

► **CUE-4** — Forget for a moment that it's about the adult film industry. "Boogie Nights," now available on video, is still a terrific film.



RON RIESTERER — Staff photos

Amana Johnson was the chief artistic and cultural consultant for the team of experts in charge of building the Oakland Zoo's African Savanna exhibit.

Out of Africa

The Oakland Zoo unveils its new African Savanna exhibit, featuring an authentic model of a Kenyan Kikuyu village

By **Jolene Thym**
 STAFF WRITER

OAKLAND artist Amana Johnson submitted her resume to the Oakland Zoo on a longshot. Zoo officials weren't looking for a sculptor or a fine artist or even a designer. They wanted someone who could turn a grassy hillside into a small African village. "I knew I didn't meet all of their requirements. I couldn't read blueprints and I had never done anything like this. I just sent my pictures (of art) in anyway," she said.

Johnson, a stone sculptor and art teacher at the Richmond Art Center, was hired as the chief artistic and cultural consultant for the team of experts in charge of building the zoo's new African Savanna exhibit.



Kikuyu dance regalia and hunting shields inspired the African Savanna designs used by Amana Johnson, a stone sculptor and art teacher.

The result of four years of research, planning, negotiating and building will be unveiled today, as the Oakland Zoo

savanna, and what traditions and symbols are important to them. Sharing her research with several

Tickets

Zoo: Artist content with her project

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was hired because of my sensitivity to Africa, and it was my job to make sure the village reflected that."

The idea, she said, was not to replicate the village, but to present it accurately in her designs of the hut structures, benches, restrooms and walkways. For example, the huts are, in reality, simple cement structures that have been embellished to look like the packed dung and wood huts of the Kikuyu. Since dung and mud do not create a durable surface, Johnson suggested substituting stucco, then painting it just the right color.

"We started out by looking at the authentic materials, then using those whenever possible," she said. The thatch rooftops came direct from Africa.

But when the traditional materials clashed with building codes, the team had to get creative. "We had to figure out how to get the same effect by using something else," she said. "I suggested using stucco and it worked."

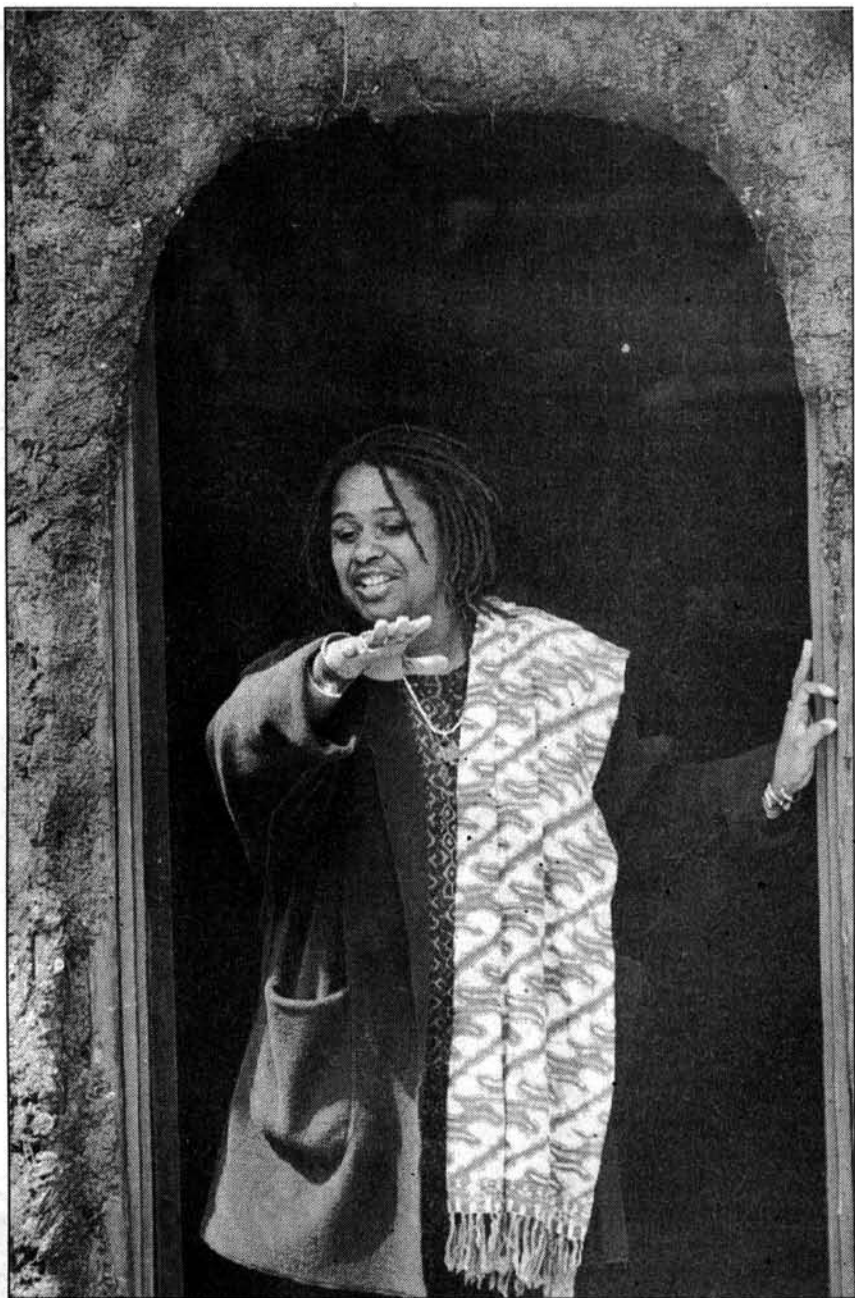
In some cases, Johnson opted to compromise authenticity in order to create a more aesthetic result.

"The Kikuyu don't have a lot of design work in their structures, so the buildings would have been really plain if we hadn't added something. I looked at their dance regalia and hunting shields to see what kinds of designs and colors we might incorporate."

Johnson came up with a design for an elaborately carved and painted wood trim, and some colorful geometric tile patterns, then did the painting on those herself.

Surveying the village that bears her artistic imprint, Johnson said she is content with the result. But she mentioned one major disappointment.

"I did a lot of design that



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Amana Johnson pauses in the doorway of one of the simulated dung and mud huts in the Safari exhibit at the Oakland zoo.

didn't fly. I put in a lot on designing a foot bridge that would have connected the older part of the zoo with the savanna. But after the design was complete, we found out that the whole area was landfill, and to drill the holes to support the bridge would have put the whole project way over budget. The whole plan for the bridge was scrapped. That was hard to take."

While the major part of the project is complete, Johnson will be busy for another six months, completing a separate sculpture commission for the project.

Chipping away at a 2-ton chunk of imported Zimbabwe springstone, she is creating a medicine man that she hopes will "promote healing among people in Oakland." It will be installed near the concession hut.