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"Not to be neglected-

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â\200\234itAlbert Munyai"

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By Michael Markovitz

Three years ago, Venda nature conservation officials confiscated all Albert Munyai's sculptures and burnt them. The reason: Munyai did not have a permit to carve wood.

Today Munyai is a bitter man but he still continues to carve wood with maniac energy. Some of Munyai's more disturbing work depicts quasi-reptilian, horned creatures with erect penises. He has also completed two skeletal woodcarvings on "Slims Disease"

44Aids).

Twenty-nine year old Munyai has not been recognised by the art world. He was neglected by "The Neglected Tradition" exhibition at the Johannesburg Art Gallery which closed in January. A recently published book - "Art of the South African Townships" by Gavin Younge - also omitted mention of Munyai's work.

When I visited Munyai in Thengwe Village, north of Thohoyandou, he was in a foul mood.

"Wood has given me a lot of problems. I still haven't got the money to buy a permit. But I haven't stopped working since the age of twelve. At the moment I'm feeling crazy. If I stop for a moment, I might just die" he warns us.

Munyai says that he has some kind of chemical imbalance for which is being treated at the Mutale hospital.

"I've still got a lot of fucking tablets to suck and they are not workingâ\200\235.

Munyai was trained by his

brother-in-law Samuel Nethengwe, the master craftsman of the Mutale area. Nethengwe gathered together 48 carvers in his workshop. They made calabashes, spoons, bowls and walking sticks which were sold as finely crafted curios. After the workshop disintegrated, Nethengwe returned to farming as a full-time occupation. Munyai continued to make curios.

Godfrey Dederan, a lecturer in Venda University's anthropology department, maintains that Munyai is a better fine artist than he was a craftsman.

"You should have seen the junk he made as a craftsman. He went crazy and hated making spoons" says Dederan.

Midway through 1986, artist David Roussow introduced Munyai to the work of Michelangelo. Roussow says that Munyai "started copying techniques and from there his work just took off". Albert began to sell his sculptures more widely. 'Ditike' 231, an outlet run by the Venda Development Corporation, began purchasing many of Munyai's pieces. But in early 1987 he was arrested and charged with carving wood without a permit.

Venda's Nature Conservation and National Parks Act provides protection for over 110 indigenous tree-types. Traditionally, a carver could obtain wood through his headman or chief. However, along with 'independence' 231 in Venda came a department of agriculture and forestry, incorporating its own department of nature conservation. Forestry officials have since been trying to replace

the traditional system of payment with a permit system. According to Roussow, "very few woodcarvers in Venda have permits. Most of those people who have permits are in the timber business".

The permit system is not strictly enforced as there are only 11 nature conservation officials in the whole of Venda. However, in Munyai's case, there were more

powerful forces at work.  
Although Albert was articulate and calm, the magistrate found that he and his wife were faulty witnesses. All Albert's work was confiscated and he was given a R200 fine for carving wood without a permit. His sculptures were placed in a storeroom and earmarked for burning.

Six months later all the works were discovered - ready for sale - at a rival sculptor's workshop. Albert's rival happened to be the magistrate's brother-in-law. Roussow collected the works and took them to the magistrate. Nature conservation officials were called and eventually a story was constructed. It was claimed that the nightwatchman at the storeroom had given them away to be burned for firewood "because he

- didn't know that they were

sculptures". Despite Roussow's attempts to save Munyai's work, it was duly re-confiscated and burned.

Munyai now refuses to talk about his arrest and the subsequent burning of all of his work because "it breaks up my mind". But the problem of getting wood is not the only issue disturbing his mind. Munyai has a traditional job. He has to do a malombo dance

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designed to appease the ancestors.  
The spirits of the ancestors reside  
in sacred groves throughout  
Venda. But many of these groves  
are being threatened by roads,  
agriculture and electricity pylons.  
Munyai is constantly disturbed by  
the problem that the ancestors  
"have nowhere to go"235.

Dederan says that "Munyai will  
cross the river and go and sit in  
the graveyard, where nobody else  
will go. He is not afraid of the  
ancestors and communicates with  
them through visions and  
dreams".

Most of his art is based on these  
images. He tells me that he is  
busy with a six-piece work that he  
intends to join together in a metal  
frame. Three of the twisted  
reptilian figures have been  
completed. Although it is hard to  
visualise Munyai's plan, he  
clearly intends it to be a work of  
massive proportions.

Steve Hilton-Barber/Afrapix

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He complains that "the pampoens  
in the village are cutting down  
the trees. It's a big problem  
because all the good forms are  
broken up for firewood". Munyai  
whistles in despair after every  
comment and remonstrates with  
himself for not working harder.

Roussow compares Munyai to the  
great Nelson Mukhuba who killed  
himself, his wife and two  
daughters in February 1987.  
Mukhuba is still regarded as  
having been one of South Africa's  
greatest wood sculptors.

Munyai has a similarly obsessive  
view of the relationship between  
death and art. An atmosphere of  
latent violence pervades his  
workshop and he occasionally  
rages off on a tangent, without  
provocation.

Roussow is worried that Munyai  
may not survive the trauma of his

own obsessions. "He is a great  
artist but he is still very young"235  
says Roussow.

Munyai, who is married and has two daughters, is feared by some members of his community who think he is a witch. In the short time I spent with Munyai in his workshop, he became excessively agitated.

He asked me for a lift down to the fiver where he wanted to continue sculpting. In the car he insulted everybody and complained vociferously about his lot in life. As we stopped near a group of workers felling trees to make way for electricity pylons, Munyai shouted out the window: "Pampoens! I had to pay a fine all because of a tree". The workers seemed bewildered as the young, shirtless man with an axe in his hand stormed off into the bush.

Venda artist Albert Munyai with his work

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