

# Story of a project

## Cyprian Mpho Shilakoe Revisited

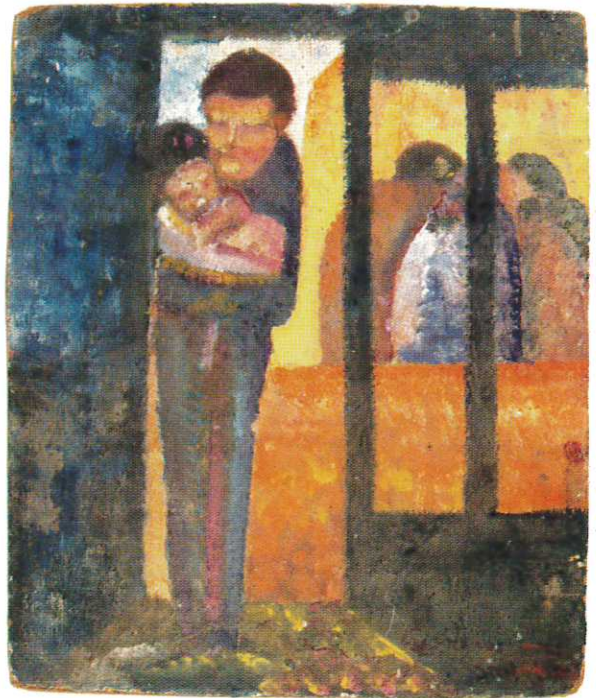
The research behind *Cyprian Mpho Shilakoe Revisited*, the posthumous exhibition due to launch at Durban Art Gallery on March 29, 2006, grabbed media interest when work on the project had barely begun. The reason? A surprise discovery of a cache of unknown artworks by Shilakoe. The curator of the exhibition, Jill Addleson, tells the story of what she believes to be the most significant art find in her distinguished career:



Shilakoe's sister, Emily Mahlangu, with curator Jill Addleson, viewing a large composite figure carving. Other works by Shilakoe appear in the background

'The greatest excitement about curating this exhibition was the discovery of unknown works by Cyprian Shilakoe which had been kept in the Shilakoe family home in Dennilton, Mpumalanga Province, until we found them. It was by sheer chance that I discovered Shilakoe's family. Most of us in the South African art world had firmly believed that there were no members of the Shilakoe family still alive. However, I was convinced that there must be more sculptures by Shilakoe in private collections. And so, in trying to trace these, I wrote for assistance to the editors of major newspapers in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng — the two provinces where Cyprian Shilakoe had lived and worked. Imagine my complete surprise

when, out of the blue, I received a phone call from Emily Mahlangu of Themba in Gauteng to tell me that she was one of Cyprian's sisters and that she had seen the article on Cyprian Shilakoe in *The Daily Sun*. A field trip to interview her and see the Dennilton home was planned.



One of the rare acrylic paintings from Dennilton, *Figure in a doorway*. The date of this and his other works found here remains unknown



An untitled bisque-fired ceramic sculpture Shilakoe made as a boy



Some of the unknown works at Dennilton

We left Johannesburg early in the morning on a crisp highveld day, and took the road leading roughly northeast towards Bronkhorstspuit. There are no signs to Dennilton; we just carried on driving along on the tar road until we suddenly found ourselves in the middle of a small town. By chance, we saw a sign on a building which read Dennilton Slagtery. We had arrived. And nearby stood Emily, waiting patiently for us at the appointed place, the Elandsdoorn Trading Store.

When Emily unlocked the front door of the old family home it was like walking into a time capsule from the 1950s; as if nothing had been disturbed for years. Emily confirmed that, since the death of her parents over twenty years ago, the family had barely visited the house. On a dark settee in the lounge were

paintings and early clay sculptures by her brother. Three wood carvings stood on the floor. We also found an etching plate by Cyprian's great friend, the printmaker Dan Rakgoathe, as well as the Fine Art Certificate Cyprian Shilakoe received on completion of his course at the ELC Art and Craft Centre, Rorke's Drift. What was our reaction to all this? Pure disbelief at first, then dawning amazement, and finally a feeling of dizzy excitement about this amazing discovery.'

These previously unseen works will be shown on *Cyprian Mpho Shilakoe Revisited*, in the company of some 90 further works: a group of paintings, almost all his known etchings, and over twenty sculptures. Learners, teachers, gallerists, curators and art lovers will enjoy seeing Shilakoe's life's work as a whole for the first time.

