José Alicide St. Lot, "Wisdom and Beauty in Haitian Vodou," (paper presented in "Across the Waters: The Haitian Religious Diaspora," Congress of Santa Barbara Colloquium V, Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, June 7, 2003).
[304] Dan Cameron, "Shape Shifting," *Meet Me at the Center of the Earth*, 22.
[305] Ibid.

that have taken place nationally and internationally. These labs involve bringing forty Soundsuits and his team of assistants for a residency of several months. Like a theater or dance production, they do an open call and select dancers, musicians, and spoken word artists for collaboration.[306] Cave's studio process, both in his studio and in the exhibition space, is based in collaboration and community similar to the way in which Black Atlantic artists prepare for Carnival or masquerade events. Cameron suggests that the suits are interwoven with their carnivalesque function because, "there is both an autonomous existence to the suits, and a context-dependent existence, either one of which could be brought to the foreground at any moment."[307] Without his relationship to Carnival, sequin embellishment practices from Haiti and New Orleans, and a larger focus on community, Cave's work would be disconnected from the root of its inspiration. His decorative surfaces' grounding in centuries of cultural assertion and resistance imbues it with a powerful social and spiritual meaning for oppressed peoples throughout history.

Function

Patterns of Protection

Since their genesis, Cave's Soundsuits have exemplified surfaces and patterns that activate forces of nature to address violence, racism, war, environmental devastation, cruelty, and irresponsibility. Suits made from sticks and twigs may take inspiration from forest spirit masquerades from many peoples

[306] Nick Cave, interview with the author, June 8, 2011, Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, PA.
[307] Cameron, "Shape Shifting," 22.

Fig. 3.57 Phyllis Galembo, *Yaie Masquerade*, Bansie Village, Burkina Faso, 2006, courtesy of Phyllis Galembo and the Tang Museum, Skidmore College

Fig. 3.58 Carlos Mora, *Bedik masks, "Spirits of Forest" Initiation Ceremony* from the Tambacounda Region (Bassari Country) in the remote "Village of Iwol" in Senegal, stock photo, https://www.123rf.com/photo_11906092_senegal-tambacounda-region--bassari-country--bedik--village-of-iwol---bedik-mask--spirits-of-forest-.html

throughout the world, including the Nootka indigenous peoples of the Northwest Coast, British Columbia, Canada, Oceanic cultures, and many variations of forest spirit masquerades from sub-Saharan African peoples. Many suits resemble African masquerades that feature an organic arrangement of leaves and sticks, such as the *Yaie* masquerade (Fig. 3.57) and the *Bedik* masks (Fig. 3.58) used for the Spirits of Forest Initiation Ceremony from the Tambacounda Region (Bassari Country) in the remote Village of Iwol in Senegal. Functionally, these costumes made of natural materials imitate the patterns of trees and branches to embody an anthropomorphic nature spirit. For instance, during their annual *Minymor* festival in May, the Bedik community invokes a group of nature spirits to bless the land and drive out any evil forces that could thwart a successful harvest. Masquerade spirits wear costumes made of bark and leaves of the

geewol tree, emerging from the sacred forest to engage with the villagers.[308] Cave's twig suits embody the spirits of the forest in a comparable metaphysical way to the Bedik ritual.

Cave's magical suits, whose sounds and surface cocoon the body with textured pattern, are parallel to indigenous masquerade performances and objects that preserve and purify each person and his or her community and environment. As previously mentioned, Cave synthesizes animal and human forms in his work because the "power of the animal forms becomes a play on power and the protective spirit."[309] Cave's stick-covered Soundsuits (Fig. 3.59), and others like it, echo the porcupinesque form of the Kongolese *nkisi n'kondi* figure (Fig. 3.60), a powerful oath-taking figure that is usually covered with nails and other pointed objects.

Fig. 3.59 Nick Cave, *Untitled Soundsuit,* twigs, metal armature, 2006, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 3.60 *Nkisi N'kondi: Mangaaka* figure, Kongo peoples, wood, paint, metal, resin, ceramic, second half of the 19th century, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

[308] "Passages: Photographs in Africa by Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher," exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art: July 14 – September 17, 2000, accessed June 4, 2012, http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/exhibitions/686/Passages%3A_Photographs_in_Africa_by_Carol_Beckwith_and_Angela_Fisher.

[309] Nick Cave, interview with the author, June 8, 2011, Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, PA.

The nails embedded into this wooden figure symbolize the marking of various arguments, lawsuits, vows, and other serious commitments.[310] This object is part of a larger practice of *minkisi*, sacred medicines and charms believed in the Kongo (present-day Congo and Angola) to enclose spirits for both healing and destructive purposes; they often contain things such as leaves, earth, ashes, seeds, stones, herbs, and sticks and can take figurative or other forms.[311] Nkisi nkondi figures can have an area in the abdomen with objects and earth protected by glass or a mirror, what Thompson has termed "the flash and arrest of the spirit."[312] Demonstrating a similar aesthetic, a Baga diviner from Sierra Leone (Fig. 3.61) wears a headdress and clothing almost entirely encrusted with cowrie shells and wearing bundles of amulets that protect and empower his spirit. Accumulated layers on the Soundsuits similarly protect the body and ward off evil.

Fig. 3.61 Christopher D. Roy, *The Baga Diviner*, Mossi, Dablo, Burkina Faso, 2007, courtesy of ARTstor

In a piece that seems to prefigure Cave's Soundsuits, American sculptor Renée Stout created a life-size *nkisi nkondi* entitled *Fetish #2* (Fig. 3.62) using body-casts, bundles, and within the glass-covered abdomen she placed a late 19th-century photograph of a baby,

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[310] Robert Farris Thompson, "Kongo Civilization and Kongo Art," in Thompson and Joseph Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1981), 37-38.
[311] Wyatt MacGaffey, "The Eyes of Understanding: Kongo Minkisi," in MacGaffey and Michael D. Harris, *Astonishment and Power: Kongo Minkisi, and the Art of Renée Stout* (Washington, DC: National Museum of African Art, 1993), 30 and 33.
[312] Thompson, Flash of the Spirit, African & Afro-American Art and Philosophy (Random House, 1984), 118.

dried flowers, and a stamp from Niger. Reclaiming her own body from the denigrating history of exploited Black female bodies, Stout also takes possession of and protects the site of her reproductive labor with amulets placed in the womb area of the sculpture.[313] Stout observes that the process of making this work became a means for personal protection when she says, “I felt like in creating that piece … I had created all that I needed to protect me for the rest of my life.”[314] Her fetish serves the same purpose as Cave’s first Soundsuit: an overall protection for his body that might shield him from racist attacks and homophobia.

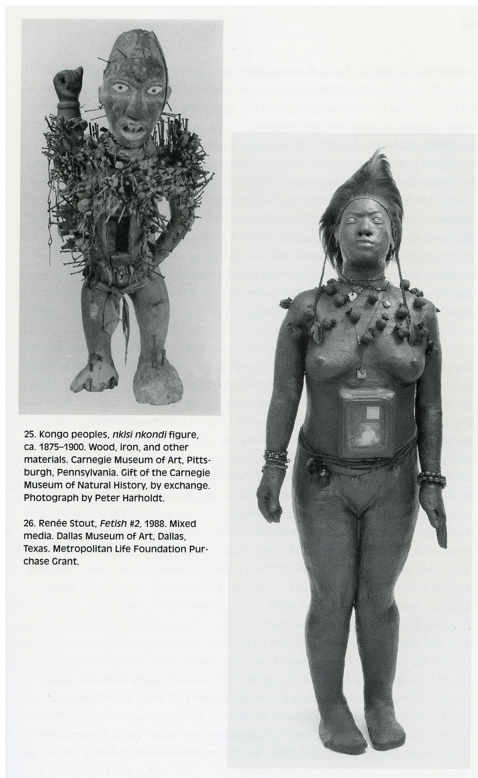

Fig. 3.62 Renée Stout, *Fetish #2*, mixed media, 1988, in *The Art of History*, p. 62-63

Eilertsen argues that the Soundsuits serve as both magical disguise and a type of psychic defense against the prejudices that Cave encounters as a Black, gay man, yet they also allow all people an opportunity to imagine themselves with a new identity, transformed through pattern, beauty, and texture.[315] Cave’s spiritual armor signifies pride in being Black, gay, and many other aspects of identity.

Cave’s recent untitled Soundsuit (Fig. 3.63), also exhibited at *For Now*, as well as an earlier version (Figs. 3.64 and 3.65) composed entirely of vintage black dolls

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[313] Lisa Gail Collins, *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 62-63.
[314] Renée Stout, *Kindred Spirits: Contemporary African-American Artists*, produced by Clayton Corrie and directed by Christine McConnell. (Dallas, Tex.: KERA-TV, 1992), videocassette.
[315] Ibid.

and mirrors, symbolize the practice of using dolls as human surrogates in conjuring of spirits and shining mirrors to deflect evil away from the body.

Fig. 3.63 Nick Cave, *Untitled Soundsuit*, *For Now* exhibition, Mary Boone Gallery, New York, September 2011, courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery and Jack Shainman Gallery, photo by Sophie Sanders

Fig. 3.64 Nick Cave, *Untitled Soundsuit,* buttons, wire, bugle beads, basket, upholstery, and mannequin, 2011, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 3.65 Nick Cave, detail of *Untitled Soundsuit,* buttons, wire, bugle beads, basket, upholstery, and mannequin, 2011, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

He references Vodou and Hoodoo through these dolls and apotropaic devices. Also, by assembling these dolls in a rhythmic pattern punctuated by the mirrors, Cave presents us with a dramatic contrast of light and dark, reflective and light-absorbing materials that suggests the Kongolese nkisi figure. He says,

> This notion of reflection, it could represent an SOS, code or signal. Or could it be a reflection [of something] back on itself, or a protective device? One has to choose what it is. I think of it as when I was a kid and in their garden my grandparents would put these shiny foil pie pans. When the wind blew, they would flicker and keep the birds away. They created a crazy play of effects. That is the driving force behind the work.[316]

The glittering surfaces and syncopated rhythms of Soundsuits protect the wearer and ward off evil with their powerful, asymmetrical designs and also with their

[316] Nick Cave, interview with the author, June 8, 2011, Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, PA.

reflective qualities. Thompson has noted that in the many parts of the African Diaspora, such as the British West Indies, patchwork dress keeps the “jumbie,” a spirit, away from a resting place.[317] Similarly, West African fabrics are sometimes adorned with amulets and small mirrors as a way of deflecting bad spirits by enlisting “the apotropaic magical properties of shiny things to reflect evil back upon its source.”[318] At the same time, lustrous surfaces strengthen the wearer’s own feeling of power and protection. Children can especially appreciate this sense of vulnerability and protection, and they can easily imagine themselves shielded by the power of a protective suit. Cave reminisced, “I remember this one little boy who … went to my exhibition on a field trip. He came up to me, and he said, ‘Mister, your work makes me not afraid’ … that is everything to me.”[319] The Soundsuits’ adornment conveys special powers like that of super heroes that make the spirit impervious to harm.

Cave’s ornamentation plays a defensive role common to the masquerade-like sculptures of Barbara Chase-Riboud, Sokari Douglas Camp, and Chakaia Booker, which use patterns to protect against external forces that attack the Black body and the natural environment. African American artist based in Paris, Chase-Riboud constructed *Malcolm X, No. 3* (1970) (Fig. 3.66) with organic patterns of braided cord and undulating metal cast in an ancient lost wax process

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[317] Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 221-222.
[318] John Picton, “Seeing and Wearing: Textiles in Africa,” *The Poetics of Cloth, African Textiles/Recent Art* (New York: Grey Art Gallery, New York University), 21.
[319] Nick Cave, interview with the author, June 8, 2011, Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, PA.

to transform Minimalism's sterility and shield the form of the militant Black civil rights activist and Muslim minister.[320] Like Cave's Soundsuits that enshrine the human form in recycled regalia, Chase-Riboud's sculptures aggrandize the body and defend a sacred figure with protective patterns parallel to West African masquerade structures.[321] Her incorporation of braided cords refer both to Black hairstyles and also to the frequency of lynching in the early to mid 20th century of African American men, such as Malcolm X's father.

Fig. 3.66 Barbara Chase-Riboud, *Malcolm X, No. 3*, silk and bronze, 1970, collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art

As Cave uses pattern to ward off threats, Britain-based Nigerian sculptor Sokari Douglas Camp makes looming sculptures whose intimidating patterning and construction derive from sculpture that surrounded her as a young child in Buguma, the primary Kalabari settlement of the Eastern Niger Delta.[322] Camp's intricate openwork of jointed steel sculptures references the complex basketry of Kalabari storage vessels, fish-drying racks, and fish traps. In *Birds Extinct Birds* (2010) (Fig. 3.67), Camp uses cut-out metal

[320] Kellie Jones, "To the Max: Energy and Experimentation," in *Eyeminded* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011), 372-3.
[321] Ibid., 373.
[322] Robin Horton, "Sokari Douglas Camp: Ekine Woman in London?" in *Play and Display, Steel Masquerades from Top to Toe* (exhibition catalog), Museum of Mankind (London: Silvara Publishers, 1995), 2.

patterns to fend off the destruction of her cultural heritage and her people's environment, both consequences of Western industry. Writes Donald Kuspit,

> Birds Extinct Birds is ostensibly ecologically minded -- it is a memorial to the birds, more broadly animal species, that industrialization has rendered extinct and obsolete, and more particularly to the birds soiled and killed by oil spills -- but subliminally it is about the problem of being a dark-skinned African woman in a country that is rapidly becoming 'white.'[323]

Fig. 3.67 Sokari Douglas Camp, *Birds Extinct Birds*, steel, 2010, courtesy of the artist and Stux Gallery, New York

Like Camp, Cave synthesizes natural and man-made materials in motifs that call for the protection of nature and culture.

Some of Cave's Soundsuits allude to Franz Fanon's "fact of Blackness" or the idea that the Black man is externally defined in the white mainstream world by his skin color, resulting in inexorable role of inferiority.[324] Cave makes this association by employing glittering black beads or buttons that both symbolize the surface of brown skin and safeguard the Black body (Figs. 3.68 and 3.69). In a comparable way, African-American sculptor Chakaia Booker reconfigures industrial rubber tires into thorny patterned surfaces that resemble skins, scales, and spikes that guard the natural world and the Black body. With textures of dense foliage like Cave's stick Soundsuits, she protests deforestation and

Fig. 3.68 Nick Cave, *Untitled Soundsuit*, metal flowers and armature, fabric with appliquéd beading, sequins, printed fabric, 2008, *Meet Me at the Center of the Earth*, p. 93

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[323] Donald Kuspit, "Sokari Douglas Camp, Tough as Steel," *Artnet.com*, accessed June 25, 2012, http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/kuspit/sokari-douglas-camp12-9-10.asp.

[324] Franz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," *Black Skin/White Masks*, 1952 (Reprint, New York: Grove Press, 1967).

Fig. 3.69 Nick Cave, detail of *Untitled Soundsuit*, metal flowers and armature, fabric with appliquéd beading, sequins, printed fabric, 2008, *Meet Me at the Center of the Earth*, p. 92

Fig. 3.70 Chakaia Booker, *Acid Rain*, rubber tires and steel, 2001, National Museum of Women in the Arts, photo by Max Hirshfeld, courtesy of the artist and Marlborough Gallery, posted April 12, 2013, http://womeninthearts.wordpress.com/category/nmwa-magazine/

Fig. 3.71 Chakaia Booker, courtesy of Chakaia Booker and Marlborough Gallery, New York, accessed July 14, 2012: http://www.afterhood.com/?cat=43

destruction of nature by the oil and auto industries. Her work Acid Rain (2001) (Fig. 3.70) shows limbs of bent and looped rubber that threaten to spiral out of control, rebelling against their usurpation by corporate enterprise and embodying nature's wrath. Booker exploits the geometric patterns of tire treads to suggest African textiles and body ornamentation, and the rubber material represents the resilience of Black people in overcoming many obstacles."[325] Decked out in an elaborate vest made of rubber tires, fabric headdress and anklets, and laden with beaded necklaces, Booker dons her own shamanistic Soundsuit (Fig. 3.71). She says, "In the morning when I get up, I sculpt myself first … At the studio, the process continues."[326] The patterns of Cave's suits similarly extend from the protection of his own body, and like Booker's sculptures, they urge social change.

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[325]Christopher Cook, Chakaia Booker, and Valerie Cassel Oliver. *RubberMade: sculpture by Chakaia Booker* (Kansas City, MO, Kemper Museum, 2008).

[326] Michelle Joan Wilkinson, "Of Material Importance," in *Material Girls: Contemporary Black Women Artists* (Baltimore, MD: Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture, 2011), 13.

Beaded patterns add another layer of intimidating iridescence to Cave's suits and sculptures. Like many of the ecstatically textured surfaces of the late fashion designer Alexander McQueen, many of Cave's suits capitalize on intricate beaded patterns to contrast strength and delicacy. As one of the original symbols of protection, beaded designs connect his work with centuries of adornment as well as making it amazingly contemporary and fashion-forward. Bone, ostrich shell, and metal beads date back to the late Stone Age and Iron Age, and there is evidence of trade in stone beads in western Sudan by the first millennium CE.[327] As early as 1500 BCE, the members of the West African Kintampo culture lived in round mud and wattle homes and constructed terracotta animal figures also made beads from semi-precious stones.[328] Beyond the abundant opulence of Cave's beadwork, the overlapping and collision of related patterns (Fig. 3.72) associates his sculptures with a range of African and African Diaspora beadwork. Like other sequin and bead artists of the Black Atlantic world, Cave uses multiple patterns to tell complex stories and speak proverbially through the repetition of color,

Fig. 3.72 Nick Cave, *Untitled Soundsuit*, 2007, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

[327] Drewal, Beads, Body, and Soul, 34.
[328] Merrick Posnansky, "Putting Nigeria's Ancient Art in a West African Prehistoric Perspective," in *Observations and Interpretations: 2000 Years of Nigerian Art*, eds. J. Povey and A. Rubin (Los Angeles: James S. Coleman African Studies Center, January 1, 2000), 33.

shape, and texture. At *Prospect 2* in New Orleans, he exhibited Soundsuits alongside the work of American sculptor and bead artist Joyce Scott, who also incorporates African patterns in her sculpture. Her *Cobalt, Yellow Circles* (2011) (Fig. 3.73) is a web of floating figures that suggest a Nigerian Yoruba beadwork remix of a Navajo dream catcher.[329] Like Scott's revolving circles of beads in hot and cool colors, Cave's beaded designs provide a rhythmic tension as they writhe across the human shape and form an undulating landscape of pattern.

Fig. 3.73 Joyce Scott, *Cobalt, Yellow Circles,* beads and wire?, 2011, *Prospect 2* exhibition, New Orleans, courtesy of Joyce Scott and Newcomb Gallery

Cave's extensive ornamentation of the tops of his Soundsuits may also relate specifically to Yoruba art's veneration of the head through beaded patterns. Ilé-Ifè brass castings of heads as well as fine terracotta heads (1000-1400) had beaded face coverings, which may have later evolved to form a beaded veil.[330] These terracotta heads (Fig. 3.74) were often ornamented with beads over the brow and dotting the hair, and were originally painted red.[331] In Yoruba culture, the head (*orí*) is especially decorated because it symbolizes the self as the seat

[329] Bookhardt, "Prospect 2: Nick Cave and Joyce Scott at Newcomb," *New Orleans Insider Art*, Sunday, November 13, 2011, http://www.insidenola.org/2011/11/prospect2-nick-cave-and-joyce-scott-at.html.
[330] Alissa LaGamma, *Heroic Africans: Legendary Leaders, Iconic Sculptures* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011), 70.
[331] Alissa LaGamma, 70.

Fig. 14 *Head*, Yoruba peoples; Ife, Nigeria, terracotta, 12th-15th century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

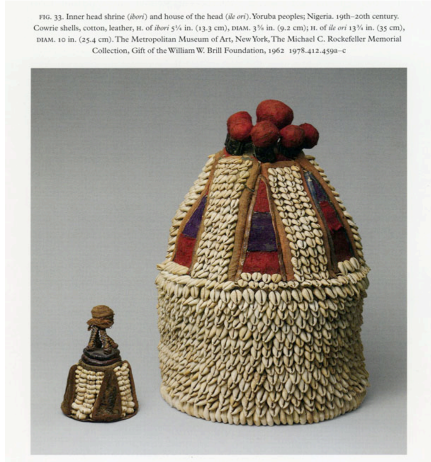

Fig. 25 *Inner head shrine (ibori) and house of the head (ilé ori),* Yoruba peoples, Nigeria. 19th-20th century. Cowrie shells, cotton, leather. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

of the brain.[332] Africanist Babatunde Lawal notes that "the head is also the outer shell (*orí òde*) of an inner/invisible head (*orí inú*), which localizes àşẹ, the enabling power that sustains the cosmos and determines the personality as well as destiny of an individual."[333] For this reason, many Yoruba dedicated a cone-shaped altar (*ìborí*) to the inner head (*orí inú*) that was kept inside a container called *ilé ori* or house of the head (Fig. 3.75) "for the purpose of harnessing its àşẹ to cope with the existential struggle."[334] Elaborating on this Yoruba tradition of adorning and enshrining the head both symbolically and literally with conical patterns of beads, Cave often extends the head with radiating designs.

Cave's beadwork camouflages the human form in Soundsuits that encase the torso and head in glittering beads or vintage foliage and flowers, reminiscent of the forest spirit masquerades previously discussed. 19th-century photographs of Yoruba kings, such as a postcard of the king of Oyo (believed to be Adeyemi I Alowolodu) (Fig. 3.76) shows kings wearing a beaded headdress with a beaded

[332] Babatunde Lawal (Art Historian, Virginia Commonwealth University) "ORÍ ÒDE/ORÍ INÚ: Metaphysics of the Head in Osi Audu's Art," exhibition press release, Skoto Gallery, 2011, http://www.skotogallery.com/viewer/scripts/local/press.release.asd/id/117/vts/design002.
[333] Ibid.
[334] Lawal, "ORÍ ÒDE/ORÍ INÚ: Metaphysics of the Head in Osi Audu's Art." [IS THIS CITATION COMPLETE?]

Fig. 3.76 ***The king of Oyo (believed to be Adeyemi I Alowolodu [4. 1876-1905])*. Oyo (?), Nigeria, ca. 1900, postcard, collection of Arthur F. Humphrey III**

Fig. 3.77 ***Adenla or beaded crown with veil*, Yoruba peoples, *Beads, Body, and Soul* by Henry John Drewal and John Mason (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1998), 204.**

Fig. 3.78 Henry John Drewal, *Elepe of Epe with Beaded Crown*, 1982, Beads, Body, and Soul, p. 30

Fig. 3.79 Detail of *Egungun masker with beaded veil, Agemo festival*, Margaret Thompson Drewal, Beads, Body, and Soul, p. 31

veil that mysteriously conceals the face in a way that some of Cave's Soundsuit heads are enshrined with beads and other objects. This encircling and veiling with beads is particular to the beaded patterns of Yoruba crowns (Figs. 3.77 and 3.78), some Egungun masquerades (Fig. 3.79), as well as Afro-Caribbean representations of certain deities such as Oxum in Brazilian Candomblé (Fig. 3.80).

Cave encrusts his suits with beads to protect the body in the same manner that beads often represent a connection to the divine and the sacred in Black Atlantic cultures through their beauty and reflective qualities. Among Yoruba sculpture and beadwork often worn by initiates, priests, or priestesses for ceremonies, bright strands of beads often encircle the key points of the body as if outlining chakras: head, neck, chest, waist, as well as arms, wrist, ankles, and toes (Fig. 3.81). Henry John Drewal writes, "Such encirclement seals in àşẹ as it

Fig. 3.80 Phyllis Galembo, *Oxum, Marileide Farias Silva Lima*, Cachoeira, 1993

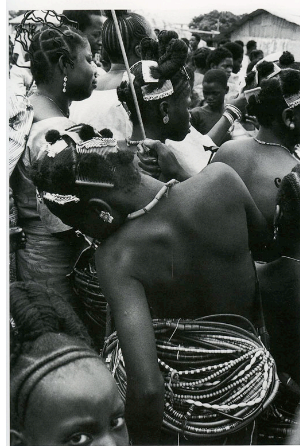

Fig. 3.81 John Henry Drewal, *Young girls with multiple beads honoring Oba Oronsen queen during Igogo festival,* 1975

wards of danger and *ofo* (loss)."[335] A painting of the Yoruba cosmogram, a circle with intersecting lines, and a pattern of colorful bead-like dots adorn the heads of initiates during ceremonies that connect their destinies with particular divine forces in the cosmos (Fig. 3.82).[336] Writes John Mason, "Beads, like our spirits, are solid, then liquid, then solid again. In their flowing, they inform us about the state of things and influence the way we see and say things."[337] Thompson has described how the shimmering properties of beads and sequins represent spiritual power across the African and African diasporic world. He writes:

Fig. 3.82 Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Òrişà initiates*, 1986, *Beads, Body, and Soul,* p. 22

> Sequins … mask an inner presence of Kongo bearing … through an outwardly Creole manifestation …. In Petwo (Haitian Kong) context … they become ritual metallic dotting. Ritual dotting … associates with the secrets and power of the dead in Kongo … Sequins light up the flag, which ushers in Vodou services … Sequins translate into visual Creole, the ancient dotting patterns which in Kongo stood for spotted mediatory felines … moving between the two worlds, bush and village. The power of mediation returned in the scintillating flags bringing in the gods.[338]

Cave's patterns made from beads and sequins build upon appropriated fabric motifs to encase his figures in a glistening coat of iridescence and affirm their authoritative presence.

Through dance and gestures that further animate the Soundsuits, Cave expresses their individual characters and enhances the vitality and fierceness of

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[335] Drewal, Beads, Body, and Soul, 44.
[336] Ibid., 23.
[337] John Mason, "Yorùbá Beadwork in the Americas," in *Beads, Body, and Soul* by Henry John Drewal and John Mason (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1998), 174.
[338] Robert Farris Thompson, *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas* (New York: Museum for African Art, 1993), 28; and Thompson, "From the Isle beneath the Sea," 107.

his patterns of protection. In many of images of the Soundsuits, they are leaning, lunging, jumping, or stepping rather than upright and static. The dramatic juxtaposition of erect versus bending figures is part of the cultural dialogue embodied in the work, and is punctuated always by the patterns that create a tension between the gesture and the visual movement. In his recent exhibition catalog, *Meet Me at the Center of the Earth*, Cave repeatedly contrasts the erect, balletic position of some Soundsuits against those in a diagonal leap or bending position. As Thompson has written of West African dance, "In the classical religion of Kongo, to bend down while circling is to travel two worlds. When dancers "get down," they surge with the spirit. When they stand up they move as themselves."[339] Says Cave of the shape and formidable decoration of one suit (Fig. 3.83),

Fig. 3.83 Nick Cave, *Untitled Soundsuit*, fabric with appliqué of found sequined material, beading, crocheted and knitted yarn, metal armature, 2007, *Meet Me at the Center of the Earth*, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

> It may appear to be linear and erect. By wanting to be aggressive in it, I can bend my body downward, and cut as a blade ... So it can seem to be one thing, but it can also protect itself. Don't assume that the surface is *pretty*.[340]

His statement asserts the sublime beauty and razor sharp intention of his decorative aesthetic. Cave's patterns of protection synthesize a cross-cultural amalgam of African ceremonial art to produce extraordinarily beautiful armor that safeguards and honors vulnerable bodies and spirits.

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[339] Thompson, "Kongo Louisiana, Kongo New Orleans," *An Aesthetic of the Cool*, 161.
[340] Nick Cave interview with the author, June 8, 2011, Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, PA.

