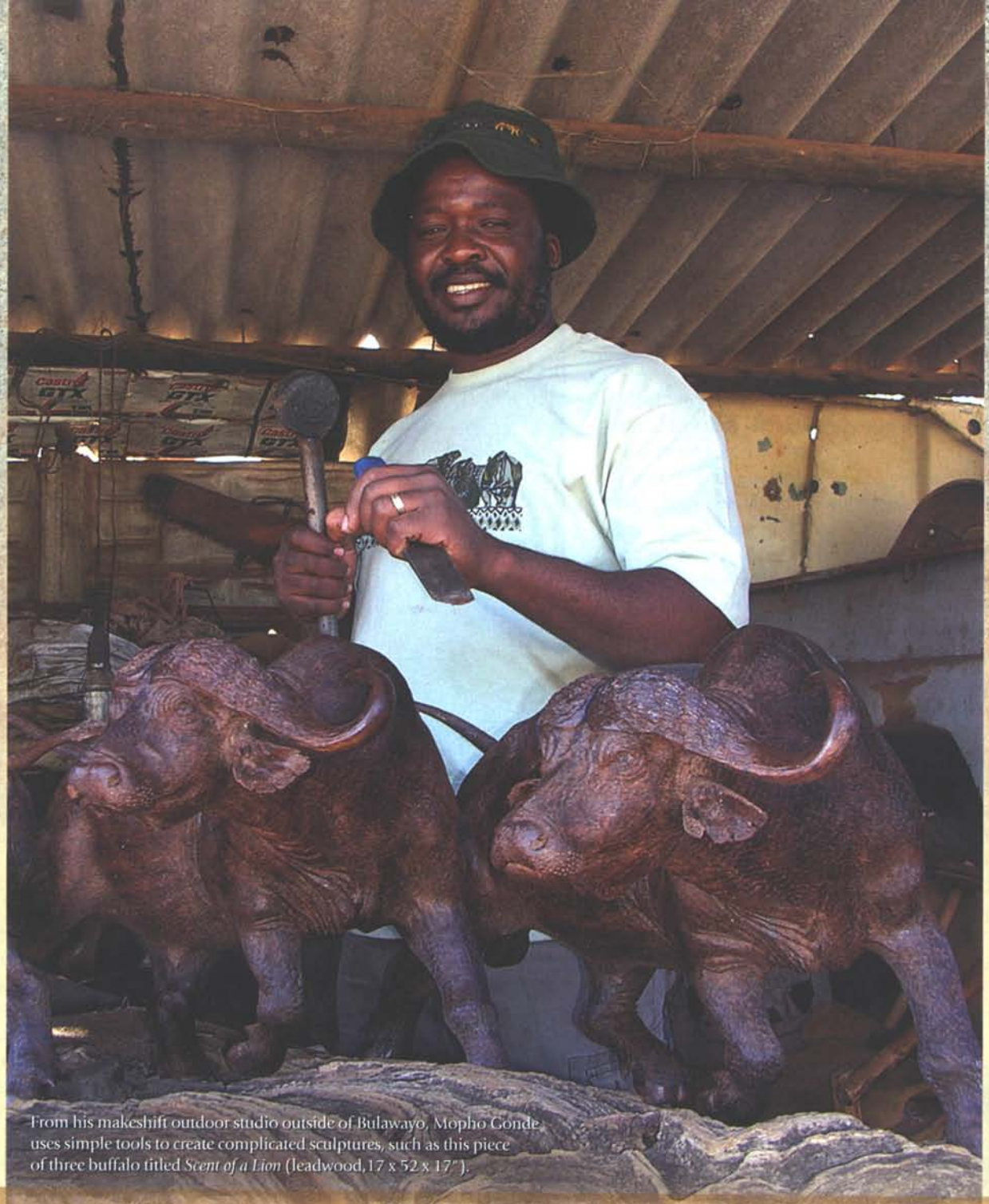


Photo by Todd Wilkinson.

From his makeshift outdoor studio outside of Bulawayo, Mopho Gonde uses simple tools to create complicated sculptures, such as this piece of three buffalo titled *Scent of a Lion* (leadwood, 17 x 52 x 17").