For more information about *Cyprian Mpho Shilakoe Revisited*, contact Durban Art Gallery on (031) 311 2269



**Pity (1969) Etching**

Though he lived only twenty-six short years, Cyprian Shilakoe's contribution is legendary in South African art, and his sculptures, prints and paintings are highly prized by collectors. But of all the media he mastered, printmaking was the one he worked with the most. Various fortuitous developments that promoted his interest in printmaking were to occur in his life. The first was his meeting, in 1967, with the experienced artist, Dan Rakgoathe, who introduced the young man to artistic ideas and encouraged him to study art at the Art and Craft Centre in Rorke's Drift. It was a happy co-incidence that this Centre initiated a Fine Art School in January 1968, and that the School was to develop an active printmaking programme. It was here that Shilakoe was to start making the etchings that have earned him such distinction.

### Encounter with etching

The etching facilities at Rorke's Drift were basic, but the expertise of his Swedish teachers, Ola Granath and Otto Lundbohm, was extensive. With their help he learned aquatint, an etching process by which he could create the misty grey tones in his etchings such as *Pity*. This involved using a shaker, consisting of a small can with gauze across the top, with powdered rosin inside. When this was shaken over the metal etching plate it produced a shower of dust on the surface. After the dust particles had been melted onto the plate over heat, they would resist being corroded, or 'bitten,' when the plate was doused in acid. Shilakoe would often use varying strengths of acid, painting them onto the plate surface.

The different acid solutions would bite it to different depths. The result, in

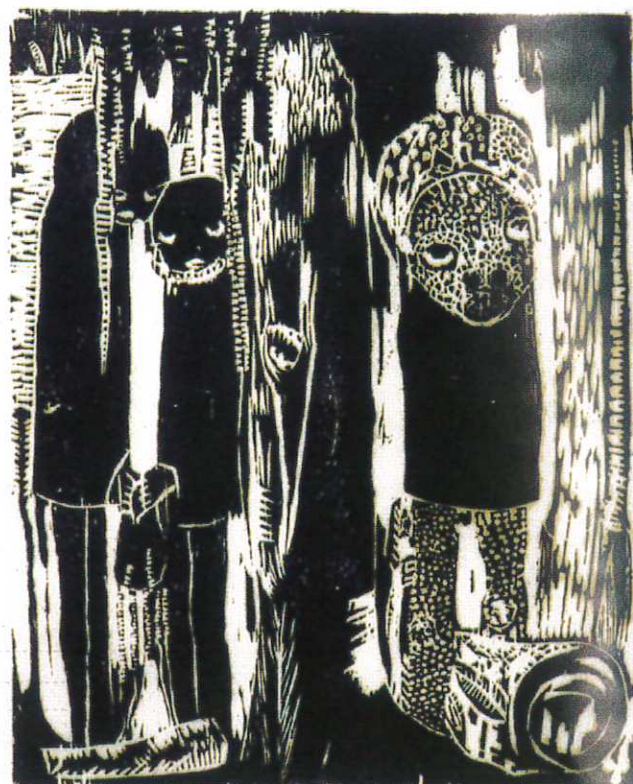
turn, was varying densities of ink on the plate, giving a range of tones in the final print that looked as if they had been painted. In this way Shilakoe's etchings are often close approximations of watercolour paintings. Curiously, he seems to have made surprisingly few actual paintings, evidently preferring the moody quality of black-and-white aquatint etchings.



**An untitled watercolour painting by Shilakoe which shows similar fluidity to his etchings**

Shilakoe's tones in his etchings were not always delicate. From around 1970, particularly, he used exaggerated specks and blotches for expressive effect. A blowpipe, or 'atomiser,' was useful for spattering large drops of liquid etching ground onto the plate surface. The result was a rough, textured aquatint. There were further changes in his etchings later, as he defined his figures more

precisely by means of stronger and more extensive line work. In *The Lovers*, for example, his etching needle found its way to the patterning of garments and detailing of facial features. The two lovers are enclosed by outline, set against the artist's hallmark coarse aquatint in a congested sky that seems to shower down onto the waifs below.