Patterns that Liberate the Spirit

Cave's decorative motifs complement and disrupt one another to create a feeling of being in between different states that is a quality of much Black Atlantic art and design. In terms of African American quilts and African textiles, Maude Southwell Wahlman described some of these qualities as multiple patterning, asymmetry, and improvisation.[341] Identified by Africanist Arnold Rubin as the African aesthetic of layering and characterized by Susan Blier as an Afro-Atlantic aesthetic of assemblage, Cave's work encompasses these qualities.[342] Blier observed that assemblage, employing disparate materials to produce new forms through the process of recycling, is the principle aesthetic of Black Atlantic culture that substantially informs all the sacred arts of Vodou.[343] Cave works in this vein of reusing and mingling unlikely combinations of materials to fuse patterns together. He says,

> I've always been interested in repeat, and the role of dovetailing [patterns]. How does one pattern fit into another so that it becomes invisible in terms of the repeat? These patterns are critical in terms of Haitian Voodoo, or when looking at a Tibetan rug, Japanese shibori, woven structures, high fashion, and Picasso. Borrowing from these indigenous cultures that looked at pattern as a way of storytelling and narrative. I ask how they signify language within these patterns and mark-making.[344]

John Picton argues that irregularities in African pattern and artists' use of overlapping or interrupting patterns is what communicates a state of transition, such as the rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood.[345] Cave expresses

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[341] Donald J. Cosentino (Professor Emeritus, Department of World Arts & Cultures, University of California, Los Angeles), interview with the author, March 23, 2011, Arts Council of the African Studies Association (ACASA) conference, Los Angeles, CA..
[342] Ibid.
[343] Suzanne Preston Blier, "Vodun: West African Roots of Vodou," in *The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald Cosentino (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum, 1995), 61-87.
[344] Nick Cave, interview with the author, June 8, 2011.
[345] John Picton (Professor Emeritus, Department of the History of Art and Archeology, The School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London), interview with the author, March 30, 2011, Arts Council of the African Studies Association (ACASA) conference, Los Angeles, CA.

these states of in-between through pattern to catalyze something dormant in many of us: the uninhibited impulse to dream.

Cave's art demonstrates that the sacred exists in the detritus of the secular, and that the secret of unlocking the essence of spirit through juxtaposition is in taking objects from the secular world and making a frisson. As described by Donald Cosentino, "it's like atom splitting, but in this particular case it's the release of spirit. The supreme example of this is the Vodou altar."[346] Cosentino has analyzed the spiritual power of patterns such as the Kongolese cross and other designs made with sequins, beads, and the heads and bodies of dolls in the combinations of reused materials in the little altars of the late Pierrot Barra and his wife Marie Cassaise.[347] Barra and Cassaise were priests and artists of the Iron Market in Haiti's downtown Port-au-Prince, where they made and sold what Cosentino considers to be the most original Vodou art in the world, and whose unpredictable designs create a spiritual release for many viewers. Cosentino coined the term *mojo board* to describe Barra's artwork that includes good luck charms similar to those used to conjure and protect in the Hoodoo culture of the Mississippi Delta. Barra incorporates inventive mojos such as speedometers, headlights, and barbeque forks juxtaposed against doll parts on cloth-covered boards (Fig. 3.84).[348]

Other artworks by Barra and Cassaise fall within a group Cosentino calls *reposwa* (Fig. 3.85), which are physical vessels created to house spirit powers.[349]

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[346] Picton, interview with the author, March 30, 2011.
[347] Donald J. Cosentino, *Vodou Things: The Art of Pierrot Barra and Marie Cassaise* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 31.
[348] Ibid, 27.
[349] Cosentino, *Vodou Things*, 26.

When asked about the purpose his artworks serve in the world, even for non-Vodou practitioners, Barra responded, "I work only for Mystique. [Mystique] is not just for Vodou. It's for the world Vodou."[350] Like Cave's Soundsuits that manifest their activist force in performances and Kongo nkisi that require their essential bundles of cemetery soil to be potent, the *resposwa* await another action by a *Mambo* (female high priest) or *Houngan* (male high priest).[351] Akin to the ceremonial artworks of Barra and Cassaise, Cave's syncopated patterns provide an opportunity for something magical to emerge from their abundant materiality.

Fig. 3.84 Pierrot Barra, *Mojo Board, "Cross with Spoon and Fork,"* 1995, *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, p. 380

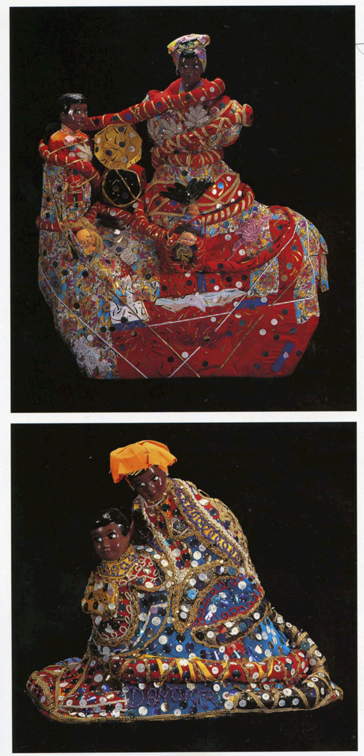

Fig. 3.85 Pierrot Barra, *Reposwa*, 1995, *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, p. 380

Vibrant patterns and striking combinations of materials are what activate the energy of Cave's installations, videos, and live performances and provoke a response from audiences. Says Cosentino of this phenomenon:

> It's always in the irregularity of patterns that the breakthrough can occur, the spirit being released. In drumming in the Vodou ceremony, it's when you go off-beat that the possibility for spirit possession takes place… Irregularity breaks that seal, whether it is visual through a pairing of different colors, or the using of different materials in a statue or mojo board. The irregularity breaks the surface, and then things under the surface can emerge. When the drum beat is irregular, what they call in Haiti casse, it jolts people and creates a fissure that allows the

350 Cosentino, *Vodou Things*, 23.
351 Ibid.

> spirit to rise. The energy is always there. But can the energy be channeled? Art makes that energy available.[352]

Cosentino describes a process of spiritual release in Vodou where the spirit that resides inside the body is "heated up" and released from external sources. Cave's patterns in Soundsuits, relief sculptures, and performance produce these opportunities for the life force to emerge and for the dreamer to dream. The irregular layering of visual rhythms enables moments where the hot and cool vibrate against one another. What happens on a formal and perceptual level is an indication of a metaphysical transformation that can occur in the body.

Synthesizing experiences through pattern like Barra and Cassaise, Cave explores the metamorphosis of objects from every-day commodities to items laden with symbolic spiritual value. This is especially evident in his appropriation of African American memorabilia that has been transformed from acceptable to despicable to collectible.[353] Combining motifs and objects in decorative assemblages and wall installations that he calls relics, he tells a story about American history and liberates the African American image entrapped in Aunt Jemima and Uncle Mose salt and pepper shakers, cookie jars, and other Black memorabilia. These welded artworks do not take a figural form, but branch out with tree-like limbs laden with many found objects. Cave's incorporation of a target motif as the backdrop for *Untitled* (2012) (Fig. 3.86), one of his relic installations exhibited at the 2012 Armory Show in New York City, suggests the violence often directed at the Black male body. A popular backdrop from a

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[352] Cosentino, interview with the author, March 23, 2011.
[353] Stacey Menzel Baker, Carol M. Motley and Geraldine R. Henderson, "From Despicable to Collectible: The Evolution of Collective Memories for and the Value of Black Advertising Memorabilia," *Journal of Advertising* 33, no. 3 (Autumn 2004), 37-50.

carnival beanbag game of the 1920s and 1930s provided Black faces as targets for play in the same way that Cave uses a rug with concentric circles behind the figure of a Black cast iron yard jockey.[354] This appropriated figure is dressed in a vest and cap, and features a caricatured large red grimace, bulging eyes, and a broad nose, similar to Cave's earlier relic from 2009 that presents the target-like rug like a giant balloon (Fig. 3.87). The jockey balances atop an alligator and above him floats a historic model of a ship, invoking the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Fig. 3.88). The alligator may correspond to a racist joke that Black children be used as alligator bait.

Fig. 3.86 Nick Cave, *Untitled (Relic series)*, mixed media, courtesy of Jack Shainman gallery from the *New York City Armory Exhibition* 2012, New York

Fig. 3.87 Nick Cave, *Untitled* (*Relic* series) mixed media, 2009, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 3.88 Nick Cave, detail of *Untitled (Relic series)*, mixed media, courtesy of Jack Shainman gallery from the *New York City Armory Exhibition* 2012, New York

In Cave's *Untitled* yard jockey relic, the punctuated alternation of porcelain tchotchkes and Black memorabilia are interwoven with veils of bead

[354] Ibid.

strands and flowers. Like the lawn figure in Flannery O'Conner's short story "The Artificial Nigger" (1962), these objects show African Americans in a servile role and refer to a specific time in American history in which white people manufactured these items to keep Black people in economic, political, and social servitude. Cave recontextualizes these historical symbols of racism in the same way that Barra appropriates dolls, by incorporating them as decorative power figures attached to a tree-like armature strung with beads. Combining memorabilia with porcelain birds, colonially-dressed figurines, and painted metal flowers, Cave synthesizes a structure similar to Southern African American bottle trees. Connecting these disparate objects through an organic design, he reconfigures the Yard Jockey, a vestige of slavery and Jim Crow history, into a powerfully alluring reliquary.

Fig. 3.89 Xenobia Bailey, *Moon Lodge*, crochet yarn and armature, 1999, courtesy of Xenobia Bailey

Soundsuit designs serve a similar role as those of crotchet sculpture and wearable art by American fiber artist Xenobia Bailey. For both artists, polyrhythmic patterns and beading provide a protective, talismanic energy for the wearer or an architectural space. Her mandala-like wall

Fig. 3.90 Nick Cave, detail of *Untitled Tondo*, 2008, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

and floor pieces radiate cosmic energy, like a supernova exploding (Fig. 3.89). Cave's wall tondos (Fig. 3.90) have similarly energetic sequin and beaded embellishment that show the collision of patterns that allow for the spirit to emerge. Bailey's hats often have a theatrical, multi-tiered form that emulate African ceremonial crowns and regalia, but it is their intricate crotched motifs that create a sense of energy, as if the hat is radiating electricity from the wearer's head. Her recent full-body costume and installation, *Sistah Paradise the Gatherer* (2008) (Fig. 3.91), sits like a queen on her throne holding her decorated broom and perhaps mocks Gordon Clark's remake of *American Gothic*. Patterns of concentric circles, triangles, and stripes accentuate centers of power in Sistah Paradise's body, reinforcing her chakras like beaded jewelry through their placement over her heart, head, and waist. As in Bailey's fiber artwork, Cave's crocheted orbs produce an overall syncopated circular pattern that floats across the body.

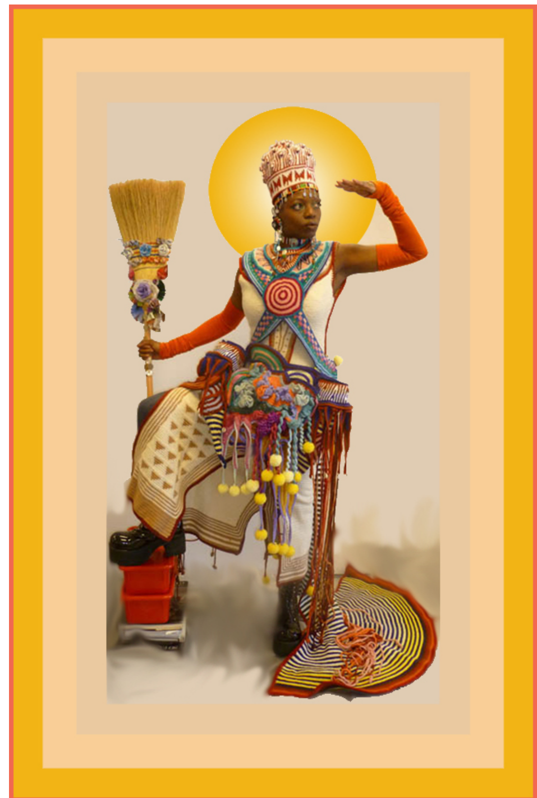

Fig. 3.91 Xenobia Bailey, *Sistah Paradise the Gatherer,* crochet yarn, 2008, courtesy of Xenobia Bailey

Inspired by the symbiotic relationship of design and dance, his animated patterns activate the senses to liberate the soul.

Patterns of Dreams

As both visual artist and performer, Cave's aesthetic of pattern arises out of the interwoven heritage of artist-shaman-craftsperson from an African Atlantic context. Cave's 2011 exhibition entitled *Let's C* at the Fabric Workshop and Museum (FWM) in Philadelphia exemplify his patterns and textures that inspire audiences to dream. It also manifested the evolution of his ideas into more sophisticated interactions between his decorated tribes. The show featured a group of brilliant Soundsuits, his ecstatic *Drive-By* video, and a unique installation he made in collaboration with FWM entitled, *Architectural Forest* (2011). Working with project coordinator Abby Lutz and other staff from FWM, the *Architectural Forest* was a soundscape created by reassembling sections from reconstituted bamboo curtains originally adorned with brightly painted designs such as snow leopards, tigers, palm trees, and floral motifs (Fig. 3.92). Cave removed every other strand of bamboo and added it to

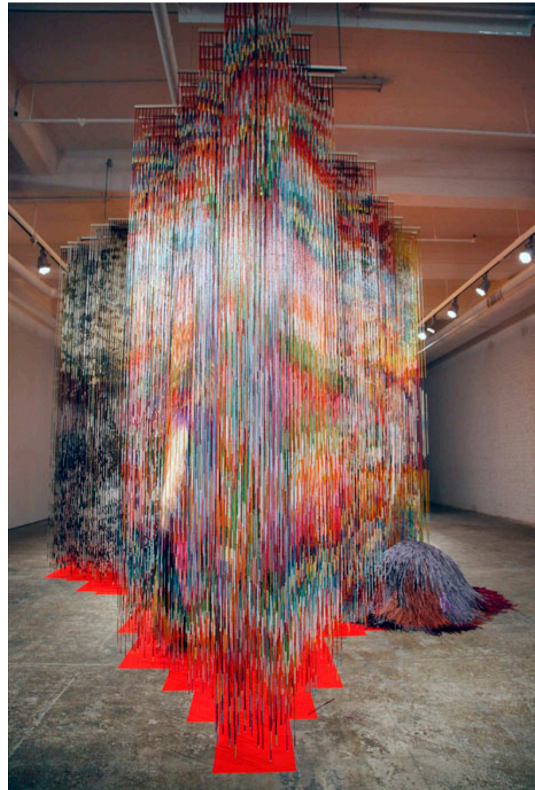

Fig. 3.92 Nick Cave in collaboration with the Fabric Workshop and Museum, *Architectural Forest*, 2011, Philadelphia, PA, image by Carlos Avendaño, courtesy of Nick Cave, Jack Shainman Gallery, and the Fabric Workshop and Museum

its adjacent strand, doubling the length of each strand to create a mirror effect of pattern and form an optically transparent screen. This reassembling of the original patterns resulted in new, ethereal motifs that resembled trees, graffiti scrawl, and abstract designs of black, white, pink, and orange. These designs interacted with the neon vinyl floor, echoing colors of the bamboo, reflecting color from below, and causing the eye to shift in and out of focus as one navigated the installation. The forest of natural and mass-produced filaments flickered as one moved through the space and produced a panoply of bead-like patterns and images, such as snow leopards.

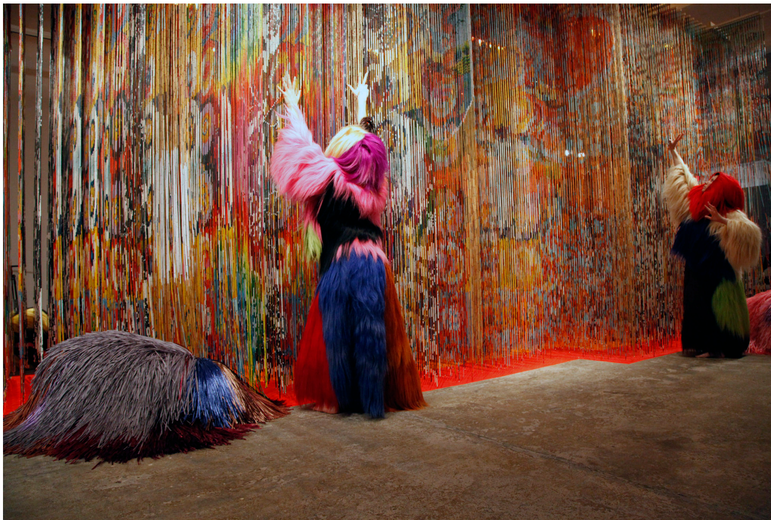

Fig. 3.93 Nick Cave in collaboration with the Fabric Workshop and Museum, *Let's C performance*, 2011, Philadelphia, PA, image by Carlos Avendaño, courtesy of Nick Cave, Jack Shainman Gallery, and the Fabric Workshop and Museum

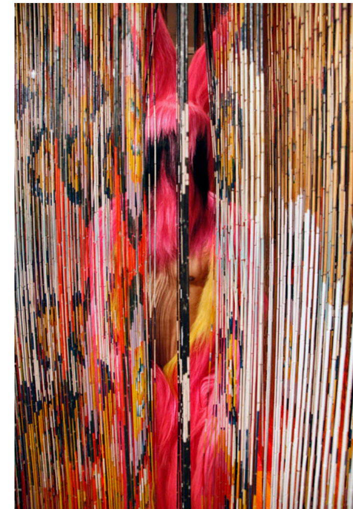

Fig. 3.94 Nick Cave in collaboration with the Fabric Workshop and Museum, *Let's C performance*, 2011, Philadelphia, PA, image by Carlos Avendaño, courtesy of Nick Cave, Jack Shainman Gallery, and the Fabric Workshop and Museum

The *Architectural Forest* served as the site for an hour-long performance held December 16, 2011 on the cavernous top floor of the Fabric Workshop and Museum. Eleven suited dancers and three musicians, wrapped in Cave's silk

scarves digitally printed with twig, flower, and bead designs, caused the patterned bamboo curtains to tinkle and crackle with their movements. According to one of the dancers, Cave referred to dancers wearing raffia Pitchy-Patchy Soundsuits as the Living and Unliving Shrubs, who feed the growth of the forest and replenish it, whereas the furry Soundsuits were known as the Guardians, who protect the forest (Fig. 3.93).[355] In the context of the performance, the Guardians and Shrubs represented spirits of the forest that have a specific role in its survival.[356] A hot pink guardian with bunny ears (Fig. 3.94) remained within the *Architectural Forest* throughout the performance and represented a shy recluse who is threatened by the encounter with others, but must stay enveloped within nature.[357] This tall bunny-man was cut open to expose the dancer's athletic but vulnerable brown torso. Other Guardians were boldly colored, with asymmetrical patches of candy pink, orange, blue, black, red, or brown that echoed colors and designs of the bamboo curtains.

Cave directed the event, which included aspects of musical improvisation, as well as dances created by two different choreographers that corresponded to the Soundsuits' characters. The Guardians performed modern dance choreography while the

Fig. 3.95 Nick Cave in collaboration with the Fabric Workshop and Museum, *Let's C performance,* soprano Kristin Norderval and jazz violinist Marina Vishnyakova, image by Carlos Avendaño

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[355] Nick Cave, interview with the author, December 15, 2011, Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, PA..
[356] Ibid.
[357] Ibid.

Shrubs danced steps from African dances from Senegal, such as *sabar* and *djembe* dance movements from Guinea. Soprano Kristin Norderval, percussionist Tom Teasley, and jazz violinist Marina Vishnyakova produced a rhythmic and melodic sound collage that represented the voice of the forest and its animals, such as birds, monkeys, small mammals (Fig. 3.95). Said Cave,

> The Architectural Forest is an invitation to go where the wild things could be. Contained in this isolated plot are mystical forms that move through and in and out of the architecture. Signaling what's hidden within, the sound and its stream of echoes—like a choir of chimes blowing in the wind—attract all in its path. The floor of the forest acts as a midnight oasis, emitting a glow that entices you into a vernacular void that you want to—but can't quite—trust.[358]

The *Let's C* performance was both a bacchanal of vivid patterns, texture, and sound produced by the dancing Soundsuits and also a sober reminder of the frailty of many ecosystems due to human infringement. In a deliciously orgiastic gesture, the Guardians surrounded one dancer (Jumatato Poe) from their group and all of their hands stroked his furry, patterned body. They then engaged in a ritual baptism of another of their group who fell backwards into the forest curtain, sending a ricocheting effect of sound and pattern. The soprano penetrated and walked through the forest as she sang, ultimately provoking the Guardians to disrobe and travel on their backsides in a long chain across the ground through the

Fig. 3.96 Nick Cave in collaboration with the Fabric Workshop and Museum, *Let's C performance*, 2011, Philadelphia, PA, image by Carlos Avendaño, courtesy of Nick Cave, Jack Shainman Gallery, and the Fabric Workshop and Museum

[358] Nick Cave, "*Architectural Forest* artist statement," *Let's C* exhibition gallery notes, Fabric Workshop and Museum, December 2011.

forest. Cave referred to this semi-nude part of the performance as a sacrifice.[359] The Shrubs animated their patterns with bombastic West African movements as they engaged with members of the audience (Fig. 3.96). They popped shoulders and hips, rustling vigorously like wind-shaken bushes to the xylophone and electronic beat.

In his *Let's C* performance, Cave resurrected the mysterious sensuality and patterned aesthetic of Wifredo Lam's cubist painting, *The Jungle* (1943) (Fig. 3.97). He invoked Lam's wooded environment with its Surrealist dream imagery, densely layered and repetitive motifs, abstracted human and animal hybrids, vibrant colors, and sacred forest animated by colorful masked spirits. In a similar way that Lam alludes to anthropomorphic deities from Cuban Santería, as suggested by the rightmost woman-horse hybrid, Cave's dancers synthesize from animal, human, and plant textures and patterns.[360] Cave's voluminous Soundsuits contrast the delicate linearity of the bamboo curtains very much like Lam used

Fig. 3.97 Wifredo Lam, *The Jungle*, gouache on paper, 1943, Museum of Modern Art, New York

[359] Nick Cave, interview with the author, December 15, 2011, Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, PA..
[360] "Art Through Time: A Global View, Dreams and Visions: The Jungle," Annenberg Learner, WNET.org Thirteen, accessed April 15, 2012, http://www.learner.org/courses/globalart/work/55/index.html.

horizontal stripes and striations to complement his vertically punctuated composition.

The synthesis of patterns and movement styles in the *Let's C* performance reflected the collage of cultures and history of cultural resistance that derive from Carnival, as previously discussed. Like his performance *Heard*, the choreography incorporated movements from West African dance from Guinea and Senegal, Afro-Caribbean Carnival steps, modern dance, house, and other American hip-hop dance styles. His performances' eclectic fusion of surfaces and styles is emblematic of Carnival, which has absorbed dances and flamboyant movement patterns from the creolized cultures of the Caribbean and the Americas. Through carnivalesque surfaces, Cave's performances and sculpture reframe historical narratives and represent the endurance and innovation of Black Atlantic cultures.

Cave melds aspects of performance, religion, and ritual through the unifying elements of pattern and decoration. He transforms the historically racist caricatures of Carnival characters into power figures that respond to the ills of contemporary society. His ornamented Soundsuits, installations, and performances are at home in the museum or the street. The form and function of his patterns elaborate on African and African Diaspora art traditions, infiltrate the art world's exclusive confines, and allow his work to be accessible to the everyday person. The hybridity of his assemblage synthesizes aspects from sacred traditions, kitsch and popular culture, and urban experience. Cave's surfaces complement this era of media and information overload because it

speaks to an essence of layering, multi-dimensionality, and flow, as well as the limitations of human evolution and technology. Through animal references in pattern and texture, Cave attempts to bring consciousness to the decimation of animals, genocide, and devastation of the earth.

The immense range of Cave's Soundsuit designs represent a diverse population that can flourish and live harmoniously on this planet without destroying it. His embellished suits challenge racism and the prevalent intolerance of homosexuality in many social and religious contexts. His masterful embellishment addresses forces of hot and cool, the duality of human nature, and how we relate to one another and the environment. Through the polyrhythmic patterns of performances such as *Let's C* and *Heard*, and with the syncopated designs of the Soundsuits themselves, Cave energizes the surface so that his viewers can dream and compassionately connect with the sublime.

This study shows that Cave's exquisite pattern and decoration goes well beyond its superficial beauty and association with other types of performance art. His integration of aesthetics from many Black Atlantic art and performance contexts informs his process of combining found materials toward a social and spiritual purpose. The suits' materials and the symbolism of their designs and textures protest crimes against humanity and the natural world while they affirm the transcendent customs that hold communities together. This analysis of Cave's carnivalesque pattern and texture demonstrates how Black Atlantic artwork inspires social change by entrancing audiences with the tactile magnificence of the surface and its polyrhythmic movement.

CHAPTER 4

EL ANATSUI: PATTERNS OF MEMORY

Layered patterns and extravagant textures are arguably the most consistent qualities that characterize an Africanist aesthetic, as well as a highly inventive pastiche that inserts non-art materials and subjects into fine art formats. The fusion of disparate designs and overlapping of visual rhythms are employed by many Black Atlantic artists to make the surface sparkle and dance, to deal with the complexity of cultural engagement, and to elaborate on traditional uses of pattern. Flamboyant design and ornamentation inform the process and meanings of artworks, and often the tactile beauty of works reveals the ugly underbelly of history, politics, or social issues. Patterned and embellished surfaces can seduce the viewer in order to expose the traumas of historical events and testify to the resilience and adaptability of African and Black Atlantic peoples to overcome great obstacles. This employment of pattern is not a formalist attribute, but rather a system for grouping, organizing layers, and connoting the historical references of materials and motifs. In this chapter, I investigate how works by El Anatsui, a West African artist living on the continent, presents a synthesis of vivid, rhythmically structured, and highly textured surfaces that express personal and collective histories.

In relationship to Anatsui's work, the term history represents a repository of personal memories, experiences of migration as a result of post-colonial realities of war and political restructuring in West Africa, and the past lives of the materials themselves. The specific chronology of events is less important than the lineage of cultures, languages, and the processes of memory to paste together ruptures and disjunctions into a new fabric. Anatsui often expresses this passage of time through the patina of a surface and the transformation of found objects into many layers of texture and pattern. His poetic vision of the past is often tied to traumas that communities have survived, specifically relating to colonial and postcolonial history. Surface and design embody history in Anatsui's work because his placement of elements is intrinsically linked to traditional patterns of ideographic symbols, woven and stamped designs, and the contemporary patterns of urban geography. His patterns refer to and disrupt original systems of ordering as he manipulates clay, wood, or metal in groundbreaking techniques. Anatsui's conglomeration of patterns reflects a collective history that has been built through the engagement of many hands, the transformation of consumer waste, the appropriation of symbols, and the combining of different topographies. His recent works have served as shrines and monuments to numerous historic sites throughout the world.

For over 40 years, Anatsui has synthesized African graphic symbols and designs in clay, wood, paint, and most recently monumental metal installations.

Compared with the meteoric fame of Wiley and Cave, Anatsui methodically and diligently built his career in West Africa and abroad while overcoming the entrenched segregation of the art world that often prevents African artists from penetrating contemporary art spaces. Until he began working with recycled metal elements in the late 1990's, his work was barely recognized by contemporary art critics and institutions. His earlier sculptures often incorporated West Africa ideographic systems, texts of obituary printing plates, textile patterns of kente cloth, and even the designs and colors of liquor logos to produce a hybrid of historical and contemporary meanings. Christine Mullen Kreamer points out that graphic systems have "long been associated with expressions of power, for they represent access to and mastery of specialized knowledge that is linked with the potential for social, political, and economic dominance and, at times, with the capacities to influence and control religious and spiritual domains."[361] It explores how Africanist aesthetics of pattern and decoration are epitomized by Anatsui's work in addition to the particular African motifs that he incorporates. Anatsui not only employs patterns aesthetically, but also symbolically to investigate themes of power, history, and interdependence. I investigate how Anatsui uses ideographic motifs and textile patterns to reveal truths about the past and present.

[361] Christine Mullen Kreamer, "Inscribing Power/Writing Politics," *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art* by Christine Mullen Kreamer et al. (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, 2007), 127.

