

Time goes on," writes Alan Donovan in his new book, *My Journey Through African Heritage*, "and sitting on my roof once again, I watch the grass of the savannah rapidly fade from verdant green to somber tones of brown and tan, signifying the coming of the hot weather..."

Sitting with Donovan, I cannot help but agree that time really has passed. It is almost 40 years since Donovan, a native of Colorado, USA, first arrived in Africa. Since then, Donovan, co-founder of African Heritage — the continent's first Pan African Gallery — deserves the tribute as one of the most passionate crusaders for African art and culture.

I visit him just days after his return from a tour of the US and Switzerland to launch *My Journey Through African Heritage*, which chronicles his lifelong quest and passion for the continent's beauty and creativity.

Evident in our conversation is the fact that even though African Heritage has succumbed to the changing eras, the passing of time has only served to reaffirm the attraction that Donovan felt for Africa long before he stepped into the continent.

He writes in his book: "To those outside its magnetic spell, Africa may seem incomprehensible, fathomless, in the primordial past." But, even having been a "stunned witness to famine, death and rabid tribal hatred," Donovan saw, and still sees, a different Africa — "one with an ageless and vibrant beauty".

His discovery of Africa's legacy to the world of art, though, has left him with a sad conclusion: that Africa is "always left out." This is an echo of his initial feelings when he first arrived 1967, against a backdrop of "... a seismic shift of the old plates of the cold war as countries sought their own destiny, to Nigeria, a country at war itself".

Back then, he felt that war was forgotten to the world, at least based on the response he obtained when he asked an American agricultural officer based in Nigeria about it: "Africans can't fight a prolonged war — they have to get back to planting maize and beans".

The plight of African people — and black people for that matter — has not, according to Donovan, improved much since. "It is as the Reverend Jesse Jackson said the other day (about the New Orleans Katrina tragedy): America has a huge capacity to let black people suffer".

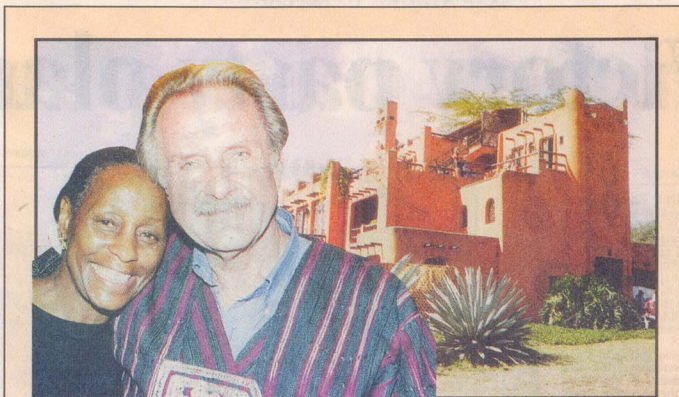
Donovan regrets that African art and African things in general have suffered. He feels that, for instance, a sturdy prejudice, which does not arise when discussing art from other parts of the world, exists in the west when it comes to African art. "Take this statue for instance," he says pointing at a sculpture at the front door of his Athi House. "Francis Ngunjiri who made it is a brilliant artist... the chairman of the Makerere University Art Department. Yet some people might look at this work and say that this or that artist from the west has influenced it. But it hasn't".

If anything, Donovan maintains the reverse to be true. "African art and culture has hugely influenced modern art. The famous 'southern cuisine' and southern hospitality in America all have to do with Africa... indeed anything traditional found in that region all came from Africa. Even the music has its roots in Africa. The tall pillars and big houses are the only colonial legacy."

The Bakuba palm fibre tapestries from the Congo — which Donovan considers the most beautiful designs in the world — have influenced works by artists such as Picasso and Matisse. Appliques made by the latter inspired by the Kuba cloth now sell for millions of dollars in America.

In this regard, Donovan finds it even more unfortunate that Africans themselves are not able to see, or take advantage of this inter-linkage between their art with modern times and times.

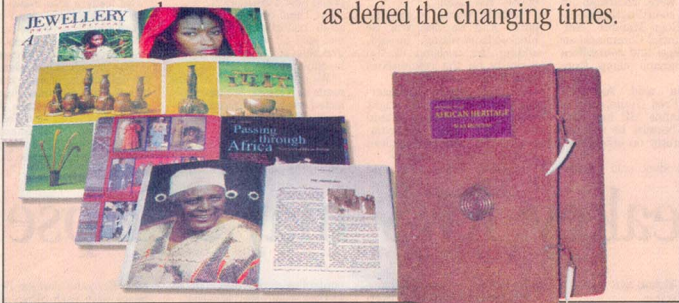
Just as he helplessly watched "as



Donovan and Irene Mugambi, a pioneer Kenyan model, with his Athi House in the background. Bottom: Pages from his colourful book, *My Journey Through African Heritage*, including the picture of former vice-president Joseph Murumbi.