Zimbabwean Wood-Carver Mopho Gonde

BUSHVELD DREAMING

BY TODD WILKINSON

Mopho Gonde has been dreaming. In the mystical Matopos Hills of southern Zimbabwe, the quiet, bearded sculptor awakens from a six-hour slumber on the precipice of a steep ravine. According to his traditional beliefs, dreams are the mediums where artists receive visions passed along from the spirits of departed ancestors. Last night, the offerings were prodigious indeed.

Gonde's mind is filled with images of elephants, rhinoceros, elands and buffalo. As dawn suffuses the sky with warm drenching light, he sets out to find these actual beasts of the bushveld, hoping for an encounter in the flesh.

Silent Reflection (leadwood, 11 x 20 x 12")

For members of Gonde's tribe, the Ndebele, every day begins with a cleansing of the body. In search of water, he picks his way lower through a jumble of hoodoos—distinctive, surreal rock formations that have made the Matopos globally famous—and kneels beside a creek where the fresh tracks of predators and prey are indented in the sand. "The rhinos come to drink here," he says.

Gonde washes his face with cupped hands and absorbs the visceral symphony. From aeries in cliffs far above, black eagles screech and take to morning flight, their wings casting moving shadows across the valley floor. Echoing through the chasm, baboons shout guttural challenges, telling rival troops to stay clear of their territories. He will draw upon these stimuli later in his makeshift studio near the outskirts of Bulawayo. As if imbuing his leadwood creations with a magic polish, he'll apply the texture of this place with his hands, fulfilling the highest calling of a tactile animist.

Among collectors of wildlife art, Gonde's portfolio is acclaimed for its original approach to realism, yet he himself resides in obscurity. Considered a national treasure in Zimbabwe, along with the better-known Mashona stone carvers, whose masterpieces reside in major museums around the globe, his struggle is about more than artistic discovery. With social turbulence tearing his country apart, Gonde's story speaks to the fragile balance of survival confronting humans and nature.

Ever Watchful (leadwood, 29 x 18 x 17")

An Innate Talent

New York art collector Alan Davies describes Gonde as one of those exceptionally rare talents whose gift cannot be easily explained. It's akin, he says, to classical composers who know innately how to play by ear, long before they ever receive formal training in putting notes on paper. "This may seem an exaggeration but I honestly believe that, for his generation, Gonde is like the Michelangelo of native animal artists in Africa. He is a carver but he doesn't CARVE wood. He sculpts it as Western artists do with stone and clay. The guy is a genius and you can see it in the astounding accuracy of the depictions of his figures," which, Davies says, are not the kind of stiff pieces found in the Africa section at Pier I Imports. "Whatever

your conception of wood carving is, he's taken it to higher levels."

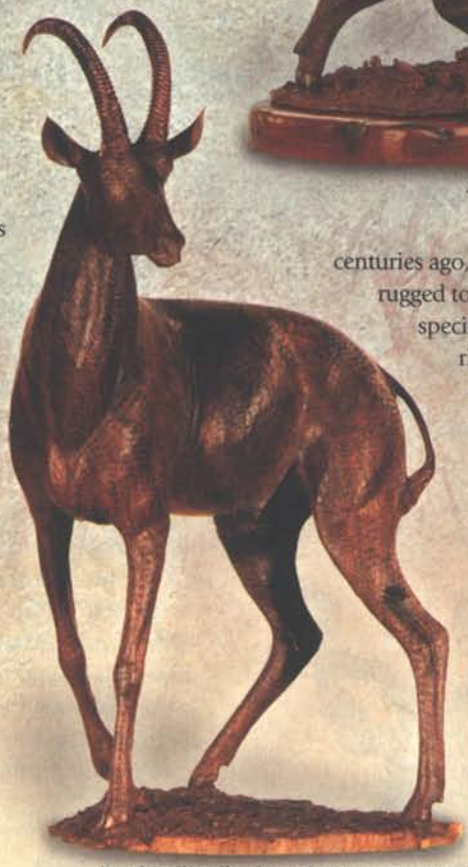
It may be obvious that Gonde's life exists in sharp contrast with that of contemporary wildlife artists in North America and Europe. Inhabiting the densely populated Nkulumane Township on the edge of Zimbabwe's second largest city, Gonde's 'luxuries' are: potable water and reliable septic systems, a four-wheel drive vehicle that runs, healthy family members amid a populace where HIV is rampant, and a tiny 25-by-25-foot courtyard of coveted personal space where he works beneath a tin roof to shade him from the broiling sun.

"It surprises me that people on the other side of the world would want to have my art to look at, but I do not complain," he says. "This is what I do. It is who I am."