**Let's wait until (sic) they come (1970) Linocut**

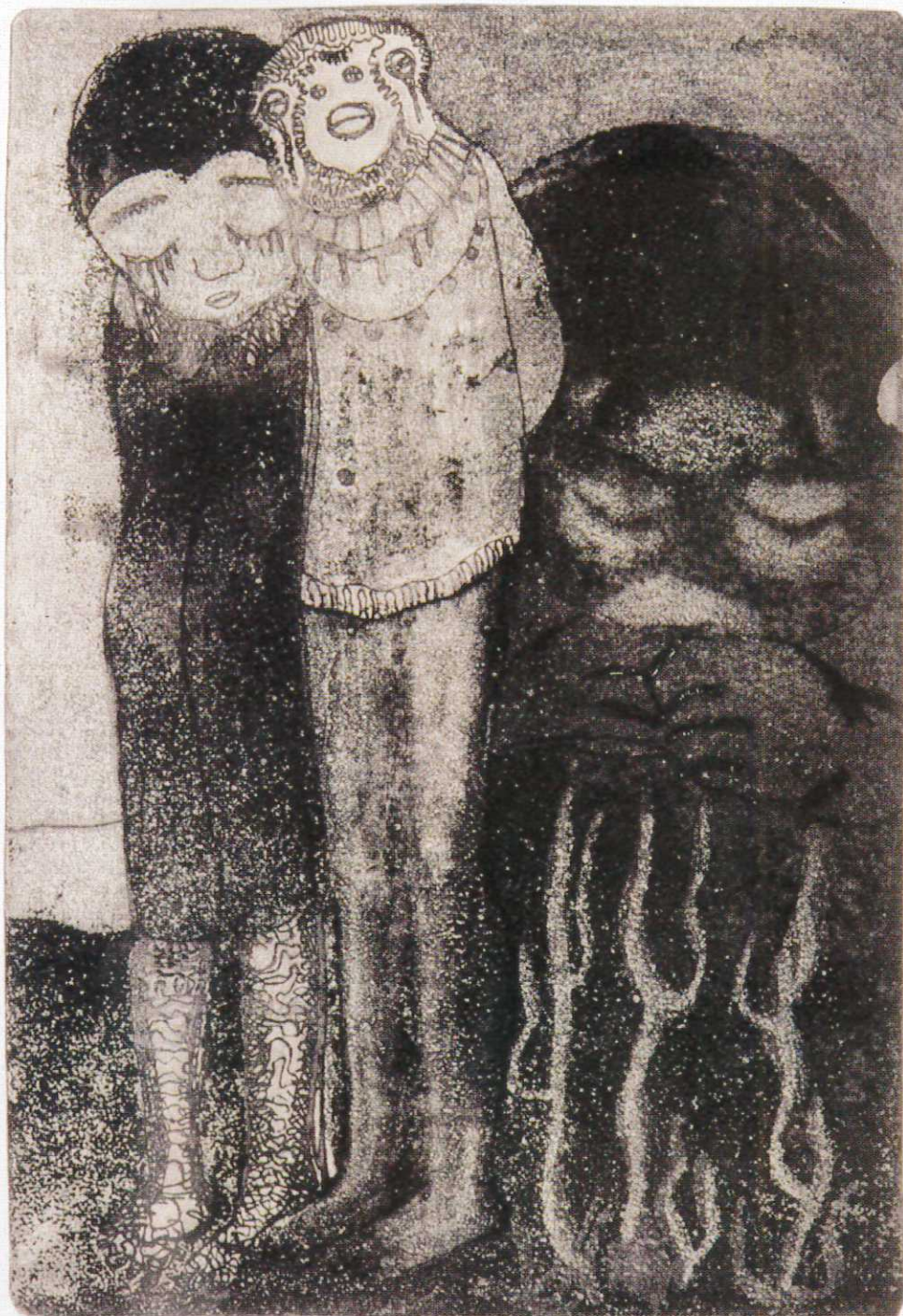
## Cyprian Shilakoe's prints

### Inspiration and a ghostly society

Other than the etching medium itself, where did Shilakoe's inspiration come from? As an admirer of Goya's etchings, which he learnt about in the Rorke's Drift studio, combinations of line work and grainy aquatint evidently attracted him. Goya's famous *Caprichos* etchings of 1799 are typically made up of such line work and heavy aquatint, his skies a grainy fallout of white spots on dark grey. Stark figure groups are isolated in a shallow space, pressed towards the viewer. Like Goya also, Shilakoe employed themes relating to human experience, often visualised in desolate landscapes with sunken horizon lines. Shilakoe's haunted and haunting subjects, as well as his etching processes, were to be adopted by the next generation of fine artists at the Centre, more particularly by Eric Mbatha, Hugh Nolutshungu and Vuminkosi Zulu.