Until recently, Africanists have situated his work in terms of specifically African contexts and traditions, very differently from that of contemporary art critics who interpret his work in the context of postmodern, Western sculpture. Now that his work has been exhibited in more than twenty-five countries, Anatsui's art has addressed West African and international audiences who appreciate the glittering surfaces and asymmetrical rhythmic harmonies of his sculptures. This chapter bridges the separate camps that have analyzed his work and consider how Anatsui's multi-patterned artwork elaborates on specific West African design systems to speak to global art audiences about philosophical and historical interconnectedness.

As the youngest of thirty-two children, Anatsui found ways to emphasize his unique talents in a large group through his art. His mother, one of five wives, died when he was a baby, and he saw little of his father; Anatsui was raised by an uncle who was a Presbyterian minister.[362] Anatsui grew up in Ghana's Volta region, and the town of Keta where he went to high school is separated from the Atlantic Ocean by a thin peninsula, located on the southern shore of Keta Lagoon. He was typically sequestered from his Ewe culture, and his world consisted of the church and school that were modeled after European systems.[363] However, he later learned about the patterns and symbols from his

[362] Ann Landi, "Master of Scrap: Cultural Conversation with El Anatsui," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 17, 2012, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390443884104577647511292332248.html.
[363] Brooklyn Museum of Art, "El Anatsui in Conversation with Susan Vogel" (public program in conjunction with the exhibition *Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui*, Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, February 10, 2013).

own Ewe culture. As a youngster, he drew letters and shapes with chalk at school, which he found to be visually intriguing as images, and says that he was fascinated by the liturgy that looked different from other signs and symbols.[364] He was exposed on occasion to the patterns of kente weaving and the rhythms of poetry that he experienced through his family and community. Anatsui never practiced weaving or desired to learn this medium, but he observed the woven kente cloth of his father and brothers. Other brothers wrote lyrics for music related to traditional drumming, and he refers to these siblings as poets. For a time, he considered becoming a musician rather than a visual artist.[365] This childhood, he comments, gave him a strong hunger and a thirst to learn about his indigenous culture that was not satisfied by his later university education.[366] The seeds of his interest in signs and symbols had been planted.

Anatsui received a BA from the College of Art, University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana in 1969, and his career emerged after the period of euphoria during the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's founder and president from 1951 to 1966. His work therefore reflects both the hope and the disillusionment of the post-colonial African reality, and draws from pre-colonial traditions as well as references post-industrial conditions on the continent. Nkrumah made *sankofa*, an Akan word for "go back and pick" (from the past),

[364] Landi, ibid.
[365] Brooklyn Museum of Art, "El Anatsui in Conversation with Susan Vogel."
[366] Ibid.

the model of Ghanaian cultural nationalism.[367] As Chika Okeke-Agulu observes about Anatsui,

> Sankofa for him was thus a very specific proposition in the sense that … it provided him with the philosophical basis for rethinking and reordering his own work as a *s*culptor … he seemed convinced of the need to assert on the one hand the complexity rather than the singularity of what constituted his African/Ghanaian/Ewe artistic heritage, and on the other hand the contemporary artist's right to choose which sources provided him the best chance of developing a new formal language appropriate to the artistic implications of his postcolonial subjectivity.[368]

Anatsui's recent work, which first sparked major international excitement evokes kente cloth, the "indigenous fabric that Nkrumah made a central part of the iconography of the Ghanaian nationalist struggle, and ultimately, the ceremonial attire of his independent new nation."[369] Anatsui's incorporation of kente cloth and other textile designs into his work, in addition to West African ideographic symbols, exemplifies a process of sankofa.

Anatsui's artistic methods developed out of rethinking what he learned in art school in Kumasi, a school that was still very Western in its training, associated with Goldsmith's College in London and offering little direct relation to African experiences. He studied about European art from the Renaissance to the Modern period, but these examples of attempting to reproduce form using academic models were of little interest to him. He questioned the age-old methods of carving logs of wood to reveal figural forms in the traditions of indigenous African sculpture and Modernist European sculpture. Instead, he

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[367] Chika Okeke-Agulu writes that Sankofa is also associated with an abstract adinkra symbol of a bird swallowing its egg. Ideologically it represents the relevance of an imagined past in the process of creating a progressive present and future (Chika Okeke-Agulu, "Mark-Making and El Anatsui's Reinvention of Sculpture," 50).
[368] Okeke-Agulu, "Mark-Making and El Anatsui's Reinvention of Sculpture" in *El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote You From Africa*, ed. Lisa Binder (New York: Museum for African Art), 36.
[369] Olu Oguibe, "El Anatsui: The Early Work," in *El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote to You About Africa*, ed. Lisa Binder (New York: Museum for African Art), 24.

went to the national culture center in Kumasi, where he learned about a collection of ideograms that represented proverbs or concepts. They offered him an opportunity to express very abstract ideas. Also, he found inspiration in the bustling local rural villages and lively marketplaces.

As a Ghanaian artist living in Nigeria, Anatsui draws upon centuries of graphic traditions from a variety of West African cultures and influences to articulate Africa's changing role in international politics and economics. His vision is expressed through patterns that merge Africa's past, its struggles for stability, and the contingencies of the present. Anatsui's work elaborates and integrates various West African ideographic scripts and textile designs to express the survival and adaptation of culture as well as the ruptures in Ghanaian and Nigerian history. He represents history as a collection of many African identities and cultures that are unified in a continental African perspective.

This chapter investigates the changes in the surface treatment of his work that has resulted in a metal sculptural process evolved from the distillation of several African textile and ideographic practices, responses to social and political conditions in West Africa as well as insights from his residencies and travels, and the recent opportunity to expand his work to a monumental scale. The first section looks at the designs inscribed on ceramic vessels and broken shards that show his early engagement with signs and symbols to reorient postcolonial African history. The next part explores his mark-making systems in wood sculpture and intaglio printmaking to show the development of his improvisational organization of incised patterns. The last section investigates the evolution of

patterns and surfaces of his metal sculpture to determine how this has taken on an architectural scale and function in recent works. Anatsui's mature work reveals a consistent progression of reinventing found materials that have become a primary subject of the work. The sophisticated arrangement of his recent metal sculptures serves as the physical embodiment of wisdom and memory.

Inscribed Trays and Ceramics

In early works Anatsui resourcefully incorporated patterns and materials specific to his environment that reflect its history as well as its current context. His early sculptures in wood and clay prefigure a consistent approach throughout his career to appropriate locally available materials and combine them with a variety of ideographic scripts and other culturally specific designs. Anatsui chose materials sourced from the community to inscribe ideographic scripts based on a personal mark-making system blended with references to ancient languages and indigenous sources.

Anatsui took a strong interest in the motifs of *adinkra* arts of the Akan culture of Ghana that led him to incorporate them into sculpture. Adinkra symbols (Fig. 4.1) are ideograms found in textiles, wooden prestige objects, jewelry, and other Akan artwork. Each ideogram (Figs. 4.2 and 4.3) represents a maxim or aphorism that is a key to a myth or proverb with a moral, and traditionally, these symbols were reserved for Asante kings. They are carved into calabash stamps that are used to print these designs onto textiles that traditionally were worn by royalty or spiritual leaders for funerary or special

ceremonial occasions. Older signs are linked to proverbs, folktales, and aphorisms, whereas newer designs may show flora, fauna, and everyday objects.[370] Many men's adinkra cloths also feature multicolored bands of

Fig. 4.1 Adinkra Fabric, 1825, material: cotton tree bark dye, woven, hand printed, stamped, painted dimensions: L 271 cm W 212 cm geographical origin: Ghana, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Adinkra_1825.jpg

Fig. 4.2 Adinkra symbols, *African Alphabets*, p. 34

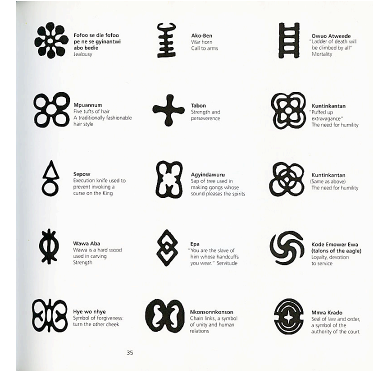

Fig. 4.3 Adinkra symbols, *African Alphabets,* p. 35

whipstitched embroidery in combinations of yellow, red, green, and blue along their lengths.[371] This embroidery is primarily straight-edged along the length of the cloth, but some have serrated edges in a design called "centipede" or "zigzag."[372] The bark and iron slag mixture made for printing designs provides a highly valued, glossy surface.

Adinkra symbols may have been especially meaningful to Anatsui because they evoke Asante history both during the pre-colonial and colonial period. Anatsui began to collect these stamps with an interest in how they

[370] Kreamer, "Inscribing Power/Writing Politics," 129.
[371] "Adinkra," online Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion, accessed August 31, 2012, http://angelasancartier.net/adinkra-cloth.
[372] Ibid.

became signifiers of language, philosophy, and myth, and has involved their motifs in his work ever since. He says,

> My initial take on [adinkra] symbols was not about patterns. I was interested in them individually. Although I studied them graphically, my interests were in their forms and content—the ideas they [express], especially their engagement with abstract, immaterial concepts.[373]

An Asante legend suggests that Adinkra symbols originated from Gyaman, a 15th century kingdom in today's Côte D'Ivoire. *Nana kofi Adinkra* (King Adinkra) was the name of the Gyaman king who was captured in a battle with the Asantes and wore patterned cloth to show his sorrow when he was taken prisoner by the Asante kingdom that soon killed him and annexed his lands. The Asantes adopted these Gyaman symbols into their own textile designs. The Asante are members of the Twi-speaking branch of the Akan people and in the Twi language, adinkra also means "farewell," which is why it is often worn at funerals.[374] The adinkra genre may have also been influenced by Arabic inscribed cloths that are still made by the northern neighbors of the Asante, who share a similar grid-like division of space arranged in registers and certain hand-drawn motifs that can be recognized as adinkra patterns.[375] Anatsui found adinkra symbols to be richly symbolic of the medieval and colonial history of conquest and political struggle of the Asante kingdom.

In 1969, Anatsui arrived to take a position at the Specialist Training College in Winneba (now University of Winneba) where he replaced Ghana's

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[373] El Anatsui, "Viewer Q&A: Responses from Catherine Opie, El Anatsui, and Marina Abramović," response to question from the author, *Art 21*, accessed August 13, 2012, http://www.pbs.org/art21/season-6-features/viewer-qa-responses-from-catherine-opie-el-anatsui-and-marina-abramovic/.

[374] Valentina A. Tetteh, "ADINKRA - Cultural Symbols of the Asante people," accessed May 15, 2013, http://www.ghanaculture.gov.gh/privatecontent/File/Adinkra%20Cultural%20Symbols%20of%20the%20Asante%20People.pdf.

[375] Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion, ibid.

leading modern sculptor, Vincent (Akwete) Kofi, as a professor of sculpture. Anatsui collected wooden food platters and trays used by local Winneba market sellers and transformed these into wall plaques carved with a blend of adinkra signs and his own invented designs. This was the first of many examples of his appropriation of materials related to food and consumption. He commissioned artisans who made the trays to engrave motifs into new platters and then he reworked these with burned, painted, engraved, and other marks in collaboration with their craftsmanship. Anatsui reflects,

> I used to work on them, embellish them; turn them into works of art, so to say. And the raw material I used for my designs was mostly adinkra symbols because I found them so engaging. I was trying to relate them. For instance if you took a symbol like "The Omnipotence of God," and you put it down, you tried to see what type of border would do to supplement or even emphasize what is in the middle. That was the challenge that I set myself.[376]

Anatsui took inspiration from Kumasi's local carvers and textile artists, drummers and other musicians, who were attractive to him on a formal level due to the abstract concepts and integration of symbols and patterns of their crafts and music.[377] *God's Omnipotence* (1974) (Fig. 4.4) exemplifies how Anatsui looks for materials within his environment rather than using either traditional African or

Fig. 4.4 El Anatsui, *God's Omnipotence,* carved and painted wooden tray, 1974, courtesy El Anatsui and Jack Shainman Gallery

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[376] El Anatsui quoted by Olu Oguibe, "El Anatsui: The Early Work," *El Anatsui, When I Last Wrote to You About Africa*, New York: Museum for African Art, 2010, 25.

[377] Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Metropolitan Museum of Art Interview between Curator Alisa LaGamma and El Anatsui" (interview transcript) (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, December 16, 2009). http://www.metmuseum.org/metmedia/audio/collections/022-interview-with-el-anatsui.

European art media. He changed a food tray and everyday object into a meaningful sculptural surface using adinkra symbols. The central adinkra symbol floats like a developing embryo surrounded by circular lines and a diagonal band that cuts across, arresting its movement. The outer border is a repetitive shape of many fingers or even phalluses that point inwards towards the center design. The rich line-work integrates all of these motifs into a surface like that of a tightly woven fabric. Incorporating century-old patterns onto a contemporary object imbues it with layered contexts and represents aspects of identity for his African audience.

Anatsui's fragmented clay sculptures of this time suggest both the destruction of the colonial period, the forming of new post-colonial governments, and the subsequent power struggles and dictatorships that ensued. Socially and politically in West Africa, the 1970s was a time of great upheaval and dramatic advancements in Africa. Shortly after Anatsui arrived in Nsukka, Nigeria in 1975, there were two military coups and the violent assassination of a young and popular military leader, while Ghana was experiencing a dire economic crisis and its own quick turnover of military leaders. When Anatsui lost access to the Ghanaian market trays he had worked with before, he began to explore clay, which was readily available, and incorporated fabric textures, signs, and adinkra symbols into his sculpture. He made a vessel out of the clay that he transformed

by inscribing and printing patterns into the surface and then broke them, which represented the extreme transitions taking place in Africa at this time.

Anatsui took inspiration from *Broken Pots,* a collection of poems by the poet and dramatist colleague at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Ossie Enekwe. In his poetry series, Enekwe wrote,

> "Broken Pots" affirms the inevitability of destruction and continuity, death and immortality, hate and love …. The old and obsolete must yield to the young and vibrant, but in this process, the old are not annihilated: they pass on to a stage befitting their age and experience. In African metaphysics, therefore, the dead remain with the living ... Africans are not terrified by death/nothingness since they believe in the spirit, the breath of eternity.[378]

In Anatsui's work, reorganizing of fragments symbolizes the combining of past and present and the historical layering of multiple languages and cultures into West Africa's current complex reality. The first example of Anatsui's treatment of the surface as a hodgepodge of patterns can be found in his similarly titled "Broken Pots" series, which are largely made of clay pieces that were created, broken, and repaired to represent regeneration and rebirth. This work speaks to the violent change and turmoil that was taking place in many parts of Africa in the 1970's. He adapted adinkra patterns to refer to pre-colonial and colonial episodes of violent political change in African history that have determined its contemporary reality. For instance, *Gbeze* (1979) (Fig. 4.5) reassembles the fragments of a pot that had been inscribed with adinkra designs that referred to the absorption of earlier Gyaman symbols into Asante textiles and the strength

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[378] Ossie Onuora Enekwe, *Broken Pots* (Greenfield Center: Greenfield Review Press, ca. 1977). This quotation is from an unpublished introduction to Enekwe's *Broken Pots*.

Fig. 4.5 El Anatsui, *Gbeze*, ceramic, manganese, 14 ¾" 15", 1979, courtesy of El Anatsui and Jack Shainman Gallery

of Asante cultural continuity even under British colonial rule.[379] Instead of recreating the old structure of the vessel, he builds with the fragments and surfaces of the shards to show its "richer, more-informed life."[380] Anatsui makes no attempt to fill the gaps between shards, which may convey the way in which lapses in memory cannot patch the narrative of events forgotten.

Anatsui's "Broken Pots" series shares a common message with Chinese artist Ai Weiwei's appropriation of Neolithic and Han dynasty Chinese ceramics as ready-mades (1993-present), some of which Ai smashed in performances for the camera. Ai's breaking of ancient ceramics is what transformed them into works of contemporary art.[381] Like Ai's symbolic acts of destroying ancient vessels, Anatsui's broken ceramics convey the idea that a new system cannot repair the damage created through war or violent change. Both artists suggest that holding onto the past as a precious commodity, symbolized by the ancient vessel, expresses an unwillingness to confront change. Anatsui's method of

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[379] "Adinkra: Cultural Symbols of the Asante people," compiled by Valentina A. Tetteh, accessed March 3, 2012, http://www.ghanaculture.gov.gh/privatecontent/File/Adinkra%20Cultural%20Symbols%20of%20the%20Asante%20People.pdf.
[380] El Anatsui, "Viewer Q&A: Responses from Catherine Opie, El Anatsui, and Marina Abramović."
[381] Arcadia University Art Gallery, "Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn Ceramic Works, 5000 BCE - 2010 CE," accessed May 29, 2013, http://www.arcadia.edu/news/default.aspx?id=30162.

leaving negative spaces and gaps between the shards may also express the impossibility of trying to build a coherent narrative out of fragments.

Fig. 4.6 *Nok sculpture*, terracotta, 6th Century BCE to 6th Century CE, Louvre, Paris

Encountering Nok terracotta in Nigerian museums, Anatsui perceived the power of the archeological relic, the fragment, and the occasionally reconstructed ceramic that together communicate the historical memories of a civilization. Nok sculpture, dating from 500 B.C. to 200 A.D., are ancient terracotta clay figures with distinctively carved eyes and nostrils, elongated forms, and patterns that describe coiled and braided hairstyles and beaded ornamentation along the waist, arms, neck, and wrists (Fig. 4.6). Nok sculpture was unlike other traditions where clay may have served as a modeling medium for metal work and statuary, and it established an ancient tradition of clay as a major sculptural medium. Anatsui took inspiration from this sculptural use of clay in his vessels, which are symbolic rather than functional.

Through the delicacy of designs inscribed or pressed in relief onto shards of ceramics, Anatsui explored for several years the duality of this medium's fragility and yet its survival as a record of history. Olu Oguibe describes Anatsui's interest in the fragment as a symbol of memory. He writes, "As it transits from utility to relic, from wholeness to fracture, and from one epoch to

Fig. 4.7 El Anatsui, *Chambers of Memory*, ceramic, 1977, courtesy of El Anatsui and Jack Shainman Gallery

another, ceramic fragments become codices that bear within them what Anatsui would refer to as sealed and intact chambers of memory."[382] In *Chambers of Memory* (1977) (Fig. 4.7) Anatsui referenced a well-known Nok terracotta head from one angle, but inside he created catacomb-like structures within the skull to represent these spaces of historical and cultural memory."[383] Anatsui observes that there is a spiritual dimension to the change inherent in a broken vessel when he says, "It's as if the pot, having broken, is transformed into a dimension which makes it ideal for use by ancestors and deities who are themselves in the spirit dimension."[384] Robert Farris Thompson notes: "in Dahomey, broken pottery at a funeral signifies the shattering of life by death, the anguish of which is eased by pouring soothing liquid on the earth and by speaking beautiful phrases and words."[385] Anatsui's patterns suggest a way of communicating with both the ancestral and his living audience. Anatsui's designs on the ceramic surface incorporate the West African tradition of using a broken vessel to communicate with the ancestors.

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[382] Olu Oguibe, "El Anatsui: The Early Work," 30.
[383] Ibid.
[384] El Anatsui and Laura Leffler James, "History, Materials, and the Human Hand-An Interview with El Anatsui," *Art Journal* 67, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 39.
[385] Robert Farris Thompson, "An Aesthetic of the Cool II," *The Aesthetic of the Cool: Afro-Atlantic Art and Music* (Pittsburgh and New York: Periscope Publishing, 2011), 21.

A number of early works from the "Broken Pots" series, such as *We de patch am* (1979) (Fig. 4.8), are titled in Pidgin English, a Nigerian dialect originating in the colonial period that linguistically abbreviates, combines, and reorganizes English words to produce a shorthand language and which Anatsui considers to be especially picturesque and imagery-laden. This work takes inspiration from an exchange when a man was greeting a friend and said, "ol boy, how life?" and the friend answered, "boy, e dey leak, we dey patch am" which means "life is leaking and we are trying to patch it."[386] Anatsui employs the layered richness of Pidgin English titles in the same way that he reorganizes patterns to reference multiple contexts and layers of history. The different textures of the pieces are fused together like a pieced cloth that is common to some types of West African clothing made from fabric remnants, such as the *Balfour* cloth worn by Senegalese Mourides. This sculpture takes the form of a round vessel that is pieced from separate shards, many with inscribed patterns of circles, diagonal stripes, and other designs. The destruction of the broken sections has been restored, but negative spaces

Fig. 4.8 El Anatsui, *We de patch am*, ceramic, 1979, courtesy of El Anatsui and Jack Shainman Gallery

[386] Lisa M. Binder, "Introduction," El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote to You About Africa," 15.

remain between the pieced sections, suggesting the traumas and losses as a result of wars and migration that will never be fully healed.

Anatsui's potsherd with surviving elements of ancient design and ideographic symbols is a metaphor for the radical transformation of African countries during this time of transition from colonization to postcolonial statehood, and its surviving elements became fragile new parts to be handled with care and vigilance, the same as a restored pot. Oguibe observes,

> [Anatsui] used fragments of different textures and colors to speak to the nature of Africa's experiment and experience in modernity, which is necessarily a patchwork of the old and the new, the indigenous and the foreign, all held together in a delicate yet fairly resilient patchwork that represents evolution and recovery, reconstitution and rebirth.[387]

The modus operandi of Anatsui's sculpture is this hodgepodge of individual patterned sections and fragments of clay, wood, or metal materials that he reworks into a synthetic surface. In his organic patterned sculptures and installations, Anatsui interweaves African motifs and symbols to communicate the rhythms and contingencies of life, the fusing of ancient and modern knowledge sources in a non-linear version of history, and shows a miraculous rebirth through the transformation of familiar and discarded materials.

Rhythmic Marks and Symbols in Prints, Paintings, and Wood

Several ideographic systems contributed to Anatsui's visual vocabulary of pattern and ornamentation when he joined the faculty at the University of Nigeria,

[387] Oguibe, "El Anatsui: The Early Work," 33.

Nsukka in 1975, where he has taught for over forty years. This university became a hotbed of intellectual ferment and creativity since so many important Artists had been forced to Nsukka due to the Nigerian–Biafran War (1967-1970). There Anatsui became part of a group of artists led by Uche Okeke who were implementing the patterns of *uli*, the Igbo mural and body art. Their modern style embedded with uli symbols symbolized an independent postcolonial subjectivity.[388] Uli is an ephemeral body and mural painting form practiced primarily by women artists in Igbo areas of southeastern Nigeria (Fig. 4.9). There is no singular uli aesthetic, and there is a wide range of conventions according to artist, region, and period. However, it has two dominant qualities: a tension that derives from lines that approach one another but never meet, and compositions that suggest extensions of energy and power in all directions beyond the visible picture plane.[389] Uli depicts only the essential lines that compose a given object, and balance power and precision with lyric

Fig. 4.9 ***Agbaejije Anunobi working with Uli designs on Professor John Umeh's obi*, 2000, photograph by Sarah Adams**

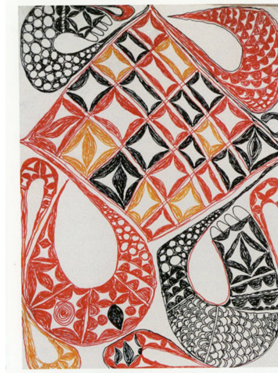

Fig. 4.10 ***Agbaejije Anunobi's Uli drawing on paper*, 1995, photograph by Sarah Adams.**

[388] Okeke-Agulu, "Mark-Making and El Anatsui's Reinvention of Sculpture," 38.
[389] Sarah Adams, "Can't Cover the Moon with Your Hand: Uli Artists, Artist Identity and Stuff," *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art*, 176.

buoyancy (Fig. 4.10).[390] For Anatsui, the visual tension between these lines and designs is realized in patterned wood and recent metal sculptures that use line energetically and organically in compositions that break out of their own borders.

Okeke led a group of significant Nigerian artists whose research into and exploration with uli and other local graphic and visual traditions in the mid-1970s laid the foundation for what would become the Nsukka School when Anatsui arrived there.[391] Okeke organized a group of artists, later called the Zaria Rebels, who campaigned for the acknowledgement of an authentic Nigerian art based upon a "Natural Synthesis" of long practiced indigenous traditions, such as those of the Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa in combination with western techniques and materials.[392] Anatsui later distinguished himself from a literal adherence to implementing uli patterns, but initially they gave him a new visual language and ultimately they informed his graceful line work and open-ended quality of his compositions.

In addition to adinkra and uli patterns, Anatsui had the resources in Nsukka to study and implement *nsibidi* script (Figs. 4.11, 4.12, and 4.13), an ancient form of written communication developed by the Ejagham peoples of southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon in the Cross River region, and also used by neighboring Ibibio, Efik and Igbo peoples. In his book *Flash of the Spirit*, Robert Farris Thompson delineates three types of nsibidi script: the first is most common and not secret, the second are "dark signs" because they are

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[390] Ibid.
[391] Ọla Oloidi, "Ilé Ọlà Ùlí: Nsukka Art as Fount and Factor in Modern Nigerian Art," in the *The Nsukka Artists and Nigerian Contemporary Art*, ed. Simon Ottenberg (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian National Museum of African Art; Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2002), 239-253.
[392] Okeke, Uche, "Natural Synthesis," 1960. Quoted in Okeke, Uche, *Art in Development – A Nigerian Perspective* (Nimo, Nigeria: Orion Printing, Inc, 1982).

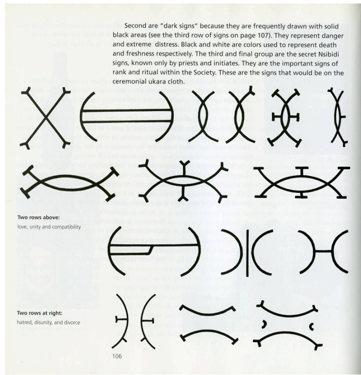

Fig. 4.11 Nsibidi script, *Afrikan Alphabets,* p. 106-108

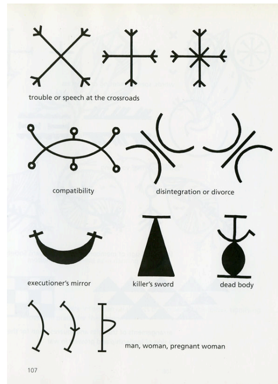

Fig. 4.12 Nsibidi script, *Afrikan Alphabets,* p. 106-108

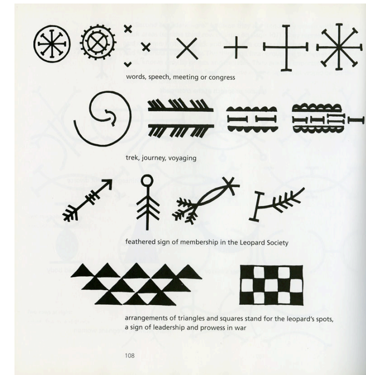

Fig. 4.13 Nsibidi script, *Afrikan Alphabets,* p. 106-108

often drawn with solid black and symbolize danger or extreme distress, and the third are the secret signs known only to priests and initiates.[393] Nsibidi does not relate to any single spoken language but is an aesthetically encoded ideographic script whose symbols refer to abstract concepts, actions, or things and which facilitates communication among several ethnic groups that speak different languages. It includes almost a thousand symbols that can be traced in the air (as gestures), inscribed on the ground,

Fig. 4.14 *Ukara cloth*, Igbo peoples, Nigeria, cotton, indigo dye, Fowler Museum at UCLA, 1983

marked onto the skin as tattoos, or painted on houses and on art, such as masks and textiles (Fig. 4.14). Thompson observes that nsibidi script is "cool writing" because it has a "function of abiding concern with social purity and reconciliation."[394] Although many are familiar with the symbols through art, secret knowledge of the nsibidi symbols is limited to members of men's

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[393] Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 244-248.
[394] Robert Farris Thompson, "An Aesthetic of the Cool II," 21.

associations, such as the Leopard Society, which once controlled trade and maintained social and political order in the Cross River region.[395] Anatsui, like other artists, combines nsibidi and uli, but whereas nsibidi is considered a writing system, uli is known as a design system.[396] Uli motifs are organic and nsibidi combine organic designs with geometric shapes, and there are signs that appear in both. Anatsui's employment of these designs seems purely aesthetic and decorative, but the act of writing and inscribing communicates his vision of West African history.