Born in 1968, Gonde grew up in a rural village not far from the Botswana border. His given name emanates a powerful inference: 'Mopho' is a word meaning 'blood' in Zulu, and 'Gonde' refers to a tall tree species with golden leaves that grows prominently along the Zambezi River below Victoria Falls. Within the first dozen years of his life, a civil war raged around him, culminating in 1980 with the nation of Zimbabwe supplanting the former white-run government of Rhodesia. Gonde speaks Ndebele, English, and he can understand another half dozen native tongues and dialects, allowing him to converse with anyone in the countries that span the Horn of Africa.

Although he was educated in a primary school modeled after the British system, he says his school was closed for long stretches during the fighting. The most important lesson he took away, he says, is that when adversity happens, one must improvise. Adversity in Africa is a staple of daily existence.

At The Ready (leadwood, 14 x 22 x 10")



Regal Stallion (leadwood, 26½ x 13 x 12½")

Dangerous for Man and Beast

Much has changed since Zimbabwe's dismantling of colonialism. Given the current strife that has fueled an exodus of citizens, it is not wise to openly discuss politics or to criticize the direction of one's leader. Gonde expresses himself instead by escaping into his art, but even he must cope with a troubling reality: His country's once prolific wildlife populations, held up as the beacon of wise stewardship in Africa during the latter half of the 20th century, have dwindled due to poaching, meat hunting and wanton killing in national parks and private game preserves.

The Matopos, a landscape that historically offered refuge to both the San Bushmen and Ndebele after the latter branched off from the Zulus centuries ago, remains a natural fortress because of its rugged topography. It is still a haven for rare iconic species, including imperiled white and black rhino, nearly erased by black-market traders killing the animals for their horn. A sign at the front gate of the Matopos warns ominously: "Any One Seen or Suspected of Poaching Activities May Be Shot on Sight."

"The crazy people who are destroying Africa do not even think about the next generation," Gonde says. "We are creating deserts. How are we going to live in a desert without trees and animals? Without nature, there is no life."

Gonde will tell you humbly that he is self-taught, but that does not render him stylistically naive. Descended from a family of wood-carvers, he and his brothers were mentored by their father in techniques they still employ. His own attraction to

On the War Path (leadwood, 27 x 49 x 27")

sculpting was catalyzed after a succession of dreams in which elders appeared and said he needed to give a voice to animals.

While still a teenager, he received rudimentary instruction at an art and craft center and was mentored in figurative composition by Sam Songo, a Shona artist he regards as a key influence. As many contemporaries set up roadside stands, cheaply hawking their work for a few dollars, Songo became a champion for Zimbabwe's black artisans, insisting that they defy the patronizing Western stereotype and assert their own valid place in the global art world.

Pays His Dues Making Trinkets

Gonde first had to pay his dues. During the early 1990s, he and other Ndebele carvers were recruited to mass-produce animal and human figurines, tribal masks and faux warrior shields for international export. Soon thereafter, in need of money, he left Zimbabwe and moved to Pretoria, South Africa's capital city, where he, a few family members and hundreds of others fashioned trinkets from wood, stone, ivory and elephant bones. The experience left Gonde feeling depressed, but the grind of working quickly honed his ability to translate with his hands what he observed directly with his eyes.

Painter and sculptor Kim Donaldson, a former Rhodesian now living in South Africa, says Zimbabwe and most of Africa suffers from wood carving's bad cliché. But with Gonde and Shona realist James Tandi, he says, there is a deeper, more sophisticated grasp of line, form, proportionality and mass, consistent with the old masters of Europe.

Critics praise Gonde for making leadwood glisten like bronze, conveying musculature without pandering to literalness, and, in a soulful way, insinuating movement by understanding light and shadow. At the annual Safari Club International convention last winter in Reno, Nev., viewers were left rapt with Gonde's game animals. Ironically, one of his greatest initial skeptics was the art dealer who today is his sole representative in the United States and England—Ross Parker, founder of Call of Africa's Native Visions Galleries in Florida, who was born and raised on a farm in Zimbabwe. "Yes, I admit it. Long before I met Mopho Gonde and became acquainted with his work, I dismissed him, sight unseen," he says.

