Son of Combes: Of Life, Loss And The Search For Meaning In Kenya

After Artist Simon Combes' Tragic Death, Guy Combes Paints His Own Vision Of Africa

Written By Todd Wilkinson (Author's Bio)

"*I loved the country so that I was happy as you after you have been with a woman that you really love, when, empty, you feel it welling up again and there it is and you can never have it all and yet what there is, now, you can have, and you want more and more, to have, and be, and live in, to possess now again for always, for that long, sudden-ended always*."
—Ernest Hemingway in *Green Hills of Africa*.

by Todd Wilkinson

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE EQUATOR, not so far from where archaeologists unearthed early human bones in the Great Rift Valley, the start of east African summer is fragrant with green-up. Sonically, it is a boisterous time, with baying young quadrupeds and birdsong broadcast though the gaps by hundreds of species. Normally the season is about regeneration.

Every December for nearly a decade, Kathryn Combes and Alan Binks have encountered a painful, indescribable void that does not go away. In 2011, Combes posted a simple photograph (above) on Facebook. She does not need to elaborate on what happened inside the tranquil-appearing scene; her friends know. Her sweet remembrance held only these words: “The last view Simon had before it got dark. We miss you my love.”

Simon Combes, her late husband and Alan Binks’ best friend, was not a daredevil—not in the reckless, egomaniacal sense that American stuntman Evel Knievel was. In his own way, Combes was a figure fashioned from the cloth of Hemingway. He didn’t court danger for danger’s sake, but neither was he afraid of it. He lived in a place, on a big broad shouldered continent, and in a country—Kenya—where peril has a knack for unexpectedly finding a person.

Anyone with a history in Africa understands this impetuous duality, the twin faces of nurturing and indifference a landscape can wear; a potential to switch from one to the other in an instant. Those who call the bush home do not speak of it in words; they feel the reality, sense it, know it, and have absorbed it into their being. They must accept it. This is a story about a father and son, both painters, one who had become famous, the other searching for his own voice; each with the archetypes of wildlife imprinted upon their psyches.

SIMON COMBES WAS ONE OF THE BEST-KNOWN WILDLIFE PAINTERS OF HIS GENERATION. Born in Shaftesbury, Dorset, England, he entered the world the same year, 1940, that the Luftwaffe began relentlessly pounding London with bombs. When Combes was five, after World War II was brought to a close, his parents moved the family to colonial Kenya. (This Painting: "Titan", oil, by Guy Combes. Cape Buffalo were among Simon Combes' favorite subjects to paint).

“Our father, Jim Combes, gave distinguished service in the British army in World War II before coming to Kenya to face a new and uncertain future,” says Jenny Combes, Simon’s sister. “He struggled against all odds, but always kept his humour and resolve to face the next hurdle. There you have Simon’s strength and resolve, a great sense of humour, and adventure. Our artistic talent is definitely inherited from my mother who painted beautifully, designed costumes for theatre, excelled at set dressing, window dressing and flower arranging like a professional, which were all part of her various jobs. From our parents we were given a loving and close family, impeccable manners *and honesty*.”

The Combes kids spent a lot of time gaining a natural inclination for wildness at the family's 800-acre farm in the Great Rift Valley. Unfortunately, Combes, as was the custom, found himself sent off to boarding school in Nakuru and Duke of York in Nairobi, something he resented. Finally, he was able to break free from the city and, at 17, hired to manage a large farm in western Kenya.

At the end of his teenage years, compulsory service drew him into the army where he earned a commission in the King's African Rifles. It coincided with the years in the early 1960s when Kenya secured independence from England. Becoming an officer in the Kenyan military, Combes exhibited uncommon ability as an artist. Self taught, he sketched and painted landscapes as well as human figures. Often, his subjects involved portrayals of military life and of native peoples in their villages. As Binks says, Combes was hardly known as a soft-handed artiste. A rough and tumble soldier warrior when he needed to be, he attained the rank of major, commanding men in Kenya's guerilla war with Somalia and leading the country's first airborne unit. He oversaw the translation of all of the instruction books into Swahili and, in England, trained 250 parachuting colleagues for combat.

His art represented a form of unwinding, a way of chronicling what was most memorable in his days. Along the way, he met, sketched and married a hardy English countrywoman, Susie. "They met in a pub while Dad was in training at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst," Guy says. "He took her home to Kenya and they were together 25 years. She very much nurtured his confidence. Mum is also artistic and has an amazing eye. She was influential in many of his creative decisions."

Guy Combes considers "**Tension At Dawn**", oil, to be one of his father's finest. It is a work that earned praise from the late Bob Kuhn.

