

Consecration from the Margins: El Anatsui in Venice and the Turbine Hall

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Abstract : Context: This study focuses on El Anatsui and his global acclaim in the art world despite his origins from the global artworld's margins. It addresses the disparities in the treatment between Western and non-Western artists and questions whether Anatsui's consecration is a result of exoticism or the growing consensus on decolonization. Research Aim: The aim of this study is to investigate how El Anatsui achieved global acclaim from the margins of the art world and determine if his consecration represents a mark of decolonization or the typical Western desire for exoticism. Methodology: The study utilizes a case study approach, literature analysis, and in-depth interviews. The artist, the organizers of the Venice Biennale, the relevant curators at Tate Modern London, and the October Gallery in London, and other galleries in Nigeria, which represent the artist were interviewed for data collection. Findings: The study seeks to determine the authenticity of the growing consensus on decolonization, inclusion, and diversity in the global artistic field. Preliminary findings show that domestic socio-economic and political factors debilitated the mechanisms for local validation in Nigeria, weakening the domestic foundation for international engagement. However, alternative systems of exhibition, especially in London and the USA contributed critically to providing the initial international visibility, which formed the foundation for his global acclaim. Out of the 21 winners of the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement since its inception at the 47th Venice Biennale in 1997, American artists have dominated with 10 recipients, 8 recipients from Europe, 2 recipients from Africa (2007 and 2015) and 1 from Asia. This aligns with Bourdieu's concept of cultural and economic capital, which prevented Africa countries from participation until recently. Moreover, while the average age of recipients is 76 years, Anatsui received the award at the age of 71, while Malick Sidibé (Mali) was awarded at 72. Thus, the Venice Biennale award for El Anatsui incline more towards a commitment to decolonisation than exoticism. Theoretical Importance: This study contributes to the field by examining the dynamics of the art world's monopoly of legitimation and the role of national, ethnicity and cultural differences in the promotion of artists. It aims to challenge the Westernized hierarchy of valorization and consecration in the art world. The research supports Bourdieu's artistic field theory, which emphasises the importance of cultural, economic and social capital in determining agents' position and access to the field resources (symbolic capital). Bourdieu also established that dominated agents can change their position in the field's hierarchy either by establishing or navigating alternative systems. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures: The opacity of art world's operations places the required information within the purview of the insiders (agents). Thus, the study collects data through in-depth interviews with relevant and purposively selected individuals and organizations. The data was/will be analyzed using qualitative methods, such as thematic analysis and content analysis. The interpretive analytical approach adopted facilitated the construction of meanings that may not be apparent in the data or responses. Questions Addressed: The study addresses how El Anatsui achieved global acclaim despite being from the margins, whether his consecration represents decolonization or exoticism, and the extent to which the global artistic field embraces decolonization, inclusion, and diversity. Conclusion: The study will contribute to knowledge by providing insights into the extent of commitment to decolonization, inclusion, and diversity in the global artistic field. It also shed light on the mechanisms behind El Anatsui's rise to global acclaim and challenge Western-dominated artistic hierarchies.

Keywords : decolonisation, exorticism, artistic field, culture game

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