

## ART REVIEW

# Gorgeous trash and radical recycling at ICA's Watershed

‘Revival: Materials and Monumental Forms’ is a group exhibition exploring themes of work and waste

By [Murray Whyte](#) Globe Staff, Updated May 26, 2022, 12:58 p.m.



Installation view of "Revival: Materials and Monumental Forms," currently at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston's Watershed in East Boston. Left, Ebony G. Patterson, "...and the dew cracks the earth, in five acts of lamentation ... between the cuts ... beneath the leaves ... below the soil...", 2020; center, Madeline Hollander, "Heads/Tails: Walker & Broadway 2," 2020; right, El Anatsui, "Area B," 2007. CHARLES MAYER

The warm glint of sunshine floods the building-length channel of skylight at the ICA's Watershed in East Boston, playing on the surface of [El Anatsui](#)'s "Area B," 2007, a glittering tableaux pinned loosely to the wall midway through the big, bright space. It



evokes a regal tapestry spun of shimmering silk, fit for a king. But look closely. To make it, Anatsui, a groundbreaking Ghanaian artist now in his 70s, knit together thousands of foil scraps salvaged from the necks of thrown-away liquor bottles in one of the most spectacular acts of radical recycling you'll see.

“Area B” is one of a half-dozen works by as many artists on much the same theme, with the Watershed itself an unofficial seventh. [Opened four years ago](#), the building, a former waterfront fabrication facility for the Bethlehem Shipbuilding Corporation, was derelict for decades before the ICA did some radical recycling of its own. The Watershed has opened four of the last five summers — [2020 was a miss](#), given the fever pitch of early pandemic anxieties — as an unofficial herald of the sunny season. After a winter of Omicron and its still-lingering spawn, bring it on, I say.



El Anatsui, "Area B" (detail), 2007, aluminum and copper wire. PRIVATE COLLECTION, TORONTO. IMAGE COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK. © EL ANATSUI

With this show, “Revival: Materials and Monumental Forms,” the Watershed deviates

from its script. All three past installments featured a single artist, and in two cases — [John Akomfrah](#) in 2019 and [Firelei Báez](#), whose 2020 installation was bumped to 2021 — a commissioned work made with the Watershed in mind. (Diana Thater, [who went first in 2018](#), showed three video pieces from years past.)

By comparison, a group exhibition, even at monumental scale, inevitably feels a bit like pulling back: placing the furniture, maybe, versus building the house. To be fair, the ICA has built so much from the ground up this year already — it commissioned and produced Simone Leigh's exhibition, "[Sovereignty](#)," for the Venice Biennale, which opened in April — that a departure feels warranted. And with the ICA nearing the end of its five-year lease on the space (next summer is the last on its current deal), curator Ruth Erickson told me the museum wanted to see how the Watershed worked as more conventional blank-slate exhibition space, albeit one nearly large enough to accommodate a 737.

"Revival" is pretty conventional, not a bad thing; it's ebullient and color-filled, with a sparkly veneer that belies deeper issues that emerge on close reading. The show falls together conversationally as repartee on the practice of transforming cast-offs into objects, often, of great beauty: Anatsui shares space with Ebony G. Patterson, whose five enormous collage works of cutouts of flowers, foliage, animals, and people, present as an Eden-like web of verdant pleasure. Together, they make for a spectacular entry — they're closest to the front door, which is still a dozen yards away — and, more deeply, a meditation on the schism between aesthetics, material, and the intensely handmade.

"Area B" offers an immediate push-pull: It is decadently gorgeous trash. But it's also deeply labor-intensive; fragments are hammered flat or folded into small squares and linked by copper wire. The piece evokes the grim labors of countless pickers in the infamous, [town-size garbage heaps that plague many African urban centers](#). Anatsui's work is undeniably beautiful, but it's also an indictment. It's a monument to



scavenger ingenuity in a part of the world where organized systems of waste reduction are largely absent.

Anatsui finds kinship with Patterson in the simple fact that her work is not merely beautiful, though it's certainly that. Its lushness, wreathed in butterflies, is also invaded by cockroaches, a symbol both of rot and of endurance. Black figures swathed in bright fabric are snarled in the undergrowth, all but subsumed; they feel ominous amid the splendor. Emerging, or being swallowed whole? Patterson leaves it an open question, the rough evolution of a society so often at war with itself mirrored in a natural cycle of order and chaos, growth and decay, beauty and terror.



Ibrahim Mahama, "NON ORIENTABLE PARADISE LOST 1667," 2017. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND WHITE CUBE. PHOTO BY CHARLES MAYER

Around the corner, even bigger stuff awaits: Madeline Hollander's "Heads/Tails: Walker and Broadway 2," 2020, an algorithmically-choreographed collage of disembodied head- and taillights flickering in tune with traffic patterns at one New York City intersection; Karyn Olivier's "Fortified," 2018-22, a towering brick wall that shows its cracks in the hundreds of salvaged garments sandwiched between rows; and

Ibrahim Mahama's "NON ORIENTABLE PARADISE LOST 1667" 2017, a pair of rickety wooden monoliths cobbled from countless battered crates used by Ghanaian shoeshiners to tote their gear.

Amid all the work here, Mahama's piece is powered by an intensity of absence; the boxes are personalized with newspaper clippings and photos, each one a ramshackle portrait of its owner. The whole thing feels precarious, and an appropriate shrine to its subjects: workers who cling to society by the slimmest thread, undervalued, transient, and perpetually insecure.



Joe Wardwell, "Gotta Go to Work, Gotta Go to Work, Gotta Get a Job" (detail), 2022. CHARLES MAYER

Labor is the show's most powerful common thread — so much so that works not explicit about its role in the culture of creative reuse feel a little misfit. As a fine point, Joe Wardwell's "Gotta Go to Work, Gotta Go to Work, Gotta Get a Job," 2022, a bright floor-to-ceiling text painting on two facing walls, finishes things off. Wardwell's work



frequently uses graphic depictions of song lyrics to carry his ideas (the title is borrowed from “Custom Concern” by Modest Mouse). Here, verses from plaintive workers-rights tunes — John Lennon’s “Working Class Hero,” Bruce Springsteen’s “Factory,” others by Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, Mercedes Sosa — are stenciled against silhouetted landscapes of East Boston vistas.

The piece recycles and distills the motif of a protest song and transforms it into a plaintive chorus. With the work set against a familiar backdrop, Wardwell brings it all home: In a neighborhood, and a country, largely built by undervalued labor, what size and scale a monument do we finally need to notice it, or care?

## **REVIVAL: MATERIALS AND MONUMENTAL FORMS**

Through Sept. 5. The Institute of Contemporary Art’s Watershed, 256 Marginal St. 617-478-3100, [www.icaboston.org](http://www.icaboston.org)

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