Along with many Rorke's Drift artists, Shilakoe also made linocuts and woodcuts. But he quickly developed an expressive chiaroscuro. In heavily abstracted works, such as *Let's wait untill (sic) they come*, his block carving explored the drama of high contrast, directed light, strong shadows, back lighting and simple compositions. These works were probably an impetus for relief printmakers such as Joe Ndlovu, Jacob Matsose and Evelyn Matsoso, who studied at the Centre in the mid-1970s.

The poignancy of the figures depicted in Shilakoe's work stresses the fragility of life in the townships of the 1970s. His figures do not challenge the world; they accept it by living out experiences such as leaving, waiting, hesitating, lingering or separating. They seem part of a ghostly society in an ever-shifting, displaced state. Shilakoe's restraint from direct reference to the oppression of apartheid, and his embrace of wider human frailty, makes his prints a universal reference to human experience.

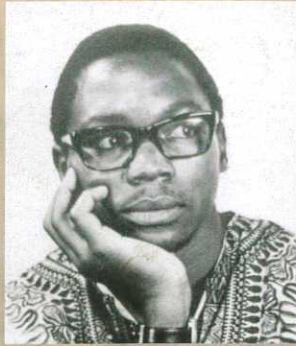


The etching *The Lovers* (1971) shows Shilakoe's more robust use of etching techniques, including deeper corrosion of lines and coarser aquatints

# Cyprian Mpho Shilakoe

## time-line of an artist

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As this time-line poignantly attests, Cyprian Shilakoe's life, which ended tragically in a car crash in 1972, was all too short. Nevertheless, he left South Africa a surprisingly large legacy of artwork.

- 1946 Born in Barberton, Mpumalanga
- 1948 Sent with his siblings to live with his maternal grandmother, Emily Dibakoane, or 'Koko,' in Mathibestad, near Pretoria. Attended Mathibestad Primary School.
- 1962 Death of Koko. Shilakoe and his siblings returned to live with their parents in Dennilton, Mpumalanga, where he attended Paledi Secondary School. Began to make drawings, carvings and clay figures.
- 1967 Probably met artist Dan Rakgoathe during this year. Rakgoathe encouraged Shilakoe to make art his career.
- 1968 Enrolled for a Fine Art Certificate at the Art and Craft Centre at Rorke's Drift, where he was taught by Ola Granath, Otto Lundbohm and other Swedish art-school graduates. Worked alongside classmates John Muafangejo, Dan Rakgoathe, Paulos Mchunu, Albert Ndlovu and Caiphax Nxumalo, making linocuts, drypoints, carvings, drawings, paintings, and his first etchings, such as *Lost*.
- 1969 Made his celebrated acid-painted etchings such as *Silence, Pity and Rorke's Drift at Dawn*. Exhibited with other Rorke's Drift artists at Durban Art Gallery. Completed his Fine Art Certificate. Works accepted onto the national competition exhibition, *Art South Africa Today*, at Durban Art Gallery.
- 1970 Continued at the Centre as artist-in-residence for about two months. Moved to St Ansgar's Mission in Roodepoort, where he set up an etching studio with an etching press from Rorke's Drift. Made high-contrast relief prints, such as *Let's wait untill (sic) they come*. Made the mysterious etching said to have been inspired by his girlfriend, Catherine Tlhale, *Follow the footsteps you will find her sleeping*. Exhibited at the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg.
- 1971 Held his first solo exhibition at Goodman Gallery. Prints shown on the *SA Graphic Art Exhibition* in Belgium, Holland, and West Germany. Made his etching *The Lovers*, as well as etchings memorialising his grandmother 'Koko,' such as *Inspiration from Koko* and another graveside image, *Mma Koko*, this time with Koko's name on the tombstone.
- 1972 In this year probably carved his big totem sculptures, such as *It's Heavy*. Exhibited on *SA Graphics 1972* at Goodman Gallery. Made the fatal decision, en route to see the movie *Let it be*, to take his fiancée, Catherine Tlhale, a note explaining where he was going. This diversion resulted in the car crash that killed him and seriously wounded his passenger, Dan Rakgoathe. Awarded first prize for printmaking at an exhibition of African art at the University of California, Los Angeles, organized through the journal *African Arts*.



Shilakoe's old Dennilton home

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 Design, Repro and Printing: Keyprint

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