

ART

Waging an artistic battle against Aids

By ELLY WAMARI

A lush art exhibition with a grassroots purpose. That is what it was — a five-day display of 130 stone sculptures that ended on July 16 in Nairobi, by a group of 20 skilled artisans from Gucha District in Nyanza Province.

Lush because a good number of the items on display were masterpieces with costly price-tags on them; and grassroots purpose because the group plans to plough back part of the proceeds from their sales to needy communities in their home district.

Known as Design Power Consultants (DEPCONS), the group is waging an "Artistic War Against Poverty, HIV and Aids", as they have aptly titled their mission, conceived in 2001 but just beginning to take shape.

Their approach to tackling poverty and the impact of Aids is three-fold. First, a good number of their works portray aspects of poverty and Aids, illustrating the respective impacts in ways that sharply bring out the real picture on the ground.

Secondly, they have launched a grand scheme to commit 20 per cent of the proceeds from their sales to useful community projects in Gucha District. In addition, they want visit various parts of the country to create awareness among the local people on how to use locally available materials (mostly stones) to make artistic items for sale in order to uplift their welfare.

Using other types of stone

According to the group's co-ordinator, Elkanah Ong'esa, stones other than the better known soapstone can also be used to make artistic items for sale. This was effectively demonstrated by an abstract carving of an elderly woman made out of

volcanic rock from Kerio Valley displayed at the exhibition, which was held at Nairobi's Grand Regency Hotel. Also displayed was an unfinished sculpture from a type of granite stone common in Kakamega district.

Said Ong'esa: "These extra sculptures are here to demonstrate the possibilities of using other stones in carving. We want to go around and train other people on how to use stones within their localities to create works of art that can be sold to enable them to earn some money. We are also keen on demonstrating the use of different kinds of clay in pottery and ceramics."

Ong'esa was a happy man at the end of the exhibition, which he described as "highly successful" because of the surprisingly good turnout of people, the significant sales made and the establishment of "good contacts" willing to make worthwhile contributions to their efforts.

Indeed, one contact has invited the group to Rwanda next month, not only to display and sell their wares, but also to introduce their approach to the war on poverty and Aids to the country.

And their approach is simple, but very meaningful. Having been touched by the devastating effects of HIV/Aids in their rural community, the group has drawn up plans for water projects which they want to benefit needy households affected by the pandemic.

"We see water as a very important ingredient in the war against poverty. We have also observed a lot of children orphaned due to Aids being used to fetch water, sometimes from very far away.

"Our aim, therefore, is to bring water to these households using sustainable means such as installing systems for rainwater harvesting, digging boreholes, fitting water-driven high-drum pumps, and channelling water from catchment areas through pipes by means of gravity," says Ong'esa.



Photo/Stephen Mudiari

CAST IN STONE: Elkanah Ong'esa with a sculpture, 'The victim', by John Masese.

He says that easy access to water serves two main fundamental purposes: it makes it possible to irrigate farms during the dry season and therefore avoid starvation, and also reduces the suffering of the already unfortunate Aids orphans who walk long distances to fetch water for their grandparents.

From a seemingly low sale of 10 pieces of the 70 put up for sale during the exhibition, Ong'esa expects the group to earn Sh500,000 "if all the buyers honour their commitments and pay up". Out of this, Sh100,000, will go towards initiating DEPCONS' water projects. Ong'esa says that this amount is enough to start off at least one water project.

Detailed sculptures

Some of the works on display fetched as much as Sh90,000 apiece. And with good reason? The detail in most of the sculptures admirably brought to life the topics in a manner that could easily induce emotional reactions.