# For the Love of Africa

Liz Ng'ang'a looks at how Alan Donovan's quest for African beauty and creativity as defied the changing times.



a people sacrificed its children to the vision of nationhood" when he first arrived in Africa, today Donovan sees Africans shunning their own culture and art.

Despite holdings one of the world's finest collections of art and crafts, the Athi House defies being strictly traditional by maintaining an avant garde feeling in its designs and accoutrements. The modern cooker in the kitchen, for instance, fits in just as well as the 15th century sculpture of a Benin horn-blower at the entrance of the house. Donovan's sleek green Jeep does not seem out of place against the house's ochre walls, sensual arches and raised colonnades.

Donovan defies other notions about Africa too. He continues to serve as a conduit and catalyst to the awesome beauty of Africa, even when little positive publicity seems to be getting into the international media from the continent.

My Journey Through African Heritage, designed and published in Kenya, has received international acclaim and is on sale in several outlets in America including the San Diego zoo, which is displaying the special bark cloth cover edition.

At present, Donovan is negotiating with the largest mall in America, the Mall of America in Minneapolis, Minnesota, to present a show by Kenya's African Heritage Festival along with a book signing in 2006.

So far, Donovan has done one major book signing tour, in May to July, which retraced the steps he

made with African Heritage. In his native Colorado, Donovan gave a slide lecture on his life in Africa for a class reunion at his home town in Wray. Posters distributed throughout the Rocky Mountain resorts described *My Journey Through African Heritage* as "a rare and unusual book that charts an important period in Kenyan history and contemporary culture through the lens of one man's life." "The Athi Plains was my view of the world for more than three decades," says Donovan. Sitting in his favourite room, the rooftop verandah, which overlooks the Nairobi National Park, with Kenya-Uganda railway in the foreground, Donovan would look at amazing sights, such as the annual migration (described as the greatest natural spectacle in the world).

"I would watch as the plains turned into a churning, mooring sea of wildebeest, with their camp fol-

lowers: Zebras, a few antelopes, and hyenas looking for a young baby still too weak to outrun them and ever circling buzzards and stocks. It was estimated that 20,000 wildebeest, along with the attendant zebras, hyenas and others seasonally migrated through the park twice a year."

As I sit with him here today, I see how times have changed: only two zebras and two ostriches. And even these, Donovan tells me, are lucky sightings. "There are days I don't see even a rat trawling by."

The park is now sometimes largely empty of animals due to the fences and settlements, which clog the animal dispersal area further down. The wildebeest that used to visit the park in their thousands now are forced to take another route, which takes them up behind the cement factories in the Athi River area. When they try to get into the park from the fenced side of the park, many get hit by trains. Last year, for instance, there was no migration of note and 1,000 wildebeest got trapped in a fenced area.

It is no wonder then that throughout his book signing tours, Donovan continues to raise money for the lions in the Nairobi National Park, which often go out of the park in search of food. Recently, Donovan did a book signing in Nairobi, at the International Book Fair at the Sarti, and also at the Text Book Centre in September. He will soon commence a book signing tour of all Serena Hotels in Lodges in Africa, sponsored by Serena Hotels.

He will then travel back to the US to pick up from where he left off after he ran out of books in July. The trip will once again take him to San Diego zoo, then to Phoenix Arizona, where he will open a new emporium and lecture Lions and Rotary Club members in Washington, D.C., he will join former US Ambassador Tim Carney — who served in Somalia and Sudan — who will release his new book on Sudan. Donovan will also speak to World Wildlife Clubs and other venues. Back in Kenya, Donovan will host a book signing for Ambassador Tim Carney at the Athi House during the Second African Heritage Day in February 2006.

In his own words, Donovan's life has come full circle. "Mel and Patricia were on Oprah (Winfrey Show) a couple of days ago I hear and spoke to her about me," he told me recently. Mel and Patricia Ziegler were the founders and original owners of Banana Republic, famous in the US for its wonderful catalogs and store displays, and which retailed African Heritage designs. Incidentally, Donovan designed jewellery for Oprah's first movie, *The Colour Purple*, and provided a Kenyan model, Susan Auma, who played the role of Oprah's daughter returning from Africa.

To crown it all, a few days ago Donovan received an invitation from the Africana Bull Art and Craft Museum to do a show on Vanishing Textiles and Heritage. It was in that same venue — when the museum was called the Egg and the Eye — that Donovan held one of his first tours in 1971.

"So much has been lost in the African continent. Some of it we will never know. The Vanishing Textiles Exhibition will allow people what Africa had and what it still has," says Donovan. The saying that "the more things change the more they remain the same" could not be more appropriate. And despite the changing times, Alan Donovan's passion for African beauty and creativity continues.

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