Within a decade, having shifted into oils, Combes' pictures came into demand among well-heeled collectors on safari and prominent members of the colonial generation who believed his art emanated the exotic essence of their experiences. Among those who saw promise was Bob Kuhn, the American who

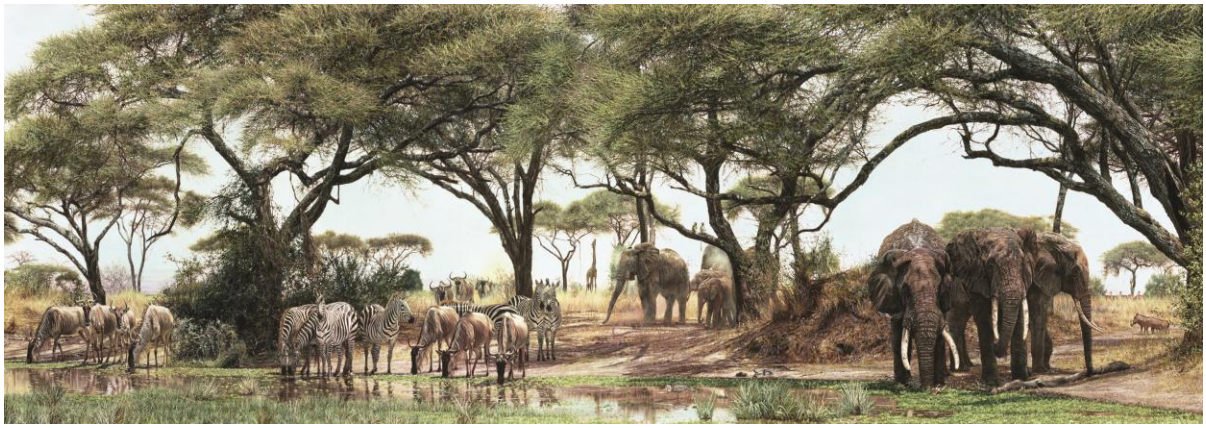
went to Kenya on research trips—Kuhn himself then was painting animals full-time after a successful career in New York as a commercial illustrator. Combes too became a wildlife artist.

The first ever exhibition of his work was held in 1969 in Nairobi's New Stanley Art Gallery. He quickly became known as Kenya's premier animal artist. By the mid 1970s and for decades afterward, he enjoyed a meteoric rise of popularity. It was punctuated, in 1980, by the decision of David Usher, founder of Greenwich Workshop in the U.S. to market a number of original Combes paintings as fine-art prints. Subsequently, Combes had as many admiring collectors in North America as he did in the U.K.

"Simon was *an experience* as much as he was an artist— the full package. I always thought he made Indiana Jones look like greasy kid's stuff." —Scott Usher

"Simon was *an experience* as much as he was an artist—the full package," says Scott Usher who took over the reins of Greenwich Workshop from his late father. "I always thought Simon made Indiana Jones look like greasy kid's stuff. And that was what we wanted in an African artist. It is a wild untamed place and behind the British accent you sensed right away you were in the presence of either a wild, untamed man or a man that could tame a wild place. He could communicate that in his paintings, he could communicate that as a storyteller."

"I think we looked upon Simon Combes with a bit of envy," says the American animal sculptor Ken Bunn, who remembers Combes and his work from the annual Game Coin safari convention in San Antonio, Texas where a few originals appeared every year. "We all felt blessed to be spending time in Africa, but at the end of the day we were visitors. Kenya was *his* home, and that's what I think about when I see his work. He's communicating something about that relationship that just comes shining through. The narratives oozed with authenticity. Combes had been charged by elephants, and stumbled upon lions, leopards and cheetahs on foot in the tall grass, and similarly, while assisting on anti-poaching patrols had close calls with other species ranging from snakes to rhinos and black-market traders toting AK-47s, Binks notes.



"**African Oasis**", oil, by Simon Combes

In 1990, Greenwich published Combes' first book *An African Experience: Wildlife Art and Adventure in Kenya* that featured 80 paintings and a foreword by his friend, the eminent English wildlife artist David Shepherd. In many ways, that book was also Combes' homage to his friendship with Binks. "We had many experiences in the bush. They were special and there was, throughout our relationship, a friendly competitive comradeship that I hold very close to my heart. I could teach him a thing or two, and did, but not often."

Combes' natural ability to draw—a skill that he always harped to his son as being the prime, irreplaceable necessity of an artist—became the foundation of many classic predicament scenes, portrayals of animals in action. Africa lit the fire inside him, but he ranged far. Combes went to Mongolia's Altai Mountains in search of wild mountain sheep and leopards; he sketched tigers from the howdah elephant saddles in India and he stalked jaguars in South America. He even spent time on America's Great Plains.