Anatsui says that his arrival in Nsukka enabled "an enlargement and intensification of experience."[397] This expansion of experience is characterized by a heightened awareness of how he wanted to implement abstract patterns from African ideographic systems to express symbolic meanings in his work. He reflected,

> The same spirit which led the adinkra symbolists to contrive a visual sign for the abstract concept: seriousness … the spirit which led the uli artists to leave the kolanut and get concerned rather with the spaces in-between them [the lobes], or to ruminate over the beauty of the trails of the "eke" or the coils of the "ome ji" tendrils, the spirit with led the nsibidi artists to graphically encapsulate man in simple curvilinear terms, that kind of spirit I feel, is opening up my vision, leading me to conceive of things not in their vulgar physique but to rather delve deeper below the surface of events, objects people and experiences, in an attempt to seek for visual meanings and truths, to distill essences, to decipher symbolic contents.[398]

The mysteriousness of nsibidi symbols made them especially appealing to Anatsui because they allowed for artists to express a highly personal philosophy

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[395] "Nsibidi," *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art* (exhibition website) National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C., 2007), accessed August 19, 2012, http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/inscribing/nsibidi.html.

[396] Amanda Carlson, "Nsibidi: Old and New Scripts," in *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art*, Christine Mullen Kreamer, Mary Nooter Roberts, Elizabeth Harney, Allyson Purpura (Washington DC: Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, 2007), 151.

[397] Chika Okeke-Agulu, "Slashing Wood, Eroding Culture: Conversation with El Anatsui," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, (1994): 34-40.

[398] Franco-German Auditorium, Lagos, Nigeria, El Anatsui, *Pieces of Wood: An Exhibition of Mural Sculpture*, exhibition catalog (Lagos: Franco-German Auditorium, 1987), 9.

of life and art, and highly abstract concepts.[399] Due to their visual adaptability into artwork, Anatsui found that he could combine nsibidi symbols with the adinkra motifs that he had already incorporated in relief sculpture and drawings. By adapting these symbols to form patterns in his own work, Anatsui developed a broader visual vocabulary with which he would use pattern to "write" a new history of Africa and to bridge the divides between modern and contemporary, Western and African. Okeke-Agula notes that for Anatsui, "the act of sculpting had become primarily concerned with mark-making and the ordering of shapes of color for both their visual impact and their ability to evoke states of being, metaphysical ideas, and concepts associated with the human sociopolitical and historical experience."[400]

Anatsui's art of this period is remarkable because of its array of ideographic scripts combined with rhythmic marks. It shows that "the multiplicity of varied styles vying for the eye's attention is ultimately subsumed to an articulate controlling design … emblematic representations of 'natural synthesis' achieved."[401] Through this research, Anatsui studied a polyglot of other ideographic syllabaries, learning the Nigerian Yoruba scripts, the Bolange scripts of East Africa, the Mande writing from Cameroon, and many others.[402] Anatsui notes that he felt the freedom to browse among many styles from the common source of African continental culture, when he says, "You see the cultures of Africa, no matter how diverse, they seem to have a common binding factor. So if

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[399] Amanda Carlson, "Nsibidi: Old and New Scripts," 151.
[400] Okeke-Agulu, "Mark-Making and El Anatsui's Reinvention of Sculpture," 39.
[401] Gerard Houghton, "El Anatsui and the Transvangarde," *El Anatsui: A Sculpted History of Africa* (London: Saffron Books and October Gallery, 1998) 33.
[402] Ibid.

I am taking from another African culture apart from mine, I am still very much within my culture, my continental culture."[403] Anatsui weaves together many histories as he shows their common cultural threads and shared aesthetic lineages.

As a metaphor for the layered history of Africa, Anatsui presents an array of ideographic motifs and an underlying unevenness and patchiness. He represents a vision of multiple stories and a non-linear progression through time and space rather than a grand narrative. For instance, his intaglio print entitled *History of Africa* (1987) (Fig. 4.15) shows a pattern of black and white squares that shift into a grid of ideographic symbols and transitions back into tiny squares. The symbols are incised more lightly, somewhat playfully, and include a range of invented and familiar signs, such as an Egyptian *ankh*, an adinkra symbol that resembles a comb, and tiny figures. The irregular pattern is cropped on the bottom so that the squares are cut abruptly in half. Like a woven fabric, it seems that the patterns could continue indefinitely, but it is starting to unravel on the unfinished edge. Anatsui does not attempt to wipe the plate clean, but he leaves

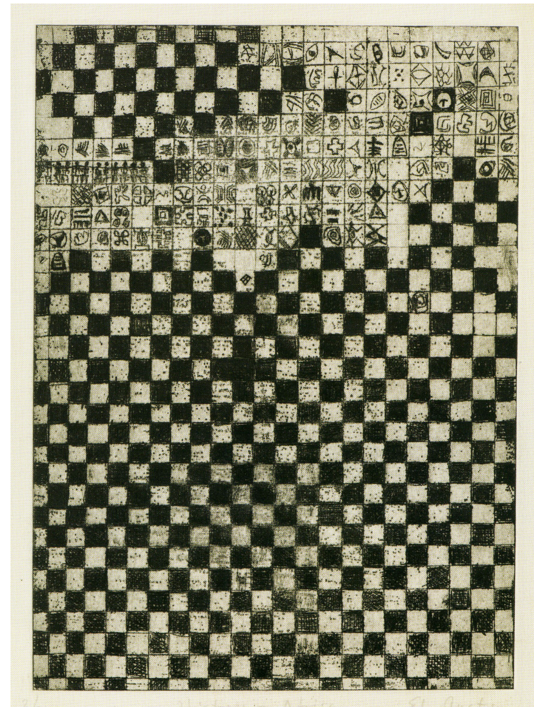

Fig. 4.15 El Anatsui, *History of Africa,* etching, 15 7/8" x 10 3/8", 1987, courtesy of El Anatsui and Jack Shainman Gallery

[403] Chika Okeke, "Slashing Wood, Eroding Culture: Conversation with El Anatsui," 35.

a good deal of tone and the scratches and burnishing marks of reworking the image. This allows the plate itself to have a sense of history. Anatsui's analysis of history in this print is not one-dimensional or static, but rather it reflects that power relationships are in flux, and that shared meanings are encoded in proverbs and aphorisms. Anatsui employs African symbols with a consciousness of what each sign represents, and his compositions relate to writing as well as decoration. He wields semantic power through his patterns, expressing harmony of form and concept.

Fig. 4.16 El Anatsui, *When I Last Wrote to You … II*, intaglio, 19 ½" x 15 1/8", 1986, courtesy of El Anatsui and Jack Shainman Gallery

In other prints and wood relief sculptures Anatsui refers to writing about Africa with patterns of squares and other shapes that suggest an invented language. In 1986 he created a related aquatint *When I Last Wrote to You … II* (Fig. 4 16) and wood relief sculpture, entitled *When I last wrote to you about Africa, I used a letterhead parchment paper, There were many blank slots in the letter… I can now fill some of these slots because I have grown older* (Fig. 4.17). Both of these works

Fig. 4.17 El Anatsui, *When I last wrote to you about Africa, I used a letterheaded parchment paper, There were many blank slots in the letter… I can now fill some of these slots because I have grown older*, wood sculpture, 73 3/8" x 55 3/8", 1986, courtesy of El Anatsui and Jack Shainman Gallery

take the shape of an unfurling scroll of paper dotted with small squares or compartments with adinkra and other symbols. The aquatint fades out in places and lapses of time and memory. In the same way that Anatsui would later transform bottle tops, these small shapes are linked together in a flowing, organic surface that imply writing and textiles. As in musical rhythms, in which the silence is as important in creating structure as the notes themselves, Anatsui uses pauses and gaps to convey the idea of piecing together an imperfect understanding that can only be supplemented later, once one has grown older and wiser. Motifs and symbols express what cannot be written in the language of the colonizer and thus provide Anatsui with the tools to tell a different version of history.

Anatsui's employment of adinkra symbols and other ideographic symbols to create a visual fabric of pattern is similar to their affect in the paintings of Kwesi Owusu-Ankomah. Owusu-Ankomah is a Ghanaian artist based in Germany who camouflages figures engaged in sport or wrestling with dense patterns of adinkra symbols of his Akan heritage against a similarly patterned as background. His massive

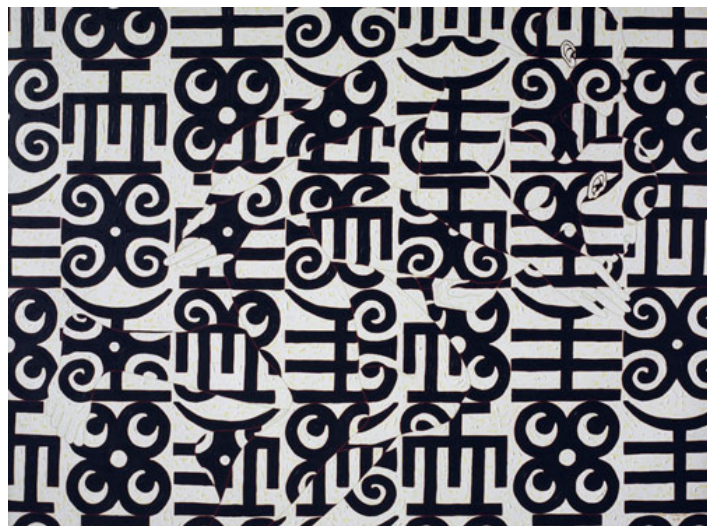

Fig 4.18 Kwesi Owusu-Ankomah, *Off My Back*, acrylic on canvas, 61 7/8" x 83 3/8", 1995, *Inscribing Meanings*, p. 205, collection National Museum of African Art Smithsonian Institution

figures are substantial but almost invisible, caught in the decorative field. The overall patterning of black acrylic paint on white background that approximates the dye known as *adinkra aduru* integrates the beauty and strength of his athletic male figures drawn in thin red lines, in his image *Off My Back* (1995) (Fig. 4.18). While Owusu-Ankomah's paintings play upon the optical illusions of these patterns and the human form, Anatsui employs the physical texture of the wood and the powerful burnt lines to brand the skin of his relief sculptures.

Anatsui employs Akan and Elegham syllabaries to signify positive and negative space, gesture, and concept in a comparable way to how Ethiopian painter Wosene Worke Kosrof engages ancient Amharic symbols. Kosrof observes about the Amharic symbols in his painting *The Monument* (2003) (Fig. 4.19),

Fig. 4.19 Wosene Worke Kosrof, *The Monument*, acrylic on linen, 2003, courtesy of Wosene Worke Kosrof

> The symbol communicates with the viewer through its form and color, through the space in which it moves, through the relationship it has to other syllables next to it and within the broader ambience of the entire canvas … I create spaces for them to appear, move, dance, and strut their stuff.[404]

The graceful and arching black Amharic signs in *The Monument* are both figural and abstract, dominating the composition like dramatic architecture against the sky. Like Kosrof's synesthetic response to color and sound in

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[404] Wosene Worke Kosrof and Patricia D. Rubbo, "Words: From Spoken to Seen," *Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, 2007), 237.

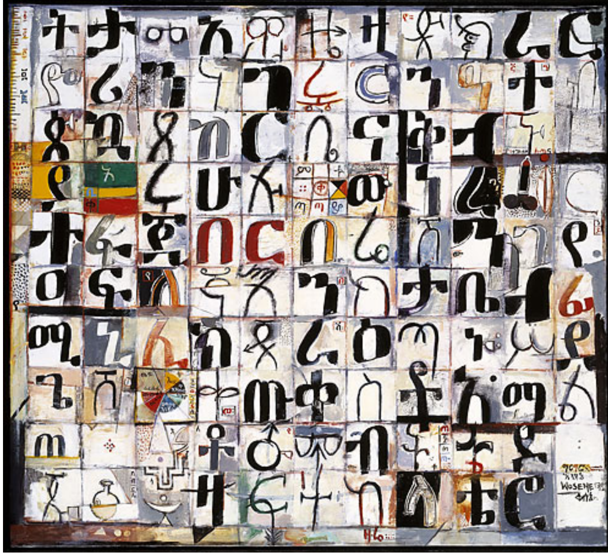

Fig. 4.20 Wosene Worke Kosrof, *Color of Words*, 1995, acrylic on linen, courtesy of Wosene Worke Kosrof

works such as *Color of Words* (1995) (Fig. 4.20), Anatsui overlaps verbal and visual in compositions that express the power of language and symbol, and his ordering of these symbols creates unpredictable patterns.

Also in the 1980s, Anatsui made mysterious paintings that feature flat bands of rich color painted with broad rollers or with wide swaths of color and compressed areas of tiny shapes and linear details that suggest strip cloth patterns. These images, such as *Untitled* (1980s) (Fig. 4.21) are

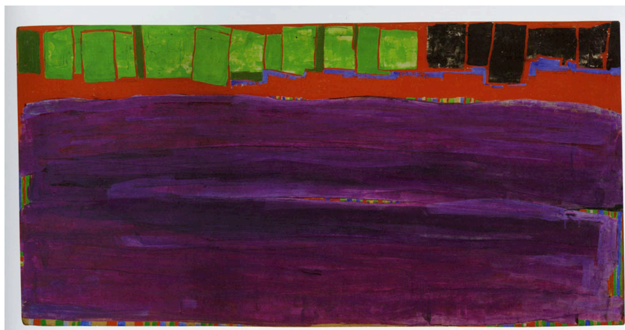

Fig. 4.21 El Anatsui, *Untitled*, acrylic on masonite, 24" x 48", 1980's, courtesy of El Anatsui and Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 4.22 *Kente cloth design, "Agyenegyenesu," Wrapped in Pride*, private collection, p. 116

characterized by rows of rectangles on the edges and tiny bead-like interludes that fill in tiny spaces between the broad swaths of color. The hot and cool combination of green rectangles floating across a red-orange ground and wide horizontal strokes of magenta cause the eye to move across a syncopated space

that resembles African textiles. The strips of vivid color suggest West African double-heddle loom weaving techniques such as kente cloth.[405] Like many kente designs, these paintings show a dramatic shift in scale between broad areas of color and intricate detail, as in the kente cloth design *Agyenegyenesu* (Fig. 4.22) named after a small insect that can walk on water. It symbolizes a warning against deceptive behavior."[406] In the context of Anatsui's work, these complex patterns imply multiple narratives that are woven together in the composition.

The paintings of fellow Ghanaian artist and friend Atta Kwami share a similar aesthetic in how they organize space and echo the patterns of kente cloth. Kwami learned weaving as a boy, as did many of his generation, and was exposed to art through his mother, the sculptor, painter, and textile designer

Fig. 4.23 Atta Kwami, *Lanier Place Goddess II*, oil on canvas, 2010, courtesy of Atta Kwami

Fig. 4.24 Atta Kwami, *Amsterdam Archways*, 2011, The Netherlands, courtesy of Atta Kwami

Grace Salome Kwami. The urban landscape is also reflected in his patterns. Many of his paintings are inspired by the renditions of street artists for

[405] See John Picton and John Mack, *African Textiles* (London: British Museum Press, 1993), especially chapter five, for an in depth study of the narrow strip or belt loom.
[406] Doran Ross, "Weft Names," in *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1998), 116.

kiosks, shop fronts, billboards, and murals. Kwami says that his works "embody those aspects of my everyday life which have the greatest significance: kiosks, commercial (sign) painting, woven textiles—Ghanaian music (Koo Nimo) and jazz, all of which allow for series composition in strips, stripes, and grids."[407] His painting *Lanier Place Goddess II* (2010) (Fig. 4.23) has a broad palette of primary colors, black, white, green, and pink. It moves the eye from longer verticals and horizontals to thin stripes in the lower left corner, as if the viewer is meandering through a maze of perpendicular bars of color. The alternating stripes that lay parallel or perpendicular to the top layer of paint suggest the weft and warp of kente, especially highly valued double-woven types. The rhythms are syncopated and irregular like many of Anatsui's patterns that preclude predictable repetition. Kwami's *Amsterdam Archways* (2011) (Fig. 4.24) exhibited at the free open air art exhibition *Artzuid* in Amsterdam transformed the patterns of his two dimensional work into sculpture and played upon the theme of European classical and perhaps triumphal and commemorative architecture.

Like Kwami's work, Anatsui's organization of form and patterns are about a sense of place and a response to the specific patterns and materials of his environment. Anatsui's prints, drawings, and paintings of the 1980's inform his engagement with color and the visual ordering of elements and textures. Okeke-Agulu argues about Anatsui's paintings, "We must appreciate his long-standing fascination with and attention to the ordering of two-dimensional graphic gestures, and the way they substantially structure the optical, physical, and even

[407] Atta Kwami, email message to Lydie Diakhaté, April 14, 2008 cited in *The Poetics of Cloth: African Textiles/Recent Art*, ed. Lynn Gumpert (New York: New York University, Grey Art Gallery, 2008), 82.

conceptual conditions of his three-dimensional work."[408] Anatsui's sculpture is characterized by a great attention to texture and surface as well as the larger compositional structure in a very painterly manner.

In the 1980s and '90s, Anatsui's travel to Europe and America and participation in major international exhibitions and residencies expanded his visual vocabularies and sense of pattern in terms of location. One of the most influential events of this time was his participation in a Massachusetts residency program at the Cummington Community of the Arts, where he learned to harness the raw power of the chainsaw to carve large pieces of wood. He began to use this tool to work with smaller strips of wood that he could reorganize in a range of ways, similar to how he previously manipulated sections of broken ceramics. The chainsaw enabled him to draw curvilinear lines and designs into wood with the same facility with which he had previously marked the surfaces of clay sculpture. As Anatsui said, "Power-saw tearing rough-shod through organic wood at devastating speed … constitutes a metaphor of the hassling, rat-racing, hypertensive pace of present-day living."[409] This tool also allowed him to make a complete break with the work of previous Ghanaian artists, becoming more aligned with trends from other aspects of African two-dimensional design. Anatsui found that he could personalize this mechanical, industrial method of mark making, and showed that "the very process of inscription is a powerful act

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[408] Chika Okeke-Agulu, "Mark-Making and El Anatsui's Reinvention of Sculpture," 33.
[409] Franco-German Auditorium, Lagos, Nigeria, El Anatsui, *Pieces of Wood: An Exhibition of Mural Sculpture*, exhibition catalog (Lagos: Franco-German Auditorium, 1987), 10.

as well as a *creative* one."[410] The freedom of working abroad enabled Anatsui to assimilate these tools into his process with new vitality and freedom.

Anatsui often treats his wood sculptures as a textured and patterned skin that he cuts with scarifications, burns with fire, or tattoos with linear designs. In the drawings he showed as part of his exhibition in 1982 at the Goethe-Institut, Lagos, he incorporated uli designs as well as other abstract patterns with powerful contour lines and dark, heavy shapes that anticipate the treatment of his wood sculpture in the mid-1980s. In *Between Ontisha and Asaba* (1986) (Fig. 4.25), Anatsui uses the rhythmic s-curving lines made with a power saw and fire to suggest the force and movement of the Niger River that flows between the cities of Onitsha and Asaba. The massive girth of the lines that swirl from one diagonal of the sculpture to the other is subtly interrupted by the vertical cuts that segment the wood into sections. On lower left and upper right, the rectangular pieces of wood suggest an aerial view of villages. This mapping of landscape and geography through pattern is consistent with other works and has been further developed in his recent metal sculptures.

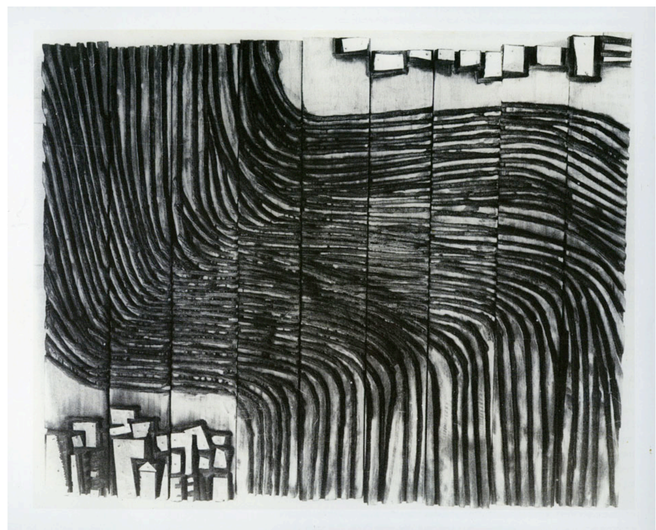

Fig. 4.25 El Anatsui, *Between Ontisha and Asaba*, wood, tin, 1986, courtesy of El Anatsui and Jack Shainman Gallery

In the 1990's, Anatsui's work earned increased international attention, and this exposure enabled him to expand

[410] Kreamer, "Inscribing Power/Writing Politics," 144.

its scale and the boldness of his patterns. His works were shown in residencies, biennales, and exhibitions, such as *Five Contemporary African Artists* in the 44th Venice Biennale and *Contemporary African Artists: Changing Tradition* at the Studio Museum in Harlem (1990). He chose specific types of wood for their color and grain patterns. Working with the saw, flame, sander, power routers and other power tools, Anatsui found a new method of drawing on wood. The flat composition of colored and patterned strips of wood became a relief surface on which he could incise lines with power tools and oxyacetylene flame. He used oxyacetylene flame to burn out loose wood and to char surfaces left by the saw, therefore creating areas of black shapes and lines. In part of a statement that accompanied his Lagos exhibition *Old and New: An Exhibition of Sculptures in Assorted Wood* (1991), Anatsui enumerates the types of wood he combined in these sculptures, how he manipulated and juxtaposed the different kinds, and the marks he applied to the surface. He concludes his artist statement with the following poem:

> *Slash rip sear saw whittle*
> *devastate chip chop*
> *break burn impose juxtapose*
> *control*[411]

Basing his two-dimensional works on narrow pieces of wood in which he incised striking abstract marks, signs, and designs, Anatsui conveyed the structural and design connections between his sculptures and West African fabric patterns.

His sculptures of this period bear marks from a rotary saw that allows clean straight lines that create cross-hatched patterns akin to the warps and

[411] National Museum, Lagos, Nigeria, *El Anatsui, Old and New: An Exhibition of Sculptures in Assorted Wood* (National Museum, Lagos, Nigeria, 1991), 7.

wefts of woven cloth, and to convey printed or finely-woven patterns that represent the value of Africa's rich textile traditions. Anatsui has also implied that the rapacious bite of the chainsaw signifies the European colonial destruction of Africa's histories and cultures, the carving up of the African continent, and post-colonial discord of many African nations.[412] So the physical act of his patterned art reflects historical concepts and symbolism. Furthermore, his assembling of thin strips of wood with individual designs recalls the way narrow-strip cloths are sewn together, edge to edge. The vitality and dynamic, irregular rhythms of these marks and patterns, including the symbols of adinkra and the painted bands of color that represent kente woven designs, have had a longstanding meaning for Anatsui as metaphors for African history and its survival in spite of the violence and devastation of colonization, war, corporate usurpation, and political corruption.

Anatsui gouged geometric shapes that reference both writing and animal patterns into concave wooden strips that he assembled unevenly in an undulating, rhythmic surface in *Leopard's Paw Prints and Other Stories* (1991) (Fig. 4.26). The weight of charred marks and geometric shapes are similar to nsibidi patterns that reference leopard's markings as in some designs of *ukara* cloth (Fig. 4.27). Patterns of repeating triangles and squares serve as the leopard's spots, a symbol of leadership and success in war.[413] These designs bring the wooden shapes into high relief. Within many of these squares, the

[412] Okeke-Agulu, "Mark-making and El Anatsui's Reinvention of Sculpture," 45.
[413] Saki Mafundikwa, *Afrikan Alphabets* (West New York, NJ: Mark Batty Publisher, 2004), 108.

Fig. 4.26 El Anatsui, *Leopard's Paw-prints and Other Stories*, wood, paint, 16" x 35 ¼", 1991, courtesy of El Anatsui, October Gallery in London, and Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 4.27 Detail of *Ukara cloth that hung on the wall in the Mgbe Hall of an Etung-Ejagham village along the Cross River*, Abijang, Nigeria, photograph by Amanda Carlson, 1997

circular patterns are carved or gouged and painted ochre, red, or white. The title suggests a parable or narrative, and the leopard itself is an animal celebrated in masquerades, proverbs, and patterns throughout the region. As the icon of the male Secret Society of the Ekpe also known as the Leopard Society in Nigeria (mostly across Efik, Oron, and Igbo tribes), the leopard also has historical significance since this group developed the nsibidi ideographic language before the eighteenth century. Among the Leopard Society, an elaborate dyed cloth called *ukara* bears signs in nsibidi script that can only be interpreted by initiates, and therefore the cloth itself serves as a coded manuscript. Anatsui has employed nsibidi, adinkra, and perhaps other symbols that create a rough landscape above a series of small stick figures at the bottom left that traverse the strips of wood.

Another example, *Old Cloth Series* (1993) (Figs. 4.28 and 4.29) is a panoramic piece that functions similarly to his later works with bottle caps in its

areas of transparency, continuous pattern, and sense of deterioration. The pattern of

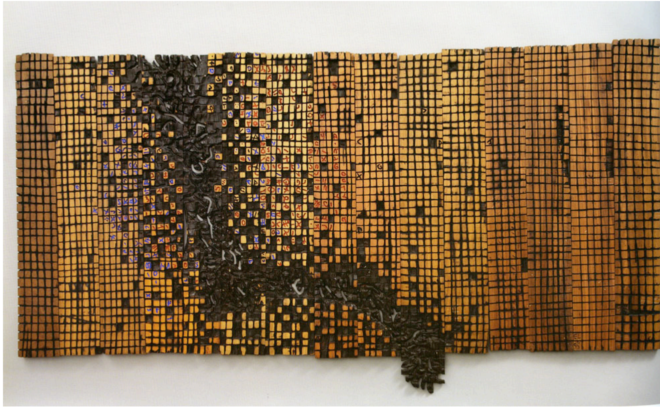

Fig. 4.28 El Anatsui, *Old Cloth Series* (and detail), wood, paint, 31 ½" x 60 ¼", 1993, courtesy of El Anatsui, October Gallery in London, and Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 4.29 El Anatsui, detail of *Old Cloth Series* (and detail), wood, paint, 1993, courtesy of El Anatsui, October Gallery in London, and Jack Shainman Gallery

small squares, some of which have been carved and burnt out, moves horizontally across the composition, and is subtly interrupted by the vertical cuts of the wooden panels that have been assembled together. As if eaten by worms, the piece is characterized by a tunnel-like form, of black shapes and lines that bores through the left top to the bottom center. The organic and uneven degradation of this dark tunnel gradually ruptures the rest of the cloth-like surface, but the larger composition remains intact as a monument to the history and longevity of this material.

In *Old Cloth Series*, A variety of marks that include adinkra, uli, or nsibidi symbols are incised and brightly painted in the individual squares. For instance, Anatsui incorporates an "X" motif that may represent an nsibidi symbol for trouble at the crossroads, but

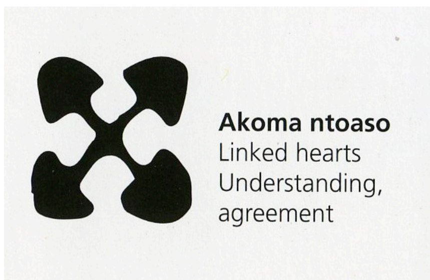

Fig. 4.30 *Akoma ntoaso* adinkra symbol, *Afrikan Alphabets*, p. 34

is similar to *Akoma ntoaso* (Fig. 4.30), which signifies hearts linked in understanding or agreement in adinkra ideographs.[414] Also, he includes a spiral, an nsibidi sign that symbolizes a journey, but also alludes to the sun and eternity.[415] Relevant to the African diaspora, the spiral was adopted as the identity of the 1960s African American artist collective based in New York City and formed by Romare Bearden, Charles Alston, Hale Woodruff, Emma Amos and a number of other artists who felt it would signify their relationship to the American civil rights movement by representing their journey to promote social change through art.

