Comparison of Blema and The Seven Powers Come by the Sea
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Commissioned in 2005 by the October Gallery in London, El Anatsui’s Blema commemorated the bicentenary of Britain’s abolishment of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. A monumental sculpture of found aluminum and copper wire, Blema—meaning “ancient” in the Ewe language—is comprised of small round bottle caps linked together in a style the artist calls “designer one (round).” (See Figure 1) An excellent example of El Anatsui’s signature bottle-cap sculptures, Blema captures some of the concepts tying together his overall body of work. Themes such as globalization and transformation illustrate the context in which the slave trade operated, as well as the slave trade’s local and international impacts. Likewise, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons explored these issues in her 1992 installation The Seven Powers Come by the Sea, which used mixed media to convey the religious influence of enslaved Africans on the Caribbean, as well as to underscore the connection between slavery and the influence of diaspora on the artist’s identity. Both of these demonstrate the trans-Atlantic slave trade’s transformative effect on the world from simultaneously personal and universal perspectives.

Blema’s formal composition highlights the sculpture’s messages. The bottle caps are largely arranged by color, with gold-colored caps dominating the surface. Small pockets of red interrupt the gold and give it the appearance of being organized into vertical lines of connecting circles. Some of these red sections, as well as the lower left corner, are outlined in black. Together, these three colors—gold, red, and black—form a glittering surface reminiscent of both painting and mosaic. Blema’s design approximates a lined pattern that is reminiscent of kente cloth, which is made from strips of woven fabric sewn together. While much of Anatsui’s recent sculpture has been compared to cloth, Blema’s formal allusions to textiles are especially significant because cloth was one of the commodities traded by Europeans for enslaved Africans in West Africa. The material itself also speaks to the theme of slavery, since the caps used in Blema once belonged to liquor bottles, and alcohol was yet another good used by Europeans in the triangular trade of the Atlantic Ocean. Additionally, the overwhelmingly golden color and rounded patterning recall the shape and color of gold coins and, by extension, the profits of slavery. Blema therefore incorporates elements that speak to specific locations—like textiles, bottle caps, and coins—and connect them to the global map of the slave trade.

The Seven Powers Come by the Sea investigates similar themes by highlighting the arrival of Yoruba religious practices in the Caribbean. This installation contains a far wider variety of elements than Blema: it includes seven large wooden tablets with small stick figure carvings, seven life-sized silhouettes, and an array of photographs on the floor. The photographs are arranged into two groups, each one around the phrase “Let Us Never Forget” and “Prohibido Olivar.” Modeled after the plans of slave ships, the wooden tablets also bear the names of Yoruba orisha, or deities. The silhouette of the corresponding orisha is placed to the left of its tablet. Together, these emphasize how faith was carried across the Atlantic, and how the worship of these orisha in the New World thrived despite the horrors of slavery and the trauma of the Middle Passage. Furthermore, the stature of these orisha is a reminder of past identity even as they continue to act as guardians in the present. They watch over the photographs on the floor, which depict the artist’s Cuban and American relatives. The two phrases amongst the photographs urge the audience to never forget the cruelty of slavery and its effect on those enslaved and their descendants.

Like Anatsui, Campos-Pons incorporates location-specific—and in her case, highly personal—imagery that speaks to the larger theme of exchange that occurred as part of trans-Atlantic slavery. The presence of the orisha in Seven Powers underscores the spiritual experience of enslaved Africans by drawing attention to the human form, which is repeated in the carved boards and the photographs. This repetition is a reminder that a human was considered as much a mass commodity as coins or cloth. Blema, by contrast, has no figural forms at all. Anatsui’s bottle caps, as well as the coin and kente imagery evoked by the composition, point to the material aspects of trade. The focus on the material goods, rather than the enslaved Africans, recalls the historical emphasis on profit over human life. Campos-Pons and Anatsui thus convey a similar critique of consumerism and dehumanization, although approaching these themes from opposite angles. Furthermore, Anatsui’s reference to kente and his use of found materials ground Blema in specific African locations, while the photographs of Seven Powers depict the artist’s own family in the Diaspora. Elements in both works speak to larger questions of how to construct identity in Africa and the African Diaspora, and how the effects of the trans-Atlantic slave trade continue to influence identity to this day. While the two works are visually very different, Blema and The Seven Powers Come by the Sea both address slavery as a global phenomenon with far-reaching effects of exchange that continue to define identity in the modern world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

El Anatsui (Ghanaian, b. 1940)
*Bëma*, 2006
Aluminum and copper wire
12’ 2” x 18’ 1”
Private Collection. Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons (Cuban, b. 1959)
*The Seven Powers Come by the Sea*, 1993
Mixed-media installation