"I have sat with Diane Fossey's gorillas in the high forests of Rwanda, mingled with the wild chimpanzees in the Mahale Mountains on the eastern shore of Lake Tanganyika, trapped, tranquillized, held and released a wild snow leopard in the Altay Mountains of Mongolia, tracked Siberian tigers in the wilderness of Vladivostok, been surrounded by brown bears as they fished for salmon in Alaska and spent many days following the great wildebeeste migration in the Serengeti and southern Kenya," Combes once wrote. "I feel truly blessed."

Later, he penned another book *Great Cats: Stories and Art from a World Traveller* that featured his pursuit of feline subjects, including hilarious encounters with animals, game wardens, and nights imbibing in drink. In short, he was a living legend, held high in a category of painters and sculptors associated with African subjects that included Kuhn, Bunn, Shepherd, Guy Coheleach, Robert Glenn, Jonathan Kenworthy, Alan Hunt, Paul Bosman, Lindsay Scott, Dino Paravano, and Kim Donaldson.

"**Wildebeest Migration**", oil, a panoramic scene that Simon Combes actually witnessed—and painted—on the Serengeti, rendered romantically in the spirit of what 19th century landscape artists chronicled on the American Great Plains.

"**There Was A Time**," Simon Combs' interpretation of "the American Serengeti" as a parallel to what remains at stake in Africa.

“Any artist that becomes popular does so because they get themselves out in front of a lot of people. You couldn’t meet Simon and not become a Combes enthusiast, whether you had been to Africa or not. You felt that way after spending time with him,” Usher says. “In fact, that may have been one of his greatest secrets If you had the chance to *learn Africa* from him, you didn’t necessarily have to have been there. You were able to look at an image vicariously and associate the experience behind it with the person who was there, and that was enough.”

In the 1990s, I was on a panel of jurors selecting award winners for the Society of Animal Artists annual Art and the Animal exhibition, that year hosted by the Wildlife Experience Museum in Parker, Colorado. Amid a strong field of entries, I remember Combes’ “African Oasis”, a large horizontal depiction of elephants, wildebeest and zebra converging upon a water hole in Tanzania’s Tarangire National Park.

I spoke with Combes in Bozeman, Montana later about the piece, as he delivered paintings to Skip Tubbs’ Out of Africa—In Montana Gallery. He admitted that he sought to convey the idyllic: that as vast stretches of wild Africa were slipping away, he wanted his works to serve as panoramic counterpoints for reflection—no different from what the Romantics in America—Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Moran and others— had done during the 19th century when the wild West was being tamed by Manifest Destiny and bison nearly extinguished in the name of progress. The parallels, he said, were dramatic, and asked, “The question is, ‘Can Africa learn from America’s mistakes and from her foresight to protect the best that remains?’”

Combes was a serious thinker, despite the fun-loving persona he projected. It was not his way to beat viewers over the head with presumptive allegory or to make grand political statements with his art. Nonetheless, his friends and family members say he felt heartsick about the fragmentation of the east

African highlands and savannah enwrapping the escarpment of Mt. Kilimanjaro. Along the main travel corridor leading between Mombasa on the Indian Ocean and Nairobi, he saw how the twin national parks of Tsavo East and West were being squeezed by development pressure encroaching rapidly upon their borders.

Farther inland, across the Kenyan border in Tanzania, he presciently worried of what could become of the great Serengeti Plain—the continent's emblematic wildlife wonder—were it ever to be bisected by a major highway. Combes knew the only salvation for Serengeti, Maasai-Mara, Lake Manyara and Tarangire national parks, combined with the Maswa Game Reserve and Ngorongoro Conservation Area, was the lack of commercial development penetrating their interiors. And yet, he was keenly sensitive to how important it is for those living on the land to have decent standard of living. "A poverty of people leads to biologically impoverished ecosystems. The world cannot afford to stand by and let either happen," he said. He watched the elicit trade in elephant ivory and rhino horn swell. He was a major proponent for strengthening the training programs for native game wardens and exercising zero tolerance for poaching. He also sought to increase environmental literacy.

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To the northeast of Serengeti and Maasai-Mara parks, just inside the Kenya border in the Great Rift Valley, was the area that Combes considered home ground. The 48,000-acre Soysambu Ranch, situated between Lake Nakuru National Park and Lake Elmenteita, with a breathtaking view of Alberdare National Park, the highest elevation nature preserve in east Africa. Soysambu is a swatch of terra firma where he wanted to make a difference. He believed it could be a model for sustainable ecotourism. He and Banks, who guides safaris, had many late-night conversations about strategies.