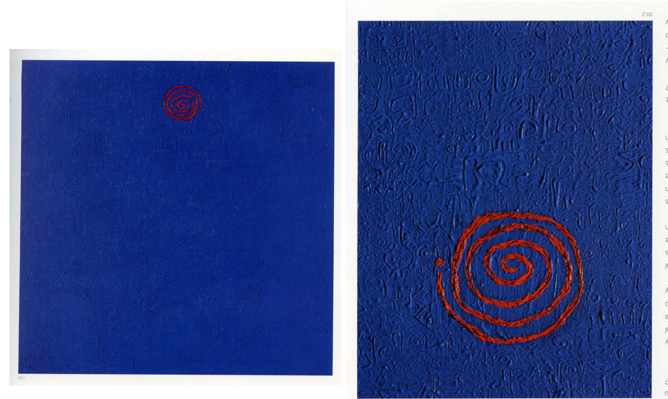

Fig. 4.31 Victor Ekpuk, *Good Morning Sunrise*, acrylic on canvas, 129.2 x 129.2 cm, 2002, courtesy of Victor Ekpuk; Fig. 4.32 Victor Ekpuk, detail of *Good Morning Sunrise*, acrylic on canvas, 129.2 x 129.2 cm, 2002, courtesy of Victor Ekpuk

Victor Ekpuk, a Nigerian artist based in Washington, D.C., also adapts this symbol in paintings with hot and cool colors as in his *Good Morning Sunrise* (2002) (Figs. 4.31 and 4.32), in which a red spiral design floats upon a blue sea of other signs. This painting expresses the artist's memory of a cool morning in Ife, Nigeria after a long night of work in the studio.[416] Seen in various contexts, these artists' use of adinkra symbols expresses personal and more universal meanings, speaking cross-culturally and also decoratively. Anatsui's engagement with the signs is never simply literal so audiences can access

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[414] Mafundikwa, *Afrikan Alphabets*, 34 and 107.
[415] "Nsibidi," *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art*, accessed August 19, 2012, http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/inscribing/nsibidi.html.
[416] Amanda Carlson, "Nsibidi: Old and New Scripts," email correspondence with El Anatsui, November 4, 2004, *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art*, 153.

these images on an aesthetic level without any knowledge of the specific symbolism.

Anatsui's *Coins on Grandma's Cloth* (1992) (Fig. 4.33) is another sculpture that employs the repetitive circular motif cut with a hole saw to stand for the metaphor of textile designs.

Fig. 4.33 El Anatsui, *Coins on Grandma's Cloth*, wood, paint, 25" x 55", 1992, collection of Contemporary African Art Gallery, New York

The layering of patterns in this work suggests a fabric woven with different designs such as tiny squares, syncopated diagonal streaks of color, and the circles of coins all integrated in a horizontal composition with vertically cut strips of wood. Anatsui creates a dramatic contrast of charred wood against blonde colored circles and deeper red wood, as well as the diagonal lines of red, purple, green, and yellow, colors that are frequently woven in kente cloth. Even more dramatic and specific to cloth is *Remnant of Grandma's Cloth* (1995) (Fig. 4.34) that exploits similar patterns of charred wood and squares with holes.

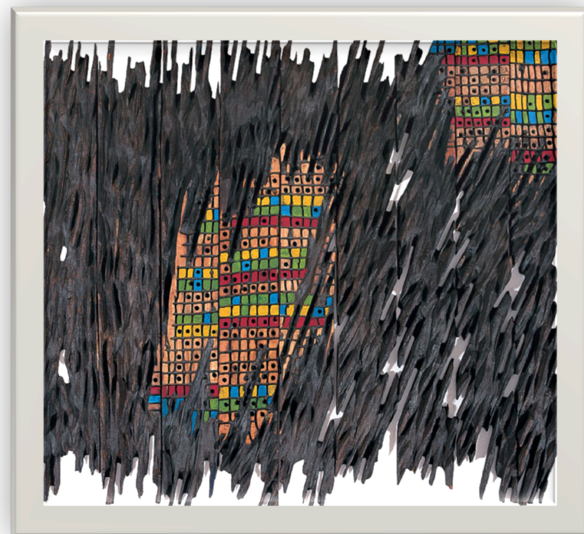

Fig. 4.34 El Anatsui, *Remnant of Grandma's Cloth,* wood, paint, 31 ½" x 36 ¼", 1995, courtesy of El Anatsui and Jack Shainman Gallery

The diagonal design of blackened and gauged lines is interrupted only by passages of squares, some painted in red, yellow, blue, and green. Anatsui carved the wood slats and then worked with a chainsaw to cut away entire sections of wood and scorch these marks with fire. His piece *Kente Rhapsody* (2001) (Fig. 4.35) refers very specifically to strip weaving and kente patterns through both the black charring of wooden strips to produce a zebra-like pattern and also horizontal bands of red, yellow, blue, and green that traverse the piece at two sections.

Fig. 4.35 El Anatsui, *Kente Rhapsody*, aluminum and copper wire, 52 ½" x 69", 2001, courtesy of El Anatsui, collection of the British Museum

Anatsui's drawing with fire to burn patterns into wood has correspondences with scorched designs by African American artist Willie Cole and South African artist Sandile Zulu. Cole's visual vocabulary consists of ordinary domestic objects, such as the steam iron that may stand for the historic domestic role of Black women as well as the Yoruba god of iron and war, Ogun.[417] Transforming the burned impression of the iron, it takes on multiple meanings depending on its context and the surface on which he prints. When

Fig. 4.36 Willie Cole, *Branded Irons*, scorching on four plywood panels, 2000, collection of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts

[417] David Krut Projects, "Willie Cole: Biography,"accessed February 27, 2013, http://www.davidkrut.com/bioCole.html.

printed alone, this shape can reference a face or African mask, a slave ship, or a shield. The arrangements of iron marks resemble flowers, plants, and adinkra patterns. In his piece *Branded Irons* (2000) (Fig. 4.36), the rhythmic design of the irons invokes a textile pattern that plays upon positive and negative shapes, but the title perhaps references the cruel practice of slave-owners that branded their slaves with specific burn marks so that they could be tracked if they escaped.

Sharing similarities to Anatsui's rhythmic burn marks on wood sculpture, Zulu's two-dimensional works are organized by patterns of smoky scorched shapes. Both artists draw with the blowtorch to produce spontaneous patterned sections that can be arranged. Their accumulation of marks is enhanced by the negative spaces in the work, the pauses between the burns. His work *Degeneration, Regeneration, Life Cycle Forms 10* (2006) (Fig. 4.37), shows rings of crisp circles in the center that degrades into a smoky and irregular pattern of burned marks on the perimeter of the canvas, conveying a sequence of mark-

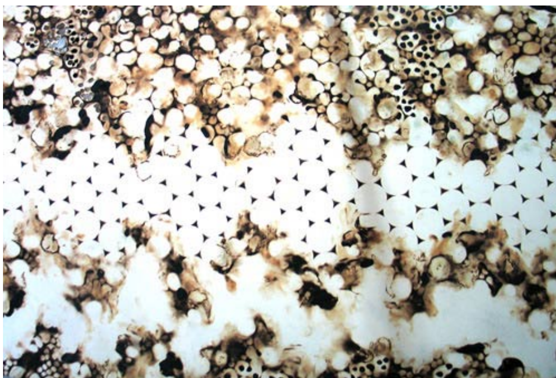

Fig. 4.37 Sandile Zulu, *Degeneration, Regeneration, Life Cycle Forms 10*, 2006, courtesy of Sandile Zulu and October Gallery

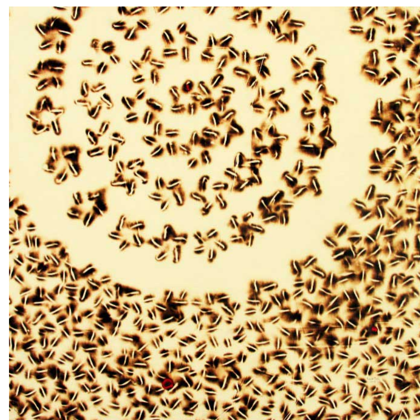

Fig. 4.38 Sandile Zulu, *Galaxy 5*, fire, air, water on canvas, 2005, courtesy of Sandile Zulu and October Gallery

making that relates to a cycle of life and the passage of time. Like many of Anatsui's wooden sculptures in which patterns are a metaphor for the environment, sociopolitical issues, or the ephemerality of life, Zulu's method depends on rhythm and repetition as well as the unpredictability of natural elements, including fire, water, and scavenged industrial debris. Zulu's *Galaxy 5* (2005) (Fig. 4.38) employs a repetitive star-shaped stencil to form a spiral that represents harmony and order within the universe.

Like Cole and Zulu, Anatsui harnesses the destructive power of fire to adorn his work and create images of regeneration.

Fig. 4.39 El Anatsui, *Adinsibuli Stood Tall,* wood, tempera paint, 94" x 15 ¾", 1995, courtesy of El Anatsui, October Gallery, and Jack Shainman Gallery

Although most of his works are abstract, Anatsui has also produced figurative works with patterns that demarcate the forms of the body. In 1995, he made *Adinsibuli Stood Tall* (Fig. 4.39), which incorporates adinkra, nsibidi, and uli designs with painted marks around the mid-section. This wooden sculpture is one of several he made in the mid-1990s from castoff mortars originally employed to extract palm oil. Having been pounded to the point of breaking, this sculpture survived its utilitarian function and embodies its own history of use. The long graceful lines that decorate the sculpture's body are uli figures, while others are nsibidi designs, and the repeating circular designs reflect adinkra patterns. These

colorful symbols suggest the fertility and vitality of this female figure. Joined together by thin pieces of metal and wire, she is a hybrid figure that consolidates the many patterns of ideographic systems that Anatsui engages in other wood sculptures.[418] Her undulating and extenuated shape exemplifies his work with raw, discarded materials to build form expressively. That the mixture of designs is the central idea is confirmed by both the sculpture's composite form and her name that is derived from the first two syllables of each of the three names of these patterns: **Adi**nkra, **Nsib**idi, and **Uli**, yielding the compound word *Adinsibuli*. Through an amalgam of patterns, Anatsui's figure signifies the many generations of women involved in the laborious process of extracting palm oil and implies that these women should stand tall, "proudly confident in the possession of a personal complex of inherited histories and cultures."[419] She represents an anonymous and collective figure, a symbol perhaps for all African women whom he celebrates with surface pattern and decoration.

Anatsui integrates patterns of adinkra, nsibidi, and uli to write a history of Africa that diverges from the colonial history written by Europeans, symbolizes a plurality of African cultures as well as shared experiences, and shuttles between past and present. His materials and mark making are evocative of events, textures, rhythmic designs, and great leaders as well as everyday people. He says,

> I look at the textures of my work in progress and I think about the texture and grain of Africa's History. I look at the authentic colours of the different types of wood and they remind me of the real colours of Africa's History. I contemplate the directions of the large populations of mobile figures and they replicate the migrations of Africa's History. I look at the variegated circumstances on the face

[418] Lisa M. Binder, "Introduction," *When I Last Wrote to You About Africa*, 18.
[419] Houghton, "El Anatsui and the Transvangarde," 35.

of a large figure just created and the feeling takes me across the face of Africa's History.[420]

However, he has expressed concern that some audiences will not see beyond the aesthetic discussion of pattern to its broader conceptual foundation. He observes, "[i]f there is pattern discernible in my works, they [sic] are not the destination but just means to the bigger picture [and] statement. They are like words coming together to form sentences, which grow into paragraphs, and may eventually end in a book."[421] Anatsui asserts that the patterns in his work signify the deeper meanings and symbolism of his process, and he reinforces the analogy of writing that has sustained him throughout his career.

Anatsui incorporates symbols and designs towards a different purpose than American modernist abstractionists who integrated cryptic signs in their paintings in the 1940s and 50s to express the universality of pictographs and symbols in human communication from ancient times. For instance, *Afro Emblems* (Fig. 4.40) (1950) by modernist painter Hale Woodruff divides the canvas into loose rows of rectangles, each with an emblem inspired from those

Fig. 4.40 Hale Woodruff, *Afro Emblems*, oil on canvas, 1950, courtesy of the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

[420] El Anatsui, *El Anatsui: A Sculpted History of Africa* (London: Saffron Books and the October Gallery), 8.
[421] El Anatsui, "Viewer Q&A: Responses from Catherine Opie, El Anatsui, and Marina Abramović."

of Asante gold weights, which were often adorned with depictions of folktales, proverbs, and social rituals. Woodruff's adaptation of the Asante weight designs and his rhythmic ordering of these shapes expresses his identification with his African heritage and the relevance of these powerful objects for all humanity. However, Woodruff's paintings focus on the abstraction of these symbols rather than what each particular symbol might represent. Anatsui responds to the meaning of individual symbols so that his references can often be interpreted through the title of each work. Anatsui's specific combinations of symbols and patterns refer to the coexistence of different ethnic groups as well as the clashing and reintegration of language systems as a result of war and power-struggles in Africa. Therefore, Anatsui generally uses symbol systems to signify change and transformation rather than stasis.

Another aspect of Anatsui's wooden sculpture is its improvisational and unfixed nature that can yield a range of possible patterns and outcomes. Anatsui often numbered the wooden strips, but he asserts that these numbers are simply a suggestion for the curator rather than a fixed ordering. He invites the curator or the owner of the piece to creatively reorganize his patterns and elements. However, there is the underlying logic of the arrangements in strips. Writes Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie,

> Anatsui uses the architectonic logic of west African strip-woven cloth as the frame (and ground) on which he inscribes images and motifs from such diverse

backgrounds as Akan Adinkra, Igbo Uli, and Ejagham Nsibidi syllabaries … this underlying textile orientation is a structural grid for Anatsui's creative endeavor.[422]

His process of allowing others to rearrange these sections enables these sculptures to have multiple possible compositions that would allow the moveable parts to complement one another and to accentuate different motifs as a focal point.

Anatsui's work *Signature* (1999) (Figs. 4.41 and 4.42) marks a transition to a new way of accumulating pattern and form that prefigures his metal "cloth" sculptures.[423] He made this outdoor installation by stacking several hundred lengths of cut wood in the mossy Plas Caerdeon woods, north Wales, next to a leafy path. There is a common practice in Nigeria of marking cut wood for sale with a stroke of paint to represent the owner of the logs, and in a similar way,

Fig. 4.41 El Anatsui, *Signature*, wood, paint, 1999, Cyfuniad International Artists Workshop in Plas Caerdeon, Wales, courtesy of El Anatsui

Fig. **4.42 El Anatsui, detail of *Signature*, wood, paint, 1999, Cyfuniad International Artists Workshop in Plas Caerdeon, Wales, courtesy of El Anatsui**

Anatsui references the individual "signatures" on his wood with painted designs.[424] The timber is painted on one sawn end with monochromatic bands of color in cool blues, warm yellows and oranges, and a few in solid colors. These

[422] Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, "Wonder Masquerade: Transfiguration and Embodiment in the Art of El Anatsui," in *El Anatsui: Gawu* (Wales: Oriel Mostyn Gallery, 2003), 14.
[423] Okeke-Agulu, "Mark-making and El Anatsui's Reinvention of Sculpture," 47.
[424] Ibid, 46.

decorative patterns of stripes on circles pop out against the rich greens of the forest. Also, the amassing of many like-shaped forms that are organically organized with colorful designs show a shift in his method of manipulating found materials. Rather than carving the pattern into the material, Anatsui began additively assembling and manipulating the surface so that it became a collective structure in its environment.

In the 1980s and 90s, Anatsui's prints, paintings, and wood sculpture evidence the deliberate and increased presence of ideographic symbols organized into decorative patterns. Fluidly mixing signs from adinkra, uli, and nsibidi scripts, he developed a flexible mark-making system with the blowtorch and a method of assembling his sculptures into sections that resemble African strip cloth. Anatsui's innovations of ordering small sections from combined units led to his next great innovation in sculptural process: creating large scale metal sheets from colorful aluminum bottle caps.

Metal Cloth Mosaics

Anatsui's work of the last decade has blossomed into large-scale metal installations that have expanded the complexity and expressiveness of his patterns and earned him a place in the international art world. In 1999, Anatsui began to appropriate discarded metal from his environment and piece together units of metal to create monochromatically patterned "cloths." As a testament to the originality of his medium, scholars are still searching for the appropriate term to describe these works. Anatsui has come to call these works "metal pieces,"

"metal works," or "metal sheets."[425] He provides a spellbinding transformation of the material that seduces viewers to explore the play of light on the metallic surface and the intricate patterning within the larger composition. In these works, design and texture organize two-dimensional and three-dimensional space with equal force.

Anatsui first experimented with discarded milk tin lids from Peak brand condensed milk cans and linked these circular units to create a metal fabric. He found that this metal fabric was flexible and could be formed into various structures, such as tubular forms that climbed along the floor and up the wall. *Peak Project* (1999) (Figs. 4.43 and 4.44) and other works reflect the lingering dependence on European powers because this milk is produced in Nigeria under license from a Dutch company, and is often used to make a boiled pudding sold at roadside stops.[426] In this piece, he formed the material into mountainous metal peaks that rose from the floor like glimmering mounds of gold and silver.

Fig. 4.43 El Anatsui, *Peak Project*, tin, copper wire, 1999, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 4.44 El Anatsui, detail of *Peak Project*, tin, copper wire, 1999, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

[425] Susan Vogel, *El Anatsui: Art and Life* (Munich, London, New York: Prestel, 2012),16.
[426] Martin Barlow, "Forward" in *El Anatsui: Gawu* (Wales: Oriel Mostyn Gallery, 2003), 5.

Anatsui was just beginning to see the potential of this metal medium when he came upon an even more adaptable material: bottle caps.

In 2002, Anatsui happened across a goldmine of colorful metal caps from schnapps, whiskey, wine, rum, gin, brandy, and vodka bottles produced in West Africa, and brought the tops to his studio. In comparison with the more rigid material of the milk tins and their monochromatic palette, Anatsui realized that he could produce more complex designs by manipulating the shapes of the caps and benefit from their varied palette and logos. He began flattening out the tops and cutting them into thin strips that he connected with copper wire into narrow rows of alternating colors that reproduced the effect of woven cloth. He also saw the potential for part of the alcohol bottle to symbolize an entire transatlantic history of migration and consumption.[427]

Anatsui's metal works allude to the history of alcohol's role in the dependence of colonial Europe on Africa and the Americas through the transatlantic slave trade. Anatsui's connecting of bottle tops echoes the historical networks that bound peoples across the Atlantic, and the "thousands of tiny parts from which these monumental cloths are made evoke the staggering, dehumanized statistics of the slave trade, this paradox of scale extolling the potential of collective action."[428] Anatsui observes that his metal cloths, as he originally called them, "encapsulate the essence of the alcoholic drinks which were brought to Africa by Europeans as trade items at the time of the earliest

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[427] Lisa Binder, "Introduction," When I Last Wrote to You About Africa, 17.
[428] October Gallery, *From Courage to Freedom: El Anatsui / Romuald Hazoumé / Owusu-Ankomah* (gallery brochure) (London: October 2007), unpaginated.

contact between the two peoples."[429] Both textile designs and liquor brands are given commemorative names, and both materials substituted for currency to purchase slaves.[430] Records from 1820 suggest that a slave could be bought in the Bight of Benin with 126 US gallons of the spirit *aguardente*.[431] In 1885, gin had almost entirely supplanted cowries as currency in Lagos, and the ownership of liquor represented social status.[432] Distilleries were established in Liverpool, England just for export to Africa, and rum, produced from the Caribbean sugar plantations for which Africa had provided the labor, was highly profitable for European traders and destructive to the cultures to which they were imported.[433] Anatsui transforms the containers for products, such as liquor bottle caps, that have a history of everyday social function to express larger historical and global issues of consumption, labor, privilege, and power.

In addition to alluding to alcohol's part in the slave trade, Anatsui integrates the names printed on bottle caps to infer postcolonial Africa's aspirations for self-determination and authority. He adapts labels from local Nigerian brands of whiskey, rum, vodka, brandy and other powerful libations with names such as Chairman, Dark Sailor, King Solomon, Makossa, 007, Top Squad and Ecomog.[434] "Ecomog Gin," for instance is named after the regional though largely Nigerian, armed force established in 1990 to intervene in the civil wars in

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[429] National Museum of African Art, "El Anatsui: Gawu, An Oriel Mostyn Gallery Touring Exhibition," text by the Fowler Museum at UCLA and Oriel Mostyn Gallery, 2007, posted by the National Museum of African Art, accessed August 30, 2012. http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/gawu/artworks.html.
[430] Polly Savage, "El Anatsui: Contexts Textiles and Gin," *El Anatsui, 2006* (Johannesburg, South Africa: David Krut Publishing, 2006), unpaginated.
[431] David Eltis and Lawrence C. Jennings, "Trade Between Western Africa and the Atlantic World in the Colonial Era" in *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 4 (October 1988): 943.
[432] Susan Diduk, "European Alcohol, History and the State in Cameroon" in *African Studies Review* 36, no. 1 (April 1993): 1-42.
[433] Polly Savage, "El Anatsui: Contexts Textiles and Gin," unpaginated.
[434] National Museum of African Art, "El Anatsui: Gawu, An Oriel Mostyn Gallery Touring Exhibition."

Sierra Leone and Liberia. Today, local Nigerian distilleries produce dozens of liquor brands in bottles of various sizes that they recycle interchangeably but discard the old aluminum tops, seals, and labels in the process.[435] Creating luminous structures and patterns out of the colors, textures, and names of used liquor tops, Anatsui inspires viewers to reconsider the key role that alcoholic spirits played in the slave trade. His metamorphosis of the bottle caps into patterned cloth invokes contemporary issues of consumption and coexistence.

Anatsui's metal works are assembled much like woven sections, although initially he has to rip apart, stretch, and make holes in the metal pieces and then arrange them into sections and stitch them together with wire. He establishes large sheets that consist of blocks of individual caps, called "corks" in Nigerian English. The caps are flattened and manipulated into formats and then coupled using copper wire to form blocks that have specific names based on their designs.[436] As in kente cloth and quilt making, these sections are joined together to form the sheet. Each block of pattern is composed of 25 pieces by 10 pieces in size, and he lays these blocks out on the floor to decide what he needs for each portion of the work. Working with assistants, Anatsui has developed over 20 different ways of manipulating the metal tops and foils that have resulted from the style and touch of each hand.[437] The particular patterns are usually named based on their method and appearance, such as: "crushed" (crushed round caps); "plain" (flattened strips cut in parallelogram shape); "crumpled" (thin strips that have been twisted); "four corner" (skinny strip of metal folded into square);

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[435] Ibid.
[436] Vogel, "Discovering Metal Sheets," 68.
[437] El Anatsui and Gerard Houghton, "An Interview with El Anatsui," in *El Anatsui: Gawu*, 22.

Fig. 4.45 El Anatsui's bottle cap techniques, Susan Vogel, "Discovering Metal Sheets," *El Anatsui: Art and Lif*e, p. 74

Fig. 4.46 El Anatsui's bottle cap techniques, Susan Vogel, "Discovering Metal Sheets," *El Anatsui: Art and Lif*e, p. 75

Fig. 4.47 El Anatsui's bottle cap techniques, Susan Vogel, "Discovering Metal Sheets," *El Anatsui: Art and Lif*e, p. 75

and "chain" (resembles a metal chain) (Figs. 4.45, 4.46, 4.47).[438] Other styles were nicknamed by assistants, such as "G8," which is made from flattened, folded strips latticed together in a loose grid that allows for transparency and flexibility, and was given this name during the time of the Scottish summit.[439].

Over the last decade, Anatsui has continued to expand the repertoire of his bottle cap oeuvre, and has found that each element could also be coupled in more than one way. By 2011, Anatsui realized that his palette consisted of over "thirty elements to deploy for increasingly nuanced effects of texture, transparency, reflectiveness, stiffness, suppleness, line, and color."[440] He composes these monumental works spontaneously by laying out the sections on the floor and deciding how to combine them by juxtaposing fields of pattern and texture. He remarks, "It's not only colour, but the flow of lines also. Basically all those elements are alive and have their inflective properties which one can engage – or ignore at one's peril."[441] He organizes these sections, photographs them for viewing on the computer, and rearranges them once again until they make up a powerful composition. In this way, the blocks of manipulated material and the computer image bank helps him to generate ideas for patterns and compositions.

Anatsui requires that his material be able to fold in any direction. The linking of these lattices produces a visual transparency to the metal mesh, provides flexibility that the tight weave of some textiles does not offer, and makes

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[438] Vogel, "Discovering Metal Sheets," 68.
[439] Anatsui and Kate McCrickard, "Telephone Interview with Kate McCrickard," *El Anatsui* (New York: David Krut projects and London: October Gallery, 2006), unpaginated.
[440] Vogel, "Discovering Metal Sheets," 70.
[441] El Anatsui and Gerard Houghton, "An Interview with El Anatsui," in *El Anatsui: Gawu*, 21.

the work light entrapping or reflective. He enjoys the paradox of a material that seems flexible, but whose rigidity is subverted by its ability to move and drape, and he organizes these metal elements into patterns that will ultimately bring the material to a higher function than its original use.[442] Exploiting the adaptability of his patterned blocks, Anatsui has developed what he calls a “nomadic aesthetic” that enables his work to be flexible and transportable even while it is monumental in scale.[443] When designing his patterned compositions, Anatsui enjoys the improvisational freedom of shifting things around until they feel right.[444] Rather than providing specific instructions, he gives freedom to the gallery or museum staff to hang works as they wish in the space. Unlike most Western artists, he allows for the work to be ultimately completed in a range of ways in terms of how it is exhibited in the space by those who install the work. He therefore enables a transience of form and indeterminacy in how the work ultimately appears.

Anatsui’s patterns incorporate many aspects of kente and adinkra cloth, yet they also provoke a broader formal response that connects tangentially with the history of modern art and debates between Minimalism in the 1960s and the Pattern and Decoration (P&D) movement of the 1970s. Anatsui’s metal sculpture is quite opposite to Minimalism’s anti-gestural and anonymous austerity that stripped art to the bare surface and geometric structure, but shares a common embrace of mass produced and industrial materials and also the blurring of boundaries between painting and sculpture. His patterned aesthetic may superficially relate to the tendency of P&D artists in the 1970s to appropriate and

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[442] El Anatsui and Gerard Houghton, “An Interview with El Anatsui,” 24.
[443] Anatsui and Kate McCrickard, “Telephone Interview with Kate McCrickard,” unpaginated.
[444] Ibid.

combine many bold and colorful patterns into a single work. This P&D characteristic was an outgrowth of the Feminist art movement's celebration of women's craft traditions and interest in design traditions from cultures around the world. In contrast, Anatsui's metal sculptures are made from a single type of material that has a specific social and historical symbolism within his local environment, and has been extensively hand-manipulated and constructed into massive installations.

Anatsui dynamically hangs his metal sculptures so that their patterns seem animated by rippling folds as they drape across the wall. His billowing metal sculptures convey movement and "dance" their designs as when a body moves under patterned clothing or it blows in the wind. Anatsui's transformation of metal into sculptures reminiscent of draped cloth exemplifies the importance of cloth as a monument in Africa and the Diaspora. As Atta Kwami points out, Anatsui references all kinds of fabric, not only African, and "[f]or its elastic metaphors on fragility and Africa's eroding cultures there could not be a more imaginative leitmotif."[445] The patterns of symbols and abstract marks in Anatsui's graphic work and sculpture suggests that the fundamental roles of textile patterns and textural surfaces transcend the specific geographic, historical, and ethnic differences between artists living in Africa and their peers of African descent in the greater Diaspora. African American artist Sonya Clark commented on the importance of textiles for African and African Diaspora artists with the statement "that cloth is to the African what monuments are to Westerners."[446] Anatsui

[445] Atta Kwami, "Nsukka – A Place to Hide: Towards a Conversation with El Anatsui," in *El Anatsui: Gawu*, 32.
[446] Sonya Clark, email message with the author, November 17, 2010.

responded to Clark's assessment about cloth in Africa, remarking, "Indeed their capacity and application to commemorate events, issues, persons, and objectives outside of themselves are so immense and fluid it even rubs off on other practices."[447] Defying gravity with their airy movement and animated patterns, Anatsui's metal sculptures serve as monuments to the colonial history of Africa and the continent's contemporary struggles for self-sufficiency and agency in the world.