One such carving depicted a clearly frustrated

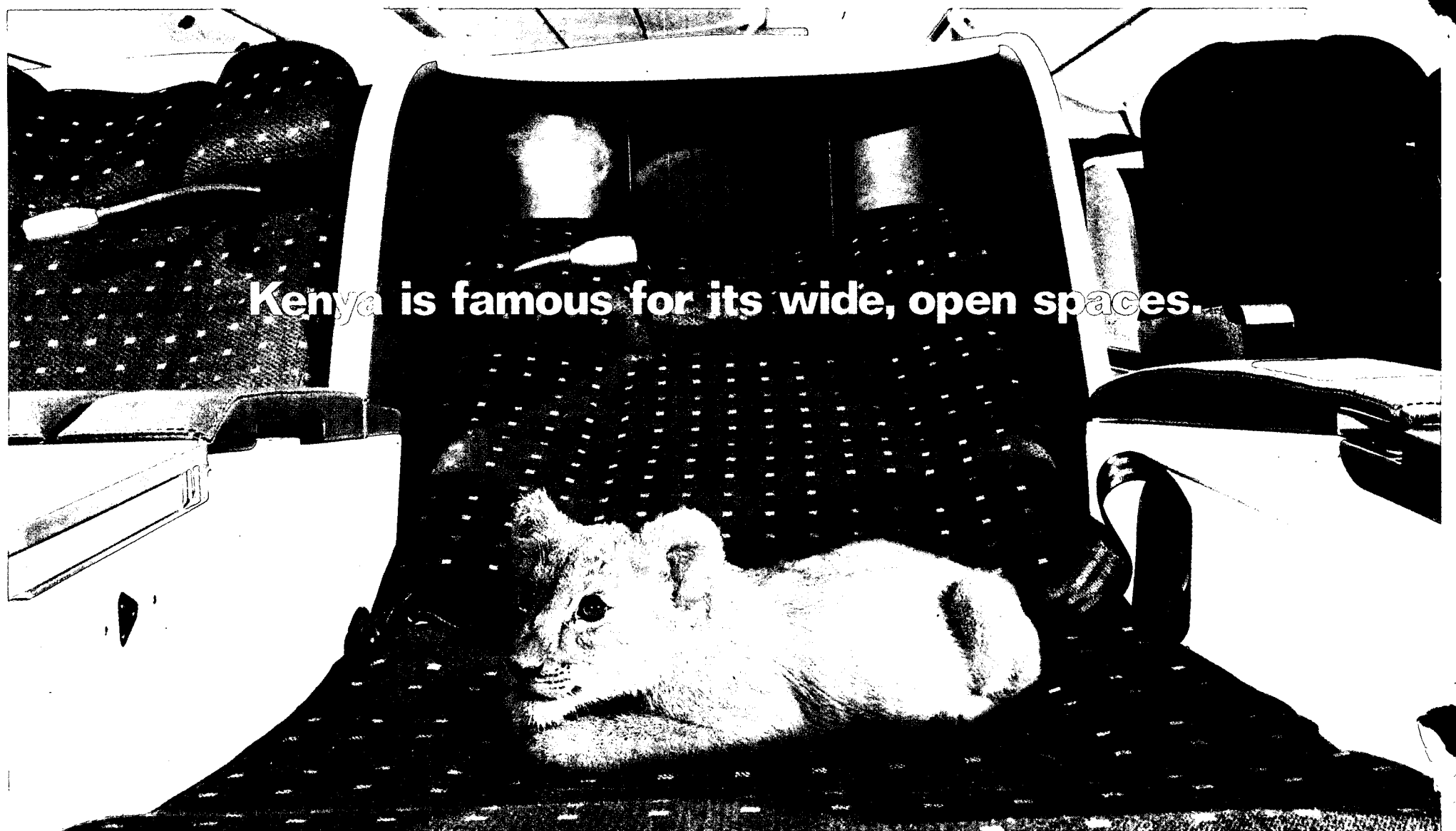
elderly woman holding a dying adult Aids sufferer, completely at a loss as to what to do. Another presented a moving scenario of a baby blissfully suckling from its already dead mother. This, according to Ong'esa, depicts cases of neglect of HIV/Aids patients, which is common in many communities.

The group's works are inspired by first-hand experiences. Half of the artisans, are either directly or indirectly affected by HIV/Aids, explains Ong'esa, hence their commitment to the subject.

But the exhibition was not all about sad scenes. There were also sculptures depicting life in traditional set-ups, some portrayed in a humorous manner as though to break the monotony of the sadness generated by those relaying Aids messages.

The group's next stop will be Kakamega, where they intend to market the use of granite to make sculptures, before moving on to El Wak in north-eastern. Here, Ong'esa is keen on leading his group in marketing a type of soft-stone available in the region that can also be used in carving.

—ewamari@nation.co.ke



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