Soysambu commands a historical mystique. Since 1906, the family of Hugh Cholmondeley, better known in Britain as Lord Delamere, had farmed Soysambu. Delamere had first gone to Africa in 1891 on a lion hunt. Three years later, he was famously mauled by one of the big cats as he endeavored to shoot it. Soysambu in its earlier era attracted a cosmopolitan list of guests, among them Winston Churchill and Evelyn Waugh. It is also a place where Combes spent his impressionable youth prior to military service.

All THIS LEADS TO A QUESTION: HOW DOES THE SON MEASURE UP to a patriarch who is bigger than his art? The first eight years of Guy Combes' life were spent in Kenya. Simon and Susie were proud to be raising Guy and his sister, Cindy, in a place that they knew would set their children apart. "Dad's career was just taking off," Guy says, "but at that stage I don't think he envisioned me following the same path." Still, the adoring son doodled and scribbled on paper as he watched his father at work.

A bashful boy born in 1971, Guy describes his African childhood as “a blissful utopian time.” In 1978, Simon and Susie moved their tribe to England, in part so that their children could receive a proper education. Guy and his sister attended boarding schools, an adjustment that Combes says was traumatic and ironic, given his father’s own distaste for that kind of academic environment.. Guy discovered that, with his father’s growing stature as a painter, came high expectations of his own artistic talents and tales of derring-do.

Here, two perspectives emerge, the first from his mother. “Simon and I knew [Guy] was talented from the start. At his junior school in Kenya, aged 11, he came first in a countrywide prize from the National Portraiture Foundation with an award of £100, that made Simon and I think. Then he got a scholarship to his senior school Malvern College [a large private school in England] which was well known for its art teachings. He was very well taught there and Simon was in awe of his growing knowledge of art history.”

Guy Combes remembers it somewhat differently. When he failed to perform well on the art entrance exam to Malvern, he felt shame and feared that the results were a frustration for to his father. His greatest worry was disappointing his Dad . “It turned out, as I learned much later, that I came down way harder on myself than he did, yet it seemed to propagate a mold that was to hinder my artistic confidence for the next 20 years,” he explains.

Combes the younger has proved to be a late bloomer. At art college, he was immersed in the kind of formal art education that had evaded Simon. Realism—in the style his father practiced— was actually ridiculed as passé and prosaic. Before he could embrace what his father did he has to break away from it. “Like most art students, I found the inclusion into a creative and free thinking environment very intoxicating, and took the cue from my tutors to experiment with different media, conceptualism and abstraction further alienating myself from my father’s expectations of what training in art is all about,” he says.

Combes the elder was spending three months of every year in Kenya, complementing it with travel to other continents, and churning out commissions for his avid collectors. During this time, his marriage to Susie ended, though the couple always remained on good terms. He also fell in love again. In 2003, he and his new bride, Kat, relocated back to the valley where his young life in Africa had begun. He was hired to be the project coordinator for the Rhino Rescue Trust. The assignment energized him. He devoted himself to saving species by day and celebrating them on canvas.

Simon and Kat lived on Soysambu at the invitation of the Delemeres. During this time, father and son

corresponded regularly and became closer. In England, Guy realized that he could never replicate the route to success taken by his father, but Simon provided valuable counsel and encouragement. His father told him to be himself and to not be intimated by what his patriarch had achieved or let it dissuade him from cultivating his own artistic connection with Africa.

“The lights only started to go on when I returned to Kenya,” Guy says. “I consider one of the greatest good fortunes of my life to be that of having spent a year with Dad prior to his death painting on the veranda at Soysambu and coming to the slow realization that painting wildlife was what I really wanted to do.” He adds, “I had always loved Kenya but at this point I began to see it from a whole different perspective.”

Kat Combes has photographs of them working side by side. She witnessed their bond firsthand. “It was wonderful to see the two of them painting together. I think it was frustrating for Simon to see Guy so talented and struggling to find his way. They were very different, but now I see Guy so much in his own role and embracing all the fatherly advice that was given.”

JAMHURI DAY IS A HOLIDAY commemorating the date of Kenya’s formal establishment as a republic on December 12, 1964. On Jamhuri Day 2004, Kat and Simon Combes were asked to climb an ancient volcanic ridgeline called “the Nose" with a friend. “It was something we did regularly,” Kat says. “Just as we were coming down the volcano, it horribly happened.”

Simon Combes’ death would make headlines around the world; the shocking news was felt most viscerally in England, where he was revered as a modern figure and a reminder of the British Empire’s once gloried connection to Kenya. That he was fatally taken down by a Cape buffalo, one of his favorite animal subjects, added to the tragedy. Kat, Simon and Mary Wystra, a noted cheetah specialist, had finished supper and decided to ascend the Nose hardscrabble to soak in the view. The terrain is a mixture of rolling topography, clearings and islands of tall dense grass and trees.