Textile Designs Transformed in Metal Cloths

Anatsui's metal sheets of the early 21st century reveal many relationships to West African textiles. Using cloth patterns as the original metaphor for cultural heritage and memory, Anatsui's recent installations embody the resilience of African traditions, but they also embrace change and innovation.[448] Like the palette of kente cloth, gold is the underlying or dominant color in many of Anatsui's sculptures, evoking a mysterious alchemy that transforms discarded metal into something precious. For instance, *Earth Cloth* (2003) (Fig. 4.48) is constructed of gold tops and areas of red, silver, and black sections. Photographed outdoors in Nigeria, one can see the similar palette of the artwork to the red earth and the land around it. The

Fig. 4.48 El Anatsui, *Earth Cloth*, aluminum, copper wire, 201" x 209", 2003, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

[447] Atta Kwami, "Nsukka – A Place to Hide: Towards a Conversation with El Anatsui," 32.
[448] Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, "Wonder Masquerade: Transfiguration and Embodiment in the Art of El Anatsui," 15.

draping of this material and its unkempt folds that form a rippling wall enable it to serve as a type of architecture as well as a painting or sculpture. The irregular and unpredictable patterns cause the eye to rove over its glittering surface with varying movement.

Patterns of adinkra and kente cloths are referenced through the colors and designs of many of Anatsui's earlier metal compositions. In contrast to the palette of kente motifs, Anatsui's *Adinkra Sasa* (2003) (Fig. 4.49) is primarily black with horizontal strips of gold and yellow, punctuated with subtle pieces of red and gold that cause the surface to flicker. In Twi, *sasa* means "patchwork," and is "charged with dangerous power."[449] *Adinkra Sasa's* dark splendor is symbolic of colonial African history as well as the Akan funerary cloth itself. Its writhing and undulating folds are made almost entirely of ebony, dark purple, and brown liquor foils that are penetrated by horizontal stripes of gold and bright yellow. *Adinkra Sasa's* glistening black surface is reminiscent of the shiny black pigment applied to cassava relief stamps in printing adinkra symbols onto cloth. Each of these stamps corresponds to specific semantic meanings and proverbs. Like the construction of adinkra cloth that alternates narrow embroidered stripes with

Fig. 4.49 El Anatsui, *Adinkra Sasa*, aluminum, copper wire, 192" x 216", 2003, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, collection of Mr. and Mrs. Guido Roberto Vitale

[449] National Museum of African Art, "El Anatsui: Gawu, An Oriel Mostyn Gallery Touring Exhibition."

broad bands printed with the black geometric stamps, this piece assembles long strips of black and gold metal sections three to four inches wide. It is Anatsui's only work that incorporates actual textile strips into the metal, a process that he has not continued.[450] Many have suggested that Anatsui created this piece to lament symbolically the colonial carving up of Africa by European powers. Kwame Anthony Appiah writes that there is a "cross-cultural word play here … the thought that *Adinkra Sasa* - which mourns the colonial division of Africa – is a work of dangerous power, with a meaning that is clear to a Twi-speaking audience."[451] Anatsui therefore implements a specific pattern to respond to African history and to the broader context of this textile motif.

Kente cloth patterns serve as the underlying compositional structure of many other works from the early 2000's. Kente is a strip-woven cloth produced by the Asante peoples of Ghana and the Ewe peoples of Ghana and Togo. Although there were always designs created exclusively for Asante royals, since Ghana's first president Kwame Nkrumah wore kente at his inauguration, this fabric has represented an independent and self-determined Africa. It is worn on festive occasions; men traditionally wore it as a kind of toga and women donned it as an upper and lower wrapper. Patterns are woven into the strip cloth made by weavers on wooden looms, and then the strips are sewn together to make the large rectangles of cloth known as *ntoma* (in the Twi language). Many kente patterns incorporate red, yellow, and green since the colors correspond to the national flag of Ghana. Anatsui remembers that his father and brothers, who

[450] Susan Vogel, "Discovering Metal Sheets," 59.
[451] Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Discovering El Anatsui," *When I Last Wrote to You About Africa*, 68.

were weavers, wove the more muted palette of the Ewe peoples' kente. Asante kente is typically woven with shiny silken threads that yields a silky cloth, while Ewe kente employs cotton and produces a matt finish. In a similar way, Anatsui exploits the metal to select the shiny or matt side of the surface and control its play of light.

In his piece *Sasa* (2004) (Figs. 4.50 and 4.51), Anatsui built upon a series of earlier works called the "Gawu" group. He developed what Susan Vogel

Fig. 4.50 El Anatsui, *Sasa*, aluminum, copper wire, 330" x 252", 2004, collection of the Centre Pompidou, Paris

Fig. 4.51 El Anatsui, *Sasa* (hung in vertical orientation), aluminum, copper wire, 330" x 252", 2004, collection of the Centre Pompidou, Paris

identifies as *andamento*, using the units of tesserae as in a mosaic to organize a visual flow.[452] Anatsui took apart and integrated an earlier work, entitled *Young Woman's Cloth* (2003), into this large piece.[453] With an awareness of the variety

[452] Vogel, "Discovering Metal Sheets," 59.
[453] Ibid.

of designs he could invent with the bottle cap units, Anatsui intensified the tension between patches of order and riotous chaos. In *Sasa*, Anatsui balanced colliding blocks with energetically assembled dots of metal tesserae on the left with a large swatch of silver on the right, a sedate horizontal stripe at the top and two green bars that anchor the piece at the bottom.[454] The bottom of the piece also employs andamento to assemble other sections of circular shapes and stripes, but since the work is so enormous—nearly twenty-eight feet—this section is almost always shown spilling onto the floor.

Anatsui's *Man's Cloth* (2003) (Fig. 4.52) and *Woman's Cloth* (2003) (Fig.

Fig. 4.52 El Anatsui, *Man's Cloth*, aluminum, copper wire, 297 x 374cm, 2003, courtesy of October Gallery and Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 4.53 El Anatsui, *Woman's Cloth*, aluminum, copper wire, 287 x 292cm, 2003, courtesy of October Gallery and Jack Shainman Gallery

4.53) convey the importance of gender expressed through kente cloth. These works feature thin strips of silver and gold metal organized into horizontal blocks.

These larger sections are interrupted by vertical stripes and narrow rows of red, black, and gold pieces in alternating, asymmetrical designs akin to kente patterns. *Man's Cloth* has spiky edges, and working with a specific

[454] Vogel, "Discovering Metal Sheets," 59.

metalworker's technique, Anatsui and his assistant embossed rows of little bumps (Fig. 4.54), many of which were cut from the grooved part of the cap to produce a less reflective surface.[455] *Women's Cloth* features many round format caps floating across the middle and dangling flirtatiously along the edges. Anatsui suggested to curators that *Man's Cloth* should be hung primarily flat whereas *Women's Cloth* should be draped and hung askew to show more intense creasing, perhaps mimicking the movement and voluptuousness of the female form so that its patterns billow outwards. The looseness of the sculpture corresponds to the aesthetic of how kente cloth is meant to appear on the body. An Ewe weaver describes the significance of wearing flowing cloth:

> The cloth must flow well to wear it; it cannot be stiff … good cloth moves with the person, it catches the sunlight … it makes people feel proud of the past. They remember their forefathers, their ancestors, where they came from … You have to stand upright, you have to assume a dignity to keep it from falling off.[456]

Men's Cloth and *Women's Cloth* were constructed by joining single units of metal to the growing sheet instead of first attaching elements into larger sections that he would later organize in larger compositions. The development of his working method into blocks or patches enabled Anatsui to expand the sophistication of his pattern-making and the versatility of the textures that he could design within each patch.

Fig. 4.54 El Anatsui, detail of *Man's Cloth*, aluminum, copper wire, 297 x 374cm, 2003, courtesy of October Gallery and Jack Shainman Gallery

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455 Susan Vogel, "Discovering Metal Sheets," 58.
456 Kathryn Linn Geurts, Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing in an African Community (Los Angeles, 2002), 151-152.

Versatility (2006) (Fig. 4.55) suggests the colors and perpendicular patterns of kente cloth with its vertical three-inch strips of red, yellow, and striped liquor foils that bisect the installation on the far left, to the right of center, and on the right. Anatsui creates lines, squares, and dots of color with the lattices of bottle caps. They are "stitched" together using copper wire, and like kente cloth, they reoccur like specific designs that refer to proverbs, political, and historical events. This method of assembling the sections of bottle caps and other materials relates to the specific construction of West African strip textiles that are made of bands that are always arranged horizontally. Anatsui comments on the unconscious impact of family and cultural influences on his work when he says, "I have discovered only much later . . . that cloth has been a recurring theme or leitmotif, and it is featured in so many dimensions."[457] Thompson states that in kente cloth, balance is achieved by the richness of oppositions: vertical and horizontal; large blocks of blue against complex passages of gold, black, green, and red; and simplicity juxtaposed against complexity.[458] In kente design, the artful phrasing of stripes whose colors have powerful symbolism makes the cloth doubly iconic. Kente weavers are always innovative, and some include unorthodox color palettes or have even enlisted computer technology to incorporate traditional adinkra motifs into a new type of hybrid cloth called "adinkra kente."[459] Therefore, the creativity involved in synthesizing patterns from different systems of symbols is also reflected in the innovative culture of kente weaving, as well as in Anatsui's sculpture.

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[457] National Museum of African Art, "El Anatsui: Gawu, An Oriel Mostyn Gallery Touring Exhibition."
[458] Robert Farris Thompson, "Round Houses and Rhythmized Textiles," *Flash of the Spirit*, 209-211.
[459] Kofi Anyidoho, "Ghanaian Kente: Cloth and Song," in *The Poetics of Cloth: African Textiles/Recent Art*, edited by Lynn Gumpert (New York: New York University, Grey Art Gallery, 2008), 45.

Fig. 4.55 El Anatsui, *Versatility*, aluminum, copper wire, 147 ½" x 195 ½", 2006, collection of the Fowler Museum at UCLA, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

Similar to Anatsui's titles that allude to African history and political situations, kente weavers often title their designs with poetic names that may reflect historical events. For instance, *Ohene aforo hyen* [*The kind has boarded a ship*], is a design that honors the return of Asantehene Prempeh I from the Seychelles Islands where he was sent by the British colonial authorities.[460] Some designs have multiple names such as one worn by Ghana's first president Kwame Nkrumah called *Fathia Fata Nkrumah* (Fathia benefits Nkrumah) (Fig. 4.56), but after he was deposed in 1966 it came to be called *Obaakofo mmu man* (*One man does not rule a nation*) (Fig. 4.57).[461] This enduring pattern was originally designed to honor the 1958 marriage of Nkrumah to Helen Ritz Fathia, a relative of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser.[462]

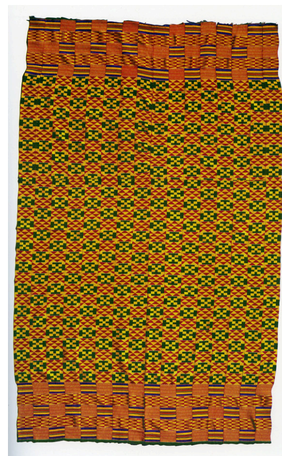

Fig. 4.56 Samuel Cophie, *Fathia fata Nkrumah,* worn by the Queen Mother of Asotwe, Cophie, a prominent Ewe weaver, Cophie began to integrate both Ewe and Asante designs in his cloths, *Poetics of Cloth*, p. 53

Fig. 4.57 Asante artist, *Man's Kente Cloth, Obaakofo mmu man (One man does not rule a nation),* cotton and rayon, Ghana, the Glassell Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

[460] Anyidoho, "Ghanaian Kente: Cloth and Song," 40.
[461] Doran Ross, "Asante Cloth Names and Motifs," in *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History Textile Series, 1998), 119. http://www.nmafa.si.edu/exhibits/akan/764.html.
[462] Lynn Gumpert, *The Poetics of Cloth: African Textiles/Recent Art* (New York: New York University: Grey Art Gallery, 2008), 52.

Cloth in the pattern of *Fathia fata Nkrumah* (Fig. 4.58 shows another example) was developed to be worn by the Queen Mother of Asotwe by Samuel Cophie, a prominent Ewe weaver who apprenticed with an Asante weaver and who began to integrate both Ewe and Asante designs in his cloths.[463] This same design has other variations including *Afoakwa Mpua* (Afoakwa's nine tufts of hair) (Fig. 4.59) and *Akyempem* (A thousand shields) (Fig. 4.60).[464] The symbolic aspect of color in kente cloth is also tied to its cultural and political history. John Picton

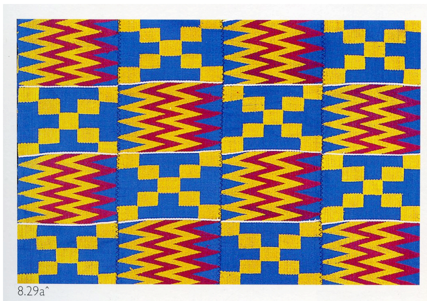

Fig. 4.58 Asante artist, *Fathia fata Nkrumah,* in Doran Ross, *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History Textile Series, 1998), 119

Fig. 4.59 *Afoakwa Mpua (Afoakwa's nine tufts of hair)*, in Doran Ross, *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History Textile Series, 1998), 119

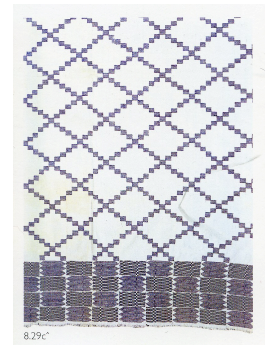

Fig. 4.60 *Akyempem (A thousand shields)*, in Doran Ross, *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History Textile Series, 1998), 119

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463 Ibid.

464 Ross, "Asante Cloth Names and Motifs," 119.

notes that the yellow and green stripes on the red ground of *oyokoman* cloth refer to an early eighteenth-century conflict between two groups within that lineage.[465] Anatsui's names for his works are enigmatic, but many obliquely refer to specific political or environmental issues.

Fig. 4.61 El Anatsui, *Gli (Wall)*, aluminum and copper wire, installation at the Brooklyn Museum, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Anatsui's other titles relate to a specific history, as in the case of the piece *Gli* (2010) (Fig. 4.61). As a child, Anatsui heard a story of the Ewe people's migration, culminating in them being trapped within the Notsie wall, and he later visited this site and found inspiration in the remnants of the wall surface. Yet the open-ended title for *Gli* could reference any wall or façade, and he plays upon the nuances of his language to allow for these multiple meanings. Anatsui explains,

> Initially I worked with language and signs… Ewe is a highly tonal language, but they write it without markings so you have the freedom to interpret it according to context. For instance, *Gli* could mean "to disrupt" or it could mean "wall." Many of my forms are not fixed and I sometimes title the work in my language so that it's not tied to one interpretation.[466]

Anatsui's titles are another aspect of the unfixed nature of the work and show his preference for open-ended, poetic language that allows for many interpretations.

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[465] John Picton, "Colonial Pretence and African Resistance or Subversion Subverted: Commemorative Textiles in Sub-Saharan Africa," in *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994*, ed.Okwui Enwezor (Munich: Prestel, 2001), 159.
[466] Brooklyn Museum of Art, "El Anatsui in Conversation with Susan Vogel."

Textiles, Music, and Metalsmithing Informs Metal Cloth Patterns

Although they are not cloth or woven materials, Anatsui's work signifies the integrated, synesthetic relationships of kente woven patterns to musical rhythms and to poetry in a Ghanaian context. These analogies are reflected in many of his titles that employ the metaphor of cloth, writing, or poetry such as *Man's Cloth*. Ghanaian master weaver Kofi Anyidoho observes, "My personal reflections on the aesthetic experience of cloth begin with the observation that there appears to be a significant connection between cloth and song—song as poetry in the oral tradition."[467] Anyidoho realized that his uncle, Dumega Kwadzovi Anyidoho, and all the great master weavers that his uncle could recall were also master drummers and heno (poet-cantor). Dumega Kwadzovi Anyidoho explained that weavers, either alone or in groups, often sang to ease the boredom of many hours at the loom. More importantly, weaving as well as drumming and singing are rhythm-based aesthetic performances.[468] The tediousness and deliberation that Anatsui's current process requires have enabled him to slow down and work in a more methodical way, similar to a weaver.

Anatsui's process of designing rhythmic patterns with the bottle caps is akin to both the repetitive movements of the weaving process and also to musical rhythms. Ghana's pioneer musicologist, Ephraim Amu, features the kente weaver's polyrhythms in his classic song *Bonwire Kente* that begins with the

[467] Kofi Anyidoho, "Ghanaian Kente: Cloth and Song," 33.
[468] Ibid, 34.

ideophonic and mnemonic phrase "Kro kro kro kro … kro hi kro."[469] The percussive rhythm caused by the regular alternation of the heddles (*eno*) and the treadles (*aforke*), accentuated by the throwing and catching of the shuttle (*evu*) and the continuous sound of the beater (*exa*), all contribute to the inclination for song.[470] Like West African strip-cloth weaving that requires mathematical calculations and improvisation to design patterns from cotton and silk thread, Anatsui's complex designs are methodically built with geometric forms. As Anyidoho points out, this process is similar to the architectural design or a well-written song or poem, and therefore it is fitting that the author or singer has been often called a "weaver of words."[471] Anatsui's metal cloths are constructed of units that are comparable to musical notes and he produces visual melodies and rhythmic compositions that share the aesthetics of West African percussion, poetry, and also weaving.

However, by translating weaving into metal patterns, he also connects with the historical and contemporary prominence of metalsmithing in African art. Ogbechie notes that "[t]here are many allusions present in Anatsui's metal evocation of prominent African textiles traditions given the important role that metals (iron, gold, silver, etc.) and blacksmiths played in traditional African societies. African peoples ascribe occult powers to blacksmiths on account of their mastery of the elemental force of fire and the changes they exert on metal during the process of smelting iron out of stone."[472] Anatsui has commented that "metals and liquor in many cultures (especially African) have this association with

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[469] Anyidoho, "Ghanaian Kente: Cloth and Song," 34.
[470] Ibid.
[471] Ibid.
[472] Ogbechie, "Wonder Masquerade," 15.

the spiritual, with healing."[473] So in addition to repurposing, Anatsui's metamorphosis of metal caps through vivid patterns perpetuates an ancient heritage of metalwork and its relationship to specific deities, such as Ogun in Yoruba religion. Anatsui embeds aspects of West African languages, weaving, and metalwork to infuse his work with cultural and spiritual meaning. Offering a plethora of sensory experiences and associations with other media, Anatsui's metal surfaces are specifically grounded in African contexts.

Anatsui's metal cloth patterns engage with ancient histories of weaving, music, poetry, metalwork, and beadwork. They relate to the symbolism of metal and alcohol in West African religions, the colonial role of alcohol in the slave trade, and the contemporary issues of waste management and environmental destruction throughout the world. In addition to the relationship of his sculptures to African metalsmithing, the glittering and apotropaic property of his works may be similar to beadwork and the amulet-like power of certain textiles across West Africa, such as Bamana Basiae women's mud cloth that is patterned with geometric designs and symbols to protect the wearer from harm (Fig. 4.62). The chain-like elegance of his variety of patterns invokes jewelry and beadwork that has adorned African kings

Fig. 4.62 Bamana peoples, *Basaie cloth*, cotton, dye, Mali, mid to late 20th Century, *Inscribing Meaning*, p. 61

[473] El Anatsui and Kate McCrickard, "Telephone Interview with El Anatsui," unpaginated.

throughout history. Moreover, converting metal dross from alcoholic beverages, his installations suggest shrines or sites for libation and ritual.

Patterns of Consumption and Collaboration

Anatsui's patterns made of metal detritus evidence the interconnectedness of human consumption. They show that although our existence is ephemeral, there is the remnant or residue of our touch that continues. In a recent interview, Anatsui observes that he prefers materials that have been used by people. He says, "I believe that when a human hand touches something it leaves a charge, it leaves an energy."[474] He continues, "when someone else touches it, you are connected with them. Anything that has been used by humans has a history. Those properties help to give whatever I do meaning."[475] His appropriation of found objects relates to the Modernist history of collage and assemblage, but it is also particular to the African way of reprocessing cast-off materials and privileging of cloth and its patterns. Not only does the bottle cap bear the history of human touch and use, his construction of a metal cloth suggests intimacy because cloth touches and conforms to the shapes our bodies, even absorbing its smell. Using cloth-derived patterns expresses this history of touch. Anatsui's expression of history through pattern and decoration represents physical connection between individuals, impressions upon a tactile surface, and the way in which materials provide evidence of the interconnectedness of time, place, memory, and human impact.

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[474] Museum of Modern Art Kamakura and Hayama, Japan, "Liddell, C. B. Interview with El Anatsui at the Museum of Modern Art Hayama," posted 2/17/2011, http://yknow-interviews.blogspot.com/2011/02/el-anatsui-artist.html.
[475] Susan Vogel, *Fold Crumple Crush: The Art of El Anatsui* (Brooklyn, NY: Icarus Films, 2011, 53 min.).

Working with assistants, Anatsui exploits the range of patterns that he can obtain with the creative and technical help of many hands. The particular styles of bottlecap patterns developed with assistants become part of the work, and Anatsui likens his process to conducting an orchestra of musicians each with specific performing skills.[476] He directs this team of assistants so that they share his common vocabulary of formats and support the innovations in his medium. Anatsui acknowledges the benefit that he and his assistants can work interrupted since they do not depend on tools or electrical power, and he says that this process is "in consonance with my wish to create work with many human hands leaving their individual charges on it."[477] The heroic amount of labor and massive scale of his work also contributes to the spiritual dimension of the work.

The handling and arranging of materials becomes a part of the work and communicates the way in which his patterns stand for the interrelatedness of his community with the rest of the world. Anatsui says, "My resources, materials, and human [labor] are sourced from the community, and I believe that make[s] me a community artist. The ideas I work with, even if sourced from the community, address issues that go from the community to the outside world. They have universal resonance [and] relevance."[478] He implies that the charge of human touch invigorates a wall surface or architectural structure and activates public spaces throughout the world. Anatsui says,

> You've touched it, and I've touched it. There is now a kind of bond between you and me. And this is an idea which is very much related to religious practice, spiritual practice, in many parts of Africa, and I believe, in many cultures of the

[476] Anatsui, "Telephone Interview with Kate McCrickard," 2006, unpaginated.
[477] Laura Leffler James and El Anatsui, "Convergence: History, Materials, and the Human Hand-An Interview with El Anatsui," *Art Journal* 67, no. 2 (June 2008), 44.
[478] Anatsui, "Viewer Q&A: Responses from Catherine Opie, El Anatsui, and Marina Abramović."

> world. With this, a person is able to establish a connection, a link. Doesn't that sound like a hint at some awareness of DNA?[479]

By manipulating these strips and caps of metal that reference the history of alcohol consumption and its role in the European conquer of Africa and the slave trade, Anatsui establishes a bond of touch between individuals across the world that transcends time and space.

In the installation of his work, Anatsui requires a collaborative engagement with many others rather than an imposition of his ego upon the space or audiences. His process also runs counter to the Modernist idea of the artist as a unique genius. Each time Anatsui exhibits his metal works, the patterns and structure look different because he wants them to be hung uniquely in each space. In fact, he prefers that the same work take different shapes depending on the exhibition and the curator involved. Says Anatsui, "The amazing thing about working with the 'fabrics' is that each time you display one, it's an entirely new work of art. The process of display becomes part of the process of creation."[480] He observes that this aspect of collaboration "had to do with my desire to invite people to manipulate the data that I give them."[481] As stated before, for his wood sculptures he provided numbers on the back of sections to suggest their order. This consistent openness to the improvisational and unfixed nature of the work has been a challenge for many museum professionals, who are accustomed to receiving precise instructions for installation. Anatsui's process of producing patterned sections in blocks and sections allows for this flexibility and enables others to participate in his art, to respond to and elaborate on his patterns.

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[479] James and Anatsui, "Convergence: History, Materials, and the Human Hand-An Interview with El Anatsui," 49.
[480] Anatsui quoted in Gerard Houghton, "The Epitome of Freedom," 7.
[481] Brooklyn Museum of Art, "El Anatsui in Conversation with Susan Vogel."

Anatsui's ideology embraces change and the physical responsiveness of each hand to his patterns and the possibilities of his medium.

The physical connection to other people in the work is further manifested in the decorative quality of the materials that usually relate to food and drink. From his earliest market tray sculptures, to the ceramic pots that also could potentially serve as food and water vessels, to the wooden mortars, and now to the bottle caps, Anatsui has shown a preference for containers of sustenance. Whether combining milk tins, cassava graters, or liquor tops, these works deal with consumption. In West Africa, there is less infrastructure for recycling, but there are many secondary markets for the industrial re-sale of scrap aluminum, tin, and other metals so these materials are abundant. This aspect of consumption connects many hands and mouths. Anatsui jokes, "I have tried to satisfy my hunger and thirst for my culture by using media and processes sourced from my environment."[482] The patterns and textures he creates with containers of sustenance therefore represent rhythms of every day life.

Recent responses by some western critics have included an impatient complaint that Anatsui should move on to the next subject and argue that he has fully investigated the bottle cap medium. Other critics have been perplexed by the formal beauty of his work or reduced these works to "eye candy."[483] These reactions suggest a superficial interpretation of his work and a reductive reading of the relationship of it to African design contexts. Addressing the extravagance of consumer culture and commercial waste, a global issue perhaps epitomized

[482] Brooklyn Museum of Art, "El Anatsui in Conversation with Susan Vogel."
[483] Kimmelman, "That Unruly, Serendipitous Show in Venice," E29, E34.

most by the West, Anatsui transforms this ugliness into lustrous gold and presents it without any bitterness.[484] In the decorative arrangement of his materials, Anatsui simultaneously references wealth and poverty, abundance and devastation. In this double meaning of the material, there is pathos in the beauty of these metal installations.

Anatsui's bottle cap works are imbued with the collective history and symbolism of a substance that has been used and has a past life. While his early sculptures are more about the literal idea of consumption, works since the mid-2000s focus on the effects of consumption. His process of working with many assistants to develop formats and construct works and his collaboration with curators enables an improvisational way of hanging installations that incorporates many hands and the metaphysical "charge" of collective human touch.

Beyond Cloth: Patterns of Global and Environmental Interaction

Originally, when he began to make his metal sheets, Anatsui said that he strove for the flexibility and malleability of cloth.[485] Whereas his early metal cloths are tied closely to patterns in kente fabric, in the mid 2000's, he began to be frustrated with the close interpretation of his work only in terms of African textiles. He became concerned that he had made a mistake in relating them to cloth and kente because when many westerners seized upon this idea, it

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[484] Vogel, "Entering the Global Art World," *El Anatsui: Life and Art*, 85.
[485] Brooklyn Museum of Art, "El Anatsui in Conversation with Susan Vogel."

thwarted the discussion about all the ramifications of his work as sculpture.[486] Anatsui has increasingly resisted a narrow interpretation of his art that limits it to the contexts of kente weaving and other textile processes, and prefers to speak more metaphorically of these relationships. He says,

> My work springs from ideographs, but these are often printed on textiles. So I regard myself as a sculptor, but then the colors came into the work. The bottle caps happen to have the color palette of kente cloth and initially, I wasn't concerned about these colors. Like a painter, I've collected the whole palette so I can decide to restrict or use it. When I became conscious of the color I began to think of the challenges that painters face. I did a series of joinings in "Gli" and it reminded me of transparent watercolor washes. Recently I've found a way of making them two-sided and so they can be hung in any way.[487]

In the past five years, Anatsui has worked to depart from kente patterns and instead produce many installations that blend sculpture and painting through their distinctive vocabularies of design and color. This change in technique also signaled a shift in concept, particular palettes, patterns, and titles that refer to animals, geographies, and environmental concerns.

