In different corners of South Africa’s Cape, Peter Gray and Peter Stewart are giving contemporary wildlife art a refreshing facelift.

In The Guardian, Peter Gray reminds us that even the king of beasts plays second fiddle to the elephant.
In Naples, Florida, says Gray and Stewart are enjoying some of their strongest sales among collectors under 50 years old. ‘I’m hearing two things,’ he says. ‘The first is that older collectors have filled up their dens and trophy rooms with traditional portrayals of big game animals and their wives want something different on the walls of the living room.’ Secondly, Parker notes, the grown children of aging collectors aren’t interested in decorating their homes and offices with their parents’ tastes. Couples, typically involving one spouse who hunts and another who doesn’t, want to build contemporary collections together.

I became aware of Gray and Stewart nearly a decade ago during a visit to Gray’s studio in Noordhoek east of Cape Town. Later, while spending a day at painter Kim Donaldson’s home outside of Durban, I was introduced to Stewart. Donaldson, a boundary-pushing painter in his own right, has served as Stewart’s mentor.

Born in 1950, Gray has steadily built a loyal following of collectors in North America, the UK, and Europe. His provocative images, in which he combines species not typically associated with one another in the wild, have been a delight of critics. Moreover, his elegant avian portraits—of waterfowl and marsh birds—have routinely been juried into the annual Birds in Art Show at Woodson Art Museum in Wausau, Wisconsin. They have also been selected for the museum’s prestigious traveling exhibitions.

Kathy Foley, the Woodson’s director, told me a few years ago that Gray’s painterly approach to realism is more kindred to the late Andrew Wyeth than art one would find at a Ducks Unlimited banquet. As a boy raised in an old colonial farmhouse in the middle of the African bush, Gray says the aesthetics of nature were imprinted on him; so, too, was an archetypal relationship with wildlife. The Grays lived close to Hwange and Matobo national parks. ‘Wild animals would regularly come into our garden to eat our vegetables and occasionally my dad would go out to protect the family from some dangerous creature, armed with just a dustbin lid as a shield and broomsticks. That Africa is gone.’
Born in 1966, Peter Stewart grew up in Durban where he developed a deep bond with wild areas in KwaZulu-Natal. His passion for wildlife led him to become a graphic designer for parks in the Natal province, a region famous for rescuing its rhino populations in the 1960s. Those populations have since been devastated by black market poaching.

“It’s not only wildlife that conjures up a nostalgic imagery and iconography of Africa, but also the many tribes, different settlers, legendary explorers, and big game hunters,” Stewart says. “Many of us who have traveled around Africa tend to relate to these early adventurers and their captivating stories.”

Stewart’s foundation is built upon studying the techniques of European masters and artists ranging from Wilhelm Kuhnert to Bob Kuhn, David Shepherd, Paul Bosman, Dino Paravano, Shirley Greene, the late Simon Combes, and others who were traditional in their approaches. Yet it was Donaldson’s mentorship and his multimedia approaches to his subject matter that convinced Stewart to be daring.

Ivan Carter, the Zimbabwe-born conservationist, professional hunter, and TV show host who spends 200 days a year in the wilderness, is a collector of Stewart’s work.

“The ability to accurately portray wildlife moments is a very rare talent,” says Stewart.
Carter. “Peter’s passion for wildlife shines through in the mood and lighting he conveys.”

Stewart is working on a new series that he calls “Legends of Africa,” in which he portrays people such as explorers David Livingstone, Henry Stanley, and Frederick Selous. “Each painting concept begins by creating a background of textured paint, manipulated and stressed to look like an old weathered surface onto which I paint what appears to be a real photograph,” he explains. “I sometimes use old frames, pieces of tape, old nails, postal stamps, studs—all to create an authentic feel that matches the painted ‘sepia’ image.”

The paintings morph and develop the deeper that he progresses into them, and collectors love them because they are so different, so provocative; they command attention on the wall. When pressed to describe them, Stewart says, “I guess you could call them contemporary realism.”

“Here’s a sense of eager expectation for the new works of both artists,” Parker says. “People who plan on attending the Safari Club show season in Houston, Dallas, and Las Vegas have been asking us about what Peter and Peter plan to unveil. And I tell them, ‘Well you have to attend the show. Having just returned from Africa and seen the paintings coming off their easels, all I can say is you’ll be amazed.’”

Note: Todd Wilkinson, who has hunted and fished his whole life, and written about sporting art for 30 years, is author of the new book, Grizzlies of Pilgrim Creek, An Intimate Portrait of 399, the Most Famous Bear of Greater Yellowstone, only available at www.mangelsen.com/grizzly.