Combes savored twilight—he loved dusks as much as awakening to glowing dawns—and it was an aesthetic pleasure he often insinuated into his work. Evenings are when the sounds of animals deepen the texture of Africa’s primordial life-force. As Combes himself had said years earlier over lunch in Bozeman, “When you hear the animals in the advancing darkness, and rely on your ears rather than eyes, you know you live in a part of Africa that is still wild.”

Cape buffalo are notorious for being temperamental and unpredictable. The trio didn’t see the lone bull in the brush. It caught them by complete surprise, stirring into an immediate charge; the outburst so sudden that there was no place or time to flee. “We walked everyday, and were cautious,” Kat says. “If I had been on the right that day it might have been me the buffalo attacked, not Simon. I wish it was. I would not have fought as hard as Simon did to live. I am not as strong...well maybe now, not then. Fate is something we cannot change.”

Combes, who was gored and stomped, battled to survive but the injuries were too severe, Kat says, bravely recalling the events. “I didn't think for a minute that he would be taken, but it was dark and I didn't know how bad it really was. I just tried to keep him alive as best I could. I think around four hours passed as he fought to live and then the sky fell. Literally.”

"Buffalo", oil, is Guy Combes' cathartic attempt to both cathartically come to terms with, and recognize the majestic beauty of the beast that took his father's life. It is considered one of his finest works to date.

“I didn't think for a minute that he would be taken. I just tried to keep him alive as best I could. I think around four hours passed as he fought to live and then the sky fell. Literally." —Kathryn Combes

Nighttime hampered the ability to get a medical team to the scene. Kat never left Combes’ side, holding his hand, talking to him softly. “When I guess they pulled me away from him I looked up through tears and there was a huge meteor shower occurring. Somehow with the help of the farm staff carrying Simon we made it down the Nose, sliding and tripping most of the way. I don't know how they managed in the dark with no moon and the stars falling. Life changed forever.”

Thinking back, she notes, “He used to terrify me by jumping out of the car and walking into the bush to check something out. I do that now because I better know my surroundings. He grew up here. I guess it would take too much precious time to dwell on the dangers, just better to get on with it—and live without fear.”

Otherwise, Combes reckoned, there is so much of life that one misses by letting tentativeness or worry or allowing someone else to define who you are. This is the enduring message that he imparted to his son.

For those closest to Combes, there was—and is—of course, no way of ameliorating the pain. Alan Binks dismisses any notion that Combes set out that day with any inkling of fatalism, nor does the clichéd explanation that he “died doing what he loved” provide any comfort.

Simon Combes' oil, "**The Crossing**"

A while afterward, I met Guy Combes for the first time. He was at the annual Safari Club International exposition, then held in Reno, Nevada. Guy had a few works on display at the Out of Africa—In Montana Gallery booth operated by Tubbs. Combes was subdued, unable to summon his painter’s voice. Next to his own works were some of the last pieces completed by his father. Shyer and with a personality less imposing, he was adrift. Combes was dividing time between England and Soysambu, trying to help Kat carry on the formidable caretaking tasks.

“When Simon died it’s almost as if his mantle fell on Guy’s shoulders,” Susie says. Guy came to the U.S. and went to work creating paintings that he never intended to show in a gallery. They were cathartic expressions more than anything yet they gave him an escape. Seeing glimpses of what was emerging from this period of introspection and searching, the late Marijane Singer, curator at the Hiram Blauvelt Art Museum and friend of Simon’s, made Guy a Blauvelt artist in residence. Combes was the

fourth to hold down the fellowship after Dwayne Harty, Geordie Millar and Terry Miller. Another figure who took Combes under his wing was Scott Usher at Greenwich Worship.

Out of devotion to his best friend, Binks has kept on eye on Combes. “Guy and Simon are very different but they do share a common sense of humour and obviously the same talent for art,” he says. “They both are/were passionate about wildlife and the problems it faces with increasing human conflict. But I don’t see a lot in common between the two: Guy is his own person and his own persona, different from, and separate to, Simon.”

“I'm sure Guy has had a very hard time dealing with the fact of his father's popularlity as an artist—in trying to break in to that world, match the prowess, even beat it. Guy is now well along that road." — Alan Binks

Making sure the comment doesn’t across as a disparagement, he adds, “I'm sure Guy has had a very hard time dealing with the fact of his father's popularity as an artist—in trying to "break in" to that world, match the prowess, even beat it. Guy is now well along that road and has obviously managed to find his own way there, perhaps because of Simon's success, perhaps in spite of it; I think he has found his own road and will do well in his own right, adding to Simon's stature, not competing with it.”