Parker's father, Dick, still lives in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital city, and is always scouting emerging local talent for his son. "When my dad phoned me up and said there was a wood-carver from Bulawayo worth checking out, I told him to forget it," Parker explains. "As a general rule, I'm not interested in representing wood-carvers because the quality of their work seldom reaches the level of being collectible fine art.

"And I adamantly object to their choice of material. Most African carvers are working hard to put food on the table for their families, and I sympathize with that." But in recent years, he explains, the proliferation of carvers and the unregulated harvest of common and rare trees has contributed to widespread deforestation in Africa. "I don't want to support that as an art dealer, nor do my clients," he says. "Enough living forests have already been logged, and too much wildlife habitat has already been destroyed."

Using Leadwood Spares Forests

But Gonde's material of choice, leadwood, comes from recycled dead trees found on the ground—many of which were felled by wild free-ranging elephants when they leaned against them as rubbing posts. However, leadwood is unforgiving, difficult to scavenge and, therefore, eschewed by amateurs. It was used prehistorically in Stone Age times to make spear points and takes its name from the fact that its fiber is leaden in density and resistant to termites. Comprised of tightly wound tree rings and capable of living 2,000 years, its massive trunks can seem as hard as rock—especially after they've toppled and weathered in the dry, harsh climate of the veld.

Chipping and fracturing easily, the wood's grain and

Buffalo (leadwood, 16 x 29 x 12")

intriguing nuances must be penetrated carefully or days' worth of work can be ruined. "You can make mistakes, but if you are experienced in making peace with the wood, you don't make many," Gonde says.

For Gonde, the proportionality of his pieces flows from his rendering of an animal's head. In *Regal Stallion*, a sable is portrayed in a stoic pose. With *At the Ready*, a skittish warthog darts to its right, tusks locked and ready for engagement, and in *On the War Path*, an elephant charges with flaring, rippling ears.

With Gonde's stature growing, he has received special permission from the local chief to gather leadwood on tribal lands around Tsholotsho. But he must do so with caution. Bandits and poachers are active during day and evening hours, so he typically goes out early in the morning before first light to avoid danger. He is careful to harvest only pieces that have intriguing physical characteristics, such as color anomalies, burls, gnarls and shapes that are more conducive to interpretations of certain species.

At his studio, he shows his small arsenal of tools: basic mallets and chisels along with portable electric die grinders. Sometimes, when he is meticulously replicating the supple feel of an animal's fur or hide, he can sense another's hand guiding him. "When you get a piece of wood and put it here, the spirit comes forward, flowing like milk," Gonde says.

Legendary 2-Ton Elephant

While many of Gonde's visions for new works have come during sleep, the inspiration for one of his most ambitious creations, a large piece titled *In a Frenzy*, occurred while he and wife, Margereth, trekked across the undulating savanna beyond Hwange National Park, home to the country's last great elephant herd.

The sculpture is based on Kambaku, remembered in lore as an almost mythical 55-year-old tusker, one of the 'the magnificent seven' elephants that lorded over the veld encompassing Kruger National Park in South Africa. While researching the legacy of Kambaku, Gonde happened upon a mighty trunk of a 1,000-year-old leadwood that existed in the middle of an elephant migration corridor. It had probably been pushed to the ground by a hulking pachyderm.

Gonde spent months plotting a strategy that would bring the huge piece to life. When it finally arrived at Parker's gallery in Fort Lauderdale, it took 12 people to carry the 2-ton carving inside. Remarkable touches are the intricate texture of the trunk, the rippling of the animal's shoulder muscles, and tusks made from inner layers of kudu horn, simulating the appearance of ivory. *In a Frenzy* sits on a base made of antique teak that was recycled from Zimbabwean railroad ties.

"The artwork is magnificent but the leadwood itself has special meaning and a context that gives viewers an actual physical connection to the Zimbabwean landscape and the elephants Gonde celebrates," Parker explains. "Once upon a time, a real elephant leaned against this tree."

Often, leadwood trunks of this size have flaws from decomposition that leave them unworkable but this one, which spawned *In a Frenzy* and a series of others, was in perfect, almost petrified condition. "Finding trees like this is like stumbling upon a diamond, but the real priceless treasure is Mopho Gonde himself," Parker says. "Someone like him comes around only once in a lifetime." WA

Todd Wilkinson is a free-lance writer living in Bozeman, Mont.

Images courtesy of Call of Africa's Native Visions Galleries, unless otherwise noted.

In A Frenzy (leadwood, 38 x 75 x 30")