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(Barbara Ludman)
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“The heart of my
sculptures beats as I
work”
SCULPTING LIFE INTO
DEAD TREES

EARLY in winter, when the river beds begin to dry up, sculptor Lucas Sithole sets out for the veld.

It's the best time to find the wood he needs: broken trunks and branches of wild olive, msimbiti and ironwood, battered by storms, washed into the river.

Sithole is not the only person in Zululand after stray bits of timber. But he is one of the few seeking wood to preserve it. The competition wants to burn the wood in cooking fires.

A leading sculptor for decades, he's well-schooled in the techniques of gathering hardwoods, his raw material. He goes out early in winter, or in the wake of veld fires, or after a tornado.



“I never cut down a living tree,” he says. By sculpting the wood into animals or graceful elongated human forms, his idea is “to bring the dead trees back to life. I use only those trees that have been destroyed by nature.”

Sithole is finding it increasingly difficult to find the type of material he needs, despite his single-minded pursuit. South African hardwoods outside

protected plantations are disappearing – and once grown in plantations, the wood is out of bounds, both for sculptors and for people who might need the wood for heat and cooking.

“In a few years,” he says, “wood will be like diamonds, you won't be able to get it.”

Sithole's works are in collections in Europe and the USA and most major South African collections include his sculptures. He also works in stone, liquid steel and bronze, but prefers to work in wood.

“I like it,” he says. “I can feel the warmth. I can almost feel the heart of my sculptures beating as I work. I can't get that from stone or from liquid steel.”

He turned 50 last month, and remembers a time when there was plenty of wood for the taking.

The best wood is in Swaziland, he says, and for years he scoured the Swazi veld for kiasat, tambotie and nkunzibomvu.

“It's wonderful wood,” he says, “and very hard to find.” It is also impossible to take it out of the country; a few years ago he was stopped at the border and the wood was unloaded before he was allowed to proceed.

“At one time, I had the road to myself, now they tell me it is Swazi wood and I may not take it out of the country.” Why not? The Swazis, he says, also need firewood.

A year ago he moved from Kwa-Thema near Springs to an undisclosed spot in Zululand, to live closer to nature and to find the solitude he needs in order to

work. He sculpts outside in a plantation.

“It's beautiful,” he says. “The birds come and try to eat the crumbs from the wood. In Springs, there are so many visitors I can't work.”



Sithole's family is still in Springs; one trip to the bundu was enough. Only his youngest son, Putshu, 17, will accompany him to Zululand – but Putshu is a painter and, says Sithole, “He is fond of experiments.”

So Lucas Sithole divides his time between his two homes, with township life part of the month, and work in the veld for the rest.

“It's good to study life”, he says, “to live with the trees, to see them when they grow, and to see them when they die.” To know a living tambotie tree or a wild olive adds an extra dimension to his sculpture. It makes the sculpture live, he says. *