Combes credits his time at the Blauvelt, his burgeoning professional relationship with Greenwich Workshop and his expanding gallery representation with bolstering his confidence and discipline “Being in the US and befitting from the astonishing generosity of folks over here, the road has been mapped out for me,” he says.

Today, Usher says there’s no longer any question about Guy Combes’ position as a rising star in wildlife art. “He’s become the real deal and that is important. People able to pick up on things in Guys’ African paintings that they may not be able to express, but intuitively know. From design, to color, to atmospheric conditions, they see this in Guys work—just as they saw it in Simon’s.”

Usher explains that the younger Combes has a “sense of place” that most non-African artists do not have. “His connection is an advantage,” Usher says. “If you put a work of his father’s at the same age side by side with one of his, you’d find that Guy has some skills that his father did not. I find this combo to be the most exciting about where he is and I don’t know how much this is picked up on by the public. But it’s there if people want to see it.”

When Combes is asked to identify artistic reference points, besides the substantial body of work produced by his father, he says, “I have always been inspired by artists who communicate dramatic narrative with breathtaking ability: Titian, Delacroix and Rembrandt, and from the wildlife genre Kunhert and Liljefors. I should add Bob Kuhn and Robert Bateman because they were favorites of my

father. For the Old Masters, form and beauty were the most important tenets of creativity, unlike the last 100 or so years where we seem to have progressively lost those ideals in mainstream art to the impact of the camera."

"**Siren's Isle**," Guy Combes' dramatic portrayal of an African fish eagle

Combes now spends one fourth of the year at Soysambu, another part with family in the UK and the rest in the U.S. Recently, he relocated to Antioch, California, near San Francisco, and shares a studio-home with acclaimed contemporary nature artist Andrew Denman. In 2012, Denman and Combes will be featured in a joint exhibition "Old World-New World: The Wildlife Art of Guy Combes & Andrew Denman" at the Nature in Art Museum in Gloucester, UK. "Guy has achieved international distinction. for his wildlife paintings which have been sold and commissioned in the UK, Africa and America. He has an international following," says Simon Trapnell, director of Nature in Art. Over 20 new major works will be on display ranging from Combes' best African pieces and Denman's contemporary bird paintings inspired by his work in North and South America. (In particular, Denman will showcase avian pieces inspired by a trip he took to Trinidad as part of winning the Don Richard Eckelberry Memorial Scholarship. It's a program that encourages young painters to embark upon artistic expeditions).

Denman says America is only awakening to the vision that exists in the second generation of the painting Combes family. "I know plenty of artists for whom one could separate out all sorts of aspects of their characters, their personal lives, and their artistic endeavors, and come up with portraits of very different people (e.g. artist, accountant, competitive bicyclist, and horror film addict)," he says. "But with Guy, his life as an artist, a naturalist, a safari guide, a conservationist, and an educator, is so centered around his Kenyan home that one can't consider him or any of those facets of his character at all without reflecting on this complete integration of person and place," Denman adds. "Everything Guy does wearing any of his various hats ultimately relates in one way or another to his dedication and commitment to preserving his country of origin."

Guy Combes' lion sketch and his painting **Titan II** that plays off the theme of a predator-prey diptych concept explored by his father.

It also means heeding a call to activism. When the Tanzanian government in recent years announced a proposal to build a commercial highway across Serengeti and Mara national parks, thereby slicing through the heart of their famous wildlife migration corridors, Combes didn't hesitate. He joined a global grassroots effort, but he didn't stop there: He and other artists have tried to illuminate before the world what's at stake by sharing their artwork. One illustration appeared at *Wildlife Art Journal* and can be viewed by clicking here .

"To the point of distraction, Guy is significantly involved with issues of conservation. I think he spends so much time on activities to make people aware of what is happening that he loses some ground with collectors. His work is in huge demand," Scott Usher says. "I don't think he gets the credit for starting the ball rolling on the whole Serengeti Highway effort he should. He set up the first Facebook page for it in my living room. No doubt many were involved, but he really helped to get it going."

"**Leopard Lounge**," portraying the charismatic predator in a sausage tree, has earned Guy Combes an international award.

Just as his father would have done, Combes threw himself into the cause. There are core principles that cannot be compromised and one of them is giving voice to the voiceless—in this case millions of animals—wildebeest, zebra, lion, giraffe, elephants and other iconic creatures—that rely upon being able to pass through the corridor for their survival. Like his dad, Combes is not callous to the human dimensions of the controversy. The needs of rural Tanzanians and Kenyans who share the landscape with wildlife need to be addressed. If citizens of the world want wildlife protected, they need to open

their wallets. This summer, a portion of the proceeds derived from the exhibition at Nature in Art will go to a Combes legacy project.