Fig. 4.63 El Anatsui, *Zebra Crossing III*, aluminum and copper wire, 61" x 107", 2007, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 4.64 El Anatsui, detail of *Zebra Crossing III*, aluminum and copper wire, 61" x 107", 2007, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

One of the ways that his work has shifted is the employment of a specific, more saturated palette and patterns that correspond to wildlife and sources other than textiles. For instance, his piece *Zebra Crossing III* (2007) (Figs. 4.63 and

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[486] Ibid.
[487] Brooklyn Museum of Art, "El Anatsui in Conversation with Susan Vogel."

4.64) has a repetitive rhythm of alternating gold, purple, and black thin metal strips that is offset by narrow vertical lines of red and yellow, and edges that progress on each end into solid areas of purple or black. Anatsui subtly incorporates the pattern that moves across the whole composition like a zebra's stripes. is offset by narrow vertical lines of red and yellow, and edges that progress on each end into solid areas of purple or black. Anatsui subtly incorporates the pattern that moves across the whole composition like a zebra's stripes. This and several other works bear a resemblance to the layered and striped surfaces of paintings by American painter Mark Bradford', such as his stormy work, *The Devil is Beating His Wife* (2003) (Fig. 4.65) in which Bradford paints with a mixed media process of patches made from photomechanical reproductions and permanent-wave end papers. Also, like American Modernist painter Mark Rothko, Anatsui expressively intensifies the layers and blending of his color palette in sections. In the same way that Rothko's colors resonate and produce a physical response, Anatsui's complementary color combinations and undulating lines in horizontal and vertical configurations articulate the pattern and movement of the zebra's camouflage.

Fig. 4.65 Mark Bradford, *The Devil is Beating His Wife*, billboard paper, photomechanical reproductions, permanent-wave end papers, stencils, and additional mixed media on plywood, 335.3 x 609.6 cm, courtesy of the artist and Saatchi Gallery

Other works employ pattern, line, and wrought bottle caps in a different palette or style that hint at a representational image. Recently,

Anatsui has added a few other types of metal such as aluminum printer's plates that provides a matte opalescent color and aluminum roofing strips that come in bright blue, dark green, and brilliant red to supplement his color palette.[488] *Bleeding Takari* (2008) (Fig. 4.66) features the forms of red and black bottle caps and foils contrasting a gold ground to achieve an image of raw wounds from which rivulets of blood drip down onto the floor. Curator Robert Storr describes this as a work that "nearly weeps as it bleeds."[489] However, Anatsui comments, "I am probably also thinking about violence that is not destructive but comes with blood as well, like childbirth."[490] This and other works employ specific color for their symbolism rather than decorative intent.

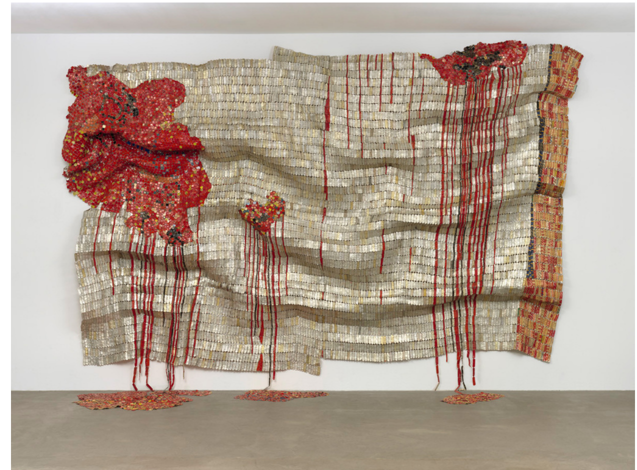

Fig. 4.66 El Anatsui, *Bleeding Takari*, aluminum and copper wire, 61" x 89 ½", 2008, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

The expanded range of Anatsui's metal medium has enabled him to "paint" with texture and color, and to return to some of his larger themes that have to do with history, global and environmental concerns, and metaphors such as broken pots. He has explored such an extensive array of textural possibilities with his medium that his installations can take the form of opaque sheets of irridescent metal, patchwork cloth, translucent skeins, and even delicate veils. His approach keeps changing to reflect an increasingly painterly purpose.

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[488] Vogel, El Anatsui: Art and Life, 75.
[489] Storr, "The Shifting Shape of Things to Come," 53.
[490] James and Anatsui, "Convergence: History, Materials, and the Human Hand-An Interview with El Anatsui," 48.

Anatsui comments, “My idea initially that I was doing sculpture that was so free that it could change forms in any way. I don’t believe in artworks being things that are fixed. My work is now the marriage between painting and sculpture. I am looking for something ethereal.”[491] The delicacy of recent patterns express this shadowy quality, and imply layers of patina and past memories.

His metal installations from 2006 onwards tend towards patterns that

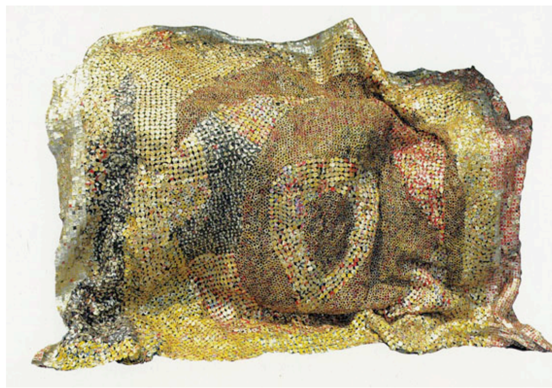

Fig. 4.67 El Anatsui, *Dzesi I,* aluminum and copper wire, 2006, photo by Lisa Binder (David Krut and October Gallery publication)

Fig. 4.68 El Anatsui, *Dzesi II*, aluminum and copper wire, 2006, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

signify trans-Continental spaces and themes, therefore serving as a metaphor for global experiences. Anatsui’s *Dzesi I* (2006) (Fig. 4.67), which was exhibited at *The Missing Peace: Artists Consider the Dalai Lama* at The Fowler Museum in Los Angeles, 2006 and also *Dzesi II* (2006) (Fig. 4.68), show the duality of two bold designs converging to form a larger pattern. They have an overall composition of concentric circles that Anatsui reflects was inspired by the

[491] Susan Vogel, *Fold Crumple Crush: The Art of El Anatsui*.

zero sign and circular adinkra symbols.[492] Anatsui says of a particular adinkra symbol,

> [t]here is this one which is characterized as the king of these signs, which consists of several concentric circles … we have developed a stitch which has a lot of flexibility about it, and therefore could be used specifically to configure freer and more organic forms than hitherto.[493]

Swaths of opaque caps alternate with hollowed-out metal rings to form the ringed design. In this and other works, Anatsui refined the manipulation of the material to develop areas of transparency that would enhance his painterly lines and offset the opaque sections.

Akin to Anatsui's painterly patterns in sculpture, American painter of African descent Odili Donald Odita achieves similar optical effects by showing the intersection or collision of designs that represent the tension of different peoples coming together. Odita's work often implies the difficulty of being culturally different in a society where one is a minority, and also the way in which groups of people engage with and impact each other in a heterogeneous society. Odita comments,

> What is most interesting to me is a fusion between cultures where things that seem faraway and disparate have the ability to function within an almost seamless flow. The fusion I seek is one that can represent a type of living within a world of difference. [494]

Odita's paintings exhibited at his show *Body & Space* at Jack Shainman Gallery in 2010 such as *Free Form* (Fig. 4.69) employ color and pattern to weave together multiple places, times, or temperaments. In many works such as

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[492] Anatsui and McCrickard, "Telephone Interview with Kate McCrickard," *El Anatsui 2006*, unpaginated.
[493] Ibid.
[494] Jack Shainman Gallery, "Odili Donald Odita: Fusion," (exhibition website), 2006,. accessed July 20, 2012..http://www.jackshainman.com/exhibition65.html.

Vertical Hold (2008) (Fig. 4.70) an invisible vertical line becomes the fissure that separates as it

Fig. 4.69 Odili Donald Odita, *Vertical Hold*, acrylic on canvas, 2008, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 4.70 Odili Donald Odita, *Free Form*, acrylic on canvas, 2010, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

conjoins, a flash point where two or more vibrant color fields become one.

Like Anatsui's joined sections of patterns, Odita's tense juxtapositions of zig-zagging designs suggest the difficult coexistence of different ethnic, religious, racial, class, and other groups in a society. Similarly, Anatsui's metal patchwork contrasts sections of light and dark with irregularly placed areas of pattern and texture to signify the experience of not quite belonging in one place, but being a composite of many things like the experiences of many diaspora peoples. The intersections of these joined sections of pattern convey the human struggle to connect and be communities, as well as the areas that cannot be unified.

The organic patterns and shapes of some works make an apt metaphor for land masses on maps, and broken objects, as well as rent fabric. These works convey the history of power struggles and diasporas, and also the current fragility of our planet and our irrevocable impact on it. Anatsui's installation

Three Continents (2009) (Fig. 4.71) refers to a history of global interactions although the distinction between the continents is not demarcated through specific types of patterns. In this piece, organic shapes made up of red, orange, and yellow bottle caps sprawl across three larger areas of pale gold like giant bodies of land. This work may respond to the history of the triangular slave trade that involved Africa, Europe, and the Americas. He comments on the process of working with bottle caps, "The act of stitching them into sheets is to me like melding the different circumstances of these continents together into an indeterminate form."[495] Yet it also implies the global necessity of clean water, disposal of waste, and the implications of pollution on all of the continents. This and other works suggest the interdependence of the continents and the need for people of all nations to work across geographic difference to resolve environmental issues.

Fig. 4.71 El Anatsui, *Three Continents*, aluminum and copper wire, 8' x 16', 2009, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

Anatsui's titles and the patterns have increasingly referenced destruction of the earth and the environment. His works such as *Strips of Earth's Skin* (2008), *Ozone Layer* (2010), and *Stressed World* (2011) all suggest the irrevocable impact of global warming, pollution, and damage to the planet's

[495] James and Anatsui, "Convergence: History, Materials, and the Human Hand-An Interview with El Anatsui," 48.

natural resources. *Ozone Layer* (Figs. 4.72 and 4.73) has an overall silvery palette, but the directions of small patches of flattened liquor foils are turned

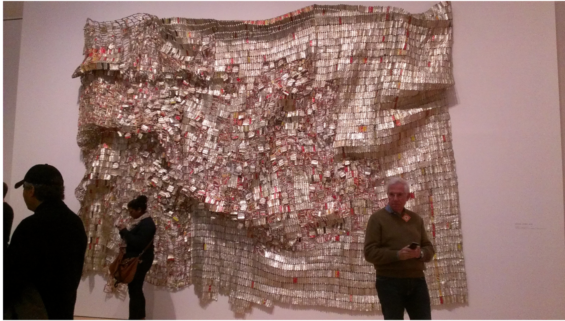

Fig. 4.72 El Anatsui, *Ozone Layer*, aluminum and copper wire, 2010, 165 3/8" x 212 5/8", courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, photography by Sophie Sanders

Fig. 4.73 El Anatsui, detail of *Ozone Layer*, aluminum and copper wire, 2010, 165 3/8" x 212 5/8", courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, photography by Sophie Sanders

at odd angles and seem to be dangling off of the overall surface, therefore suggesting a disruption in the uniform logic of the material. *Strips of Earth's Skin* (Fig. 4.74), is unusual for its huge vertical rents that are interrupted by a horizontal silvery strip that weightlessly weaves through its spaces. Openwork areas contrast against black and red vertical bands and patches of multicolored tesserae. On the far left are a section of yellow and red stripes that resemble woven kente, but this serves as a detail in the larger composition. The metaphor of the earth's skin as a cloth that has been torn and yet continues to be held together by an interweaving strip communicates the fragility of our planet and our

Fig. 4.74 El Anatsui, *Strips of Earth's Skin*, aluminum and copper wire, 12' 10" x 22' 10", 2008, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

collective responsibility for restoring and maintaining it. Works such as *Earth's Skin* and *Ozone Layer* privilege how the materials and patterns themselves tell a story about the shared need to protect the environment. While Anatsui has dispensed with the specific African syllabaries and symbols with which he began, he has increasingly turned to the expressive and ornamental effects of his medium and stretched the multitude of combinations of folding, crumpling, and joining to articulate these ideas.

Anatsui's exhibition that began at the Akron Museum and has travelled to the Brooklyn Museum of Art, *Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui* (2013) underscores the way in which pattern and decoration is the visual language that expresses his global vision. The exhibition was titled after Anatsui's piece *Gravity and Grace* (2010) (Fig. 4.75) that was inspired by a book of the same title by Simone Weil, the French activist, Christian mystic, and philosopher. Reading Weil's 1947 book *Gravity and Grace* impelled Anatsui to investigate the concepts of what he calls "the material and the spiritual, of heaven and earth, of the physical and the

Fig. 4.75 El Anatsui, *Gravity and Grace*, aluminum and copper wire, 2010, 145 5/8" x 441" (variable), Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, photo by Andrew McAllister for the Akron Art Museum

ethereal" by employing a limited, contrasting color range of hues.[496] The seriousness of Anatsui's project reveals itself in the limits to which he extends his materials and process, while the title and form evoke an interest in spiritual transcendence. This vast work, one of his largest, sprawls across the wall with a rippling iridescent surface that bleeds from orange to red to yellow to silvery white. Few curators of Anatsui's shows creatively engage his challenge of reorienting or reordering the sculptures, but Anatsui seemed pleased with the interpretations of Kevin Dumouchelle, Associate Curator of the Arts of Africa and the Pacific Islands at the Brooklyn Museum. Dumouchelle uniquely hung several pieces in the exhibition by changing their orientation from vertical to horizontal or by causing more exaggerated folds in the material.[497]

Anatsui's recent exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City also displayed his intricate patterns as the dominant organizing principle and featured his expanded range of textures and layers. These metal installations are characterized by highly differentiated, baroque designs and more figurative compositions. This exhibition entitled *Pot of Wisdom* (2012-2013) returns to the theme of a broken vessel that he explored in early ceramic works. However, now the pot of wisdom takes on even broader meaning and perhaps represents the smashing of social taboos and barriers to change. The breaking of the pot may open up our consciousness and collective potential to change the world.

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[496] Brooklyn Museum of Art, "Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui," exhibition organized by the Akron Art Museum and by Kevin Dumouchelle at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, February 8–August 4, 2013, http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/el_anatsui/#!lb_uri=gravity_grace.php.
[497] Brooklyn Museum of Art, "El Anatsui in Conversation with Susan Vogel."

The piece that may have inspired the title of the exhibition, *They Finally Broke the Pot of Wisdom* (2011) (Fig. 4.76) suggests that the pot is a vessel for memory or consciousness, perhaps as a metaphor for the skull and brain. The broken pot symbolizes the need for radical change and the shattering of old traditions and structures. He implies that this consciousness will enable humanity to confront the global problems of war, poverty, hunger, natural disasters, and global warming, and help to create productive and peaceful societies. A central, transparent vessel appears to shatter or erupt at its top. It is surrounded by a scintillating silver "fabric" adorned with letter-shaped motifs in red, black, yellow, orange, and blue. These designs are reminiscent of ideographic symbols, but cannot be identified as specific signs. One of these shapes is made up of turquoise bottle caps with a liquor logo that has a masted ship of the colonial period that suggests slave ships. This work enables a heightened contrast between opaque and transparent, shiny and matte textures. Anatsui built the transparent form of the large pot by overlapping double and triple layers of the hollowed bottle cap rings and wires. The piece drips onto the

Fig. 4.76 El Anatsui, *They Finally Broke the Pot of Wisdom*, aluminum liquor bottle caps and copper wire, 186" x 276", 2011

floor as if the precious wisdom of this pot is spilling onto our feet. As in *Gli*, the surfaces are like openwork lace and show a consistent transition as he manipulates the range of textures. Vogel has commented that Anatsui's transparent works offer a darker or more sinister aspect. She says, "Something about these flimsy, wispy little see-through hangings … suggests secrets exposed, private linens sliding disgracefully into view."[498] These veils could symbolize the invisible barriers between people, the corruption within power relationships, or simply cause viewers to notice the detailed lattices of his metal curtains. Whether they are interpreted as subtle veils or secrets exposed, the contrasting texture of these lacey patterns strengthen the visual impact of his scintillating, opaque sheets.

Anatsui's metal matrixes transform the dross of consumption to subtly point to the destruction of African lands, the oceans, and the problems of trash disposal throughout developing countries, where electronic waste is commonly exported by wealthy countries to developing ones, in violation of the international law. On a global scale, his work addresses these inequities, and the resulting social, and environmental problems, but it also symbolizes something more personal to the artist. Anatstui's joined sections of pattern are also emblematic of the piecing together of his own history and identity. It was a shock when one day as a youth, his uncle told him that the person he thought was his mother was not his biological mother and he learned the circumstances of his mother's death, causing him somewhat of an identity crisis.[499] The theme of the fragment

[498] Vogel, "Art Now: Breaking Apart, Breaking Free," *El Anatsui: Art and Life*, 134.
[499] Susan Vogel, *Fold Crumple Crush: The Art of El Anatsui*.

reorganized in a new context has been an important part of works since the "Broken Pots" series, and he has brought back the idea of synthesis from broken parts in *Pot of Wisdom*. Anatsui reflects,

> I think I use broken pieces because of my eclectic life history. You know, it's not one homogenous kind of progression, it's been in bits and pieces—not growing up in my own nuclear family, and not even living in my country, and finally, now, travelling all over the place. I think it's an attempt to put all this together.[500]

Anatsui's patterns and textures unify many disparate elements, and express the bridging of multiple narratives and histories. He constructs order and unity within a disordered, contentious world. On a global level, his patchwork is symbolic of cross-cultural dialogue between the world powers, and the idea of a cultural mosaic within societies. The messiness and unevenness of his patterns also serves as an apt metaphor for the inconsistencies of diplomacy and collaboration between African countries and the rest of the world.

Anatsui's compositions of irregular, organic shapes that create the illusion of lightness deal with themes of continents, growth, change, and cross-cultural dialogue. This dialogue is often symbolized by the synthesis or connecting of many heterogeneous patterns. He recently remarked, "I'm working toward buoyancy."[501] This floating quality seems to be determined by vibrant line and an increasingly flexible array of painterly textures. His goal of buoyancy harks back to the original aesthetic aspects that he took from *uli* and its lyrical and powerful employment of line. Another aspect of lightness is how he makes metal appear

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[500] "FCC interview with Susan Vogel, Enid Schildkrout, and Harry Kafka," Skowhegan, ME, July 2007, quoted in Susan Vogel, "Art Now: Breaking Apart, Breaking Free," *El Anatsui: Art and Life*, 134.
[501] Holland Cotter, "A Million Pieces of Home," *The New York Times*, February 8, 2013, accessed March 4, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/10/arts/design/a-million-pieces-of-home-el-anatsui-at-brooklyn-museum.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

airy, wispy, and diaphanous in some areas and opaque and impenetrable in others.

Line and pattern suggest representational aspects or reflect aerial perspectives in many works shown in Anatsui's *Pot of Wisdom* exhibition. Departing from his original textile format of verticals and horizontals, his compositions have grown into new shapes that may depict geographies, plant-like growth, and the globe. The smaller scale of these works also allows viewers to experience them as meditations on particular compositional experiments rather than environments. For instance, *Basin* (2012) (Fig. 4.77) resembles a network of loose lines seen from an aerial perspective that may include mountains, wounds in the earth, or a satellite image of a metropolis. This work perhaps best communicates a global vision of urban sprawl. In some areas, bottle caps are sewn together in abundant heaps, but these heavy accumulations dissolve into a bird's eye view of spreading streets and roads.

Fig. 4.77 El Anatsui, *Basin*, aluminum and copper wire, 2012, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

In contrast, the circular structure of *Visionary* (2012) (Fig. 4.78) is compartmentalized into many sections that range from see-through to opaque, and it is fraught with competing patterns and colors like a crazy quilt. The impact of so many condensed designs make it glow with color and pattern like a

Fig. 4.78 El Anatsui, *Visionary,* aluminum and copper wire, 2012, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 4.79 El Anatsui, *Awakened,* aluminum and copper wire, 2012, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 4.80 El Anatsui, *Seed*, aluminum and copper wire, 2012, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 4.81 El Anatsui, *Uwa*, aluminum and copper wire, 2012, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

tropical fish. Rather than suggesting a wall surface, this piece forms a large, ornamental shape. *Awakened* (Fig. 4.79) (2012) bends forward with a diagonal checkered design of red and pale blue that juxtaposes with the solid dark green spine, and it drapes a fringe of red and yellow metal strands onto the floor. This work is reminiscent of a figure bending under a heavy load, but its bottom is light and buoyant. Another work, *Seed* (2012) (Fig. 4.80) glows brilliant yellow and seems to blossom out of small red and black strands at the bottom in a way that defies gravity, and that invokes gestation and roots."[502] *Uwa* (2012) (Fig. 4.81) takes the form of a suspended ball of red and yellow metal chains that unravel onto the floor. The metal fiber flows out of this orb and leads the eye to small patterned sections on the floor. It perhaps represents the deterioration and decay of the earth itself, as if its skin is peeling off. In their versatility, Anatsui's recent metal sheets exhibited in *Pot of Wisdom* feature pattern more organically and depart from the textile grid in favor of painterly compositions from a variety of perspectives. They show a greater diversity of patterns than his original metal wall hangings.

As he pushes the limits of his medium and the range of patterns that he can produce, Anatsui's works have evolved to explore new motifs and concepts that relate less to cloth and more to architectural space and geographies. His increasingly monumental vision is intended to inspire audiences to reflect on humanity's divisive history, the devastation of the environment, and encourage people to heal the earth's wounds. His work made in the last six years reveals the maturation of longstanding themes including the transformation of materials

[502] Ibid.

related to food and drink consumption. In addition to departing from the textile formats, his work has also taken on an architectural scale for many projects.

Anatsui's recent recognition by the international art world has lead to major public commissions on a grander scale that represent an embracing of the global perspective in his work and a newfound appreciation for the major impact and relevance of African design qualities in contemporary art more broadly. Although it may be frustrating to him, even the interest in his work's relationship to textile patterns shows that Western audiences are beginning to better understand the significance of these influences for artists. The expanded scale of his work into major international public art venues also responds to the expectations of the international audience for these installations. Storr argues that the shifting nature of Anatsui's work results in a fundamentally anti-monumental effect because "it does not stand its ground, is not an anchor for ambient objects, structures, or beings. Rather it takes the shape of circumstance and so epitomizes contingency."[503] Anatsui's work is monumental in its metamorphosis of materials that have a past life to commemorate history, synthesis of traditional patterns and invented forms, and openness to innovation. Since the Venice Biennale of 2007, Anatsui's work has exploded on the international art scene and has adorned many major exterior and interior spaces across the Americas, Europe, and Asia on a monumental scale. This public art arena for his work has also elevated its status as a symbol of global transformation and awareness, but suggests that he has perhaps been seduced to create large-scale works to satisfy the expectations of the art market. Anatsui

[503] Storr, "The Shifting Shapes of Things to Come," 57.

comments, “The world is beginning to realize that artists are just artists; not “European, artists,” not “African,” nor “American.” Art is not the preserve of any one particular people, it’s something that happens around the whole world.”[504] This statement proclaims the universality of great art, but also implies the necessity for the African artist’s work to be appreciated beyond its African identity in order to be considered great art in the global art world. At this esteemed point in his career, Anatsui continues to ride the line between expanding his vocabulary with the metal process and negotiating a capitalist-driven art world audience that associates massive scale with grandeur and substance.

Adorning Architecture

Anatsui’s work has always blurred the lines between the conventional categories of ceramics, sculpture, and painting. At the same time that Anatsui has elaborated on interior installations, he developed site-specific works for particular architectural monuments. Vogel writes, “Anatsui is now creating art that increasingly asks to be experienced bodily, like architecture, not read like a text … Progressively leaving behind the circumscribed African messages he articulated earlier in his career, Anatsui’s art now draws inspiration and materials from Africa to speak about the earth and all humanity.”[505] The innovation of seeking an ethereal quality in the work corresponds to his colors and patterns that transform original architectural monuments and selectively conceal or reveal aspects of its surface. His massive installations of metal sheets alter non-African

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[504] Anatsui as quoted by Susan Vogel, *El Anatsui: Art and Life*, 17.
[505] Vogel, El Anatsui: Art and Life, 17.

buildings by incorporating the colors and textured designs of bricks, moldings, and glass mirrors. Serving as a second skin for these structures, the rhythmic designs of these installations allow viewers to see the building surface afresh and provide a new context for a monument that complicates its original cultural and historical role. By draping European and American architecture with caps from liquor bottles, a substance historically used to exploit Africans during the transatlantic slave trade, Anatsui re-clothes these monuments in a material emblematic of these power relationships. The adaptability of his patterned metal sheets and their decorative function penetrates the divides between fine art spaces and communal, public arenas.

In architectural installations, Anatsui adapts his patterns and materials to respond to the building or wall surface. His three monumental works exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2007 demonstrate the expanding range of interior and exterior architecture design innovations with his bottle cap medium. The first of these works was made for the 52nd Annual Venice Biennale (2007) for the exhibition *Artempo - Where Art Becomes Time.* He wrapped the Palazzo Fortuny, one of Italy's most important Gothic landmarks, with his patterned metal cloth entitled *Fresh and Fading Memories, Part I-IV* (2007) (Fig. 4.82). The interior walls of the

Fig. 4.82 El Anatsui, *Fresh and Fading Memories*, aluminum and copper wire, 354" x 236", Palazzo Fortuny, Venice, Italy, 2007, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

Palazzo Fortuny reveal an architectural history in their patina and hodgepodge of brick, decorative painting, textured plaster, repairs and incomplete renovations, and the exterior walls are also a mélange of brown, ochre, and beige brickwork. He evolved his bottle cap vocabulary to respond to Palazzo Fortuny's Gothic style and details of precious wall-hangings, paintings, and the famous lamps owned by the Pesaro family, as well as its more recent transformation into a museum by designer Mariano Fortuny. Similar to the ambitious scale of wrapped installations by the Bulgarian and French couple, Christo Yavacheff and Jeanne-Claude Denat de Guillebon, that accentuate the shape of an architectural structure and American painter Sam Gilliam's engagement with the exterior walls of museums for his draped paintings, Anatsui's installation at the Palazzo Fortuny feature his pieced texture and allow areas of the metal cloth to trail off of the wall surface. From below, viewers could also see through the metalwork patterns as if peering out from under a lacey curtain.

Anatsui exhibited two other monumental works at the Venice Biennale's Arsenale space, the largest pre-industrial production center of the world, built in the 13th century.[506] Historically, the Arsenale's shipyards, depots and workshops stood for the military, economic, and political power of Venice. Anatsui chose this site to exhibit two additional grandiose wall installations whose diverse patterns emphasized his control over his medium, although critics failed to respond to this aspect of the work. He presented *Dusasa I* and *Dusasa II* (2007) (Figs. 4.83 and 4.84) at the Venice Biennale's huge Arsenale space curated by Robert Storr. The title *Dusasa* derives from two Ewe words, *du* and *sasa*,

[506] "La Biennale di Venezia," accessed March 23, 2013, http://www.labiennale.org/en/venues/arsenale.html.

