

## 28 Cover

*With a Uganda, U.K., and U.S. Run of His Groundbreaking Play *Biro Under His Belt*, Actor and Writer Ntare Mwine Talks to Alina Oswald About Searching for—and Sometimes Not Finding—the American Dream in the Age of AIDS*



## Features

### 20 Gallery

*The Not-So-Golden West: New Mexico-Based Photographer Donald Woodman Visits Themes of Domination and Disease at the Wild & Woolly Rodeo*



### 18 Art Project

*UCSF's AIDS Health Project Mounts an Auction to Bring HIVers Peace of Mind*



### 24 Center Stage

*He's Gearing Up to Open The Mambo Kings on the Great White Way Next Season, But There's One Show Broadway Producer Jordan Roth Wants to Close Down for Good—AIDS*



## Departments

### 4 Frontdesk

### 5 Mailbox

### 9 NewsBreak

*A&U profiles the Lawrence/McWhorter Foundation, plus Ruby raps with Radio Personality Action Jaxon*

### VIEWFINDER

### 13 MediaWatch

### 14 My Turn

### 16 Left Field

*by Patricia Nell Warren*

### LIFEGUIDE

### 32 Treatment Horizons

### 33 Positive Outlook

### 34 The Culture of AIDS

### 38 Lifelines

### 39 HIV + Me

### 40 Correspondences



# Rodeo as Metaphor

PHOTOGRAPHER DONALD WOODMAN SHARES HIS THOUGHTS ON THE  
MISTREATMENT OF ANIMALS, DAMAGING OURSELVES, AND THE ECOLOGY OF AIDS

by Lester Strong

A calf lying hog-tied on the ground, its head stretched out awkwardly as it tries to escape the rope in which it's entangled. A bull bucking ferociously as it tries to rid itself of the human rider on its back. Another bull also bucking, not just against the rider on its back but against a cattle prod jammed into its side.

These are among the images captured on film by New Mexico-based photographer Donald Woodman over a number of years at the Galisteo rodeo, one of

the better-known local competitions in the northern part of the state. Graphic in their portrayal of the violent, often abusive, interactions between man and beast typical of rodeo events, they might at first glance seem unrelated to the issues surrounding AIDS. But dig a little deeper, according to Woodman, and it may be that rodeo as metaphor for our relationships with other creatures on this planet very much speaks to some of the causes behind the worldwide disease pandemics we face these days, of



*The Rodeo and the West*  
#39, Epson Ink Jet print  
on Arches paper, 44 by  
54 inches, © Donald  
Woodman 2002





which AIDS is a prime example. As he says in the following interview: "AIDS, we now know, is an infection within the human organism spread by numerous activities detrimental to everybody. The way we live, the way we eat, the way we treat creatures on this planet, ourselves included, just perpetuate its spread."

Woodman's photographic work is represented by Flanders Contemporary Art in Minneapolis, Minnesota, but it should be noted that he also wears the cap of architect. In the 1990s, under his direction, he and his wife, the artist Judy Chicago [A&U,

August 2001], bought and renovated a historic hotel in the small town of Belen, New Mexico, thirty miles south of Albuquerque, where they and a number of beloved cats have since made their home and where the interview with Woodman was conducted.

**Lester Strong:** Your rodeo photos are different than most I've seen—grittier, literally more down to earth.

**Donald Woodman:** Most rodeo photographers use their images to create a fantasy, a romantic picture of a way of life out west here that only lasted ten or fifteen years at most and ended with the building of the railroads, when cattle drives were no longer needed. The heart of that fantasy, I think, is the idea of men conquering nature and dominating the planet. Rodeo is the arena where they can do so by being physically superior—getting on a wild bull or horse and riding it for a set

amount of time to show they've tamed it. Of course what they're really doing is mistreating the animal. In my rodeo photography I try to capture the harsh reality behind the fantasy.

**You don't seem to like the fantasy.**

A 150- or 200-pound man getting on a 2,000-pound bull and riding it for eight seconds is taming it? Or someone riding a bucking horse until they've worn it out shows they're superior to the horse? I don't think so. Besides, movies like *The Horse Whisperer* or *Seabiscuit* have shown us that the best relationships between people and animals involve some sort of human-creature connection that develops feelings of trust, not jumping on an animal's back and riding it until it's totally worn out to show you've "conquered" it.

The idea I've pursued in my rodeo images is that life is not about human beings "conquering" other creatures, because when we act that fantasy out on other animals, or on ourselves, we're just damaging our lives. Instead we need to find a way of living more in harmony with other creatures and with ourselves. Judy and I feel very strongly about that. Our cats, for example, have personalities and lives of their own. They deserve kindness, affection, respect, and care just like we ourselves do.

I'd go even further. We're a carnivorous species. We may need animals in our food chain, but it doesn't mean the animals should be raised on some kind of assembly line, injected with hormones, force-fed, or kept in cramped, dirty, uncomfortable cages. I think



that kind of factory farming is contributing to a breakdown of the human immune system. It's leading to all kinds of problems for us in the form of diseases we now see affecting us in frightening ways—SARS, mad cow disease—

#### And AIDS?

And AIDS. AIDS, we now know, is an infection within the human organism spread by numerous activities detrimental to everybody. The way we live, the way we eat, the way we treat creatures on this planet, ourselves included, just perpetuate its spread.

#### You've talked about the way we eat and treat animals. Could you expand on how the ways we live contribute to its spread?

That depends on who you are and where you live. In this country AIDS entered primarily through the gay male community. I've been reading recently that some younger gay men want to go back to the unsafe sexual practices that propagated the spread of AIDS in the first place. That's bizarre. And if you read the statistics on where AIDS in the U.S. is going now, it's primarily women and minorities. Some of that is drug use, where AIDS can be passed through shared needles, but it must also have to do with a lack of communication between sex partners. In Africa, some Muslim groups practice female genital mutilation. That encourages, or even forces, women into anal sex, which if it's unprotected sex can lead to AIDS. And Muslim countries in general aren't too open about admitting to the homosexual aspect within their societies, which is a sure route to trouble. It forces gay people underground, and limits public education about how to avoid getting AIDS.

#### So is there a general thread in all this?

I've already described how we mistreat animals. It seems to me what I'm describing now are ways in which we mistreat each other, ways in which we don't respect ourselves or other people, ways in which we don't respect our differences.

This reminds me. Last fall Judy and I worked with seventy or so other artists in California on a project called *Envisioning the Future*. My contribution was a photo series of eight diptychs titled *Harbingers of Which Future?* in which I contrasted, in black and white versus color, differing possibilities



for the future—for example, an image of people attending a drag car race where the fuels used were so toxic onlookers needed gas masks to breathe the air versus an image of snow-capped mountains amid a pollution-free blue sky one could see in the distance beyond the race track. You have to ask yourself: What kind of future are we building for ourselves? The question applies to nearly every aspect of our lives, not the least how we choose to deal with AIDS.

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Donald Woodman: *The Rodeo and the West* goes on view at Flanders Contemporary Art in Minneapolis, Minnesota, starting September 18. For more on the show, visit the gallery's Web site at [www.flanders-art.com](http://www.flanders-art.com).

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Lester Strong interviewed Kobi Israel for the March issue.

#### Previous page top:

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