He has created special paintings to heighten awareness, including the one, above, titled "Leopard Lounge". Of that work, he says, "This painting represents probably one of the most satisfying pieces I've produced in terms of the finished product meeting the expectations I had of it at the beginning of the painting process. Previously I had only ever used glazes to tone down areas of paintings that had turned out unintentionally jarring on the eye. This was the first time I set out knowing that I would use glazes to create the feeling of space and perspective within the great tree. The painting also represents one of my favorite sales because the buyer, a well-known and respected botanist, wanted it as much for the sausage tree (kigelia africana) as the leopard and this perfectly validates my reasoning behind accurately describing the subject's environment."

IN 2008, FOUR YEARS AFTER SIMON COMBES' PASSING, SOYSAMBU took on the official title of "conservancy " to reflect a shift away from agriculture to safeguarding wildlife. The name change commemorated not only the Lord Delamere legacy but it is the realization of the artist's dream—one that his loved ones are determined to carry on. Read Kat Combes' essay about Soysambu by clcking here.

"Simon taught me the basics of conservation well," Kat says. "We spent much time walking, driving, observing and talking. The most valuable lesson he taught me was to look at any situation through the eyes of the people who are affected by it. He was so wonderful with people. He loved Soysambu, and brought me here to share it with him. I fell in love with this place on first sight. I am trying to recall any specific vision, it is more a natural passion and concern that drives us to conserve what we love."

Guy Combes praises his stepmother's drive. She says that through his art her late husband often spoke about the animals and their habitat to local Kenyan school children. "He had a tough time explaining hibernation in Swahili," she says with a laugh. "Art is a valuable component of our conservation toolbox. It has many uses: Value for fundraising, marketing of conservation objectives, education and awareness. It is visual and here, you can look beyond the painting. You can touch it."

The art of both Guy and Simon Combes bring the individual into Africa, she says. "It is sensual. You can feel the wind blowing, the dust in your face, smell the grass, hear the birds singing, or maybe that is because I know it is honest. His art may reach people who may never travel to Africa physically but may find they are drawn to it's magic through his paintings. You either love Africa and you are lost in its emotional pull or you don't. I don't think there is any in between."

A leopard crosses the interior of Soysambu Conservancy with the the notched ridgeline of "the Nose"—the place where Simon Combes died—rising in the background. Photo by Kathryn Combes

Guy and Kat Combes are trying to make Soysambu a 21st century island of protection but the challenges of conservation are very real. In their work with the Delameres to promote sustainability, they have hosted travelers, artists, photographers and wildlife cinematrogaphers whose fees for staying are pooled directly back into resource protection and management. While the conservancy, with over 50 mammal species present, is the last breeding place for Kenya pelicans and has proudly offered refuge to rare Rothchild giraffe, a local free-ranging population of cheetah was wiped out in the 1990s by livestock herders intolerant of the cats' preying on their animals.

One of Guy Combes' more recent and poignant works is "High Hopes". "It's an important painting for me personally not only because it's what I can see 20 minutes away from home in Kenya," he says. "Also because I wanted to celebrate the two most significantly threatened species in our area. The Rothschild giraffe is the most threatened of the three giraffe species in Kenya, numbering approximately 700 in total. This is mainly due to habitat destruction. Eight were

translocated to Soysambu in the early 90s and they have blossomed to a population of over 80, some of which have been translocated to another newly established conservancy. I think this is a great testament to the fact that conservation and environmental management are seeing some success and victory in a world where so much is being taken away so fast. The great white pelicans flying overhead nest only on a handful of islands on Lake Elmenteita in Soysambu Conservancy which is visible from home. Quite simply, if it wasn't for the existence of Soysambu Conservancy working to protect this area, these magnificent birds would probably disappear from East Africa."

Her nephew has indeed picked up the mantle, says his aunt Jenny. “Our beautiful country Kenya, its wildlife and landscapes, nurtured Simon’s creativity and became his final resting place Guy has all these qualities, has had to work harder at the self-discipline, and has had to come to terms with the tragic death of Simon.”

Like the return of green-up to the Great Rift Valley, a new circle has been completed. In 2011, Guy Combes presented an honor, the Simon Combes Conservation Award established by Artists For Conservation, to a painter his father greatly admired, marine artist Guy Harvey. (Other recipients have been Shepherd, Bateman and John Banovich).