Fig. 4.83 El Anatsui, *Dusasa I,* aluminum and copper wire, 288" x 360", Arsenale, Venice Biennale, 2007, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 4.84 El Anatsui, *Dusasa II,* aluminum and copper wire, Arsenale, Venice Biennale, 2007, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

which means a fusion of dissimilar elements on a grand scale.[507] Large bands of red and gold crushed caps characterize this blend, in contrast to large passages of flattened plain strips and looped chains of hollowed-out caps. No format is used more than once except for the basic "Plain."[508] Anatsui conceived *Dusasa I* as the male sheet since it employed the "Plain" format of caps whereas *Dusasa II* is made entirely of "Crushed" and "Singlet" that he characterizes as female.[509] Anatsui remarks that "[c]rushed is not geometric, like the other elements, but has been disfigured in an organic way, and that it traps light in its dark interior."[510] He scattered bright white plastic disks that came from inside the bottle cap, sprinkling them like sequins across the non-reflective ground.[511] While *Dusasa I* has a painterly composition of red and black arcs and lines embedded in the larger metal fabric, *Dusasa II* is more monochromatic in its design of alternating

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[507] Leesa Fanning (Associate Curator Modem and Contemporary Art) (museum mobile guide), The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, accessed March 23, 2013, http://www.nelson-atkins.org/mobileguide/lookup.cfm?id=54936&object=184&col=Contemporary.
[508] Vogel, "Entering the Global Art World," *El Anatsui: Art and Life,* 80.
[509] Vogel, "Working in Nsukka," *El Anatsui: Art and Life,* 70.
[510] Anatsui, "FCC interview with Susan Vogel, Enid Scholdkrout, and Harry Kafka," Skowhegan, ME, July 2007.
[511] Vogel, "Working in Nsukka," *El Anatsui: Art and Life,* 70.

opaque and transparent areas that ripple across the wall surface. Their design as complementary male and female installations reinforced the works' relationship to kente cloth's gendered contexts and tributes to historical events and individuals.

However, in relationship to the Venetian architecture, the ochre, red, and black colors of his installation and its patterns correspond to and contrast with the Arsenale's old brickwork. The overall gold palette symbolizes royal sumptuousness, and the individual glimmering units joined into larger patterns allude to the importance of mosaics in Byzantine religious mosaics in Italy. The textile-like surfaces of these works also invoke the decorative European history of tapestries, as well as the role of other fabrics such as local flags in Italian pageantry and ceremony. When he was installing *Dusasa I*, Anatsui wanted to express opulence by spilling golden waves of patterns on the floor.[512] The tears and spaces between this surface with a historic patina allowed one to penetrate the building surface, but the dominant grid with shimmering designs of gold and red call attention to the textile-like splendor of the metal "tapestry." The marriage of African and European aesthetics and royal extravagance is embodied in *Dusasa I* and *II* through Anatsui's patterns that reinvigorate Italian architectural history.

Susan Vogel points out Anatsui's response to the texture, color, and sometimes patterns of the wall surface as a powerful leitmotif in his architectural art, such as *Fresh and Fading Memories* and *Gli (Wall)* exhibited in Osaka,

[512] Vogel, "Bottle-top Hangings as an Art Form," *El Anatsui: Art and Life*, 125.

Japan and Rice University Gallery.[513] Anatsui responds both to the history of specific wall surfaces and he also creates his own symbolic walls with the metal units. He says, "[w]alls are meant—by people who built them—to either hide something or sequester something or protect something … I felt that walls, rather than conceal things, were constructs which help reveal things."[514] The architectural role of *Dusasa I and II* makes the connection between the function of monumental tapestries in Renaissance and Baroque Italy as ornate and practical decorations that reproduced Biblical and mythological scenes designed by master painters. Also, in a similar way to religious art of an earlier era, the reflective qualities of his bottle-cap patterns bestow an essence of spiritual grace on the facades that they adorn. His installations inspire a meditative effect that is partly a result of the labor-intensiveness of their multitude of patterns and units. This sense of awe is also due to the luminous intricacy of designs that is reminiscent of Byzantine mosaics, Islamic tessellations, and Baroque stained-glass windows. The gravitas and grace of Anatsui's recent architectural works and their reflective qualities expand the emotional and spiritual dimension in his work.

Another of Anatsui's public works, *Broken Bridge* (2012) (Figs. 4.85 and 4.86), is especially interesting because it was exhibited in Paris and New York City, requiring a transformation of the piece in each context. *Broken Bridge* was first exhibited at the Paris Triennial 2012, le Palais de Tokyo, Paris, where

[513] Ibid.
[514] Anatsui, "FCC interview with Susan Vogel, Enid Schildkrout, and Harry Kafka," 125.

Fig. 4.85 El Anatsui, *Broken Bridge,* tin, mirrors, exhibited at the Paris Triennial 2012, le Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2012, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

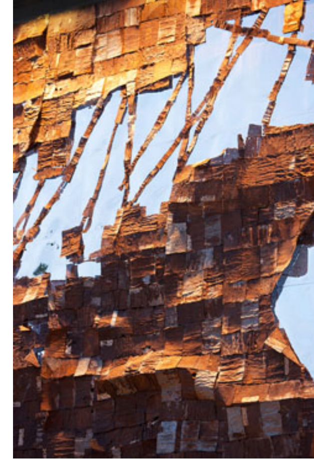

Fig. 4.86 El Anatsui, detail of *Broken Bridge,* tin, mirrors, exhibited at the Paris Triennial 2012, le Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2012, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

Anatsui decided to emphasize the mirrored surface of the building in response to its function as a museum of fashion. He also felt that glass mirrors were an ideal way to reference both Africa and Europe, reflecting one another. Anatsui attached sections of tin into asymmetrical blocks in a similar way to his smaller wall pieces, and then numbered these sections so the art installers would know approximately how to order them. He flattened and joined these blocks of red, perforated rectangles into an uneven layer to cover the reflective, undulating glass wall so that they were stretched diagonally like fabric held together by a few long threads. He extended thin strips across the large areas of the underlying mirrored surface. The metal patches were the color of land while the glass represented water and also reflected the colors of the sky. At the same time, the mirrored shapes may have suggested two parts of a bridge or an extension that has broken off, or land masses that have separated over centuries. Altering structures and monuments of European and American culture

and industry, *Broken Bridge* combined African patterns with Western aesthetics and expressed a vision of global interdependence.

He restructured *Broken Bridg*e (2012) for exhibition along New York City's *High Line* (Figs. 4.87, 4.88, 4.89), the repurposed aboveground subway track, originally built in the 1930s, as part of a massive public-private infrastructure project called the West Side Improvement.[515] Altering this project to the very different cityscape of Chelsea in Manhattan, Anatsui responded to the gritty textures and parks of downtown Manhattan and the reflective surfaces of the nearby Hudson River. This time, he covered the façade of the building with a mirrored-glass surface that would contrast to his rough metal sheets. He took the same blocks of metal from the earlier installation and reassembled them into a monumental drapery to conform to the flat surface of the building running alone the High Line between 20th and 21st Streets. The rusted and perforated pieces of tin have jagged edges reminiscent of the eroded structures of the Hudson River docks and piers in the 1970s and 80s. Also, the thin diagonal strips of metal (Fig. 4.90) echo the branches of trees planted along the High Line Park. The High Line was restored as effort of urban repurposing and Anatsui's installation complements this purpose since the same thread runs through his work.

[515] The High Line and Friends of the High Line, "High Line History," New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, accessed March 20, 2013. http://www.thehighline.org/about/high-line-history.

Fig. 4.87 El Anatsui, *High Line installation*, tin, mirrors, New York City's High Line between 21st and 22nd Streets, 2012, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 4.88 El Anatsui, detail of *High Line installation*, tin, mirrors, New York City's High Line between 21st and 22nd Streets, 2012, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 4.89 El Anatsui, detail of *High Line installation*, tin, mirrors, New York City's High Line between 21st and 22nd Streets, 2012, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

Fig. 4.90 El Anatsui, detail of *High Line installation*, tin, mirrors, New York City's High Line between 21st and 22nd Streets, 2012, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

In *Broken Bridge*, mirrors underlying the rusted tin layers form an irregular layer that provides continuity with the light surfaces of water and sky, and gives the illusion of seeing the sky behind a decaying architectural facade. The rippling surface of wave-like patterns and folds of his largest outdoor installation to date corresponded to the textures of the Chelsea architecture, the surrounding landscape, and the reflective qualities of the Hudson River running parallel to the installation. The mirrors also bring in the environment and the signature skyline of New York City, including the Empire State building. The piece "… gives a narcissistic city and art world capital a fractured, yet sky-flooded view of itself."[516] *Broken Bridge's* reflective surfaces also respond to and create a dialogue with some of the newer architecture in the Chelsea neighborhood such as the rippling curves of Frank Gehry's new IAC building (InterActiveCorp's headquarters) and facing it, Jean Nouvel's "Vision Machine," a 23-story shimmering glass tower with its own pattern of windows at 19th Street and the West Side Highway. Anatsui inserts something of his own environment and history, in the form of an earthy surface of reddish tin that contrasts with the cool rhythmic patterns of blue and gray glass windows of the Vision Machine and the silvery blue exterior of the IAC building. He therefore restores a sense of patina in a neighborhood that has recently become a symbol of new wealth and architectural opulence. Showing the range of patterns, sculptural forms, and painterly surfaces that he can create with this medium, Anatsui breaks down categories of sculpture, painting, and architecture to redesign international public spaces.

[516] Holland Cotter, "A Million Pieces of Home."

Building upon his patterned works produced over forty years, Anatsui continues to offer a vision of history as a piecing of multiple stories, experiences, and physical connections between people organized through texture and pattern. He acknowledges that his process uses fragments and pieces assembled together because that has been his history.[517] His life has been filled with disjunctive and nomadic experiences: not growing up with his nuclear family, not living in his country of birth, and most recently travelling and developing his work to suit many international contexts. On an architectural scale, Anatsui synthesizes patterns to express human interdependence in a flexible format that allows for change, fluidity, and growth.

Legacies of Anatsui's Ethereal and Buoyant Patterns

Throughout his many years as a professor in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Anatsui has inspired several generations of young artists and mentored them in a direction that engages the impact of Africa's postcolonial position and rapid industrialization in the last century. Counter to the overriding pedagogy of his institution, he has encouraged these younger artists to work with what their environments toss up both as material and content, and to seek overarching themes that address historical, practical, and ecological issues. Nigerian artist Bright Ugochukwu Eke is a recent University of Nigeria graduate who studied with Anatsui and his work shows the influence of Anatsui's sensitivity to castoff materials that reflect human

[517] Susan Vogel, *Fold Crumple Crush: The Art of El Anatsui*.

contingency and environmental impact. Anatsui exhorted Eke to experiment with and transform found materials in his sculpture. Although Eke's sculptures are less aesthetically sumptuous in color and texture than Anatsui's grand installations, they share similar conceptual concerns and techniques of combining and building with scavenged materials.

Taking inspiration from Anatsui's process of building with small units to create patterns, Eke concentrates on themes of natural resources. Eke's recent work focuses on the particular natural resources that are most in jeopardy, and is based on his experience of acid rain while he was working outside in Nigeria's gravely polluted Port Harcourt.[518] Eke's skin became extremely irritated due to contact with toxic rainfall contaminated from local industrial pollution. This led to his investigation into the causes of acid rain in that region, which are due to the pollution of local oil industry.[519] Says Eke, "Lack of pure water leads to the sale of bags—[the littered landscape shows a] total scorn for the environment on the part of authorities and the people who pollute their own neighborhoods."[520] Water is a universally powerful subject because it connects humanity across the continents and is a basic necessity for everyday existence. The focus on water enables his work to be grounded in the specific concerns of Nigerian politics, international industry, and their natural ecosystems, but also relates to an international crisis in the effects of our dependence on fossil fuels. Eke's water series implicates oil companies and other industries that grossly exploit Africa's

[518] Celeyce Matthews, "Fluid Connections, Bright Ugochukwu Eke" (delivered in a graduate seminar on modern African art at San Jose State University) accessed December 28, 2012, http://www.axisgallery.com/Axis_Gallery/Eke_Articles.html.
[519] The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, "Video: Artist Interview Bright Ugochukwu Eke on Working with Water," The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, Skidmore College, 2009, accessed February 10, 2013, http://tang.skidmore.edu/index.php/posts/view/496/.
[520] Bright Eke quoted in Vogel, *El Anatsui: Art and Life*, 31.

resources and often leave behind irreversible pollution that jeopardizes local communities and wildlife. In a similar way to Anatsui's theme of food and drink explored through food trays, old mortars and bottle caps, Eke has focused on a substance necessary to human survival that allows him to address universal issues affecting the planet.

Like Anatsui's architectural installations built out of small units, Eke's 2011 exhibition entitled *Between Earth and Clouds, Don't Panic* at the Durban Art Gallery in South Africa presented a monochromatic design composed of hundreds of small cellophane bags filled with water and some with a blend of water and carbon. Like earlier works such as *Water Drop* (2008) (Fig. 4.91), it was comprised of many water packets, each resembling raindrops (perhaps contaminated with chemicals or carbon) that seem to flow over the edges of the gallery walls, imitating water's ability to be broken into many units yet part of a larger body. These small bags draped from strings in the circular gallery space, reminiscent of a chandelier or a waterfall spray raining down from the ceiling.

Fig. 4.91 Bright Ugochukwu Eke, *Water Drop*, water, carbon, plastic bags, filament, 2008, courtesy of the artist

Similarly, Eke's exhibition of *Heavy Clouds; Water & Waste: ARS II* (Fig. 4.92) at the Ålands konstmuseum in Finland (2011) included a number of similar

installations composed of hundreds of bags of water hanging from the ceiling in a cloud-like formation that also resembles a mushroom cloud or crystalized explosion. Eke communicates the purity and reflectiveness of each water droplet, captured in a sanitary bag, but hanging just above reach.

Fig. 4.92 Bright Ugochukwu Eke, *Heavy Clouds; Water & Waste: ARS II*, Ålands konstmuseum in Finland, water, carbon, cellophane, filament, 2011, courtesy of the artist

As in earlier works, "this allusion to the concept of interconnectivity, the fluid multiplicity of water serves as a metaphor for individual humans making a cohesive, although perhaps dysfunctional, society."[521] The splendor of Eke's sparkling installations that emphasize the shrinking availability of this essential resource of clean water makes more poignant the environmental message. Like water itself, Eke's droplets conform to the curved space and surround viewers with water's life-giving power and its preciousness. Like Anatsui's preference for old wood and metal that bears the patina and even the violence of wear, Eke uses the abject quality of the natural carbon or chemically altered water to disturb the beauty of its shiny surface. Related to Anatsui's titles of works such as *Depletion* (2009), *Ozone Layer*, and *Stressed Earth* that refer to people's destructive impact to the planet's climate and natural reserves, Eke's water installations employ pattern and reflective qualities to emphasize the fragility of earth's resources.

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[521] Ibid.

Eke organized elements into organic patterns reminiscent of Anatsui's 1990s outdoor work entitled *Signature* in two installations entitled *Ripples and Storm* (I and II).[522] Both of these pieces incorporated recycled elements with a similar patterned aesthetic to Anatsui's wood and metal works.

Fig. 4.93 Bright Ugochukwu Eke, *Ripples and Storm I*, Tang Museum, Skidmore College, plastic bottles and wire, 2011, courtesy of the artist

Ripples and Storm I (Fig. 4.93) was composed of recycled plastic water bottles and wire and constructed with the help of student assistants at Skidmore College. Eke commented that he wanted to raise awareness about humanity's collective guilt over the issue of trash overflowing landfills and floating in a mass twice the size of Texas in the Pacific ocean to

Fig. 4.94 Bright Ugochukwu Eke, *Ripples and Storm II*, Tang Museum, Skidmore College, plastic bottles and wire, 2011, courtesy of the artist

[522] *Signature* was discussed on page 33.

inspire an increased sense of accountability.[523] He observes that his process develops, similar to Anatsui, out of accidents and experimentation.[524] *Ripples and Storm II* (Fig. 4.94) was more undulating and spontaneous in its serpentine lines composed of wooden disks, akin to Anatsui's *Signature* that highlights the round ends of cut wood, that sprawl across the wall. Eke employed plastic bottles and wood to replicate the movement of water when an object drops into the surface and produces a series of ripples. Both literally and metaphorically, the piece communicates the effect of each person's part in the larger universe. The ripple produced by one person or thing can cause a chain reaction that eventually leads to a great wave or even a storm. This same theme of the pressure that human beings exert upon the environment has for many years been conveyed in Anatsui's metal structures made of liquor bottle tops and rusted tin, as well as the interest in pattern as a metaphor for the restoration of social fabric and solutions to complex social and political problems. The impact of Anatsui's patterns that flow from one to another and the sense of an overall composition made up of many small elements can certainly be seen in Eke's water installations. The legacy of Anatsui's work flourishes in the work of younger artists such as Eke.

Over the past ten years, Anatsui's work has demonstrated an organic progression that pushes the boundaries of his material and its ability to respond to many formats including installations and architecture. Anatsui's sculpture has evolved to express both local histories and experiences and also an engagement

[523] The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, "Video: Artist Interview Bright Ugochukwu Eke on Working with Water."
[524] Ibid.

in spaces and monuments throughout the world, including West Africa, Europe, Japan, America, and Latin America. Using these metal elements with the same expansive repertoire as paint or any sculptural medium, Anatsui has established a seemingly endless vocabulary of patterns with which he responds to culturally specific and universal themes, historical events, and personal memories. Now that Anatsui has become an international icon, the Africanist aesthetics of his sculptures and installations have become part of the mainstream, and they may perhaps be written about in such a way that credits the unique philosophical and aesthetic contributions that stem from patterns of the Akan, Ewe, Yoruba and Igbo cultures. His work brings together numerous histories and cultures in a network of human experience. As broadly appealing and universal as this work is, we must not forget the sources of its inspiration and the special gifts that Anatsui shares with the world that come from his nomadic perspective, his lived experiences in Ghana and Nigeria, and his deep knowledge of the specific languages of African pattern.

CHAPTER 5:

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has investigated heavily adorned surfaces in the work of Wiley, Cave, and Anatsui as examples of an overarching aesthetic propensity in Black Atlantic art. Pattern is the modus operandi that enables Wiley to represent urban men of color as heroes and dignitaries, Cave to repurpose found materials into power figures, and Anatsui to memorialize African history and reference critical environmental issues. The complex layers of their paintings, sculptures, and installations show that appropriated motifs and the metamorphosis of scavenged materials serve as archives of collective knowledge. These artists deepen viewers' awareness of designs and emblems that signify multiple ways of knowing and communicate the interconnections between the physical world and the metaphysical. Through a dedication to exterior layers, they invite viewers to see beneath the surface to the symbolic and the spiritual.

Wiley, Cave, and Anatsui work with pattern and texture to present a multifaceted perspective of the past and suggest memories of events and experiences that have been under-represented in Western history. They inspire remembrance through the associations of their works' layers. The symbols that people attach to events, places, and social rituals activate memory. Wole Soyinka's book *The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness* (1999) suggests that memory is a "near intolerable burden" to bear the record of injustice in Africa and that art is the one source that may foster the beginning of

reconciliation.[525] He describes art as the process that can envelop traumatic experiences and offer hope of forgiveness.

Works by Wiley, Cave, and Anatsui act as such containers of experience and they hold the seeds of resolution and absolution. Patterns and adornment in their work trigger memory and enable viewers to bring together multiple histories and social references. Wiley's incorporation of motifs from Jewish papercuts in portraits of Ethiopian Israeli subjects intertwines the diasporic histories of Jews and Africans. Combining these symbols, he brings together the parallel experiences of persecution, dispersal, and survival of Jewish and Black Atlantic peoples. In other works, Wiley alludes to the shared experiences of discrimination and harassment suffered by Palestinians and African Americans. Cave's incorporation of memorabilia into his sculpture, such as the Black jockey figure, is a specific reference to the denigration of African Americans in popular culture imagery that dates back to slavery and intensified after abolition. Anatsui employs liquor logos on bottle caps to make a statement about their associations with power and authority, and allude to the history of alcohol as a desired commodity that served as barter during the transatlantic slave trade. Also, his kente-like patterns signify cultural pride for Black Atlantic peoples as well as the specific meanings of motifs and their associations with Asante and Ewe proverbs.

The works of Wiley, Cave, and Anatsui are songs for the eyes. They exemplify the relationship to musical rhythms in their visual counterpoint. Wiley's

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[525] Wole Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

decorative motifs serve as percussive and vocal beats that create a visual tension with his figurative subjects. Like hip-hop tracks that overlap spoken word and ambient sounds, they form the polyrhythmic environment that envelop his idealized models and enhance the designs of clothing and the smooth glow of skin. Cave's work invokes music through the potential of his Soundsuits to make a range of rattling, swishing, clattering, trumpeting, and other noises. Referencing musical sources that range from New Orleans jazz to house music and African drumming, Cave samples from many Black Atlantic musical genres. The visual cacophony of his patterns and textures represent visual counterpoint just as the musical accompaniment to his performances provides a soundscape for his dancers. The rippling designs and contrasting textures of Anatsui's sculptures reflect the relationships between kente weaving and drumming, and the structural complexity of West African music.

The inclinations of Black Atlantic art towards polyrhythm, asymmetry, and accumulated textures have been apparent for centuries. However, the embracing of these aesthetics by the mainstream art world is a relatively new phenomenon that began in the early twentieth century during the Harlem Renaissance and has re-emerged since the 1960s. This expansion continued with an interest in pluralism and multiculturalism in the 1980s and identity politics in the 1990s. Even with this progress, few Black artists penetrated museums of modern and contemporary art. This resulted in curatorial tokenism whereby one artist was expected to represent the entire Black "community," as if the whole Black Atlantic world could be reduced to a village. In the 21st century, Black

Atlantic artists are increasingly valued by museums and galleries for their varied content and versatility of styles, as well as the ideas that they contribute to the international art world. Much more work remains to be done to identify and illuminate Africanist aesthetics while at the same time enabling Black Atlantic artists to have equal opportunities to exhibit their work in the most esteemed institutions of fine art.

This dissertation reinforces how Black Atlantic artists are stretching the exclusive confines of the art world and challenging modes of curatorial practice and scholarly research. In support of this expansion, there need to be more exhibitions that present the work of African Diaspora and African artists in relationship to specific themes so that their work can debunk the cliché of being perceived through the lens of racial and ethnic identity and can inhabit any conceptual or stylistic arena. A successful example of a project that enabled artists to respond to their Black Atlantic heritage in an open-ended way is the contemporary art series at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art that invites two artists to create new works in response to one another. In their second exhibition of the series, *Artists in Dialogue: Sandile Zulu and Henrique Oliveira* (2011), the exhibition prompted a transcontinental visual dialogue between the work of Sandile Zulu of South Africa and Henrique Oliveira of Brazil. In the past decade, museums such as the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Brooklyn Museum of Art, in addition to art fairs such as Pulse in New York City and the Venice Biennale, have increasingly included curators and artists of the Black Atlantic world and worked in a collaborative manner to showcase artist-

generated topics. Exhibitions of African and African Diaspora culture such as the *Global Africa Project* at the Museum of Art and Design in New York City should be a regular biennial, as suggested by art critic Roberta Smith. The pervasiveness of Africanist aesthetics can be difficult to tease apart and would benefit from ongoing investigation rather than sporadic projects. This would allow a more continuous and focused discussion of innovative Black art and design that would foster further scholarly research. Exhibitions are surpassing the scholarly world in groundbreaking opportunities that will help Black Atlantic artists to be self-defining and present their work within a range of different frameworks.

This dissertation has aimed to identify shared threads in historical and conceptual agendas, aesthetic approaches, and other aspects that unite artists to broaden art historical methodologies. Art history continues to segregate Black artists by national or racial identities, which results in fewer scholarly projects that transcend the frameworks of race, geography, and ethnic identity. As Wiley, Cave, and Anatsui show through their free appropriation of many different design sources, artists do not limit themselves to the patterns and influences of their own racial or ethnic heritage. There remains a dearth of scholarly writing about Black artists that investigates their work in regards to social issues and topics that are considered to be universal by offering insights about life, society, or human nature. The discipline of art history must expand to allow Black Atlantic artists, and those of many other cultures and ethnicities, to share the stage with artists of European descent in the creation and expression of universal themes.

There also should be more exhibitions that group artists across racial and ethnic groups according to their methods and aesthetic approaches so that Black Atlantic artists can be appreciated in the global arena in which their work truly acts and belongs, rather than in isolation. Historically, Black Atlantic artists were rarely exhibited or studied in regards to international movements that included artists of other ethnic and racial groups. This suggested that were no African or African Diaspora artists who were influential enough to inspire others to follow in their direction, an unlikely assumption based on how artists borrow and even steal ideas from one another. When the Dada movement was born following World War I, it transcended many national borders and linked artists together across many disciplines, but it included no artist of African descent. The young African American artist Adam Pendleton has recently inserted himself into the history of the Dada artists through his conceptual word play and manifestos that redefine Dada in terms of a Black Atlantic lineage. In a similar way, curators and scholars must strive to recognize the overarching relationships between artists and not let such opportunities be lost in the artists' own lifetime because this stunts the field of art history.

Thankfully, curators in the highest echelons of the museum world are increasingly identifying and exhibiting Black Atlantic artists in the context of other important modern, postmodern, and contemporary movements. In 2011, the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibited works by El Anatsui, Anish Kapoor, Liza Lou, and Clinton De Menezes in proximity to one another based on their similar surfaces and creative strategies. Showing these monumental works in the same

gallery encourages viewers to make connections between artists cross-culturally and internationally by experiencing the works' similar scale, organization of materials, and types of symbols. Exhibitions that mix artists according to like themes and practices inspire scholars to look beyond the old categories and think about how artists take inspiration from common conditions, similar ideologies, and parallel approaches. It also enables art historians and audiences to identify transatlantic movements in the global art world in which Black Atlantic artists are originators, participants, and powerful influences on other artists.

Further inquiry into the aesthetic relationships between contemporary African Diaspora and African art in both exhibitions and scholarship will enable a deeper understanding of cultural continuity. It will foster the study of Black Atlantic peoples that assume national identities originally constructed and reinforced by European conquerors and maintain active participation in their indigenous and religious affiliations and ceremonies. The designations of African versus African Diaspora artists are political and geographical distinctions. They deny the fact that living in the diaspora is not a thing of the past, but a contemporary reality for many artists. The segregation of disciplines based on superficial differences does a disservice to art historical scholarship because it limits the connections that can be drawn and the possibility for understanding artists holistically. This is not to say that the artists' biographical and local milieu should not be analyzed; but this should not be the excuse to put the artist in box, neglecting many other influences. Many contemporary art publications, such as *Modern Painters* and *Art in America*, have broadened their scope of articles

featuring artists of African descent who work in a range of styles and explore many conceptual and aesthetic concerns, but these artists hail mostly from the United States. With the exception of a handful of scholars, there remains a wide gulf between Africanist scholarship and contemporary art criticism. There should be more cross-fertilization between these fields so that artists are written about from many perspectives. *Nka, Journal of Contemporary African Art* is one of the few journals that has spearheaded this initiative and dispensed with the ineffective categories.

This dissertation argues that there should be a revision of the archaic and inadequate classifications to determine new terms that are appropriate to the artists and their work. The success of illustrious African artists, such as Anatsui, is opening these doors. However, there remains further need for scholarship that delves into African cultures to understand their perspectives, instead of assessing everything through a Western paradigm. Since Black Atlantic culture has historically been compartmentalized at the institutional level by medium or genre, the approach to writing about and presenting Black Atlantic art must be made more interdisciplinary, as Robert Farris Thompson has demonstrated in his research of visual art, music, and dance of the Black Atlantic world. This interdependence of the arts is an essential part of African and African diaspora creative production, and should be made visible through the scholarship that analyzes art, music, and performance.

As this dissertation has shown, contemporary Black Atlantic artists such as Wiley, Cave, and Anatsui focus on pattern and texture to spark a global and

intergenerational conversation with other artists and art audiences internationally and across historical periods. There have been great strides in the exhibition and scholarship of such artists, but much more work remains to be done so that the field will identify and recognize its universal importance, and bring these insights to a more inclusive audience. Art history and curatorial practice provide a primary means of educating and sharing the value of art that comes from worlds that the public might not otherwise fathom. Academic research must promote this reorientation of art historical methodologies and broaden the study and acknowledgement of the universal contributions of Black Atlantic cultures and artists. The dissemination of this knowledge shatters the vessel of ignorance, and the breaking of ignorance is the destruction of prejudice.

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