Today, there’s another question that is unavoidable: Is it difficult being Simon Combes' son? Two decades ago, Guy Combes vowed that he would never ride his father’s coattails. “What I once perceived in the past as difficulty, I now perceive as being a great advantage,” Guy says. “ Is there an expectation for me to produce better work? Yes, but that’s no longer a challenge I’m afraid of. Although comparisons are inevitable, I am committed to forging my own way as an artist.”

“What I once perceived in the past as difficulty, I now perceive as being a great advantage. Is there an expectation for me to produce better work? Yes, but that's no longer a challenge I'm afraid of."—Guy Combes

He pauses, thinks about it more fully, and adds, “Although I believe that artistic skill is largely innate or inherited, I feel that I have reached the stage I'm at now through my own trial and error and experimental endeavor. Dad was a great storyteller and he brought this into his paintings very successfully. That is also my default approach—although I am as concerned with evoking an emotional response with the viewer as I am describing the narrative. I feel I’ve gained a different perspective on design during my many years trying so hard to be different from him.”

Scott Usher says the digital camera has given the world a proliferation of images and enabled anyone to claim the title “wildlife photographer” but what’s lacking is understanding, an allure that pulls one in deeper, and reveals something new upon each viewing, the way that fine art does.

“Big Daddy” Oil on Canvas by Guy Combes.

“I don’t know if collectors know what they *want* to see, but they want to be shown what they don’t have the chance or awareness yet to see,” he explains. “’Don’t tell me what I already know, show me what I’d never see on my own,’ they seem to be saying. And, they want to see it from someone they feel is taking them to a place no one else can.”

In that way, Guy Combes is his father’s son and he still feels his spirit. The terrain isn’t merely physical; it is filled with awe and tinged with heartache. “Kenya is and always will be where my heart is,” Guy says. “There is something fundamental about this that has never or will ever be called into question.”

EDITOR'S NOTE: Guy Combes and Andrew Denman recently made an appearance together at the 2012 Safari Club International convention in Las Vegas. For Combes, it was a triumphant art return and an opportunity to expand support for protecting Soysambu and advancing an alternative to the proposed Serengeti Highway.

Reflections

Posted By Bonnie Jean Blackmore on Feb 8, 2012

I know Simon Combes only through his art which is to know him to the very depths of my soul. I have never met Guy but he is a great friend and I am fortunate indeed to own 'The Phantom' of the great white cheetah. From what I know of these great men, I now know them to be even greater. Thank you for telling their story for it is Epic. I had the opportunity to be near 'Simon's Camp' in Lake Elementaita on May 21st of this year and met Kat. I delivered to her a magazine tear sheet of her late husband and a cheetah over his shoulder that came to me in 2006. I have carried that tear sheet around with me through three trips to Africa and it was Simon who brought me to Samburu. With all of the horrible things happening to wildlife in the world its difficult not to get depressed and discouraged. Guy has given me hope as I see what power is in the paintbrush to show the world what they will have lost if they don't give attention. I thank you, I thank Simon and I thank Guy for opening up this phenomenal talent steeped in the heart of my beloved Africa.

I like it.

Posted By wendy debbas on Feb 8, 2012

How exciting to read it right after we talked about it! You, my dear friend are amazing in many ways. Looking forward to spending more time with you and Andrew. W.D.

Like Father Like Son

Posted By Ken Hermer on Feb 8, 2012

Guy - what an extraordinary family and legacy you are presently protecting! Congratulations for carving out your own niche and creativity against a backdrop of such incredible talent. You are keep your beloved Dad's work and dreams alive by forging your very own path. I hope that your journey will continue to be fun, mesmerizing and fulfilling. Good luck too with the conservation work happening at Soysambu. I am so glad I had a chance to meet you a few years ago in New York. I am sure that from now on I will have to beat a path through the crowds to get to your front door! It will be worth the effort I know.
Warmest wishes and to continued health and success,
Ken Hermer - San Diego

Simon Combes - An African Wildlife Ambassador

Posted By Joseph W. Adkins III on Feb 8, 2012

I have been a collector of Simon Combes artwork since 1990. Simon was also a dear friend though we only saw eachother here in the USA. Todd Willkinson has written a terrific article that really captures Simon in all phases of his life. Simon was truly an Ambassador of African wildlife as he brought Africa to the USA, etc. to so many whom may never be able to travel there, let alone those lucky ones whom do travel there and see the Africa that Simon so well depicts in his paintings. He was a genuine human being in addition to being a great artist. I miss him dearly!!

TREMENDOUS

Posted By Jan Martin McGuire on Feb 8, 2012

Tremendous article Todd, written with keen insight into both Guy and Simon. I am privileged to have met Simon and to now be able to call Guy a friend.